

Vietnam's Ca trù: Courtesans' Songs by Any Other Name

by

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To my family and teachers—
thank you for the music.

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Preface

In 2004, I moved to Hanoi with my now-wife to work for two years at the *Viet Nam News* (VNN), a State-operated English-language newspaper. This began nearly ten years of travel and study that resulted in this dissertation. I had just graduated from New York University's Gallatin School of Individualized Study with a self-designed concentration in ethnomusicology. Because of my musical background and interdisciplinary outlook, at the paper I tended to work in the section called Lifestyles, rewriting and editing culture pieces. Censors, who worked for the Ministry of Culture and Information, oversaw these pieces and all of the newspaper's contents. They came to our office every evening and perused proofs of the paper, which would go out the next morning, marking unacceptable copy and prompting changes to be made by the layout team, the editors, and one native English speaker who stayed late. Journalists and the paper's editors, by this point in the day, had self-censored a good deal, because they knew through experience and training what would be acceptable. As I learned about censorship, I appreciated all the more George Orwell's abilities to observe and imagine authoritarianism.

I noticed that old culture had become an important cog in the propaganda machine of the one-party state of Vietnam. I became familiar with the wooden language of nationalism, and how it could be used to encapsulate, ensnare, and concretize culture. "Culture" as represented in Vietnam's mass media differed from "culture" as a fluid social process in the everyday practices of real people. I began to observe this distinction while living in Hanoi these two years, but I

would read and learn about, and begin to articulate, this further during the process of researching and writing this dissertation.

This first experience of Vietnam's state media would inform the years of work that followed and led to this dissertation. Before starting graduate school and researching Vietnamese music, however, the topic of this dissertation, *ca trù* ("token songs"), was not in my purview. I began to develop an interest in Vietnamese language, history, and culture, but not yet as a specialist. In this first two-year stay, I met many inspiring students of Vietnam, including foreign diplomats, NGO workers, restaurateurs, graduate students, Fulbright Fellows, a Blakemore Foundation recipient, and other expats like myself, all working on various projects in Hanoi. The idea of graduate school had always been on my horizon, and the idea of coming back to Vietnam under different auspices took firmer shape the longer I stayed.

In graduate school in 2006, I began to focus on Vietnam as a topic of research. A few articles existed on *ca trù* in English, and a few commercial recordings were available. When I returned to Hanoi in the summer of 2007 to begin preliminary research, I found that the Thái Hà Ensemble, the most prominent performers of *ca trù* today, and a handful of others performed in this genre with regularity. A mutual friend introduced me to the Ensemble. I worked with them during the course of the summer and the following summer of 2008. I returned to Vietnam in the fall of 2009, and UNESCO shortly thereafter declared *ca trù* an "intangible heritage in urgent need of safeguarding." In 2010, Thăng Long (Hanoi) celebrated its thousandth anniversary. It was an interesting time to be in Hanoi and to be researching music that was used to represent the nation's long history.

When I responded to the question of my occupation in my fieldwork period, I supported many conceptions portrayed in the media about *ca trù*, such as the idea that it was *nghệ thuật*

dân gian (folk art), because ethnomusicology in Vietnamese is *âm nhạc dân tộc học*: *Âm nhạc* means music, *dân tộc* means nation (usually meaning the Vietnamese people), and *học* means -ology. Bound by language in this semantic framework, I was engaged in the “study of the Vietnamese nation’s music.” Musicians were perceived as preservers of traditions and as guardians of ancient arts that belonged to the people. But, as I found, *ca trù* resists this categorization, because it has precursors in both erudite poetry singing as well as rural ritual music.

At one point in my second two-year stay in Hanoi, my lute teacher, Nguyễn Văn Khuê of the Thái Hà Ensemble asked me what his family could do to foster more of a thriving *ca trù* community, to increase awareness, and to broaden patronage. The UNESCO declaration had no effect in this regard. It was a difficult question, and his asking it only affirmed my concern that the music was on the edge of either being forgotten or folklorized and commodified purely for tourist industry revenue. Its revival seemed static, as it had little traction in the popular culture of Vietnam, even with attention from scholars, state institutions, and the media. Recent news suggests that *ca trù* may find a new phase of life in the modern world, but in what form it remains to be seen. My hope is that the information in this dissertation adds a meaningful contribution to the scholarship and discourse of ethnomusicology, of Vietnamese history and culture, and, more broadly, East and Southeast Asian Studies; that this study might have some positive effect for the music of *ca trù* and the musicians who perform it; and that this work does justice to those who made it possible.

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Abstract

Ca trù (“token songs”) is a genre of singing poetry with lute and drum accompaniment in modern Vietnam. It is framed today most often as ritual music of the village *đình* (worship house), although many of the performing practices come from courtesan singing for elite entertainment of the imperial period, which effectively ended in 1945. As in other contexts in East and South Asia, because of licentious and elitist associations, the courtesan music was shunned and performed infrequently after 1945. In this time, Vietnam experienced the end of French colonialism and decades of war and became a socialist nation with a market economy. In the modest revival of the music thereafter, performances have commonly included remnants from these various histories, all of which today fall under the name “*ca trù*.”

Fieldwork for this dissertation was conducted in Hanoi, Vietnam, with a family of musicians known as the Thái Hà Ensemble. This research adds to the literature on Vietnamese music and *ca trù* specifically. It illuminates for music scholars elements of Vietnamese modes. It also explores connections between language and music, examining in this case vocal and lute technique in the context of singing and accompanying poetry in the tonal language of Vietnamese.

Another fundamental question driving this study was: How did imperial music for elite consumption become a symbol for nationalism in a modern socialist state? The historiographical aspect of this study involves the questions of why we revise history and how music can be treated in this process. In this case, in public discourse since the 1980s, the music has been used

as a symbolic force for national unity and historical continuity in re-unified, post-war Vietnam. As a practice of individuals, however, it provides a context to remember one's precursors and express one's identity as *nghệ nhân* (an "art person"), and, for female singers, it provides a format to resist historically rooted chauvinism and reinvent what it means to be a songstress in modern Vietnam.

Chapter I

Introduction to “Token” Songs in Modern Vietnam

Ca trù (token songs) is a genre of singing that has appeared in Vietnamese society in many ways over the course of its history. In essence, it is a way of singing poetry that comes from the northern region of Vietnam. In the early twentieth century, a precursor of *ca trù* called *hát ả đào* (courtesan singing) became associated with the social ills of urban red-light districts. The type of business called *nhà cô đầu* (songstress or courtesan house), patronized by Vietnamese men, had come to mean brothel by the 1920s and 1930s. The music received unfavorable treatment after World War II under the ideology of anti-colonialism and socialist revolution, and it was performed very little for decades. It was reframed and revived in the 1980s and 1990s, with musicians such as the Thái Hà Ensemble beginning to perform publicly. Since then, it has become a symbolic force in the expression of national identity. Early twentieth-century historical associations were eschewed, in favor of preceding imperial times, in which it was music for elite consumption and ritual music of the village *đình* (tutelary spirit worship house). These comprise the widely differing musical and social pasts that the moniker *ca trù* today signifies.

Understanding how discourse frames the history of the music is necessary to comprehending how the music is situated in society. Therefore I inquire into the historiography of *ca trù* in modern Vietnam, demonstrate many perspectives that have arisen, explore the interplay of ideology and the writing of history, and examine the reinvention of musical meaning

and practice. Building on this, I provide a musically centered ethnography of a family of prominent *ca trù* musicians in Hanoi, the Thái Hà Ensemble, with whom I conducted fieldwork research over the course of several years.

In the early chapters of this dissertation, I examine the history of Vietnam and of *ca trù* specifically. In later chapters, I show that *ca trù* is, indeed, a living music with deep connections to Vietnamese language and ways of thinking about music, and also demonstrate how, quite disparately from the music as a practice of individuals, the music has become a symbol of nationalism in modern society. Part of this process has involved political projects of historiography. For the family that makes up the Thái Hà Ensemble, the music is a way of communing with the past and guaranteeing continuity with the future, and for female singers, the music is a medium through which to manipulate the changing archetype of the *đào nương* (songstress) in modern Vietnam. In public discourse, however, state culture brokers use the music to emphasize the longevity, unity, and historical continuity of the Vietnamese nation.

Research methodology

This dissertation involved several aspects of research, including fieldwork in Hanoi, Vietnam, during the summers of 2007 and 2008 and from 2009 to 2011. This included participant-observation study of the music with the Thái Hà Ensemble, as well as interviews and attendance of private and public performances. Interviews were usually informal and were integrated over time within the study of the music. I learned each aspect of the music over a number of months, gaining knowledge of a representative amount of the repertory for lute, voice, and drum. I integrated my field notes and recordings from these experiences to develop a cohesive understanding of how the ensemble worked together to realize poetry in song. This

process of study entailed recording and creating transcriptions in western notation, which I treat as static representations of the fluid and improvisatory performing practices. (I define performing practices (or performance practices) within a framework of usage in the field of ethnomusicology, which means here all of the physical, psychological, musical, and social aspects of making music). My transcriptions often represent the *khuôn* (model) performance of the basic musical materials that the Thái Hà Ensemble teaches.

Some musicians with whom I worked read western music and used fixed-*do* solfège. They also used a system of solmization that has loose correlation to a system in *Hán Nôm* (Sino-Vietnamese) script. A French colonial-era encyclopedia of music indicates the solmization system was originally used for wind instruments, and a separate system existed for strings. This appears to be a mistake on the part of French colonial ethnographers—they switched stringed and wind instrument syllabic systems, which Trần Văn Khê notes.¹ Scholars in Vietnam do have ancient transcriptions of music related to *ca trù*, but to reconstruct these as an historic performing practice (here used in the sense of historical musicology, concerning the reconstruction of musics from the past) would require matching pitch to ideographic character, or a musician with this knowledge, both of which we apparently lack, as musicians only loosely use the syllabic system today. The scholar named Nguyễn Xuân Diện at the Hán Nôm Institute in Hanoi quoted ideographic representations of music in his book *Lịch sử nghệ thuật*, but these are unreadable to musicians today.² This may be an area for further research for those inclined to reconstruct historic performing practices.

¹ See Trần Văn Khê, *La musique vietnamienne traditionnelle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires De France, 1962); Gaston Knosp, “Histoire de la musique dans l’Indo-Chine,” in *Encyclopédie de la musique et dictionnaire du conservatoire* (Paris, 1922), 3107.

² Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật Ca trù* [The History and Art of Ca trù] (Nhà xuất bản

Performers who read western music (notably Nguyễn Văn Khuê of the Thái Hà) reviewed my transcriptions, which were begun using a fixed-*do* system (the lowest fret of the lute was represented as middle C (C4) in western notation). There is no fixed-pitch system, and the modes are not well tempered. The lowest pitch on the lute is equivalent, in terms of western tuning, from a fifth to an octave below middle C; since fieldwork, I have lowered the lowest note on the lute, as represented in my transcriptions, from middle C to A below middle C (because a key signature with two flats to represent *do me fa so se do* was distracting to the eye).

The musical elements described here are reflective of the understandings of one family of musicians, albeit one of the most influential groups performing since the 1990s. This dissertation is by no means a comprehensive ethnography of all living *ca trù* artists. The family performed through the mid-twentieth century, but in private, and it is likely others did as well. This family was the only imperial-era guild, of which I am aware, that created an ensemble in *ca trù*'s revival since the 1990s. Other ensembles that formed were collectives of musicians and singers as well as novices who were interested in learning. These were formed originally as *câu lạc bộ* (clubs), and more recently many have begun referring to themselves as *giáo phường* (guilds), the imperial-era designation.

To get a sense of *ca trù*'s history and how it is framed today, the other aspect of my research methodology involved examining Vietnamese histories written recently and earlier works related to *ca trù*. Most of bibliography comes from the last thirty years. I also utilize articles and books published from the 1920s through the 1960s as well as an early-1800s source on the topic of music, from which many longtime presuppositions about Vietnamese music history are drawn. Previous to the twentieth century, Vietnamese literature was written in

thế giới, 2007).

Chinese and the vernacular script *Nôm*, so for this work I rely on a translation in *quốc ngữ* (Romanized Vietnamese), the method of writing that came into wide usage in the early twentieth century.

Memory Battles and the Civic Imaginary

The theoretical foundation of this dissertation grows from the work of Paul Ricoeur on memory battles in the writing of history.³ I apply his ideas to music as culture and music as an expression of historically contingent identity. Fundamentally, I ask why we continue to revise, rewrite, and reframe history, and examine how a genre of music is treated in this process.⁴

Ricoeur establishes a paradigm for how societies tend to reconcile following civil conflict. He looks at the close nature of amnesia and amnesty, which involves what he calls “commanded forgetting.” An enduring and basic aspect of many societies, commanded forgetting is when a society is compelled to forget conflict and conflicting memory, because amnesty is necessary to establish peace after conflict. This recalls the common phrase “to forgive and forget,” but Ricoeur has tailored this to the diachronic order of the process: “To forget, in order to forgive.”

³ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁴ Much has been written in this vein on the topic of Vietnamese historiography, including the broad set of case studies, *The Country of Memory*; the examination of historiography in modern Vietnam by Patricia Pelley; and Barley Norton’s work on *ca tru*, which discusses memory battles and musical practices: Hue Tam Ho Tai, ed., *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (University of California Press, 2001); Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Duke University Press, 2002); and Norton, “Singing the Past: Vietnamese Ca Tru, Memory, and Mode,” *Asian Music* 36, no. 2 (2005): 27-56.

Nations after conflict “reaffirm national unity by a liturgy of language, extended by the ceremonies of hymns and public celebrations.”⁵ *Ca trù* is a fitting element among the liturgy of language to affirm national unity in Vietnam. It is from the northern region, the seat of political power. It was an elite pastime that originated in the rural “folk” culture of an imperial period that is nostalgically recalled today. It is a perfect symbolic force in the expression of Vietnamese nationalism. It is a high art with antecedents in rural folk culture and traditional belief systems. Like the Tây Sơn Uprisings (1771-1802), which effectively brought an end to the Lê dynasty (founded in 1428), the music serves, in mythic discursive constructions today, as a proto-Socialist antecedent to twentieth-century Vietnamese communism, embodying its re-imagined form values such as egalitarianism and gender equality.⁶ In addition, as I discuss in more detail later, its history and mythology are bound to the trope of feminine strength against foreign invaders.

Amnesty helps to end political strife, and the agents that forge amnesty tend to leave a visible mark.⁷ In the context of Vietnam, the agencies that have established amnesty include the state, the Communist Party, government offices, institutes, and state-owned enterprises, including mass print, television, and radio media, which are by and large state-controlled.

The nineteenth-century French colonization, World War II, and thirty years of war that followed 1945 comprise Vietnam’s “long century” of political disorder. This concluded with a “re-unified” Vietnam, which is represented in sites of memory such as Hanoi’s *Công viên thống*

⁵ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 455.

⁶ On mythic discursive production in modern Vietnam, see: Wynn Wilcox, “Women and Mythology in Vietnamese History: Lê Ngọc Hân, Hồ Xuân Hương, and the Production of Historical Continuity in Vietnam,” *positions* 13, no. 2 (2005): 411-439.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 453.

nhát (Unification Park) and is symbolized publicly in revived imperial-era traditions such as *ca trù*.

The role of amnesty is to reconcile enemy citizens with the goal of peace, but civil peace must be founded upon society's imagined form of itself, or the "civic imaginary," where politics rely on collective amnesia.⁸ In Vietnam, political minorities fled or were sent to labor (framed as "re-education") camps in the 1970s and 1980s. Today, political dissidents are often censored, jailed, and beaten, and are generally oppressed by the state. A "forgetfulness of sedition,"⁹ in Ricoeur's words, plagues a society that in practical terms has ostensibly forgotten that opposing the state's hegemony is possible, even while incredible efforts of dissent and revolution paved the road to the present independent state. This "civic imaginary" entails the reinvention of pasts that have been rewritten to represent a long and unified history with token examples of authenticity therein.

The process of remembering and forgetting history occurs through texts, objects, sites of memory, as well as the images created surrounding musical practices. The emphasis or de-emphasis of one history or another can contribute to the expression of certain identities. Musicians and connoisseurs can, through musical practices, also imagine and affirm histories and form identities that rest upon these histories. Through written texts, historians can assert agendas for the expression of collective identity, which is haphazardly projected into the civic imaginary through the mediation of texts, radio, television, propaganda loudspeakers, and visual campaigns. In Vietnam, these agendas are structured within the dominant political ideology of socialism and with the pervasive trope of nationalism.

⁸ Ibid., 454.

⁹ Ibid.

As ethnomusicologists and musicologists have observed for some time, music is usually expressive of something, whether this is perceived as a direct emotion, the cycle of the seasons, a way of life, or a shared past. Very often, music enhances or structures some aspect of social experience. Dance and ritual are particularly visible examples. Music, viewed as an expressive culture, can also be a conduit for the negotiation of identity.¹⁰ The aspect of social experience that *ca trù* enhances, viewed broadly in the civic imaginary, is nationalism—nationalist sentiment affirms the nation as an extended Vietnamese family. In this broad frame, however, *ca trù* is, for the purposes of nationalism, a token representation of a way of life and of a shared past. *Ca trù* as a nationalist symbol is disparate from the music as an individual experiences it. It is a performing practice of individuals and small groups who pay varied levels of attention to the discursive formations of nationalism and historical revisionism.

A musical practice can become a powerful force in the negotiation of historical revision because music reflects inclusions and exclusions of history. As a signifier, music is particularly easy to manipulate, because it is often connected to its meaning through the mediation of language. This is especially so when an audience is instructed about a revived music and its historical significance.¹¹ Music as culture is a structural element in the building of nationalism, which builds upon monolithic historical narratives and suppresses minority perspectives.

When the negotiation of historical revision entails musical practices, music becomes a symbolic force in historically contingent negotiations of identity. Nationalism provides an

¹⁰ John Blacking, *Music, Culture, Experience: Selected Papers of John Blacking*, ed. Reginald Byron (University of Chicago Press, 1995); Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

¹¹ Turino, "Signs of imagination, identity, and experience: A Peircian semiotic theory for music," *Ethnomusicology* 43, no. 2 (1999): 221-255; Charles Seeger, *Studies in Musicology, 1935-1975* (University of California Press, 1977).

apposite surrounding in which to examine this. A monolithic view, however, of collective identity, which nationalist discourse and action seek to create, is an imaginary or a social construct. A dominant narrative, supporting nationalist sentiment, is visible in state-controlled publishing houses, media, and propaganda, which are curated in Vietnam by state culture brokers, or those in state institutions working to represent culture publicly.

A site of memory important to binding together the re-unified Vietnam and all of its minorities is Hanoi's Ethnology Museum. In a tangible manner, it represents ethnicities and power relations between the majority Vietnamese and the many minorities living in Vietnam. I examine the intangible museum of Vietnam's culture brokers or curators in order to unearth historically situated conceptions and misconceptions in the civic imaginary.

A noteworthy misconception is the presupposition that authenticity is always rooted in a rural Vietnamese past, and that folk culture belongs to the nation in the sense that it is public domain. Indeed, it seems that this music originated in a rural, folk past of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but it was also used for elite consumption in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, and in the early twentieth century it became a salon-style performance for urban intellectuals; these recent histories are often glossed over in public discourse.

Another issue that arose was that historical and anthropological approaches have not always blended. William Sewell discusses the theoretical tools of historical and ethnographic writing at an important moment for the fields of history, anthropology, literary and cultural studies, and ethnomusicology.¹² While many of these debates have since been shelved or problematized to exhaustion, this article is useful, because Sewell suggests adapting historical or

¹² William H. Sewell, "Geertz, Cultural Systems, and History," in *The Fate of "Culture": Geertz and Beyond*, edited by Sherry B. Ortner (University of California Press, 1999).

diachronic perspectives to anthropology, giving anthropologists the political and historical awareness in their analyses that many criticized Clifford Geertz for lacking in his conception of thick description.¹³ Likewise, Sewell proposes adapting to historical analyses the often more synchronic tools of anthropology, specifically Geertz's thick description and the so-called interpretive side of the field. In this view, history becomes a series of synchronic moments to be interpreted, and ethnography becomes the history of yesterday.

In an effort to do more than provide an historical background chapter to an ethnographic study, I took this approach from the start. As Ricoeur writes, the fundamental issue with writing historical narratives is that the past is no longer present, and only traces are available for interpretation. In studying the music today, musicians always connected present practices to the past, the past as remembered in oral and written discourse or the past as imagined through various modes of mediation.

In the context of the fieldwork research for this study, the expressive practices of *ca trù* were often embodiments of certain understandings of the past. The synchronic encounter of the ethnographic present required historic or diachronic depth for analysis because practice, identity, and history were interwoven. Moreover, public and private identities formed and competed, as voice and opinion differed depending on context and listener, and I experienced Bakhtin's conception of heteroglossia (many competing voices), as meanings shifted even within my ethnographic present.¹⁴

¹³ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973).

¹⁴ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (University of Texas, 1981).

An Overview of Literature

Few published works outside Vietnam have addressed the issue of Vietnamese music generally, and even fewer *ca trù* specifically. Two prominent Vietnamese ethnomusicologists are Trần Văn Khê, who wrote two books in the 1960s and innumerable articles throughout his career, and Phạm Duy, who wrote an introductory book on Vietnamese music in English among many other works. Nguyễn Tuyết Phong is a third prominent Vietnamese scholar who has lived and worked abroad and in Vietnam. The first two have thoroughly surveyed the various genres of Vietnam, from the northern folk singing of *quan họ* to diversion music such as *hát ả đào* (the name of *ca trù* as entertainment music) and musical theater such as *chèo*. These are useful introductions to the genres, their histories, and Vietnamese modal theory.¹⁵

Nguyễn Tuyết Phong gives a broad introduction to musical modes, instrumentation, and genres from north to south in his entry in the *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*.¹⁶ He also published the *Nhạc Việt* (Vietnamese Music) journal for a number of years at the International Association for Research in Vietnamese Music at Kent State with Terry Miller. These included examinations of ethnic minority music in Vietnam, some based on their own fieldwork.

One volume of *Nhạc Việt* was devoted entirely to Barley Norton's Master's thesis research on *ca trù*.¹⁷ His research was in the 1990s with the Thái Hà ensemble, and he later

¹⁵ Trần Văn Khê, *La musique; and Việt-nam*, Collection de l'Institut International d'Études Comparatives de la Musique publiée sous le patronage du Conseil international de la Musique (Paris, Buchet-Chastel, 1967); Phạm Duy, *Musics of Vietnam* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975).

¹⁶ Nguyễn Tuyết Phong, "Vietnam," in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music Volume 4: Southeast Asia* (Garland Publishing, 1998).

¹⁷ Norton, "Ca Tru: A Vietnamese Chamber Music Genre," *Nhạc Việt: The Journal of Vietnamese Music* (Special Issue 1996).

published an article on this topic in *Asian Music*,¹⁸ examining the relationships between the music and contexts of the past, incorporating ethnographic, literary, and ethnomusicological methodologies, and creating a foundation that inspired my study. The only preceding articles in English were written by Stephen Addiss, who first pursued research in the 1960s in Saigon, and who provided introductions to poetic forms as well as analyses of musical modes.¹⁹ Addiss worked with Phạm Duy on musical research and performance in Saigon in the 1960s, as the US was just beginning to increase its involvement in the war. He studied various genres, including what was called *hát ả đào* (courtesan singing), the name previously used for *ca trù*, and together Phạm and Addiss helped to arrange a performance for older musicians and singers who had moved from the north to the south in the migration of 1954 and 1955, which had followed the defeat of the French in the north.²⁰

In addition to these works, Norton recently produced a documentary of a Hanoi-based avant-garde group: *Hanoi Eclipse: The Music of Dai Lam Linh*. The Thái Hà Ensemble was featured in the performances that the group Dai Lam Linh produced. A scholar of avant-garde Vietnamese art, Nora Taylor, wrote a review with a useful summary of the film in *diaCRITICS*, the blog of the Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network.²¹

¹⁸ Norton, “Singing the Past.” Norton later focused on spirit possession music in the north for his dissertation and has since published a book. See: “Music and Possession in Vietnam,” (PhD dissertation, University of London, 2000); *Songs for the Spirit: Music and Mediums in Modern Vietnam* (University of Illinois Press, 2009).

¹⁹ Addiss, “Hat a Dao, the Sung Poetry of North Vietnam,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 93 (1973); “Text and Context in Vietnamese Sung Poetry: The Art of Hát ả Đào,” in *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology, Volume IX: Text, Context, and Performance in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam*, ed. Amy Catlin, Eran Fraenkel, and Therese Mahoney (UCLA, 1992).

²⁰ Stephen Addiss, personal communication, 2013.

²¹ Nora Taylor, “Barley Norton’s Hanoi Eclipse: The Music of Dai Lam Linh,” *diaCritics*, December 5, 2010. <http://diacritics.org/2010/hanoi-eclipse-the-music-of-dai-lam-linh-%E2%80%94documentary-by-barley-norton> (accessed June 27, 2013).

Another special volume of *Nhạc Việt* covered so-called “neotraditional” music in Vietnam. It provided a view into the politics of music, especially insofar as the conservatory system and institutionalized traditions are concerned. Miranda Arana wrote about this history of an invented music called *âm nhạc dân tộc hiện đại* (modernized national music), which re-centered tradition in state-run institutions such as the Hanoi conservatory. This led to traditional musicians’ disparagement.²² Le Tuan Hung also addressed music and politics in an essay in the *Lạc Việt* journal, which was published at Yale (in an issue with an introduction by Nguyễn Tuyết Phong). Le Tuan Hung explored this theme also in his book *Đàn tranh Music of Vietnam: Traditions and Innovations* and in his PhD dissertation, and wrote about the mid-twentieth century musical change and politics as well as in the journal *Nhạc Việt*. Official ideology in this period sought to supplant traditional music with national music, which was detrimental to traditional genres like *ca trù*.²³

Other works on southern Vietnamese music have included a dissertation by John Trainer on *nhạc tài tử* (amateur music of the Southern region) and recently a dissertation and article on traditional music and notions of charisma among traditional music teachers in the southern region by Alexander Cannon.²⁴ Many of the works so far on Vietnamese music have centered on

²² Miranda Arana, “Neotraditional Music in Vietnam,” *Nhạc Việt: The Journal of Vietnamese Music* (1999), 119.

²³ Le Tuan Hung, “Music and Politics: A Socio-Musical Interpretation of Aspects of the Đàn Tranh Zither Compositions in Southern Vietnam Since 1975,” *Lạc Việt Series* no. 14, ed. Nguyễn T. Phong (1991); this was co-published with the Association for Research in Vietnamese Music; also see Le Tuan Hung, “Music and Socio-Political Change: A Study of Đàn Tranh Music In Central and South Vietnam Between 1890 and 1990” (PhD dissertation, Monash University, 1990); “Traditional and Modern National Music in North Vietnam Between 1954 and 1975,” *Nhạc Việt: The Journal of Vietnamese Music* 6 (Fall, 1997); and *Đàn tranh Music of Vietnam: Traditions and Innovations* (Australia Asia Foundation, 2008).

²⁴ John Paul Trainor, “Modality in the Nhạc Tài Tử of Southern Vietnam,” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1977); Alexander Cannon, “Making Tradition Charismatic: Music,

the southern region. Lonán Ó'Briain's doctoral work on H'Mong minority music in Vietnam was a recent exception along with Norton's earlier work. In addition, a dissertation by Lauren Meeker in anthropology analyzed sociocultural aspects of *quan họ* (folk singing of the northern region) in modern Vietnam.²⁵

To-date, there has not been a book-length study of *ca trù* in English, although a French scholar, Aliénor Anisensel, is working in the area. To my knowledge, she has defended her thesis and is working on a book. Our research time in Vietnam overlapped. Her research focuses on *ca trù* music in renovated village ritual music in the *đình* (tutelary spirit worship house) of Lỗ Khê Village, the "birthplace of *ca trù*" near Hanoi. She has also published an article on the renovation of ritual singing in this village.²⁶ Another scholar, Gisa Jahnichen, has examined Vietnamese singing generally and specifically the *đàn đay* (three-stringed lute), which is used to accompany *ca trù* singing; her performance-centered approach to analyzing *đàn đay* performance is along the lines of my approach.²⁷

Memory, and Alliance in Contemporary Southern Vietnam" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2011); Cannon, "When Charisma Sustains Tradition: Deploying Musical Competence in Southern Vietnam," *Ethnomusicology* 57, no. 1 (2013): 88-115.

²⁵ "Hmong music in northern Vietnam: Identity, Tradition and Modernity" (PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 2012); Lauren Meeker, "Musical Transmissions: Folk Music, Mediation and Modernity in Northern Vietnam" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2007);

²⁶ Anisensel, "Chanter le ca trù au village de Lỗ Khê (Nord du Viet-Nam): Une fête rituelle au temple communal et a la maison des patrons de métier du ca trù," in *Peninsule* no. 59 (2009): 153-169.

²⁷ Gisa Jahnichen, "On the History of Vietnamese Vocal Music Practice," in *Studies in Ethnomusicology: Oriental Music*, ed. Jurgen Elsner and Gisa Jahnichen (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin Institut für Musikwissenschaft und Musikerziehung, 1991); and "Uniqueness Re-examined: The Vietnamese Lute *Đàn Đáy*," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 43 (2011): 147-179. Specifically, note her diagramming in the appendix of the article.

In 1962, Đỗ Bằng Đoàn and Đỗ Trọng Huệ published in Saigon a seminal reference specifically on *ca trù* called *Việt nam ca trù biên khảo*.²⁸ Along with this work, I rely on Nguyễn Xuân Diện, the leading scholar of *ca trù*-related *Hán Nôm* documents, for veracity in pre-twentieth century history. Nguyễn published his PhD dissertation research in book form and wrote another book on the subject for a broader audience.²⁹ A collection of source readings on *ca trù* usefully provides references for better understanding the course of the twentieth-century history, and a useful anthology of poetry was published in the 1980s.³⁰

A handful of books have been published on the subject of *ca trù* in the last decade under the auspices of the Institute of Musicology and the Ministry of Culture, most dealing with history, poetry, and culture, with some discussions of music. The independent scholar Nguyễn Quảng Tuân also published on the topic of *ca trù* poetry. I examine these works more closely in the coming chapters. It is worth noting that while working with Vietnamese musicians and scholars familiar with this bibliography, and since immersing myself in it thereafter, my general impression is that works on *ca trù* in Vietnam have lacked in ethnomusicological input.

In addition to these works on Vietnamese music and *ca trù* specifically, parallels exist between my study and scholarship on courtesan culture of East and South Asia. Most obvious are the similarities with the Chinese history of courtesans, and how these histories may be intertwined is an area for further research. Judith Zeitlin examines the peak of courtesan culture

²⁸ Đỗ Bằng Đoàn, Đỗ Trọng Huệ, *Việt-nam Ca-trù Biên Khảo: Khảo-cứu nghệ-thuật văn-chương và sưu tầm cổ-tích lịch sử* [Research on Vietnam's Ca trù: Studies in art, literature, and collections of antique vestiges of history] (Saigon, 1962).

²⁹ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật Ca trù*; and *Góp phần tìm hiểu lịch sử ca trù* [Understanding ca trù history] (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản khoa học xã hội, 2000).

³⁰ Thanh Việt, ed., *Ca trù nhìn từ nhiều phía* [*Ca trù* seen from many angles] (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Văn hóa thông tin, 2004); and Ngô Linh Ngọc, Ngô Vân Phú, *Tuyển tập thơ ca trù* [Anthology of ca trù poetry] (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản văn học, 1987).

in China, in the late Ming and early Qing periods (1580-1700).³¹ Zeitlin notes that the English language lacks subtlety for the many grades of classes between courtesan and prostitute in East Asian history. As in the Vietnamese context, literati and courtesans collaborated to create song from poetic form, and this culture was imbued with musically situated eroticism. Courtesans were of a hereditary caste in China, and they were often taken as concubines by their patrons, as in imperial Vietnam. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in China saw increased commercialization, but it was considered low-class to pay for an object of high cultural value, so patronage was concealed in the form of gifts, and eroticism was embedded in the social experience as well as the poetry. In Zeitlin's words, "Song was a social and sexual lubricant."³² In Vietnam, such commodification occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in *ca trù*, as I discuss in Chapter Three.

Singing was considered a feminine act in China, because, in singing, one submitted to the gaze of another, and, interestingly, patrons in the Chinese context conflated the beauty of singers with the beauty of the music, as singing was seen to enhance a woman's appearance; this is parallel to the rhetoric surrounding *ca trù*'s history, where singing competitions included judgment of comportment and appearance as well as singing ability.³³ In the Chinese context, courtesans performed for salon-style performances in private homes and on temple stages, which constituted public venues; similar performance spaces existed in *ca trù*'s history, and, like

³¹ Zeitlin, "'Notes of the Flesh' and the Courtesan's Song in Seventeenth-Century China," in *The Courtesans' Arts*. I also later discuss Catherine Vance Yeh, "Reinventing Ritual: Late Qing Handbooks for Proper Customer Behavior in Shanghai Courtesan Houses," *Late Imperial China* 19, no. 2 (1998).

³² *Ibid.*, 78.

³³ Bùi Trọng Hiền, "Không gian văn hóa: các chức năng văn hóa xã hội và những hình thức biểu hiện của nghệ thuật ca trù" [Cultural spaces: sociocultural functions of manifested forms in the art of ca trù], in *Đặc khảo Ca trù Việt Nam* [Special Research on Việt Nam's Ca trù], ed. Đặng Hoàng Loan, Phạm Minh Hương, and Hồ Thị Hồng Dung (Hà Nội: Viện Âm Nhạc, 2006).

Vietnam's history, the line between courtesan and actress historically was blurred in China, as movement occurred between these spheres.

Interestingly, the period in which *ca trù* arose and began to spread (the fifteenth and sixteenth century) corresponds to the time when *xiao-qu* (pure singing) was developed in China by courtesans, male musicians, and literati in the 1560s and 1570s. This involved emphasis on vocal technique, with *dizi* (transverse flute) accompaniment and less percussion than other contemporary ensembles; it was suitable to intimate, salon performances. *Kun qu* (opera) took over later in the elite sphere by the early seventeenth century, and courtesans began to learn this repertory. *Qu* involved setting words within existing tunes; content changed while form remained.³⁴ This is similar in theory to some poetic forms in *ca trù*, although other poetic forms are less strict in word tone scheme, so new melody is created with each poem. (I discuss musical parallels with Cantonese Opera in Chapter Five).

In the Chinese context, by the sixteenth century, it was necessary for courtesans to be literate, because they performed patrons' poems on the spot.³⁵ While Vietnamese historians have noted one or a few courtesans in a guild would have been literate, it seems likely that more would have needed literacy once courtesans began performing in private homes for patrons in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In China, Zeitlin writes, male music masters were from a low class, similar to the Vietnamese context of imperial guilds, which were comprised of families that depended on sources of income in addition to music; guilds in Vietnam were rural, village-based groups previous to the twentieth century.

³⁴ Zeitlin, "Notes of the Flesh."

³⁵ Ibid.

In seventeenth-century China, in the courtesan house, loose collaboration between courtesans and men of letters gave rise to what became popular songs and arias, and courtesans had distinctive repertoires and styles, which were collected in contemporary anthologies. Courtesans often attained success through studying with a well-known male music master, and, parallel to Vietnam, elderly courtesans turned to teaching younger ones. In Vietnam, the word for this esteemed and elderly singer (*cô đầu*) came to mean prostitute by 1945.

In a similar historical trajectory as the Vietnamese context, in India, in the nationalist reforms of the late 1940s onward, courtesan culture was banished. Courtesans had provided elite entertainment at court from the 1800s and in the salons that comprised the first public venue for Hindustani art music in the early twentieth century. Regula Burckhardt Qureshi examines this historical arc, focusing on issues of female agency in the margins of patriarchal society, which reverberates with my own study. She views the salon as the center of feminine agency in the production of music. It was women making musical decisions and attending to the relations of musical production.³⁶ The twentieth-century salon in India, like in Vietnam, was an urban phenomenon, and was patronized by urban elites and imperial aristocrats. Female entertainers in the salon context of India also had two types of men in their lives, patrons and male instrumental accompanists, and the salon provided a new space for female agency and freedom.³⁷

In the Indian context, nationalist reinvention in the mid-twentieth century sought to replace the negative associations of courtesans from the early twentieth century with images of the virtuous wife, who also made music. Radio programming was important to this reinvention.

³⁶ Qureshi, “Female Agency and Patrilineal Constraints: Situating Courtesans in Twentieth-Century India,” in *The Courtesans’ Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (Oxford, 2006).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

There was in this time a broadening of musical production in the middle class, and this marginalized the traditional courtesan, as the center of music in India moved to other forms after Independence in 1947. Qureshi argues that this history in India could be better illuminated today on its own cultural terms rather than through the twentieth-century re-framing of courtesans as fallen women.³⁸ This could also be a useful strategy for the Vietnamese context.

In the Japanese context of courtesan history is the more widely known class of the geisha. Geishas arose in pleasure quarters as a distinct class from courtesan entertainers in the eighteenth century. Lesley Downer discusses the *geisha* in modern Japan, showing the disparity of public images of geishas and their real private lives, and Downer also looks into their history.³⁹ Their profession, like the courtesan in Vietnam, was to provide entertainment to men, including music, song, and dance. Their position in modern Japan is, however, very different from singers of *ca trù* today, who, unlike modern geishas, do not act out historic entertainment roles in teahouse parties (such as performed flirting) and do not serve as mistresses to wealthy businessmen.⁴⁰

The division in the Japanese context between a female entertainer or artist and a woman who provided sex, like in the Vietnamese context, was not always clear. *Gei sha* translates to “art person,” similar to the modern term of distinction in Vietnamese for an artist or a musician in general, *nghệ nhân* (art person). Until 1945, while they were entertainers first, a kept geisha was a status symbol for a wealthy man. As in the Vietnamese context, in Japan, mistresses, courtesans, and concubines were commonplace among and expected of elites. Downer argues

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Downer, “The City Geisha and Their Role in Modern Japan: Anomaly or Artistes?” in *Courtesans’ Arts*. Also see in this volume Timon Screech’s examination of literature surrounding Edo (Tokyo) pleasure districts. Screech, “Going to the Courtesans: Transit to the Pleasure District of Edo Japan,” in *Courtesans’ Arts*.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

that geishas were, however, the first modern Japanese women with agency and freedom, along the lines of Qureshi's argument concerning Indian courtesans in the early twentieth century,⁴¹ and a similar argument could be made about the *cô đầu* (courtesan) in Vietnam.

Miho Matsugu argues that geishas have been portrayed as national symbols in the building of modern Japan. This process occurred over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Through discourse, the geisha-as-prostitute image was replaced by the geisha-as-symbol of authentic beauty and nationalism,⁴² very much parallel to the events surrounding courtesans in the Vietnamese context.

My study therefore has a good deal in common with other works on courtesan culture and history in East and South Asia, and serves to bring to light new perspectives on this topic in a new context. The region in general it seems experienced increased commercialization, which affected courtesan culture, from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. In the early twentieth century, the semiotic frame shifted around courtesan culture, and this class of women became seen, within modern worldviews, as fallen or as part of an old, backward, and immoral world. The courtesan was widely shunned not just in Vietnam but also throughout East and South Asia in the mid-twentieth century as empires decayed and modern nation-states arose, and, following, in some cases, courtesans or their arts were reinvented for varying purposes.

Chapter Summaries

To fully appreciate the metamorphosis of *ca trù*, its role in the history and culture of Vietnam, and to begin to comprehend its relative position to other music in the region, it is

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Matsugu, "In the Service of the Nation: Geisha and Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow Country*," in *Courtesans' Arts*.

helpful to recall its origins and historical trajectory. In this dissertation, I explore the many perspectives of the history of *ca trù*, provide a portrayal the music in society today, and examine the manner in which the Thái Hà Ensemble conceives of the music.

In Chapter Two, I discuss Vietnamese social history, examining Confucianism and the flow of other cultural patterns and ideologies in imperial Vietnam and contextualizing historical traditions of gender and class hierarchies. Social organization was altered under the period of French colonialism (1858 to 1954), and this contributed to the downward trajectory of the reputation of the music. The creation of urban spheres in which singing houses developed resulted from colonial change to the economy, social organization, and infrastructure. *Ca trù* came to be performed in urban singing houses and developed associations with red-light districts in the early twentieth century. Its patronage class of Confucian-oriented literati decayed and was replaced by a new class of urban intellectuals. In this time, debates formed around women's rights in the new public sphere of discourse, which was the result of the widespread adoption of Romanized Vietnamese, increased literacy, and the establishment of a publishing industry. This all set the stage for widespread shunning of the music due to its proximity to what became seen as backward attitudes towards women, who, in the view of modern Vietnam, were freed from the bonds of the imperial era by socialist revolutionaries. The end of Chapter Two comprises a political history of the mid- and late-twentieth century with an introduction to historiography in modern Vietnam. This all serves to contextualize the history of *ca trù* and its reinvention in the twentieth century.

In Chapter Three, I trace the origins of *ca trù* to mythic discursive constructions surrounding the founding of the songstress tradition. These constructions serve to underline feminist and nationalist sentiments imbued in the re-imagined form of the music in modern

Vietnam. I examine an important work on Vietnamese music from the early 1800s and writings on the music from the early twentieth century. Because many perspectives exist and have existed in the past, the historical and musical taxonomies discussed in Chapter Three become integral to understanding the music in society today.

In Chapter Four, I describe the period of decline and revival of *ca trù*. After the August Revolution of 1945, the socialist movement culminated in the seizure of power from the invading Japanese, the establishment of a modern state, and subsequent decades of war. This was accompanied by fundamental shifts in Vietnamese society, notably a turn away from ancient cultures such as *ca trù*, which were seen as *phong kiến* (feudal) and therefore backward. In the late twentieth century, Vietnam emerged from war and began the process of global economic integration. In widespread amnesia, society created newfound veneration for culture from the past, embracing *ca trù* as a renovated art. Its association with prostitution fell into the past. A discursive backdrop emerged from state publishing houses amidst and preceding *ca trù*'s revival, into which a continuity of tradition and cultural authenticity was projected. Chapter Four is concluded with an introduction to some of the main performers and performance venues in Hanoi.

The music is worthy of attention in itself, and this is the purpose of Chapter Five. As discussed in this chapter, *ca trù* involves singers realizing poems in song with improvisatory lute accompaniment, in a process that utilizes the word tones of the Vietnamese language as guideposts in the negotiation of musical modes. I examine the music that the Thái Hà teaches, looking at ornamentation, the nature of creativity and improvisation, the relationships between musical and linguistic processes, and the connections between vocal technique and lute accompaniment. I discuss the manner of rhythmic structuring of the singer's *phách* (idiophone),

as well as the nature of *làn điệu* and *cung* (words meaning in essence “mode”), parsing the Vietnamese terminology and attempting to clear up some of the confusion of previous studies. I also analyze the social and musical roles of the drum. The manner of poetic-musical realization exists in relation to a *trống chầu* (drum)-playing audience-participant. I argue the *trống chầu* is a symbol of critique and praise of effort by an intellectual male from a past age, whose performance was subsumed by the musically centered agency of a female singer. The performance represents overturned gendered hierarchies, which speaks to a current of Vietnamese feminism in modern times and perhaps a longstanding tradition of female agency in courtesan singing.

In Chapter Six, I focus on present-day Vietnam with a topical analysis of *ca trù* in society. I discuss the evolving image of the songstress in the media and in text and the role of culture brokers of state institutions in the curating of these images. Cultural amnesia and the nostalgic reinvention of tradition relate to one another, although regardless of state agendas visible in media and scholarship, *ca trù* artists themselves, and especially the female singers who control the performance practice, have agency in defining and projecting their image of *ca trù* and the *đào nương* (songstress), even if the image is indeterminately interpreted in the larger field of society.

While this is not the first study of *ca trù*, it adds to a small body of work on Vietnamese music and *ca trù* specifically, and is the first book-length work in English on the topic. This study brings to the attention of Vietnamese music scholars important components of Vietnamese modal theory in the northern region, especially concerning mode, register, connections between stringed instrument and vocal ornamentation, improvisation, strophic organization of songs based in poetic forms, and the declamation of linguistically tonal poetry. Fundamentally, I argue

for a performance-centered approach to understanding the musical aspects of *ca trù*, because this yields a nuanced understanding of how musicians and singers accompany and perform poems in song.

This study serves to bring to light Vietnamese perspectives on *ca trù* from today and in history. This is contextualized in the cultural and musical history of Vietnam. *Ca trù* serves as an index to the varied social and cultural environments through which it has passed, especially the last century, during which time nationalist and socialist historiographical paradigms have influenced, to varying extents, collective and individual understandings. I conclude this study at the starting line of the next phase of history, during which time what it means to be a songstress and a traditional musician in Vietnam will be determined by a new generation of performers.

Chapter II

An Overview of Vietnamese History

A crucial period of Vietnamese history generally and *ca trù*'s history specifically was the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This was crucial not only because of the fundamental shifts French colonization caused, but also because the Vietnamese polity exited nearly one thousand years of dynastic succession (with intermittent Chinese interruption) and entered modernity as an independent nation. Widespread change took place in Vietnamese society both due to colonial influence and as a result of Vietnamese agency. There was an influx of cultural borrowing from the west. While literacy and publishing spread rapidly, discursive debates blossomed around countless topics, from women's rights, morality, and the role of Confucianism in society to prostitution, politics, and poetry. This history would frame the shunning of *ca trù* after World War II, so is important to frame historiographical issues that have informed the cultural and identity politics surrounding *ca trù* in the present.

The early twentieth century saw a decline in reputation of *hát ả đào* (courtesan singing) and the decay of its imperial-era patron class, the *quan viên* (scholar-gentry), a class traditionally comprised of Confucian, *Hán Nôm* (Sino-Vietnamese)-reading literati, who, with colonial changes to government and social organization, became less and less important to society. A new breed of urban intelligentsia arose and became the patrons of the *ả đào* (courtesan) in the urban *nhà cô đầu* (singing house). As authors of the 1920s lamented, the arts of the courtesan class had

declined with this change. Those responsible for the music's decline were ostensibly the Vietnamese men who visited the singing houses, which were located in red-light districts of urban areas. Vietnamese society shunned *ả đào* singing after the 1950s. Since the 1980s revival, memories of the negative associations have faded. I establish here a foundation for understanding the historical revisionism and attendant identity politics of this narrative by providing a general historical background, and, in the following chapter, I discuss the history of *ca trù* more specifically.

Confucianism in Imperial Vietnam

The Đại Việt kingdom was established around present-day Hanoi in 1010 AD following a thousand years of Chinese domination. In his seminal *The Birth of Vietnam*, Taylor writes that, prior to the establishment of the Đại Việt kingdom, the Vietnamese indigenized Chinese culture.⁴³ A prominent example of continuing influence through the following millennium, which concerns the history of courtesans in Vietnam, was Confucianism; this would affect gender hierarchies, ritual practices, and moral structures. Historiographical debate, however, surrounds the extent of the penetration of Confucianism at different levels of society and at different times in imperial Vietnam.⁴⁴

Generally speaking, from the sixteenth century onward, Chinese forms of social organization influenced the Vietnamese polity more and more. This reached its height in the

⁴³ Keith Weller Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (University of California Press, 1983).

⁴⁴ Relevant essays in *Rethinking Confucianism* include: Alexander Woodside, "Classical Primordialism and the Historical Agendas of Vietnamese Confucianism;" K. W. Taylor, "Vietnamese Confucian Narratives;" and Shawn McHale, "Mapping a Vietnamese Confucian Past and Its Transition to Modernity;" in *Rethinking Confucianism: Past and Present in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam*, ed. Benjamin A. Elman, John B. Duncan, and Herman Ooms (UCLA Asian Pacific Monograph Series, 2002).

nineteenth century, when the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802-1945) unified the territory from Saigon to China and acculturated non-Vietnamese peoples, including the Cham and Khmer in the south of the polity. Vietnamese peasant society became more and more patrilineal, and this included ancestor worship and patrilineal inheritance patterns, female subservience, and the use of the *đình* (tutelary spirit worship house, in which *ca trù* originally developed) at the village level; the *đình* culture centered on the social role of men. Confucianism permeated to varying extents the culture of villages and mixed with localized forms of spirit worship as well as Buddhism.⁴⁵

Issues concerning gender, which are relevant to this discussion and important to understanding Vietnamese culture today, include the main prescriptions taken from Confucianism. Historically, this included the Three Submissions: Women's duty to serve their fathers, husbands, and sons, in this order.⁴⁶ Rules concerning behavior and appearance fell under the rubrics of the Four Virtues, which included labor, physical appearance, appropriate speech, and proper behavior. Customs passed orally supplemented these basic tenets. Men and women remained apart physically to protect women from men's advances, but this served to keep women socially insular and more easily controlled. The entertainment sphere of courtesan singing would have offered an exception to this. Further, if a woman married a drunk with a gambling or lust problem, it would have been her duty to hide his character and to maintain family integrity. Wealthy men took concubines in addition to wives, especially if the first wife did not produce a male child. Concubines were subservient to married women.⁴⁷ At times, imperial law dictated that the children of men and courtesan-songstresses taken as wives or

⁴⁵ Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830, Volume 1: Integration on the Mainland* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁴⁶ David Marr, "The 1920s Women's Rights Debates in Vietnam," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 35, no. 3 (1976): 371-389.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

concubines could not take the civil service examinations, thus would be socially inferior in status to their half-siblings from mothers of higher social standing.⁴⁸

Confucian influence may at first appear widespread in Vietnamese history, but emphasis of this history may be overstated in modern accounts, because the Communist Party reincorporated, especially since the 1990s, older *truyền thống* (traditions) into the fabric of society (this included *ca trù*). Some of these traditions were Confucian, at least in theory, and Confucianism became seen as a wellspring of authenticity in culture. Historians often take Vietnam of the past at face value, without probing to what extent the kingdom was or was not Confucian, using this blanket presupposition instead of examining variegated forms of Confucian influence.⁴⁹

The common narrative goes that Confucianism was present in the Lý Dynasty (1009-1225) and was more widely adopted in the Trần (1225-1400). After the Ming invasion of Vietnam in the early fifteenth century, Confucianism increased through the Lê Dynasty and the independent Nguyễn Dynasty (1428-1883). It has been observed, however, that these claims (that Confucianism was developing in the Lý and Trần) are dubious. A narrative is constructed today that Confucianism represents all of the traditional past of Vietnam and communism

⁴⁸ Laws governed the children of songstresses taken as wives or concubines from the early Lê Dynasty (which was founded in 1427) until the period of King Lê Dữ Tông (1706-1729). The sons of songstresses taken as wives or concubines could not take the civil service examination. A woman named Trương Quốc Mẫu, who was descended from a *ca nữ* (song woman), advanced into the palace, where a lord named Hi Tổ Nhân Vương (Trịnh Cương) fell in love with her. After she pleaded with him, he worked to abolish the law. From then on, children of *ca kỹ* (songstresses) could take civil service examinations like the children of law-abiding families. See Đỗ Bằng Đoàn, Đỗ Trọng Huề, *Việt-nam ca-trù biên khảo*, 58.

⁴⁹ McHale, “Vietnamese Confucian Past and Its Transition To Modernity.”

represents the universal modern Vietnam, and the transition between these two was a natural evolution.⁵⁰

Historians in Vietnam began, after World War II, to weed out negative elements of Confucianism and emphasize positive ones, while simultaneously creating discourse around the folklore and popular culture of the past. Negative elements of the Confucian past included its oppressive posture toward women and its failure to provide practical solutions for defeating French colonials.⁵¹ With these issues in mind, the next section provides an overview of Vietnamese imperial history; this creates a foundation for understanding the cultural politics connected with historiographical processes in modern Vietnam.

Imperial Vietnamese History

The Vietnamese territory, before the Vietnamese began to establish an independent kingdom in the tenth century, was located on the coast of the South China Sea, significantly called the East Sea by Vietnamese today, to which China historically has needed access. Thus the Vietnamese territory had essentially become a southern province for a thousand years. This was a costly venture, and, with the rise of other ports closer to home, it became less important for the Chinese to control the territory.⁵² This in part answers the question of why Vietnam became a distinct kingdom. Another part of the answer, Taylor argues, was that the Vietnamese never desired to be part of China.⁵³ Whether this proposition is true or not, this sentiment, indeed,

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam*.

⁵³ Ibid., 299.

reflects current Vietnamese nationalism and identity politics, especially with respect to historiographical paradigms.

Regardless of the desire to be distinct from their large northern neighbor, certainly Vietnam became distinct from its Southeast Asian neighbors because of Chinese cultural influence, even while influence varied depending on class, time, and geography.⁵⁴ Vietnam's history is unique among its Southeast Asian counterparts because of strong cultural connections to China and East Asia, especially through Confucian literati culture. In Lieberman's words:

“Practices that derived ultimately from China were more pronounced in 1830 than in 930 because Vietnamese-speakers—attracted by the incomparable prestige and protean utility of northern civilization—embarked on a long-term, if spasmodic process of selecting and recombining elements of northern civilization to fit local needs and to reshape local identities.”⁵⁵

This characterization is useful to understanding the history of *ca trù*, because precursors of *ca trù* fall into this cultural history; notably, *ca trù* owes a literary debt to Chinese language and poetics. This culture, however, came to develop in new contexts and thereby to express new identities that were created in distinction from Chinese influence.

For the Vietnamese kingdom's first four hundred years, the Lý (1010-1225) and Trần Dynasties (1225-1400) ruled successively. These early dynasties organized the kingdom in a typical Southeast Asian political pattern. Lieberman uses the phrase “solar polity” to describe this.⁵⁶ The further from the “sun,” the less the “gravitational pull.” Buddhist religious institutions held wealth and influence alongside an oligarchy of powerful leaders, who created a hegemonic and cosmological fabric to rule that included institutionalized blood oaths, rituals, indigenous belief systems, and Buddhism. Charisma at the center of the solar polity and a flexible and

⁵⁴ Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, 340.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 341.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

inclusive cosmology gave gravity to the center of the system. While influence was strongest at the center, beliefs among the planets, including localized tutelary spirit worship practices, where *ca trù* first grew as ritual music, folded into a greater cosmology with the king at the center.

Before the fifteenth century, the southern and central regions of today's Vietnam comprised the Indic-oriented Champa kingdom. In its time, Champa also influenced Vietnamese culture, including in the realm of music. As Trần Văn Khê notes in his seminal introduction to Vietnamese music history, the two major influences of Vietnamese music history were China and India.⁵⁷ The Indic Cham culture to the south ostensibly provided Indic-oriented musical influence, as the Vietnamese geographically absorbed this southern frontier.

In the late fourteenth century, wars with Champa led to the fall of the Trần and the rise of the short-lived Hồ Dynasty.⁵⁸ The solar polity pattern of organization in the first few dynasties contrasted with the Confucian bureaucratic administration that Vietnam increasingly moved toward from this century until the late nineteenth century. Other mainland Southeast Asian polities continued in more Indian-oriented patterns of social organization.⁵⁹

The Hồ fell to a twenty-year Ming occupation from 1407 to 1427. The today-revered historic figure Lê Lợi led a successful military campaign against the Ming, which was simultaneously suffering from economic difficulties. Lê Lợi founded the Lê Dynasty, which lasted until the late eighteenth century. He was from the southern mountains, and the dynasty broke from Lý and Trần traditions.⁶⁰ In Lê Lợi's court, an ideological vacuum was created.

⁵⁷ Trần Văn Khê, *La musique vietnamienne traditionnelle*.

⁵⁸ John K. Whitmore, *Vietnam, Ho Quy Ly, and the Ming (1371-1421)* (New Haven, 1985); John K. Whitmore, "Religion and Ritual in the Royal Courts of Dai Viet," *Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series* 128 (2009); Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*.

⁵⁹ Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, 33-35.

⁶⁰ John K. Whitmore, "Religion and Ritual," 11.

Young officials—educated by Chinese schools during the occupation—came to influence court music and rituals. In Vietnamese music history, Trần Văn Khê writes, court music was imported from China in this time.⁶¹ Other Vietnamese historians write that the incomparable draw of local music would eventually lead to Vietnamese music once again occupying the court.⁶²

The rest of the fifteenth century saw the Vietnamese moving toward the coast and intensively cultivating the Red River Delta, one of the first regional polities to do so. This created the basis for the rapid population growth to come. By the end of the fifteenth century, with the aid of Chinese tools of governance, the kingdom was an established power with an organized administration and military.⁶³

Vietnam increasingly became a bureaucratic state, in which scholar-officials toiled in provincial administrations. Called *quan viên* in Vietnamese, these scholars studied Confucian texts in order to take Chinese-style civil service examinations, by which they could advance in the state bureaucracy. Their power, acquired through merit, contrasted with the oligarchy's inherited power.⁶⁴ The Lê Dynasty saw increased influence of Confucianism, but aristocrats and the peasantry continued with Buddhist and tutelary spirit worship practices.⁶⁵

It is worth noting *ca trù*'s origins in this period briefly before continuing with the general historical narrative. *Ca trù* emerged as a ritual music during the early Lê period in the fifteenth century in what is called *hát cửa đình* (singing at the gates of the spirit worship house). “*Ca trù*”

⁶¹ Trần Văn Khê, *La Musique*.

⁶² Bùi Trọng Hiền, “Không gian văn hóa.”

⁶³ Li Tana, “The Ming Factor and the Emergence of the Việt,” in *Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century: The China Factor*, edited by Geoff Wade and Sun Laichen (Hong Kong University Press/NUS Press, Singapore, 2010), 83-84.

⁶⁴ Regarding East Asian mandarinates and the question of meritocracy, see Alexander Woodside, *Lost Modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea, and the Hazards of World History* (Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁶⁵ John K. Whitmore, “Religion and Ritual,” 12.

is mentioned in a poetic text dating to this time, and carvings in worship houses portray an instrument resembling the *đàn đáy*, the three-stringed lute used in *ca trù* ensembles.⁶⁶ While little is known about what the music sounded like, this context probably entailed multiple singers and an ensemble of strings, wind instruments, and percussion, rather than the reduced size of the courtesan variety of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which included one lutist, one singer, and one drummer.

The remainder of the Lê period to the establishment in 1802 of the Nguyễn Dynasty went as follows. The Mạc clan overtook the Lê following instability that was caused by competition between two other powerful clans, the Nguyễn in the south and Trịnh in the north. The Lê ended the Mạc's reign (1528-1592) with backing from both the Nguyễn and Trịnh. The Trịnh in the north came to rule as *chúa* (lords), and the Nguyễn as *chúa* in the southern frontier. The era is commonly known as *thời kỳ vua chúa* (The era of lords and king).

The Nguyễn and Trịnh created a political division. In the Nguyễn territory, Buddhism and localized spirit worship practices thrived. Through the ports, contact occurred with China, which would come to influence Nguyễn dynastic political and social organization later in the nineteenth century.⁶⁷ The Trịnh lords in the north, in contrast to the early Nguyễn, remained oriented more toward China and, in theory, Confucianism, although Buddhism and localized spirit worship continued to be a vibrant force throughout the territory.

They formed in essence two realms, and engaged in conflict. In 1627, the Trịnh attacked the south after the Nguyễn refused to pay taxes to the north. Wars continued to 1672. Culturally and economically, the Trịnh were oriented more toward China, and the Nguyễn toward the rest

⁶⁶ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật*, 72.

⁶⁷ John K. Whitmore, "Religion and Ritual."

of mainland Southeast Asia and the maritime trade in archipelagic Southeast Asia and coastal South and East Asia. The Nguyễn were organized as a military regime, and bonds were created through personalized ties. More in the manner of the first two dynasties, they had a flexible and inclusive cosmology. They attempted to become recognized as a separate polity by China, whose court rejected this because the Lê were still seated at the center of the Vietnamese kingdom.⁶⁸ In the north, the Trịnh ruled as lords while the Lê kept their throne, and, from the 1650s, the Trịnh tried to utilize Chinese-style governance and patrilineal patterns of ruling to strengthen the kingdom and move toward reunifying the divided territories.

In the late eighteenth century, what is popularly known today as the Tây Sơn (Western Mountain) Uprising (1771-1802) brought to a halt the arrangement of Lê kings and lords of the Nguyễn and Trịnh. Economic woes and popular unrest in the north set the stage for the Uprising. In the south, Nguyễn expansionism had meanwhile created tension between the Vietnamese in the lowlands and ethnicities in the highlands, where the uprisings originated. A remaining member of the Nguyễn clan, Nguyễn Ánh, eventually quelled the movement and founded a new dynasty in 1802 and moved the capital to Huế in the central region, unifying the territory from Saigon to China.⁶⁹

Preceding the Uprising, the late eighteenth century had been a period of intellectual ferment.⁷⁰ There had been a breakdown of formal class structures in the north, and the class of

⁶⁸ George Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising* (University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 20-23; Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1998).

⁶⁹ John K. Whitmore, "Religion and Ritual;" Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*. Tourists visit the imperial city today and can hear reconstructed versions of Vietnamese court music that was imported from China centuries before the capital was relocated.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

actors was no longer scorned socially.⁷¹ Musicians and singers could be included in this category. Scholars tried to invigorate society with Confucian ideals and popularize Confucian texts by translating them to the vernacular script *Nôm*.⁷²

In the late eighteenth century, a poetic tradition called *hát nói* (sing-speak) arose, and its history is intertwined with *ca trù*, as the poems from hereafter constituted a large part of *ca trù* repertory. The poet Nguyễn Công Trứ (1778-1858) is credited with the advancement of the form and the development of the culture of courtesan singing in his time.⁷³ *Hát nói* poetry incorporates Chinese poetic forms and Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary. A champion of poetry in this era was Hồ Xuân Hương, a renowned concubine who wrote risqué poetry as political and cultural commentary.⁷⁴ As a Vietnamese author later in the twentieth century would write, “The literature of *ca trù* is the literature of *Nôm*.”⁷⁵

Vietnamese historians write that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was when *ca trù* became music for elite consumption. Courtesans performed for scholar-officials and aristocrats, who had diplomatic dealings with Chinese counterparts in this period.⁷⁶ Nguyễn Xuân Diện writes that a *ca trù* guild in the eighteenth century was used to greet guests from abroad.⁷⁷ Vietnamese intellectuals interacted with other East Asian imperial-era literati, and mutual influence between courtesan culture of Vietnam and China seems likely.

⁷¹ Ibid., 27.

⁷² Ibid., 27-28.

⁷³ Phan Thư Hiền, *Nguyễn Công Trứ với Hát ca trù* [Nguyễn Công Trứ and ca trù singing] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 2008).

⁷⁴ John Balaban, *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương* (Copper Canyon Press, 2000).

⁷⁵ Nguyễn Văn Ngọc, *Đào nương ca* [Courtesans' songs] (Hanoi: Vĩnh Hưng Thư Quán, 1932).

⁷⁶ John K. Whitmore, “Religion and Ritual,” 13. Liam C. Kelley, *Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship* (University of Hawaii Press, 2005).

⁷⁷ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật*, 80.

When Nguyễn Ánh founded the Nguyễn dynasty in 1802, the kingdom turned more fully to models of Chinese government and social organization. The imperial city in Huế was modeled on the one in Beijing, and the new legal code of the Nguyễn was almost entirely based on the contemporary Chinese Qing code. The second half of the last millennium saw increasing influence of Sinicized forms of governance and consequently in elite culture. Even into the Nguyễn period, however, Buddhism and older cultural forms remained important among the aristocracy.⁷⁸ At the village level, Confucianism, ancestor and tutelary spirit worship, and Buddhism mixed, and *ca trù* as ritual music in tutelary spirit worship houses continued through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Although the territory that resembles modern Vietnam was unified under the Nguyễn Dynasty in 1802, it existed as an independent kingdom from only 1802 until 1858 when the French began colonizing. Before the French arrived, orientation to Confucianism increased in the nineteenth century,⁷⁹ but the political system had begun to decay and corruption plagued the bureaucratic administration.⁸⁰ Both the overemphasis of and the eschewing of Chinese cultural

⁷⁸ John K. Whitmore, “Religion and Ritual.” The two-volume French translation of the Nguyễn legal code often cited is: P. L. F. Philastre, *Le code annamite* (Paris, 1909). A newer Vietnamese version (in modern Vietnamese), with annotation, is in five volumes: Nguyễn Văn Thành, Vũ Trinh, Trần Hựu, eds., *Hoàng Việt Luật Lệ (Luật Gia Long)* [Gia Long Code] (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Văn hóa Thông tin). Note that the World Cat record for the date is “1996?,” which is incorrect; in the fifth volume, the publication information is given on page 1081, indicating a publication date of 1994.

⁷⁹ Whitmore, “Social Organization and Confucian Thought in Vietnam,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, no. 2 (September 1988), 298.

⁸⁰ Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976), 17.

influence should be questioned in this history.⁸¹ China and Vietnam, however, in terms of governance and upper-echelon culture, did have similarities in this period. The Nguyễn legal code was very close to the contemporary Qing code;⁸² leaders ruled under Confucianism and its attendant philosophy of worthy men ruling by moral elitism;⁸³ and, relevant to my study, female courtesans declaimed tonal poetry for elite men.⁸⁴

To advance in the bureaucratic administration, these *quan viên* (scholar-gentry) studied Confucian literature and took examinations at the provincial and capital levels. These examinations tested knowledge of Chinese classics, and included writing poetry and essays on Confucianism, law, and history. In Vietnam, these examinations had started as early as 1075 AD, although the relevance of the examination system increased from the Lê Dynasty onward.⁸⁵

As I have noted, however, Confucian principles were not universally applied.⁸⁶ The implementation of Confucian morality often conflicted with local ways of being. In Whitmore's words, a "clash between the rigidities of the moralistic ideology and the flexibilities of the indigenous cultural system" occurred.⁸⁷ The common people adapted or filtered Confucian principles, especially those concerning paternalistic gender separation. The poorer the family, the less a gendered hierarchy would have been possible, as husband and wife were more reliant on

⁸¹ Whitmore, "Social Organization and Confucian Thought in Vietnam," 298.

⁸² See Philastre, *Le code annamite*; Phạm Ngọc Bách, ed., *Hoàng Việt luật lệ*.

⁸³ Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution*, 15.

⁸⁴ Catherine Vance Yeh, "Reinventing Ritual: Late Qing Handbooks for Proper Customer Behavior in Shanghai Courtesan Houses."

⁸⁵ Woodside, *Community and Revolution*.

⁸⁶ Marr, "The 1920s Women's Rights Debates in Vietnam." Whitmore, "Social Organization and Confucian Thought in Vietnam." Also see the essays: Woodside, "Classical Primordialism and the Historical Agendas of Vietnamese Confucianism;" Taylor, "Vietnamese Confucian Narratives;" and McHale, "Mapping a Vietnamese Confucian Past and Its Transition to Modernity;" in *Rethinking Confucianism*.

⁸⁷ Whitmore, "Social Organization and Confucian Thought," 298.

one another to survive. Women worked in rice fields alongside men, and women often supported the family. In village festivals, men and women mingled. Moralistic teachings remained unrealistic in everyday life. In contrast, in wealthier families, three generations could live in one household with the means to maintain the cultural fixtures of Confucian hierarchies and morals.⁸⁸

The bureaucracy comprised male elites steeped in Confucian morals, which meant the dominant elite culture was intrinsically degrading to women (including courtesans). In rural areas, when disaster struck, poorer families sometimes sold their daughters as concubines or laborers, and at any time a scholar-official could appropriate a farmer's daughter who caught his eye. In addition, it seems that in Vietnam, as in other East and South Asian contexts, courtesan culture provided one way for male elites to enjoy the company of women who were not their wives.

The Nguyễn court in the nineteenth century attempted to spread Confucianism at the village level. The 1840s and 1850s saw social unrest, natural calamities, and administrative neglect. This led to the repeated failure of the Red River dike system, upon which agriculture relied. The bookishness of Confucianism seemed to fail the leadership in providing pragmatic solutions to such pressing concerns. An added problem was that with the new seat of power in the central city of Huế, the kingdom was more vulnerable to military invasion from the coast and was outgunned by European military technology.⁸⁹

The French began colonizing the Vietnamese kingdom in 1858. They led military occupations and sought collaborative partners in the local bureaucracies among scholar-officials. This created a mentality of collaborationism among some Vietnamese that would continue into

⁸⁸ Marr, "Women's Rights Debates."

⁸⁹ David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism: 1885-1925* (University of California Press, 1971).

the twentieth century.⁹⁰ The French manipulated the existing Vietnamese system to control the population by keeping in place the king and the bureaucracy. Treaties of the 1880s made protectorates out of the center and northern regions, Annam and Tonkin.⁹¹ Cochinchina, the southern region, became the seat of French power.

The French initiated large changes, building new infrastructure such as roads and railroads, encouraging population growth and migration to urban areas, and integrating the local economy into global markets. Confucian morals decayed alongside the elite Confucian class, leaving a chasm that modern legal codes did not fill, and Vietnamese society began to lose Confucian moralism. It was undermined by French colonialism, and society tumbled into a time of tumultuous transformation; as some modern Vietnamese accounts frame it, it was a kind of rebirth.

The traditional elites, the patrons of *ca trù*, went into decline, fundamental aspects of social organization changed, and French economic motives created urban spheres, which were new to Vietnam. This was the context in which singing houses flourished and where the singing tradition developed negative associations, which is why colonial history, while not directly responsible for the decline in status of courtesan singing in the early twentieth century, is important to consider.⁹²

The ruin of the scholar-gentry class, the traditional patrons of courtesans, began with the French maintaining two parallel regimes, one that controlled the populace and the other the indigenous imperial government.⁹³ This eventually made the scholar-gentry's place in society

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Woodside, *Community and Revolution*.

⁹² Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật*.

⁹³ Woodside, *Community and Revolution*.

unnecessary. In the late nineteenth century, this class's decay was a "crucial aspect of that communal disintegration which haunted the psychology" of many Vietnamese thereafter.⁹⁴ In Woodside's words, the "proudest bureaucracy in Southeast Asia" had transformed into a "stuffy sanatorium for victims of inferiority complexes."⁹⁵

The French undermined the scholar-gentry with new classes of Vietnamese who served in the colonial regime. This included a large body of Vietnamese students who were trained as interpreters and Vietnamese women who attended to French men. In so doing, the French altered the status quo of social and economic hierarchies and the traditional requirements of acquiring status, as professional advancement for men no longer required the acquisition of knowledge of Confucian classics and literacy in *Hán Nôm* (Sino-Vietnamese) script. People from lower classes could gain status and wealth by other means, and this social reordering further destabilized the traditional elites.⁹⁶

This period witnessed changes in literary tastes and modes of education among Vietnamese, which also would affect *ca trù*'s trajectory. French colonials encouraged education in western language and culture and for Vietnamese to become French citizens, which, while rarely actually occurring, promised better treatment under colonial law and better access to advancement in the new economy.⁹⁷ The French encouraged a Romanized Vietnamese writing system called *quốc ngữ*, which after 1900 spread widely. Based on the Roman alphabet rather than *Hán Nôm* (Sino-Vietnamese script) in which Vietnamese literature and pre-1900 *ca trù* poetry were written, the Romanized system was more easily learned. It enabled an explosion of

⁹⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Woodside, *Community and Revolution*.

literacy and consequently the spread of anticolonial rhetoric.⁹⁸ Vietnamese literary culture drifted away from Chinese-oriented expressions—those traditionally written in *Hán Nôm*, which constituted poems with a literary link to Chinese forms.⁹⁹ Intellectuals educated in French language and in this new script moved toward journalism, prose fiction, and new forms of poetry, with more global awareness of art, writing, music, and philosophy than ever before and in the conflicted and brewing social milieu of Vietnamese nationalism, anticolonialism, and collaborationism.¹⁰⁰

Among these larger movements, as in many parts of the world, educated women in the upper classes came to think of themselves as a social group and began to see themselves through discourse as equals to men.¹⁰¹ In the early twentieth century, it has been argued that one reason that Vietnamese women could resist gender hierarchies was that they had never completely indigenized Chinese-oriented norms of behavior.¹⁰² In Vietnamese historiography, the liberation

⁹⁸ McHale, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (University of Hawaii Press, 2004); Woodside, *Community and Revolution*; Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*.

⁹⁹ An important thing to note again is that, previous to the twentieth century, knowledge of Chinese culture and literary forms was advantageous and afforded career advancement for literati. Identity politics, a problematic aspect of society to discuss in an historical context, must have been different in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, and this period certainly defined some themes of these politics that would flow into the rest of the twentieth century.

¹⁰⁰ Peter Zinoman, "Introduction: Vũ Trọng Phụng's *Dumb Luck* and the Nature of Vietnamese Modernism," in Vũ Trọng Phụng, *Dumb Luck*, ed. Peter Zinoman, trans. Zinoman and Nguyễn Nguyệt Cầm (University of Michigan Press, 2002); McHale, *Print and Power*.

¹⁰¹ Marr, "Women's Rights Debates."

¹⁰² Ibid. See also a pithy translated fictional account of the lives of concubines: Manh Phu Tu, "Life as a Concubine," in *Vietnamese Women in Society and Revolution: Volume 1, The French Colonial Period*, trans. Ngo Vinh Long and ed. Paul Grace, Susan Koff, Nancy Nichols, Susan Phillips, Mike Prokosch, and Truong Ding Hung (Cambridge, MA: Vietnam Resource Center, 1974). For a direct view into this culture, see: Duong Van Mai Elliott, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family* (Oxford University Press, 1999). On the question of Confucian morals and women's autonomy in Vietnam, see also: John K. Whitmore, "Social

of women is attributed to socialist Vietnamese men who fostered and supported, within the anticolonial struggle, the freeing of Vietnamese women from the bonds of backward culture of the imperial era.¹⁰³

Social organization shifted in Vietnamese society through the early twentieth century. In 1919, the French colonial government discontinued the civil service examination, which the class of the scholar-gentry had taken for meritocratic advancement. This further destabilized the class, as no testing barrier or system of recruitment replaced it. Local government became grossly subjugated to the French regime, and scholar-officials became symbols of an aging, corrupt, backward world, while the French had a monopoly on administrative positions of power.¹⁰⁴ The impetus and the path to advancement for these traditional civil servants disappeared, and intelligent young men sought careers in urban areas rather than in rural administration.

Young Vietnamese were studying in French and in the new Romanized writing system, as these were economically more advantageous than learning to read and write Chinese. Studying Chinese poetry and writing, and becoming indoctrinated in Confucian morals lost economic and social impetus (that is not to say Confucian morals disappeared from Vietnamese society). This appears to have had a detrimental effect on the cultivation of courtesan music, as intellectual men no longer studied for career advancement the conventions upon which poetry

Organization and Confucian Thought in Vietnam;” Insun Yu, *Law and Society in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Vietnam* (Korea: Asiatic Research Centre, Korea University, 1990); Nguyen Tuyet Tran, “Gender, Property, and the “Autonomy Thesis” in Southeast Asia: The Endowment of Local Succession in Early Modern Vietnam,” *The Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 67, no. 1 (2008): 43-72.

¹⁰³ Đặng Thị Vân Chi, “Vấn đề phụ nữ ở Việt Nam trước cách mạng tháng tám năm 1945: Nội dung và giải pháp” [“The issue of women in Vietnam before the August Revolution of 1945”], paper presented at the Hội thảo Quốc tế Việt Nam học lần thứ ba [The Third International Vietnamese Studies Conference] (December, 2008).

¹⁰⁴ Woodside, *Community and Revolution*; and *Lost Modernities*.

was based. This marks a point at which society disconnected with older literary traditions (this has been a hurdle for the revival of the music in society more recently).

There was an increased availability of new ideas in Vietnamese society. Woodside writes that the Vietnamese were reading everything from Confucius to Rousseau. Discursive debates and those creating them, however, were “trapped in a general climate of demoralization.”¹⁰⁵ In 1926, there was an investigation of officials in three age categories from different educational backgrounds, and it was found that local governments were all engaging in unseemly behavior regardless of educational background.¹⁰⁶ While the longstanding connection between law and morality degraded, modern law did not patch the holes. The local populace did not widely understand the overlaid colonial legal system parallel to local law, and this thrust disparity between law and practice.¹⁰⁷

The blossoming of print media is a germane factor in this history. In imperial Vietnam, intellectuals were not connected as a community that discoursed through media.¹⁰⁸ This changed as new classes of intellectuals helped spread literacy, publishing, and new forms of expression. Public debate included notions of moral behavior, ethics, and social practice, not only among intellectual men, but also French-educated women.¹⁰⁹

Armed with increased literacy and a publishing industry, they also debated independence from the French.¹¹⁰ The French jailed anticolonial intellectuals, and worked to quiet political

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. McHale, *Print and Power*.

¹⁰⁹ Marr, “Women’s Rights,” *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*; and *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial: 1920-1945* (University of California, 1981); McHale, *Print and Power*.

¹¹⁰ Marr, “Women’s Rights,” 375; McHale’s *Print and Power* is an excellent source on the effects of print media on Vietnamese society.

discourse by attempting to control the media and subsidizing periodicals such as *Nam Phong* (*Vietnamese Ethos*).¹¹¹ Its editor, Phạm Quỳnh advocated studying literature in Romanized Vietnamese. He expressed routes for reform in the education of women: If women were to have equal rights, they needed educational training; women should have different educational tracks depending upon their class, one for upper, one for middle, and none for lower class, who would seldom be free from labor to study.¹¹²

The traditional institutions and social structures, upon which *ca trù* as an elite cultural fixture in courtesan singing had developed, were dissolving. Detachment from *Hán Nôm* (Sino-Vietnamese)-oriented literary culture was to the detriment of *ca trù*, and within these larger cultural changes, the semiotic frame of courtesans shifted from *cô đầu*-as-courtesan to *cô đầu*-as-prostitute.

The material success of the nouveau riche Vietnamese was founded upon collaborationism, which was discordant with anticolonialism. Phạm Quỳnh, a notable collaborationist, provides an apposite example. He wrote in the 1920s on the topic of courtesan singing. Between the late nineteenth century and the early 1920s, courtesan singing had become a popular diversion in urban red-light districts. Phạm Quỳnh, in this article, which I discuss more in the next chapter, introduces the main features of musical and poetic appreciation in the refined manner of *ngày xưa* (former days), which means in this context a past uncontaminated by French colonials. He laments about the rabble in the red-light districts that had ruined the culture of the music,¹¹³ indicating his own elevated status above them and simultaneously pointing to an

¹¹¹ Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*.

¹¹² Marr, “Women’s Rights,” 376-77.

¹¹³ Phạm Quỳnh, “Văn chương trong lối hát ả đào” [Literature in courtesan singing], republished in *Ca trù nhìn từ nhiều phía* [*Ca trù seen from many angles*], edited by Thanh Việt (Hanoi: Nhà

inherent difficulty in his collaborationist status and the effect by the French presence on vestiges of Vietnamese cultural heritage. In an instructional manual for the uninitiated audience member of the courtesan singing session, the author lamented, similarly to Phạm Quỳnh, about the deteriorated status of the *ả đào* (courtesan) arts.¹¹⁴

The milieu in which they wrote included an expanding upper class of women with French-centered educations; in this period, women's organizations had started forming. The first was the Women's Labor-Study Association, which advocated that women were not inherently inferior, and that the status of women as inferior was the result of cultural conditioning, which of course could change. This stance argued against Confucian norms and their effects on women and that both men and women should avoid infidelity.¹¹⁵ French colonial officials, in contrast, aligned with Confucian thought. They tried to subdue women's rights debates to keep women in their traditional roles as wives, mothers, and daughters.¹¹⁶ Thus many ideas concerning morality and gender were available in this time.

Literate women had available many kinds of books and journals, including texts on moral behavior, cookbooks, and books on hygiene and sexual hygiene, venereal disease, and family medicine. These were not available previous to this time, and they emphasized healthy lifestyles

xuất bản Văn hóa thông tin [Culture and Information Publishing House], 2004). This was originally published in *Nam Phong* 69 (1923).

¹¹⁴ Cuồng Sỹ, *Học đánh châu và bình phẩm lối hát Cô đầu xưa nay* [Learning the Praise Drum and Commentary on Songstress Singing in the Past] (Hanoi: Nhật nam thư quân được phòng, 1933).

¹¹⁵ Marr, "Women's Rights," 386-7.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 384-86. Ideas that arose in the 1920s regarding women's roles in society continued to be taught in schools at least until 1975 in the Republic of Vietnam. Marr, "Women's Rights," 388.

and condemned activities such as prostitution and smoking opium, which were rampant in the red-light districts¹¹⁷ where courtesan singing flourished in the *nhà cô đâu* (courtesan house).

The Romanized writing system, which the French had initially promoted, resulted in an explosion of print media and had allowed the Vietnamese to imagine themselves as an entity. They discoursed on a national level for the first time.¹¹⁸ On the side of art, literature and music, older modes of expression faded, as agendas shifted and splintered. After the declaration of Vietnam as a communist nation in 1945, society would turn away from many older customs and culture, which would become viewed as backward.

Several important events led to this moment in 1945. In summary, starting in 1940, the Japanese invaded and occupied Vietnam for the remainder of World War II. In 1941, the revolutionary leader Hồ Chí Minh returned to Vietnam from a long period of exile abroad and formed the organization called Việt Minh. On March 9, 1945, Japan completely seized power from the collaborating French regime. The last Nguyễn emperor in the central city of Huế, Bảo Đại, declared independence from France and appeared to become briefly an ally with the greater Japanese effort.¹¹⁹ Propagandizing and takeovers in rural areas led to popular support for the communist-led insurrection across the central and northern provinces. The communists and their agents seized granaries during a great famine, accelerated by Japan's mismanagement of the colonial economy and Allied Forces' bombing of shipment routes. This famine worsened toward the end of 1944, and at least a million Vietnamese died of starvation. By seizing granaries and

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 382.

¹¹⁸ McHale, *Print and Power*; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006).

¹¹⁹ An excellent introduction to twentieth-century Vietnamese history is provided in the tome on Southeast Asian History: Norman G. Owen, ed., *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History* (University of Hawaii Press, 2005).

providing food to hungry villagers, the Việt Minh gained alliances with village leaders. When Japan surrendered to the Allies in 1945, the Việt Minh recruited peasants to take power in urban areas. Today this is called the August Revolution, and this moment is used to periodize the beginning of the end of colonial domination. In some respects, it was merely an opportunistic seizure of power from Japan following their surrender to the Allied Forces. At this time, the last emperor abdicated, and Hồ Chí Minh declared independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on September 2, 1945 (on the square in which his mausoleum rests).

Reflecting historiographical paradigms of the present, Đặng Thị Vân Chi writes on the status of women leading up to this moment in 1945. Đặng betrays prominent ideological influences that are characteristic of a widespread re-framing of Vietnamese history today.¹²⁰ She argues that women's liberation from the bonds of "feudal"¹²¹ moral teachings was central to many intellectual spheres of the early twentieth century. In this view, communists and other radical groups in the late colonial period supported feminism, and the establishment of the Vietnam Communist Party in 1930 was not only momentous for the nation but also created new opportunities for the emancipation of women. Đặng argues that this created the groundwork for gender equality, because women's rights were always central to the Party's mission. She writes that the Party was active in propagandizing through journals and leaflets distributed to the new Romanized Vietnamese-reading public, and women of all classes were called to join the revolution.¹²²

¹²⁰ Đặng Thị Vân Chi, "Vấn đề phụ nữ." Đặng is a professor at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities at the Vietnam National University Hanoi.

¹²¹ I am here using the characteristic language of late-twentieth-century Vietnamese historiography, where feudal, *phong kiến* in Vietnamese, connotes a backwards way of life.

¹²² Ibid.

Đặng notes that the role of women in society was a central point of debate leading to 1945. Debate included discussion of prostitutes and a new class of women, the French-educated *Gái mới* (new girl), who threatened the status quo of the traditional roles of Vietnamese women in society.¹²³ The Party and its male leaders, Đặng writes, freed women from imperial-era customs and increased rights for women. Ostensibly, this would have included banishing from polite society prostitution, which, at that time, would have included courtesan-songstresses. Đặng concludes the article by casting an image of Hồ Chí Minh declaring independence after the August Revolution of 1945, women standing alongside the male communist leaders at the head of Ba Đình Square.¹²⁴

The sentiment in this narrative is that communist revolutionary men freed women from the imperial-era cultural legacy of subjugation, or that communism saved women. This orientation toward the imperial-era culture as backward, especially with regard to gender and power issues, framed the treatment of *hát ả đào* (courtesan singing) in the mid-twentieth century and re-framed its revival as *ca trù* (token songs) after the 1980s, and this involved socialist-oriented historiography with respect to the Party's role in procuring women's rights. The argument that communism founded a movement for women's rights is an attempt, which involves the historiographical architecture of state culture brokers, to buttress the Party's authority and the nation's re-unification. *Ca trù's* reinvention and the re-oriented understandings of gender hierarchies of the past are simply part of this larger narrative, which included reframing of Confucian pasts and histories of gender hierarchies therein.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Indochina Wars

With British aid, the French returned to southern Vietnam in 1945. Hồ Chí Minh, as president of the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam, could not persuade the French to decolonize, and war began in late 1946. Hồ's strategy was to mobilize the entire population.¹²⁵ Into the 1950s, the regime in the north spread the message that, without their leadership, "the genius of 'the people' would never be expressed."¹²⁶ This marked the beginning of modern Vietnamese historiography exemplified by the article by Đặng above, and it legitimized the regime's authority while affirming the importance of the people within this hierarchy. The Việt Minh finally defeated the French colonials in 1954 in the battle of Điện Biên Phủ.¹²⁷ The country was split along the seventeenth parallel after the 1954 Geneva Conference, and the southern regime based in Saigon came under US patronage.

As Pelley writes, a reverence for historical heroes and the national past developed and reached particular height in the commemorations of the 1950s and 1960s. This tradition of commemorations will be important to consider in the context of modern Vietnam in Chapter Six. In 1960, the commemoration of Hanoi's nine-hundred fiftieth anniversary "washed away the imprecision of the past;"¹²⁸ this also confirmed that Hanoi was the legitimate seat of power and that the Nguyễn Dynasty (which had put the capital in Huế in 1802) was illegitimate and had never been supported by the people. Debates over history located authentic culture in the traditional village.¹²⁹ This placed the authentic past of *ca trù* also in the village, contributing to

¹²⁵ Owen, *The Emergence*, 344-45.

¹²⁶ Patricia Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*, 242.

¹²⁷ Owen, *The Emergence*, 345.

¹²⁸ Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*, 243. Hanoi became the capital again under the communist regime in the North.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 244.

the decay in collective memory of associations between the music of *ca trù* and the prostitution of urban areas in the early twentieth century.

Cold war politics drew the US to intervene in Vietnam, and decades of bloodshed followed.¹³⁰ The Việt Minh engaged in guerrilla warfare, using its southern National Liberation Front. The US increased involvement through the 1960s. In 1969, there were 540,000 Americans in Vietnam. Five years of peace talks in Paris concluded in 1973 with the withdrawal of US troops. In 1975, South Vietnam fell to the North, and they were unified,¹³¹ or re-unified, as it is today phrased.

What effect did this all have on music after the communists declared independence in 1945? It is hard to imagine any non-revolutionary or patriotic form of music surviving in robust form in the North from 1945 to 1975. This period saw westernized revolutionary music and folk music adapted with revolutionary lyrics, and the rise of various popular forms of music, which included folk singers such as Trịnh Công Sơn, the “Bob Dylan of Vietnam.” Other forms of folk music were preserved to varying extents. It seems courtesan singing was widely shunned,¹³² as I discuss in the following chapters.

In 1979, Vietnam invaded Cambodia after the genocidal Pol Pot regime had attacked the border areas of southern Vietnam. China meanwhile engaged Vietnam in a border dispute in the North. Relations between Vietnam and China had already been strained, as Chinese merchants

¹³⁰ Owen, *The Emergence*, 345-6.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 346. This war brought the end to the possibility of a multi-party democracy in Vietnam, and caught between the communist Vietnamese and the Americans were the southern Vietnamese. *Ibid.*, 347. A mass exodus of refugees followed and many southerners were sent to re-education camps.

¹³² Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử*.

had been blamed for undermining Vietnam's economic agenda, and tensions had led to an exodus of Chinese from Vietnam.¹³³

After unification, Vietnam was dependent on the Soviet Bloc for a decade-long subsidy period of hunger and difficulty. Hanoi's economic agenda, notably collectivized agriculture, was proving ineffective. By 1986, the government was bloated and corrupt. Competing factions arose within the Communist Party but were suppressed.

In 1986, Vietnam launched into an economic reform period called *Đổi mới* (New Change). This was a move away from a subsidy economy toward a socialist-oriented market economy and global integration. Vietnam lacked a merchant class, historically relying on merchants from India and China, so this class had to be created, which was a hurdle in fostering a market economy after the 1980s. In comparison to China, which had Hong Kong, Vietnam lacked a trove of capitalist knowhow.¹³⁴ In 1988, collectivism was renounced, but land still belonged to the state. A law in 1993 declared that land leases would last up to fifty years ("the people" owned the land, but individuals could not). Laws were created to promote foreign investment. New laws created a gap between statutes and social practice, and this remains a problem.¹³⁵ One example is the flow of traffic around helpless police officers on an average day in any urban center; they are called *cá vàng*—"gold fish"—because of the color of their uniforms and because they do nothing.

Since the late 1980s, Vietnam has rapidly developed and integrated into the global economy while maintaining a one-party communist government. The situation today is not dissimilar from the 1920s and 1930s, with the constant breakdown and reinvention of traditional

¹³³ Owen, *The Emergence*, 474.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

social structures. The debates of the early twentieth century are ongoing. Women's place in family, society, and the workplace is a particularly visible battleground.

This change in economics was a fundamental shift. Historiographical projects turned more towards reviving, renovating, and reframing old imperial forms of culture, which, Pelley writes, was a project that had began in the mid-twentieth century. At first, they emphasized rebelliousness and resistance against foreign aggression. This was a change from history writing of the imperial period, where emphasis was on peaceful affirmations of monarchical power and legitimacy. They turned away from imperial-era cyclical forms of writing history for linear forms with the stress being on progression, social evolution, and development. Scholars rejected traces of France's longtime occupation and influence, and allowed aspects of imperial-era culture to come to the foreground. They translated major works and rewrote classical histories, bringing ancient writings to a public that read in Romanized Vietnamese. Keeping stride with nationalist sentiment, historians battled French and Chinese assertions that Vietnam did not have its own culture. In Pelley's words, they "demolished the clichés of French colonial historiography and, in the process, disengaged their own past from the tyranny of Sinitic paradigms."¹³⁶ This aptly frames *hát ả đào* (courtesan singing)'s decline and *ca trù* (token song)'s revival.

Vietnam since the 1950s had been coping with the creation of a new national identity. As a kingdom, the area that the Vietnamese occupied defined the polity's boundaries. Vietnam the nation-state was multiethnic, including ethnicities in remote inland regions. The histories created after the 1950s had to include ethnographies of multiple ethnic groups within the new national borders.¹³⁷ These other ethnic groups, fifty-three to be exact, live mostly in mountainous and

¹³⁶ Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

remote regions with limited access to political process, education, and basic modern conveniences.

Pelley shows that historians in this time had also begun foraging for authenticity in imperial-era Vietnamese history. The process was fraught because their history included literary traditions rooted in Chinese literature, which was perceived as inauthentic; one of the paradoxes of *ca trù* in society today is that it grew from this literary heritage. The Vietnamese sought to usher themselves into the modern world with a national identity distinct from the Chinese and French. *Ca trù*, which had a history alongside elite Confucian culture and had fallen into disrepute under French colonialism, so represented all that the communist revolution and its historians fought against. How did this culture become a source of pride in modern Vietnam?

“Abandoning conventional views that underscored the complex intermingling of Chinese and Vietnamese traditions, they began to discuss new ways of conceptualizing culture. They focused on what they believed would be pure and authentic: folklore, folktales, folkways—in short, rural culture.”¹³⁸

Ca trù in its reinvention was re-centered in this folk and rural past. In modern Vietnamese historiography, authentic culture became the “national essence,” a unified vision of Vietnamese—even while, I would argue, that culture remained essentially diverse in real terms. “Unified” and “rebellious” were useful qualities during the war against the Americans. After 1975, however, when Vietnam was unified under one government, these paradigms were abandoned for a “cult of antiquity” and images of peace. Historians turned to re-imagining the past and this became a mechanism to control the present.¹³⁹

Hanoi’s 2010 celebration of its one-thousandth anniversary, notwithstanding the aforementioned historical interruptions to this continuity, is an apt example. Such

¹³⁸ Ibid., 241.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 242.

commemorations contribute to managing the present by re-organizing the past. In the campaign banners around Hanoi leading to this commemoration, images included *ca trù*; the celebratory programming included *ca trù* performance. This helped foster a sense of cultural continuity and authenticity in a manner similar to what Pelley describes with regard to historiography.

Revisionism surrounding *ca trù* remains prominent. The commonly held view is that the music evolved from functioning in ritual to functioning for artistic enjoyment.¹⁴⁰ The music developed from the folk music of an undocumented past (mythical origins) into one for the intellectual elite entertainment. This construction shows the music evolving into a high art by the nineteenth century, and therefore any occurrence thereafter was illegitimate. Revisionism of the music is tangled with larger debates of framing the period in which the French colonized. Integral to these debates is the role of women in society, which taps into larger discussions of Confucianism in Vietnam.

¹⁴⁰ Bùi Trọng Hiền, “Không gian văn hóa,” 90.

Chapter III

A History of Ca trù

Nguyễn Đôn Phục wrote in 1923 that there were three ways of playing the *trống châu* (praise drum) and thereby three ways of participating in a singing session of *hát ả đào* (courtesan singing). The first way he preferred: A dignified intellectual with knowledge of Confucian morals, poetry, and history, played the drum elegantly. The second was the way of the countryside, where the player followed the rhythms of the *phách* (the idiophone played by the singer). Countryside here meant, presumably, the village *đình* (tutelary spirit worship house), in which centuries-old patrilineal *giáo phường* (guilds) performed. The third way was of the malicious man, who lacked character and roved the red-light districts. Summarizing the times, he wrote, “For every day the frivolous man succeeds, the noble man sees decay.”¹⁴¹

The context to which he was speaking was the urban singing house. With the rise of urban areas of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, songstresses had opened private singing houses, in which a new form of patronage had been created. The economics of performance and the social practices had shifted, and the semiotic frame also changed. In this time, courtesan became a dirty word, which led to the music being shunned in the mid-twentieth century.

¹⁴¹ Nguyễn Đôn Phục, “Khảo luận về cuộc hát ả đào” [Treatise on the affair of *hát ả đào* (singing of the songstresses)], in *Ca trù nhìn từ*. This article originally appeared in the periodical *Nam phong* [Southern Ethos] 70 (1923).

Previous to the rise of this new venue in the music's history, songstresses had performed in village festivals in tutelary spirit worship, for festive occasions, and in the private homes of wealthy and intellectual men. The practices today called *ca trù* have precursors that have been divided neatly by modern historians. The category of ritual includes *Hát cửa đình* (singing at the ancestor and tutelary spirit temple); the category of entertainment includes *Hát cửa quyền* (singing in the homes of the powerful), *Hát cung đình* (singing in the royal palace) and *Hát ả đào* (courtesan or songstress singing), which also has been called *hát nhà cô đầu* (singing at the courtesan's house) and *hát ca quán* (singing at the singing café).¹⁴² The extant musical repertory of “*ca trù*” descended from these various spheres. I discuss here these pasts with a focus on the origins of these categories and the paradigms of historiography that frame them today, in order to parse the paradigms of historiography affecting understandings of this music in modern Vietnam.

Ca trù's Feminism and Socialism's Egalitarianism: A Marriage Made in Discourse

Stories of *ca trù*'s origins and its famous and heroic songstresses are sprinkled into Vietnamese history. In discourse, they are presented as legend and serve to emphasize the trope of the female warrior in Vietnamese history, to stress the importance of *ca trù* in Vietnamese history, and to buttress the idea that songstresses were talented artists and also virtuous protectors of the homeland, which reverberates with recent Vietnamese history.

A story of a warrior-songstress is set in the fifteenth century, after the short-lived Hồ Dynasty (1400-1407) and during the Chinese Ming invasion (1407-1427). The Vietnamese musicologist Trần Văn Khê reiterates this, and it is an account that suggests *ả đào* (courtesan singers) arose in this period. The story, in the trope of a powerful female character resisting

¹⁴² Bùi Trọng Hiền, “Không gian văn hóa,” Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật*.

foreign aggression, is commonly known today, and contributes to a sense of continuity in Vietnamese historiography.¹⁴³

In the village Dài Xá, in the Ả đào hamlet, a talented young songstress and dancer earned the admiration and confidence of the invading Ming soldiers. The soldiers slept in a kind of mosquito shelter, similar to a sleeping bag, that required sewing shut from the outside every evening. In addition to entertaining the invaders, this became one of the singer's duties. But each night, she dragged out a few soldiers as they slumbered, and tossed them into the river, reducing enemy forces in her village over time by half and scaring away the remainder with the mysterious disappearances. A temple was built in the village in her honor, and the music of the “ả đào” flourished from the fifteenth century.¹⁴⁴

Đỗ Bằng Đoàn and Đỗ Trọng Huề (in their book from 1962) reference this story, noting that the village was called Đào đặng (in Tiên Lữ district, Hưng Yên province). In their version, the singer's family name was Đào. After a temple was built in her honor, the hamlet was called Ả đào hamlet, and eventually those in the profession of singing were called ả đào (literally, “peach lass”). They write also that a famous and talented eleventh-century singer was named Đào Thị. This led eventually to *con hát* (a pejorative meaning “singer”) being called more respectfully *đào nương*, another synonym for songstress.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Wilcox, “Women and Mythology in Vietnamese History.”

¹⁴⁴ Trần Văn Khê, *La musique vietnamienne traditionnelle*, 25. The family I rented an apartment from in Hanoi in 2006 and 2007 were from this village, and the elderly patriarch was very pleased that I knew this story. It was clearly part of the folklore of growing up in the village.

¹⁴⁵ Đỗ Bằng Đoàn, Đỗ Trọng Huề, *Việt-nam Ca-trù Biên Khảo*, 45-6. The term *con hát* speaks to a historically rooted meaning, as in this time singers were not important and were of a lower class in society.

A *đền* (temple)¹⁴⁶ on Hàng Trống Street in Hanoi honors another songstress named Nguyễn Thị Huệ from the period of the Lê Dynasty (1428-1771). Her mother performed with a guild, and her father was a Confucian scholar “with no luck,” which meant he could not pass the civil service examination. He became an herbalist. After the girl performed at a lord’s house one evening, the lord summoned her. He fell in love with her, the story goes, and gave her an honorific title. The year in which they were married, Hanoi was hit by a plague, and she helped to save many people, using her father’s traditional medicine. The temple was built in her honor, and, because her name was Huệ, it is custom *not* to make offerings with the flower of the same name (a lily) at the temple.¹⁴⁷ A similar custom surrounded singing practices in *hát cửa đình*. Singers had the custom of substituting a different name for tutelary spirits out of respect. Speaking the name risked offending the spirit. This belief is still embodied in performances today.¹⁴⁸

In the early eighteenth century, another story goes, a young student was expelled from his home by one of his deceased father’s wives. The young man was forced to live on the streets and beg for food. During a festival, he met and “fell into the eyes” of a beautiful young songstress. Afterwards, she supported him while he studied for the civil service examination, which he eventually passed.¹⁴⁹ Adding to list of the songstress’s accomplishments in history, we have cunning warrior, herbalist savior, and now loyal wife supporting her husband’s career advancement.

¹⁴⁶ Generally a *đền* is where sainted people are worshipped and hero cults are centered, whereas a *chùa* is a Buddhist pagoda and a *đình* is an historic building where tutelary spirits of villages are worshipped.

¹⁴⁷ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử và nghệ thuật Ca trù*, 82.

¹⁴⁸ Đỗ Bằng Đoàn, Đỗ Trọng Huề, *Việt-nam Ca-trù Biên Khảo*, 52. Nguyễn Thúy Hòa and Nguyễn Văn Khuê often mentioned this substitution.

¹⁴⁹ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử và nghệ thuật Ca trù*.

Another story tells of a young man named Sinh, an herbalist, who met two elderly men by the river as he was playing the *đàn nguyệt* (moon lute) and drinking wine. The elderly men gave him a drawing of plans to make a *đàn đáy* (three-stringed lute), which had not yet been invented. Sinh built the lute and played it. Later in life, he was treating a young woman, the daughter of a scholar. Her name was Hoa (flower). He fell in love with her, they married, and together they invented a song and dance tradition in the town of Cổ Đạm, an area perceived today as having a long *ca trù* tradition.¹⁵⁰ A similar story comes from the village of Lỗ Khê, a village near present-day Hanoi that is said to be the birthplace of *ca trù*. Nguyễn Xuân Diện notes parallels of these stories and others, hypothesizing that they point to the possible locales of origin.

Mythic stories of origins are not necessarily informative for the writing of linear history, but, as Nguyễn Xuân Diện stresses, they are integral to traditional culture of Vietnam.¹⁵¹ If culture is expressive (or the embodiment) of identity, then the imagining of a mythic past from whence culture sprang is integral to collective Vietnamese identity.

In Vietnamese language about music, most music of Vietnam is referred to as *âm nhạc dân gian* (folk music) or *âm nhạc truyền thống* (traditional music), both of which denote a transmission of amateur or semi-professional music from one generation to the next that dates back to an unknowable or undocumented origin. Origins stories exist in what are called *truyện cổ tích* (old story, legend) or *truyện thuyết* (legend), and are told in cultural histories as well as in the mass media. The construction of these narratives imbues the legends with authority in society and the stories themselves are “discursive act[s] through which actors evoke the sentiments out

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 71.

of which society is actively constructed.”¹⁵² Vietnamese historians, after 1954, interwove myth and history to support current visions of society. At the same time, Hanoi-based scholars were charged with writing the history of Vietnamese women, and traced the country’s history from matrilineal origins through imperial patriarchy to the socialist revolution that liberated women from the subjugation of imperial society.¹⁵³

Along the lines of the myth surrounding *ca trù*, the female poets Hồ Xuân Hương and Lê Ngọc Hân have become prominent through recent discursive constructions.¹⁵⁴ By creating myth surrounding these poets, scholars have imbued the histories with paradigmatic tropes for managing the present. Wilcox writes that, through myth making in modern Vietnam, Hồ Xuân Hương became associated with an imagined proto-Socialism of the Tây Sơn Uprisings. Hồ Xuân Hương’s poetry was critical of authority and, in this view, was reflective of the uprising’s progressiveness,¹⁵⁵ but of course the uprisings were by no means “socialist.”¹⁵⁶ Hồ Xuân Hương’s promotion to the canon of Vietnamese literature and her correlation with the Tây Sơn uprisings creates, however, the illusion of historical continuity for socialism, lending authority to the idea of Vietnam as socialist today.¹⁵⁷

“About the continuity or even the survival of their version of the Vietnamese nation, historians and literary critics harkened back to the Tây Sơn era and produced myths to try to assure themselves that their version of the Vietnamese nation would be the one that would survive. As a consequence, scholars in North Vietnam took pains to identify

¹⁵² Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (Oxford, 1989), 24-25; quoted in Wynn Wilcox, “Women and Mythology in Vietnamese History,” at 413.

¹⁵³ Nhung Tuyet Tran, “Beyond the Myth of Equality: Daughters’ Inheritance Rights in the Lê Code,” in *Viet Nam: Borderless Histories*, ed. Nhung Tuyet Tran and Anthony Reid (University of Wisconsin Press, 2006). Also see Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*.

¹⁵⁴ Wilcox, “Women and Mythology in Vietnamese History.”

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*.

¹⁵⁷ Wilcox, “Women and Mythology in Vietnamese History.”

themselves with the Tây Sơn dynasty because they regarded the Tây Sơn as proto-socialist precursors to their own government.”¹⁵⁸

In this sense, the Nguyễn were seen as illegitimate, and the will of the Vietnamese people stayed underground until it resurfaced with the communist revolutionaries of the twentieth century.¹⁵⁹ *Ca trù* lends legitimacy in a similar fashion to certain versions of history that support the present, acting as a symbolic force in the formation of national identity today and also guaranteeing continuity with past national identities.

Reading Vietnamese Music History in Phạm Đình Hổ

Writing about music history, historians today often reference the scholarship of Phạm Đình Hổ, who wrote in the early 1800s. Specifically they reference a chapter of *Vũ trung tùy bút* [A Collection of Essays] that provides a basic outline of Vietnamese music history.¹⁶⁰ The introduction to a Romanized Vietnamese translation of this collection of essays notes its importance in the Vietnamese literary canon. The collection is referred to as a work of art and an important resource for scholars of literature, ethnology, and cultural studies. Reading Phạm Đình Hổ, I get the sense that strict categorization of genres in the context of Vietnamese music history is a challenging pursuit, especially with the overlap of Vietnamese singing genres as well as a general lack of historical and musical evidence.

Phạm Đình Hổ was born to a mandarin family in 1768 in present-day Hải Dương province. He became a mandarin in 1821 and was a prolific scholar. He lived through a period of instability and change. This included the dissolving of the Lê dynasty and the Tây Sơn Uprisings

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Phạm Đình Hổ, *Vũ trung tùy bút*, translated and with an introduction by Trần Thị Kim Anh, (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2003).

in the late eighteenth century and the founding of the Nguyễn dynasty in 1802. He wrote *Vũ trung tùy bút* over a number of years between 1808 and 1818, but not until in the late nineteenth century, long after his death in 1839, did the work become widely known.¹⁶¹ He also wrote an important Hán Nôm dictionary with which the Vietnamese Nôm Preservation Foundation works.

His essay on music is a rare source from before the twentieth century for Vietnamese music history. It includes forays into early songstress practices, Chinese influences on court music, how Vietnamese and Chinese music are distinct, aspects of the establishment of musical guilds, and instrumentation in musical theater and ritual music. It ventures into general discussions of East Asian conceptions of music. Further, the essay's existence shows that, in the early 1800s, music was a subject a scholar would address. In addition, he insists on Vietnamese distinction from other musics. This is read as proto-nationalism by modern historians, and such presuppositions have become commonplace in the literature of Vietnamese music history.

In short, Phạm Đình Hổ establishes paradigms of understanding Vietnamese music history that are still widely adopted. He discusses the period of China's dominance over the Vietnamese territory (the first millennium AD), after which came the Lý and Trần Dynasties (1010-1400). He views this period as having simple, rustic music. He notes two basic categories of *Vãn ca* and *Ban hí*. *Vãn ca* was funeral procession music. *Ban hí* was a kind of comedic theater. Musicians and actors performed for guests while the latter enjoyed wine.¹⁶² In other words, there were established ritual and entertainment contexts before the fifteenth century, although we know little about them.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

He writes that a more organized system of music started to develop after the fifteenth century, when there was a twenty-year Ming Chinese occupation. This was a windfall for Confucianism among elite Vietnamese and created a resurgence of Chinese cultural influence, including in the realm of music. Trần Văn Khê notes that peace and prosperity after the establishment of the Lê Dynasty (1427) led to a flourishing in the arts in this time of Chinese influence, as the Vietnamese imported court music from the Ming, especially in the reign of Hồng Đức (1470-1497).¹⁶³

Chinese musical influence is framed in Phạm Đình Hồ's essay as an unfortunate one¹⁶⁴ on “*âm nhạc nước nhà*” (our nation's music).¹⁶⁵ He divides the music of Chinese influence into *đồng vãn* (instrumental music) and *nhã nhạc* (refined vocal music).¹⁶⁶ The music was used in ceremony and rituals of the imperial court. Historians still use this division, such as in a book published by the Hanoi Musicology Institute in 2002, as the work relies on Phạm Đình Hồ.¹⁶⁷

By the late sixteenth century, this imported Chinese music was only used at court, unimportant to the masses. Phạm Đình Hồ writes that the music of Chinese influence was unsuitable, and the melodies over time changed. The masses used what he calls *tục nhạc* (secular music). *Tục nhạc* was on the other end of the spectrum from the court music imported from China, and Vietnamese tastes returned after time to *Tục nhạc*.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶³ Trần Văn Khê, *La musique vietnamienne traditionnelle*, 28.

¹⁶⁴ The negative passive voice “*bị*” is used, meaning to be victim to something, as in to “*bị ốm*” (bear sickness).

¹⁶⁵ Phạm Đình Hồ, *Vũ trung tùy bút*, 79.

¹⁶⁶ These translations are based on Phạm Đình Hồ's own descriptions in Vietnamese. See also Bùi Trọng Hiền, “Không gian văn hóa,” 82, who quotes Phạm Đình Hồ.

¹⁶⁷ Nguyễn Ánh Nguyệt, ed., *Âm nhạc Việt Nam: Truyền thống và hiện đại* [Vietnam's music: Tradition and modernity] (Hà Nội: Viện Âm Nhạc [Musicology Institute], 2002), 46-7.

¹⁶⁸ Phạm Đình Hồ, *Vũ trung tùy bút*, 80.

The institutionalization of musical guilds was important to this history. From the fifteenth century, institutional organization in Vietnamese society increased generally. This was parallel to the development of the *giáo phường* (guild), a village-level institution. The intensification of institutional structures was, generally speaking, the result of the organizational force of Confucianism, increasingly present, even while the penetration of the elite cultural fixtures of Confucianism at the village as well as elite levels is a debated point.

Phạm Đình Hồ portrays guilds as organized institutions that had a beneficial effect on the preservation of Vietnamese music. Guilds maintained localized musical practice throughout the time of foreign influence in the fifteenth century, saving the music in a sense. *Tục nhạc*, performed by guilds, was used in rituals among the *dân gian* (folk), such as to worship deities or tutelary spirits.¹⁶⁹ This is likely what more recent historians have called *hát cửa đình*. *Ca trù* has, in this view, resisted foreign invasion for a long time and has roots in village folk culture, as it was a repository of tradition in the face of cultural intrusion from China. Below is a diagram of Phạm Đình Hồ's portrayal to this point.

Lý and Trần Dynasties, 1010-1400	Ming Occupation and influence, 1407-1427	Lê Dynasty, established 1428	
<i>Văn ca</i> : funeral procession music		<i>Court Music</i>	<i>Music in the "Folk"</i>
<i>Ban hí</i> : comedic theater		<i>Nhã nhạc</i> : refined vocal music	<i>Tục nhạc</i> : secular music
		<i>Đồng văn</i> : instrumental music	Maintained by <i>Giáo phường</i> : music guilds

Figure 1: Phạm Đình Hồ's portrayal of musical taxonomies.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

Bùi Trọng Hiền, a cultural studies scholar in Hanoi, offers a reading of the history in which the return to authentic Vietnamese culture, after the importation of Chinese music, was Vietnamese nationalism in action: Vietnamese culture was so attractive that returning to it was inevitable.¹⁷⁰ This reflects the larger historiographical paradigms discussed in Chapter Two. Viewed in this light, the history of Chinese music entering the court in the fifteenth century meant that “true” Vietnamese music was pushed out of the court into the culture of rural villages. Phạm Đình Hổ noted this in the early 1800s, and he has become, thereby, an example of proto-socialism (perhaps along with Hồ Xuân Hương) and proto-nationalism to modern scholars. For noting the importance of resisting foreign influence and the inherent value of Vietnamese culture, he rises to the status of scholarly hero in the model of twentieth-century revolutionary leaders such as Hồ Chí Minh.

Histories of ca trù

In their book from 1962, Đỗ Bằng Đoàn and Đỗ Trọng Huề write that the music of *ca trù* stems from songs and dances of the halls of lords and kings of “*ngày xưa*,” a term in Vietnamese that means “former times” or “long ago.” *Ca trù* developed with other Vietnamese music with local musical elements and those imported and indigenized from China to the north and, to the south, Champa, the Indic-oriented kingdom that the Vietnamese mostly occupied by the end of the fifteenth century.¹⁷¹ Bùi Trọng Hiền, the cultural studies scholar discussed above, speculates that the Vietnamese probably worshipped tutelary spirits and ancestors far longer than historical evidence can show, thus *ca trù* (*hát cửa đình*) probably accompanied ritual practices previous to

¹⁷⁰ Bùi Trọng Hiền, “Không gian văn hóa,” 84.

¹⁷¹ Đỗ Bằng Đoàn, Đỗ Trọng Huề, *Việt-nam Ca-trù Biên Khảo*, 23.

the fifteenth century.¹⁷² Nguyễn Xuân Diện’s exhaustive study of Hán Nôm documents, however, shows the history cannot be traced to before the fifteenth century, even if this history seems likely.

Nguyễn Xuân Diện frames *ca trù* as deeply rooted in the literature, music, rites, and customs of the Vietnamese people, emphasizing the prestige of the music in Vietnamese history.¹⁷³ In his view, *ca trù* is an opportunity for people today to remember the prominent literary figures and *ả đào* (courtesans) of the imperial period. In the past, *ca trù* was a musical and poetic communion between poet and *ả đào*—a way for poets to hear and appreciate their works performed in song.¹⁷⁴

The earliest mention of “*ca trù*,” he writes, dates to a poem called “*Đại nghệ bát giáp thưởng đào giải văn*” (“The ceremony of praising the songstress”) by Lê Đức Mao (1462-1529). Nguyễn Xuân Diện quotes the below excerpt of the poem, writing that the poem evinces the music’s longevity and cultural value today.

*Thọ bồi kể chực, ca trù điểm trăm
Mừng nay tiệc ca trù thị yến*¹⁷⁵

*Many birthday toasts, even more token songs
A happy celebration of ca trù*¹⁷⁶

Songstresses performed this poem in rituals of spring festivals for village tutelary spirits. These occurred in village *đình* (tutelary spirit worship houses) in the provinces that comprise the northern region today. Eight scholars were present to judge and praise the songstresses. To show their praise, they participated in the music by using a *trống chầu* (singing session drum) and *trù*

¹⁷² Bùi Trọng Hiền, “Không gian văn hóa,” 90.

¹⁷³ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật*, 18.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật*, 72-3.

¹⁷⁶ Translated by Bretton Dimick.

or *thẻ* (bamboo tokens), which gives us the moniker “*ca trù*.” “*Ca*” means song and “*trù*” indicates the tokens that represented financial gratuity for performers in this ritual context. The scholars placed the tokens on a platter during a performance, as they praised the singing with strikes to the drum to indicate appreciation.¹⁷⁷ Through this practice, men would *thường thức* (appreciate) songstresses in *hát cửa đình* (singing at the tutelary spirit worship house).

In his study, Nguyễn Xuân Diện looks to rural villages and the carvings there in extant village *đình* (tutelary spirit worship houses). The *đàn đáy* (three-stringed lute used in *ca trù*) was evidently widespread by the sixteenth century, as women are portrayed in carvings playing what appears to be a *đàn đáy*.¹⁷⁸ The presence of this instrument in carvings increased in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁷⁹ Nguyễn Xuân Diện argues therefore *ca trù* was spreading over the course of these centuries.

Musicians in these carvings were part of imperial-era *giáo phường* (guilds), a concept that deserves brief parsing. In a recent article, *giáo phường* was translated to “ensemble,”¹⁸⁰ but in the context of imperial Vietnam I believe that “guild” or “seminary” is more accurate. These were institutions with customs, not simply ensembles. Trần Văn Khê also equates the *giáo phường* to an ensemble, noting the usage also of the *đàn đáy* in this “*orchestra populaire giáo phường*.”¹⁸¹ Nguyễn Văn Mùi of the Thái Hà Ensemble explained it as families who passed along the musical materials in a patrilineal pattern of transmission in imperial times. These

¹⁷⁷ It is unclear to me if the money offered through tokens during such rituals was symbolically offered to tutelary spirits in this act of offering them to songstresses; in ancestor worship, along these lines, one offers money to one’s ancestors through votive burning of tokens of money.

¹⁷⁸ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử và nghệ thuật Ca trù*, 73-4.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 73-5.

¹⁸⁰ Gisa Janichen, “Uniqueness Re-examined: The Vietnamese Lute Đàn Đáy.”

¹⁸¹ See Trần Văn Khê, *Việt-Nam: Collection de l’Institut*, 93. Trần Văn Khê here also cites Phạm Đình Hồ. This essay turns up in many histories of the music of Vietnam.

practices were still in use during the course of Văn Mùì’s life, even in the years after 1945 when *ca trù* was abandoned. This agrees with the portrayal of the *giáo phường* by Đỗ Bằng Đoàn and Đỗ Trọng Huề’s work. They write that the locality in which *ả đào* lived was called the *giáo phường*,¹⁸² as in the alternative translation “seminary,” which also reflects Nguyễn Xuân Diện’s understanding.¹⁸³

In addition to carvings, for further details about the *giáo phường*, Nguyễn Xuân Diện looks to inscriptions on historic steles from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These stone slabs are concentrated in the northern region of Vietnam today, and provide rot-resistant historic documentation to modern historians. The province with the most steles related to *ca trù* is Hà Tây province (outside present-day Hanoi). The majority of them date to the second half of the eighteenth century,¹⁸⁴ the period of great intellectual ferment that preceded the Lê Dynasty collapse, the Tây Sơn Uprisings, and the founding of the Nguyễn Dynasty in 1802.

A *giáo phường* comprised an extended family whose profession was “*ca múa nhạc dân gian*” (folk singing, dancing, and music).¹⁸⁵ The *ty giáo phường* (guild bureau) acted as manager for the various guilds in a district’s villages. At the head of the guild bureau was the *ông trùm* (head male). At the head of a village *giáo phường* was the *ông trùm họ* (male head of the family). A *giáo phường* owned its repertory and the rights to perform in their respective village

¹⁸² Đỗ Bằng Đoàn, Đỗ Trọng Huề, *Việt-nam Ca-trù Biên Khảo*, 47. “*Giáo*” simply means to teach and “*phường*” means guild or neighborhood.

¹⁸³ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật*.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁸⁵ Language such as this follows in the historiographical tradition of emphasizing the rural and folk aspects of the history. *Ibid.*, 250.

worship house. This property was passed in a patriarchal pattern of transmission through the generations and could be bought and sold.¹⁸⁶

Holding the rights to perform in a *đình làng* (village tutelary spirit temple), a *giáo phường* could invite other guilds to help on special occasions. They also held singing examinations (called *hát thi*), which I would surmise must have initiated a mingling of the practices that were otherwise localized in villages. Each *giáo phường* was responsible for everything related to the “*nghi thức hát xướng tế lễ của làng*” (rites of singing for village festivals).¹⁸⁷ As represented in steles from the latter half of the eighteenth century, if a *giáo phường* fell on economic difficulty, it could sell its rights to perform in their *đình* to the local mandarin. Thus the right to perform in a certain house was a privilege and a commodity.¹⁸⁸

Carvings adorning village worship houses from later in the eighteenth century represent scenes of ensembles playing in “*nghi thức hát thờ*” (singing-praying rituals). Ensembles include *đàn đáy* (long-necked, three-stringed lute), *phách ngắn* (short idiophone), *phách dài* (long idiophone), *cây sáo* (flute), *trống cơm* (“rice” drum), and *trống mảnh* (drum).¹⁸⁹

Phạm Đình Hồ notes an orchestral arrangement from the Cảnh Hưng period (1740-1786), during which time *chèo bội* (popular opera) was added to the category of *ban hí* (comedic theater).¹⁹⁰ The orchestra included the *đàn đáy*, the three-stringed lute that *ca trù* accompanists

¹⁸⁶ Đỗ Bằng Đoàn and Đỗ Trọng Huề also discuss this. See *Việt Nam Ca trù biên khảo*, 48-50.

¹⁸⁷ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật*, 78. The *làng* (village) is a potent symbol in collective memory of rural and folk authenticity in Vietnamese culture. In modern Vietnam, the village in history is the source of a true Vietnamese essence.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 82. As I discuss later, Nhung Tuyet Tran also writes on this topic: Tran, “The commodification of village songs and dances in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Vietnam,” in *State, Society and the Market in Contemporary Vietnam: Property, Power, and Values*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai and Mark Sidel (Routledge, 2013).

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁹⁰ Phạm Đình Hồ, *Vũ trung tùy bút*, 83.

used. The *đàn đay* was perhaps of Chinese origin, he writes, disputing the common sentiment that the instrument is uniquely Vietnamese. The orchestra also could include *tiêu* (flute), *trống com* (“rice” drum), and *nhị* (two-stringed fiddle). He writes that the *đàn đay* was not to be played louder than the singer’s voice, and the *đàn đay* player would follow the mode of the singer.¹⁹¹ He uses the terms *mềm* (soft) and *cứng* (hard) to discuss modes, indicating he was a connoisseur and not a professional musician.¹⁹² In addition, Phạm Đình Hồ uses “*đào nương*” (songstress) in this context to describe singers—a term used in the history of *ca trù* as well. This female singer played a *phách*, which he notes was also called *sênh* (a castanet with metal coins).¹⁹³ This is called *sinh tiền* in colonial-era French writing,¹⁹⁴ and differs from the *phách* used in *ca trù*—a small wooden idiophone (commonly rosewood or bamboo) played with two beaters, one solid and one split lengthwise. Nonetheless, this ensemble for popular opera had some similarity in instrumentation, aesthetic, and even terminology with *ca trù*’s precursors.

By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in northern provinces, it seems *ca trù* was widespread in *đình làng* (village temples). In Nguyễn Xuân Diện’s words, it became “*nhu cầu văn hóa*” (a cultural requirement).¹⁹⁵ Guilds began performing in entertainment contexts for festive occasions in the homes of the upper class. Musicians performed in private residences to

¹⁹¹ This is consistent with *ca trù* technique today; however, in pedagogy, singers learn to sing with the use of non-semantic syllables the basic melodic materials of the lute—it is part of learning the modes of songs. For more detail, see Chapter Five.

¹⁹² Historically scholars did not learn much of the technical details or terminology of musicians, it would seem, as musicians were of a low social class. Scholars learned enough to participate through percussive praise with the *trống châu* (singing session drum). Nguyễn Tuyết Phong uses these terms to describe the two prominent *ca trù* modes, *Nam* and *Bắc*, as *soft* and *hard*, respectively. Nguyễn Tuyết Phong, “Vietnam,” *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music: Southeast Asia*, 455.

¹⁹³ Phạm Đình Hồ, *Vũ trung tùy bút*, 84.

¹⁹⁴ Gaston Knosp, *Rapport sur une mission officiele d’etude musicale en Indochine* (E.J. Brill Leyde, 1912), 62.

¹⁹⁵ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật*, 82.

greet notable guests, including diplomats.¹⁹⁶ Nguyễn Xuân Diện stresses this indicates the music's importance, as it was introduced to neighboring countries. Thus it seems to have grown into a central musical practice by the eighteenth century.¹⁹⁷

Phạm Đình Hồ discusses this movement in the history as well—women performed songs in ritual worship and also in the homes of aristocrats and civil servants. He calls the latter *hát cửa quyền* (singing for the powerful). It involved an orchestra of percussion, reed instruments, including a *trúc sinh*,¹⁹⁸ a nine-stringed instrument called *đàn cửu huyền*, a seven-stringed instrument called *đàn thất huyền*, and the more commonly known zither, the *đàn tranh*, which had strings of silk instead of the modern steel. Phạm Đình Hồ writes that the vocal music in this realm was more elegant and refined than among the folk, but the theoretical basis of the music was similar.¹⁹⁹

The women who performed in these contexts, he writes, captured their listeners' hearts, and therefore had to “fear public reproach,” meaning that they feared the consequences of becoming too close to patrons. This reflects music-centered eroticisms embedded in courtesan singing. He stresses that the songstresses were not in the profession of “wine server,” who behaved alluringly in public. He suggests, however, that the profession of “wine server” was necessary to society, because social vices needed a place to be.²⁰⁰ I find that such remarks are well within what has become a tradition of ambiguity on this subject.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 80-82.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 75-82.

¹⁹⁸ This is likely a mouth organ related to the Chinese *Sheng* (笙), as indicated by the translation of “*sinh*” into Hán Nôm. This illustrates problematic nature of examining historic documents in Romanized Vietnamese.

¹⁹⁹ Phạm Đình Hồ, *Vũ trung tùy bút*, 85.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 80.

These entertainment performance contexts resonate with contemporary practices in neighboring East Asia among the literati class, and ostensibly were the predecessors to singing in the courtesan-singing house in Vietnam. At a point difficult to determine, the music gradually moved into the sphere of entertainment, but it seems that the same guilds played in this sphere as well as ritual. Recent research by Nhung Tuyet Tran shows that the addition of entertainment music occurred amid a process of commodification: Guilds in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries began selling the rights to perform in their respective *đình* as well as the economic benefits, amid a general increase of commercialization and population growth.²⁰¹

Trần Văn Khê agrees with Phạm Đình Hổ that the songstress tradition by the early nineteenth century did not resemble that of the fifteenth. He writes that *hát cửa quyền* was an elevated manifestation of *hát ả đào* that detached from its roots in the popular and ritual realms,²⁰² and that courtesan singing of the twentieth century grew from the *hát cửa quyền* of the end of the Lê Dynasty (the late eighteenth century).²⁰³

The cultural studies scholar Bùi Trọng Hiền analyzes this history using the music's two functions, in ritual and entertainment *không gian văn hóa* (cultural spaces): *Chức năng nghệ thuật* (functioning as art) and *Chức năng nghi lễ tín ngưỡng* (functioning for ritual and beliefs). To describe *ca trù* in terms of entertainment, as opposed to ritual, he uses the phrase *hưởng thụ nghệ thuật đơn thuần* (solely enjoying art). On the ritual side, he includes *hát cửa đình* (singing in tutelary spirit worship house) and *hát thờ tổ* (another imperial-era event in which guilds performed to worship the founders of the profession). In the entertainment category, he places

²⁰¹ Nhung Tuyet Tran, "The commodification of village songs." On the general historical arc of this period, see Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*.

²⁰² Trần Văn Khê, *La musique vietnamienne traditionnelle*, 46.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 24.

the singing that surrounded festivities at private homes or at the *đình* (tutelary spirit worship house), including entertainment for birthday celebrations, marriages, and other village festivities, and what he calls singing in *nhà hát tư nhân* (private citizens' homes) or *ca quán* (cafés), which would not become manifest until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this category he also places *hát thi* (singing examinations). Thus the musical taxonomy has been interpreted in several ways, but in essence it seems there were entertainment and ritual spheres, and their histories are intertwined. Below is a chart to outline the various categories described so far.

<i>Hát cửa đình</i>	Singing in tutelary spirit worship houses	Fifteenth century
<i>Hát thờ tổ</i>	Singing to worship the founders of the profession	
<i>Hát thi</i>	Test singing: Many villages performed on the same day to compete	
<i>Hát ả đào, hát ca quán, or hát nhà cô đầu</i>	Singing of the courtesans, cafe singing, or courtesan house singing	Fifteenth century: informal borrowing of singers from ritual sphere; late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: urban singing house
<i>Hát cửa quyền</i>	Singing for the powerful	Seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: Commodification of singing

Figure 2: Divisions in history.

Discussing *ca trù*'s nineteenth and twentieth-century history, Nguyễn Xuân Diện writes that the Nguyễn court, in the new royal city of Huế, invited *đào kép* (songstresses and their lute-playing accompanists) from neighboring areas to participate in court music, such as for the occasion of wishing the emperor a happy birthday. He writes that the poet named Ứng Bình Thúc Giạ Thị was an example of a powerful man in Huế who enjoyed *hát ả đào* and wrote many

works in the *hát nói* (sing-speak) poetic form.²⁰⁴ Nguyễn Xuân Diện uses colonial-era photography to depict songstresses and dancers in court ensembles during this time. In some photos, dancers have lanterns on their shoulders, and others display ensembles of multiple singers and lute players. Below is a similar image portraying songstresses and lute players, taken from an early twentieth-century book called *Colonies françaises*.²⁰⁵



Picture 1: Đàn đáy (three-stringed lute) players sit on either side of female singers in a picture from a 1906 French publication.

Some scholars, such as Đỗ Bằng Đoàn and Đỗ Trọng Huề, claim that *ca trù* was present as early as the eleventh-century in the Lý Dynasty: “*Lối hát ả đào có từ đời nhà Lý*” (We have had *hát ả đào* since the Lý Dynasty).²⁰⁶ It seems very probable that there were traditions of singing. Projecting continuity, however, between singers of the Lý Dynasty and those in more recent history is problematic. Historian Dương Đình Minh Sơn similarly overemphasizes the

²⁰⁴ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử và nghệ thuật Ca trù*, 87.

²⁰⁵ Charles Brossard, *Colonies françaises: Géographie pittoresque et monumentale de la France et de ses Colonies* (Paris, 1906).

²⁰⁶ Đỗ Bằng Đoàn, Đỗ Trọng Huề, *Việt Nam ca trù biên khảo*, 31.

long history of *ca trù* at court in a sort of longevity complex of Vietnamese historiography.²⁰⁷ Nguyễn Xuân Diện's claims are more conservative, data-centered, and nuanced, especially concerning *ca trù* in the royal court, which he places as developing in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nguyễn Xuân Diện aligns more with Phạm Đình Hổ's account, who writes that the Vietnamese imported court music from China in the fifteenth century, and that the Vietnamese eventually returned to their own music. But Phạm Đình Hổ does not use the term *hát cung đình* (singing in the royal palace) to indicate a distinct variety of courtesan singing at court. He merely describes the refined songstress singing as *hát cửa quyền* (singing for the powerful).²⁰⁸

In this history, the relationship between *hát cung đình* and *hát cửa quyền* is unclear, but the larger ensemble of *hát cung đình* could have derived from the larger ensemble of *hát cửa quyền*. It seems courtesan singing, as Nguyễn Xuân Diện suggests, was fashionable at the court under the Nguyễn Dynasty in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It may date back further, as scholar-officials had enjoyed the company of courtesan singers for centuries. But was *hát cung đình* merely *hát cửa quyền* in a different context? Nguyễn Xuân Diện and Phạm Đình Hổ give the impression they were closely related. *Hát cung đình* may have been an expanded version for the king of traditions enjoyed by scholar-officials and aristocrats. Once an entertainment music sphere developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a function of general commercialization in society, it seems these categories were grades along a spectrum

²⁰⁷ See Dương Đình Minh Sơn, *Ca trù cung đình Thăng Long* [Ca trù at the Thăng Long (Hanoi) Palace] (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản khoa học xã hội, 2009). I found this at the National Library in Hanoi published as a slim collection of essays dating from 2006, and it was published in book form in 2009. There was a rash of this longevity complex in the year before Hanoi (or Thăng Long, the former name of the imperial-era capital)'s thousandth anniversary.

²⁰⁸ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử và nghệ thuật Ca trù*, 87

of performance contexts. On one end were smaller performances for provincial notables involving perhaps one singer and lutist, and the other was this later development of the court variety, in which the ensemble expanded for a show worthy of a king.²⁰⁹

Courtesans and Law

Isabelle Tracol-Huynh writes that in Vietnam under the nineteenth-century Nguyễn Dynasty, the legal code treats the issue of courtesans dubiously, citing a French translation of the early nineteenth-century code.²¹⁰ The Nguyễn legal code was an adaptation of the contemporary Qing code. It seems possible this law did not apply in the Vietnamese kingdom, or was a holdover from contemporary Chinese law.

In a recent Vietnamese-language edition of the code, an article of law dealing with courtesans stands out.²¹¹ The heading of the article is “*Quan lại túc xướng*” (Mandarins spending the night with female singers). It notes that mandarins and their progeny were not to spend the night with courtesans.²¹²

“Ill-mannered civil and military mandarins who at night go with *con hát* [songstresses] will bear the punishment of 60 canings (bringing *con hát* to a wine drinking party also constitutes fault under this law). Whoever plans for such occasions will be charged... If children of a mandarin [engage in this behavior], they will also bear such punishment.”²¹³

²⁰⁹ Considering the improvisatory nature of the music, it is difficult to imagine an ensemble really utilizing more than one singer or lutist, but there must have been some kind of standardization of the repertory in these larger formats.

²¹⁰ Tracol-Huynh, “The Shadow Theater of Prostitution in French Colonial Tonkin: Faceless Prostitutes under the Colonial Gaze,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 7, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 10-51.

²¹¹ Nguyễn Văn Thành, Vũ Trinh, Trần Hựu, eds., *Hoàng Việt Luật Lệ (Luật Gia Long) Tập V* [Gia Long Code Volume 5].

²¹² *Ibid.* In this edition, this is under article nine of volume eighteen.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 916.

The term *con hát* is used to describe what is meant by the archaic term *xướng*, which comes from *xướng hát* or *xướng ca* (to sing or to be a singer or actress). While *con hát* is an archaic term for songstress or actress, *con* is also a classifier for contemptible people, animals, and inanimate objects.²¹⁴

Commenting on this historical condescension and reflecting current historiographical paradigms, the editors of this edition write in a footnote that the law did nothing to decrease the level of the crime, but that singers were in the same locales as those breaking the law. The “law breakers” here presumably indicated courtesans-as-prostitutes and their patrons in the modern framing of this history. The editors continue by saying that singers maintained their virtue and professionalism. Trying to disabuse the history of the songstress of negative associations, they write that “*con hát*” were law-abiding and did not transgress—they did not participate in a depraved life, and merely became associated with illicit behavior.²¹⁵

This article of law, not to mention the licentious poetry dating back centuries, gives a sense of the eroticism of courtesan singing that perhaps was always present, as, in this history, “many kings and mandarins *viết rào* [went beyond the fence], stealing away songstresses to make them their wives.”²¹⁶ By a similar token, in Shanghai in the late nineteenth-century, urbanization created new spaces for courtesans. Courtesans were entertainers first, and sexual favors among the elites were reserved for the most devoted patrons, and rituals surrounded the taking of courtesans as lovers. Courtesans did not work in cash-for-sex brothels. It was an elite realm with ornate cultural fixtures. Visiting a courtesan house was a mark of prestige and

²¹⁴ Classifiers in Vietnamese (as well as Chinese) are words that precede nouns and impart semantic information.

²¹⁵ Nguyễn Văn Thành et al, *Hoàng Việt Luật Lệ*, 917.

²¹⁶ Bùi Trọng Hiền, “Không gian,” 91.

distinction. In Vietnam, similarly, the appreciation of *ả đào* singing meant one had the resources to be literate, to study poetry and music in leisure, and to enjoy evenings surrounded by wine, women, and song.²¹⁷ It could be that the “decline” of the courtesans’ arts had little to do with actual changes in the practices surrounding courtesan singing, and rather were connected with a shifting semantic and legal framework in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Shifting Meanings in Courtesan Culture

Colonialism created a new political regime in imperial Vietnam, and the imperial-era patrons of courtesans lost their position in society. Before this, a scholar-connoisseur of *ca trù* would have hired a lute player and singer for private lessons in the appreciation of poetry. Nguyễn Văn Mũi of the Thái Hà Ensemble recalls and argues that one had to be wealthy to afford such lessons, so connoisseurship had remained among the wealthy (the aristocratic and scholar-gentry classes). The music, along the spectrum from *hát cửa quyền* to *hát ả đào*, had become a kind of Vietnamese art song, and, as *hát cung đình*, it had become royal court song.²¹⁸

The rise of the urban singing house, which came after the French, shifted the economic and social organization of Vietnam and created urban spheres, introduced the music to a wider audience—new classes of intellectuals literate in Romanized Vietnamese.²¹⁹ In this new setting, the ensemble included singer, who played a *phách* (bamboo or rosewood idiophone), *đàn đáy* (three-stringed lute), and *trống châu* (singing session drum), the typical ensemble today.

²¹⁷ Ibid. A noteworthy late-nineteenth-century Shanghai tradition of singing translates to “bamboo twig ballads” (*zhuzhi ci*), curiously close to the idea of the designation *ca trù*, which can be translated to “bamboo token songs.” See Yeh, “Reinventing Ritual.”

²¹⁸ I am indebted to Nguyễn Văn Mũi for such observations regarding class and music in *ca trù*’s history.

²¹⁹ Bùi Trọng Hiền, “Không gian văn hóa.”

The colonial strategy undermined the distinction of social class and the importance of the scholar-gentry, who provided a moral compass for society in the Confucian tradition of moral leadership, at least in theory. The French also promoted Romanized Vietnamese, which distanced the Vietnamese from their literary and cultural heritage. This also created space for invention as well as anticolonial ferment years later. Literacy, formerly reserved for the elite class, spread, and in newfound modes of expression, with wider audiences, the Vietnamese debated issues from art and morality to hygiene (as discussed in Chapter Two).

Members of rural guilds, who had been set adrift by societal change, moved to urban areas and opened *ca quán* (singing cafés) or *nhà cô đầu* (courtesan houses).²²⁰ The patronage of urban singing houses was comprised of Vietnamese intellectuals, educated in French language and Romanized Vietnamese, and perhaps French men, although it is doubtful they came for the performance of literature. As writers of the early twentieth century lament, contrary to previous patrons of courtesans, these Vietnamese men were not initiated into the elegance of courtesan culture from previous eras.

The new class of patrons did not study Confucian texts and classical poetry for career advancement. Consequently, they were not familiar with the poetry from which *ca trù* performance had developed. Instructional books and journal articles about the music and poetry were published in the 1920s and 1930s, in order to attempt to educate the new patrons, but it was too little to counter the overwhelming social and institutional changes that led to the music's change in status. Early twentieth-century critics wrote that patrons "chopped" at the participant-

²²⁰ Nguyễn Xuân Diện favors the phrase *ca quán*. The term *ca quán* (song café) seems to be a term used by some of today's historians to obfuscate the history of *nhà cô đầu* (songstress' houses). Although during the colonial period the similar term, *quán rượu* (wine café), was used. See Cuồng Sỹ, *Học đánh châu*, 38.

praise drum. The new patrons were unaware of the codified rhythms and meanings of the drum, and the singers could only “howl” through a few lines.²²¹ As such authors wrote, a loss of reputation occurred, as more and more singers were simply prostitutes who knew a few songs. In the urban singing house, singers became lackluster performers, and it seems the ambiguous eroticism of courtesan culture had changed into an explicit cash-for-sex encounter.

Frank Proschan argues that colonialist perspectives constructed a semantic change concerning Vietnamese women in general, which extended to prostitutes as well as singers. Examining French colonial discourse on prostitution, opium, and venereal disease, Proschan argues that the meaning of *con gái* (woman) in the male colonial gaze changed over time such that Vietnamese women in general became viewed as prostitutes.²²² The French regulated prostitution as a matter of public health; the “public” whose health the colonial regime was concerned with was French men in the colony.

Vietnamese, however, opened these singing houses and patronized them, while the governance of prostitution in colonial Indochina concerned more the French-Vietnamese encounter, not the ambiguously erotic culture of courtesans. Yet with the registration of brothels came the development of clandestine prostitution in Hanoi, which, by the 1920s, included in its

²²¹ Phạm Quỳnh, “Văn chương trong lối hát ả đào” [Literature in the way of courtesan singing]; in *Ca trù nhìn từ nhiều phía* [*Ca trù* seen from many angles], edited by Thanh Việt (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Văn hóa thông tin, 2004). Nguyễn Đôn Phục, “Khảo luận về cuộc hát ả đào” [Treatise on the affair of songstress singing], in *Ibid.* These were originally published in the periodical *Nam Phong* in 1923.

²²² Frank Proschan, ““Syphilis, Opiomania, and Pederasty”: Colonial Constructions of Vietnamese (and French) Social Diseases,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, no. 4 (2002): 610-636. *Gái mới* (new women) was another category that implied a new class of western-influenced Vietnamese woman.

purview regular “*con gái*” (“women,” here meaning “prostitutes” within the male colonial gaze), singers, and young boys.²²³

As the semiotic frame shifted around the notion of courtesan singer, and the performance context shifted to the singing house of the early twentieth century, singing houses would come to be viewed, from the colonial perspective, as clandestine brothels. Singers were, in the colonial gaze, clandestine prostitutes. Within this legal and social landscape, the *nhà cô đầu* as courtesan house apparently became *nhà cô đầu* as brothel. “*Nhà*” means simply “house,” and “*cô đầu*,” which had meant “chief singer” in an imperial-era guild, came to mean prostitute. Đỗ Bằng Đoàn and Đỗ Trọng Huề parse the etymology:

“*Á* means *cô* [woman]... *á đào* means *cô đào* [songstress]. Famous singers taught younger singers working their way into the profession, and when [the famous singers] went to *hát đình* [sing at the worship house], the younger ones had to set aside money for their teacher, and this was called the *tiền Đầu* [money for the head].”²²⁴

After a singer had taught many students and received a good deal of *tiền đầu*, she became known as *cô đầu*.²²⁵ Similarly, by the twentieth century in the Chinese context, the word for courtesan, etymologically combining characters for woman and entertainer, came to mean prostitute (*ji*).²²⁶ Nguyễn Xuân Diện and others, however, use the phrase *ca nữ* (song women) to cleanse the history of the word *cô đầu*.²²⁷

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ See Đỗ Bằng Đoàn, Đỗ Trọng Huề, *Việt-nam Ca-trù biên khảo*, 46. Note the variation of terminology for *hát cửa đình* (singing at the gates of the worship house). Here they use simply *hát đình* (worship house singing).

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Zeitlin, “Notes of Flesh,” 75. See also the discussion of terminology surrounding courtesans in Beverly Bossler, “Shifting Identities: Courtesans and Literati in Song China,” in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 62, no. 1 (2002): 5-37.

²²⁷ Đỗ Bằng Đoàn and Đỗ Trọng Huề also use this term, writing that *con hát* (a pejorative for singer) in Romanized Sino-Vietnamese is *xướng nhi* or *ca nữ*. See Đỗ Bằng Đoàn, Đỗ Trọng Huề, *Việt Nam ca trù biên khảo*, 31.

Scholars also clean the history of negative associations by emphasizing the strict distinction of two classes of women in the singing house: *Cô đầu rượu* (wine courtesan) and *cô đầu hát* (singing courtesan). In this view, the *cô đầu rượu* did not always know how to sing, did not come from the traditional guilds, and did not seek employment in the singing house to learn singing. Rather, they were attractive girls who were recruited from rural areas to “*ăn trắng mặc trơn*” (live luxuriantly without effort). Their primary duty was helping patrons with relaxation. Nguyễn Xuân Diện dubs them *cô đầu ôm* (hugging courtesans). The narrative constructed in discourse today is that they worked side-by-side the singing courtesans.²²⁸ A painting from the 1990s illustrates the distinction (below).



Picture 2: A colonial-era singing session, painted in 1995. Performers and patrons sit at the same level, but historically the patron sat above the performers, signifying social status. In the background, a “cô đầu rượu” brings in a bottle of rice wine.

²²⁸ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử và nghệ thuật Ca trù*, 84.

A clandestine atmosphere came to enshroud the singing house. The servers and frequenters developed a private dialect so that they could avoid the attention of authorities.²²⁹ In a manual from 1933 on learning the praise drum called *Học đánh châu* (Learning the praise drum), a glossary of clandestine vocabulary to be used in singing houses is included. Nguyễn Xuân Diện discusses this clandestine vocabulary as well.²³⁰

Singing houses opened throughout the northern region in urban areas. By 1938, Hanoi alone had at least two hundred sixteen singing houses, with some two thousand women working as *cô đầu*. The areas where these were centered were Hàng Giầy, Khâm Thiên, Ngã Tư Sớ, Van Thai, Chùa Mói Cầu Giầy, Kim Mã, Văn Điển, and Gia Quát. Famous authors from the period, such as Tản Đà and Vũ Bằng, wrote about and lived in these areas. They were certainly not clandestine houses to Vietnamese. The latter author called Khâm Thiên the “*cái nôi văn nghệ*” (place of art and literature) of Hanoi, and wrote that there was not a literary figure in Hanoi who had not been to a singing house.²³¹ By the 1920s and 1930s, courtesan districts were known as *làng chơi* (red-light districts), and the pleasure of enjoying *cô đầu* became associated with social and actual disease. Some of the most celebrated of Vietnamese literary figures from this time lived in the middle of these districts. Like bohemian districts in other parts of the world, art and debauchery were neighbors. And like bohemian districts in other parts of the world, they have received nostalgic treatment generations later.

Học đánh châu (Learning the praise drum), published in 1933, instructs in the appreciation of declaimed poetry and *trống châu* (praise drum) technique, and provides a vivid

²²⁹ Ibid., 85.

²³⁰ Cuồng Sỹ, *Học đánh châu*, 126-130; Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử và nghệ thuật Ca trù*.

²³¹ Ibid., 86.

illustration of the *làng chơi* (red-light districts).²³² The author, whose name according to the title page says was Cuồng Sỹ (this may be an alias meaning “crazy scholar”), views the pleasure of the *cô đầu* as the poison of the youth, no longer an elegant practice. But he defines the type of diversion as dependent on the type of man. He writes that two categories of patrons existed in the red-light districts: the refined moralists and the depraved materialists. The former knew *trống chầu* technique and enjoyed wine but maintained “ancient people’s” morality,²³³ which here ostensibly means the Confucian scholar’s morality of the nineteenth century. The depraved patron did not know *trống chầu* or how to appreciate song, and only went out late at night to “make a game of love.” The author associates these categories of men with the classes of *cô đầu hát* and *cô đầu rượu*, respectively. While condemning the *cô đầu rượu* and the scoundrels who visit them, he mentions “brothels without papers”—or unregistered brothels, the same as discussed in colonial discourse.²³⁴ The author further expresses sadness that the songstress tradition found in earlier times had lost nearly all its stature because of the playboys in the red-light districts, who did not know how to appreciate courtesans’ arts.²³⁵ In the periodical *Nam Phong* (Southern Ethos), Phạm Quỳnh makes similar lamentations:

“The elegant, noble person when they *chơi* [go out on the town] will *chơi* nobly and elegantly; the rough, unmannerly and indecent person will *chơi* indecently

²³² This phrase combines the words “*làng*” (village) and “*chơi*” (play). It invokes the salacious connotation that the word “*chơi*” (play) can have. Another instance is the phrase “*đi chơi*,” which can mean, “to go on the town,” or can resonate with licentiousness and mean “to visit prostitutes.”

²³³ The phrase that I translate as “ancient people” is “*cổ nhân*.” I have heard people in the present use it jokingly to describe a person very much psychologically engaged with historical periods or remnants of the past such as *ca trù*. The adjective “*cổ*” (old) is used to describe things that are both old and highly valued. This includes *ca trù*. The adjective *cũ* (old) describes something old and not highly valued, like a deteriorated piece of clothing or an ex-spouse.

²³⁴ Cuồng Sỹ, *Học đánh chầu*, 37-39. The phrase “brothels without papers” is “*thanh lâu không giấy*.”

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

and unmannerly, and the malicious, knavish person will *chơi* as a malicious knave.”²³⁶

This notion seems to have become a theme. In former days, Phạm Quỳnh writes,²³⁷ courtesan singing was nobler. He writes, however, he was not an expert of *hát ả đào*,²³⁸ because, in this time, if he were an expert, it would indicate that he had frequented red-light districts.

He asks: Why is it that people scowl at the word *ả đào* (songstress)? Where was society’s blunder? He answers: It was in the character of the patron, not the songstress. The patrons in former times elevated the art, but *hát ả đào* had disintegrated into debauchery. He writes that every nation in history has had prostitution, but the nature of “*thú chơi*” (pleasurable diversions) in previous periods was *phong lưu* (elegant or refined), and involved merely sitting and taking in the beauty of a singer and her voice.²³⁹

Nguyễn Đôn Phục, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, gives a soliloquy in the same vein in the 1920s. The meaning of *chơi* (literally “to play”) had once been to appreciate leisure activity, but it had become synonymous with visiting red-light districts. The informed patron, he insists, must have high moral character and must know how to play the *trống chầu*, and not pound it indiscriminately. Otherwise the music comprises a “bunch of howling as the patron beats the drum like a boxer.”²⁴⁰ Singers should “*biết chữ*” (“to know characters,” i.e., be literate). He asks rhetorically what one would discuss with an illiterate prostitute except vulgar things.²⁴¹

“The prostitutes... rarely have learned anything by heart, but wallow through several lines to carry on for the sake of form when offering wine or tea... the poem “Tỳ Bà,” a

²³⁶ Phạm Quỳnh, “Văn chương trong lối hát ả đào,” 54-55.

²³⁷ He uses the historically dubious phrase “*ngày xưa*,” meaning in a previous time.

²³⁸ Phạm Quỳnh, “Văn chương trong lối hát ả đào.”

²³⁹ Ibid., 55.

²⁴⁰ Nguyễn Đôn Phục, “Khảo luận về cuộc hát ả đào.”

²⁴¹ Ibid., 113-114. Singers were illiterate—they learned by ear what they knew, Phạm Quỳnh also notes. Phạm Quỳnh, “Văn chương trong lối hát ả đào,” 57.

rice bowl [meaning “bread and butter”] in the singing house... the young *cô đào* [singers] recite it, but, confused, they often falter.”²⁴²

He admits, however, that some reputable singers still declaimed poetry as in former times. He compares the songstress to a flower, and the patron to the gardener, whose function is to cultivate the garden. He argues therefore the decay of the courtesans’ arts was the fault of patrons.²⁴³ Apparently, advocates of the “true art” of the past did little to reverse the course of history.

Trần Văn Khê, writing in the 1960s, describes the historical arc of the songstress’s decreased reputation in the following way: The eighteenth century had been the peak of courtesan culture in Vietnam, as courtesans could reach a high social rank and earn a good living. In the nineteenth century, they had rented their services to special occasions at village pagodas and temples, for ceremonial meals of dignitaries, nobles, and mandarins, and for the feasts of the wealthy.²⁴⁴ With changes to Vietnamese culture and the influence of Western culture, customs like this had fallen by the wayside. Trần Văn Khê stresses that singers in the past were not prostitutes, although some singers in the early twentieth century had lacked morals and their houses had become places of pleasure. Moreover, the term “*cô đầu*”—“*đầu*” being a mispronunciation of “*đào*”—had come to replace “*đào*,” and this connoted prostitute instead of

²⁴² Nguyễn Đôn Phục, “Khảo luận về cuộc hát ả đào,” 116.

²⁴³ Nguyễn Xuân Khoát writes in articles from the early 1940s that *hát ả đào* was a refined and elegant art, but had fallen into shambles. He hopes his contributions to understanding the music might be a remedy, and discusses elements of music, even providing transcriptions in Western notation of lute and percussion. Nguyễn Xuân Khoát, “Âm nhạc lối hát ả đào,” *Thành nghị* 12 (1 mai 1942); “Âm nhạc lối hát ả đào: Nghệ thuật hát của đào-nương,” *Thành nghị* 45 (16 septembre 1943).

²⁴⁴ Trần Văn Khê, *La musique vietnamienne traditionnelle*, 85.

courtesan.²⁴⁵ It is worth noting again that “*Cô đầu*” was in fact an honorific title for elderly singers in imperial-era guilds previous to this confusion.²⁴⁶

Đỗ Bằng Đoàn and Đỗ Trọng Huề write that *ca trù*'s spirit began to fade with the rise of the singing house.²⁴⁷ New singers, recruited from the countryside, did not study song and poetry, but greeted guests and facilitated and encouraged libation.

“They did not drink heavily, but secretly spit wine into a cloth in their hand... they had to sit next to the guests and keep them company, compelling them to consume until intoxicated. The patrons would go to sleep and girls would spread a sleeping mat and lower the curtain. Because they didn't know how to sing and only knew how to invite the patron to drink wine, they were called *cô đầu rượu* [wine courtesan].”²⁴⁸

More recently, historians have written that although the rural *ca trù* guild waned, semblances of *ca trù* practices continued in village festivals, alongside the altered urban context, wherein the music, in this newer view, thrived and evolved. Bùi Trọng Hiên frames this as natural development. The implicit notion of “development” or “evolution” grows from a view, which recalls Social Darwinism, in which the music advanced over the centuries. As society developed, the practice of inviting singers into one's home for private performances became more widespread. But this was a costly endeavor, so patrons started hiring performers where guilds were based. This time, Bùi Trọng Hiên writes, was a turning point for the rise of the singing house, a place for “*thương mại nghệ thuật ca trù*” (*ca trù* as “art commerce”). This development meant, in Bùi Trọng Hiên's view, that *ca trù* returned to the masses, becoming an

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 85.

²⁴⁶ Đỗ Bằng Đoàn, Đỗ Trọng Huề, *Việt-nam Ca-trù Biên Khảo*, 46.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 55. In Phạm Duy's view, in the twentieth century *hát ả đào* became a diversion of playboys in urban centers where the music decayed. Phạm Duy also observes historical connections between various performing practices in singing traditions in Vietnamese history, such as between courtesan singing and popular opera. See Phạm Duy, “Ca nhạc phòng” [Chamber music and song], in *Ca trù nhìn từ nhiều phía* [Ca trù Seen From Many Directions].

²⁴⁸ Đỗ Bằng Đoàn, Đỗ Trọng Huề, *Việt Nam ca trù biên khảo*, 55.

artistic product spread in a more egalitarian manner across the populace. He argues that the music nevertheless maintained its upward artistic trajectory through this time, ignoring the opinions of writers from the early twentieth century.

He writes that because of “economic aims, negative phenomenon could not be avoided.” Musicians maintained some customs from the previous period, such as *hát thờ tổ* (singing to pray to the founders of the profession) and the ethical standards that had formed the basis of the profession’s reputation. One extant custom meant punishment for a singer if she acted depraved in public or had sexual relations with a guest of the singing house.²⁴⁹

Bùi Trọng Hiền also distinguishes between *cô đầu hát* and the *cô đầu rượu*. The *cô đầu rượu* in his view was a new class of *đào nương* (songstress) recruited from outside the profession of *ca trù* singers. They were encouraged to learn some *ca trù* songs, such as a few lines of the *Hãm* mode, which is a song used to invite the drinking of wine.²⁵⁰ He writes that many *cô đầu rượu* could *ngâm thơ* (declaim poetry) fairly well. They also made a dance from the activities of arranging platters of food, preparing opium pipes, and playing card games. This *thú chơi* (diversion) for urban intellectuals became fashionable and gave way to artistic expression, and in this new performance realm the link between audience and performers through the *trống châu* (praise drum) was maintained.²⁵¹

Nguyễn Xuân Diện also articulates a vision of the period. Listeners in the *ca quán* (singing café), in his view, focused on poetry and music appreciation, a commonality with

²⁴⁹ Bùi Trọng Hiền, “Không gian văn hóa,” 96-98.

²⁵⁰ This is a questionable assertion given the difficulty of this mode, in which the breathing technique of the singer requires one breath for several lines of poetry, as Nguyễn Thúy Hòa explains.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 97-99. Note that he calls this male participant-audience member the *khan giả nghệ sĩ* (audience-musician).

preceding salon-style performance contexts. He writes that a collective consciousness formed through this musical-poetic practice, as listeners could experience the concerns of the larger community through the experience of poetry.²⁵²

Because little documentation exists surrounding the opening a *ca quán* (singing café), he suggests looking at *hát nói* (sing-speak) poetry to view the inner world of Confucian scholars and their thoughts about *ca nữ* (“song women”).²⁵³ He writes that only after the advent of the *ca quán* can we see affection between poets and singers. In the earlier works of Nguyễn Bá Xuyên (1759-1823), Nguyễn Công Trứ (1778-1859), and Cao Bá Quát (died 1855), no evidence is provided of songstresses in the singing houses,²⁵⁴ although these authors, who lived in a period of artistic development and societal change, may predate the advent of the *ca quán* (along with the scholar Phạm Đình Hổ, who I discussed earlier in this chapter). Later authors Nguyễn Khuyến (1835-1910)²⁵⁵ and Dương Khuê (1836-1898),²⁵⁶ however, give a sense of female singers in singing houses.

Conclusion

Two basic realms of *ca trù*'s history include ritual and entertainment. *Hát cửa đình*, the oldest form, dates to at least the fifteenth century. Some believe this began as early as the eleventh century. *Hát ả đào* (courtesan singing) dates in some form back to the fifteenth century

²⁵² Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử và nghệ thuật Ca trù*, 84

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 104.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 104. Nguyễn Bá Xuyên lived from 1759 to 1823; see *Ibid.*, 216; Nguyễn Công Trứ lived from 1778 to 1859; see Đỗ Bằng Đoàn, Đỗ Trọng Huề, *Việt-nam Ca-trù Biên Khảo*, 620; and Cao Bá Quát died in 1855; see *Ibid.*, 639. *Việt-nam Ca-trù Biên Khảo* provides a nice overview of biographical information of poets discussed in the book.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 649.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 654.

or before—performed by guild musicians for the entertainment of notables. Musicians in the patrilineal *giáo phường* (guilds) were borrowed for occasions outside of worship and were invited to the homes of notable men for entertainment. Courtesan music for elite consumption by men of letters and aristocrats existed before the advent of the singing house in the nineteenth century, although we know little about it. There seems to have been a spectrum of region- and social class-based variations in this entertainment realm before *hát cửa quyền* (singing in the homes of the powerful) developed into a distinct subgenre in the eighteenth century under commercialization in society at large. *Hát cung đình* (royal court singing) appears perhaps as an elevated form of *hát cửa quyền*, and seemingly *hát cung đình* emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

It could be that attracting musicians to the new capital southward in Huế for *hát cung đình* performance contributed to the decline of the quality of music further north in Hanoi; the movement of the capital south in 1802 may have left Hanoi an intellectual backwater.²⁵⁷ While this thesis is attractive, there is no supporting data with regard to *ca trù*'s history of which I am aware. In any case, the rise of urban spheres and the breakdown of traditional social structures in the north seem to be the most influential aspects in the decline of courtesan singing, or at least its reputation, in the early twentieth century.

In view of Vietnamese historians, the legitimate *ca trù* predates colonialism. When elites began inviting performers from traditional village-based guilds for entertainment performances in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the music became an elegant diversion for aristocrats and scholars. Meanwhile, the village-level tutelary spirit worship practices apparently

²⁵⁷ I am indebted to John Whitmore for asking the question that led to this observation.

continued.²⁵⁸ In the earliest context in worship houses and in the homes of the powerful, it seems *kép đàn* (lute accompanists) and *đào nương* (singers) would be arranged in large ensembles that included other instruments such as flute and various percussion instruments, similar to contemporary comedic theater and opera ensembles. In the early ritual context, an audience-participant or several played the praise drum during performance in a coded manner, which corresponded to cash gratuity to musicians. Gratuity was symbolically represented by *thẻ* or *trù* (bamboo tokens). Through the history, there was influence from other musical spheres and between the various cultural spaces of *ca trù*.

In the early twentieth century, the singing house became widespread amid increased urbanization and fundamental societal change, which French colonialism had initiated. Vietnamese men it seems primarily patronized the singing house, while colonial governance paid more attention to places patronized by French men. Resulting from this, the term “*cô đầu*,” originally a term of distinction for an older and accomplished singer in imperial-era music guilds, came to mean “prostitute” under new semantic, social, and legal rubrics. In the singing house, the ensemble shrank to its bare elements: The lute, audience-participant drum, and singer, who played the *phách* (idiophone). This arrangement of the ensemble is used today.

Historians argue that singing in worship probably dates back further than historical evidence can show. They locate *ca trù*'s origins in the folk of an unknowable and distant past. Myths of origins have become integral to the identity politics and gendered memory battles of modern Vietnam. In modern portrayals of the music history, the singing was refined as entertainment music for elites, but decayed in the colonial-era singing house. Through this lens, the “original” music was the folk version.

²⁵⁸ Bùi Trọng Hiền, “Không gian văn hóa, 96.

The legitimate *ca trù* was tied to age-old rituals of village tutelary spirit worship and, more generally, village culture, which is perceived as embodying an authentic Vietnamese essence and historical continuity. The history of *ca trù* as erudite entertainment music further lends credibility to the genre, as it has come to represent a positive element of imperial-era culture descended from the realm of Confucian men of letters. In this stream of discourse, the fact that the poetry was usually written using *Nôm* (Vietnamese vernacular) script is emphasized. This is a poetry-based form of national identity negotiation in opposition to Chinese influence.

Courtesan culture probably did not change fundamentally, however, from the eighteenth through early twentieth centuries, in terms of aspects of music-centered eroticism, as it seems clear that patrons could and did take songstresses as concubines and wives in imperial Vietnam, and, as in China, the context of courtesan singing served as a social catalyst for men and women of different classes. But the semiotic frame surrounding the music shifted, along with performance contexts, in the early twentieth century, such that courtesan became tantamount to prostitute, as in other contexts in Asia during this time. This further contributed to the music being cast in a negative light in the 1950s and afterward. The nostalgia for the “elegant” times of the distant past expressed by authors in the 1920s was merely an early form of historical revisionism on the subject, with a heavy dose of nostalgia for a time during which women were also subjugated by male patrons of their music, but less explicitly so.

Chapter IV

Hát ả đào's Decline and Ca trù's Revival

Over the course of the twentieth century, Vietnam was transformed from colonized kingdom to war-torn country to socialist nation-state with a market economy. After the end of World War II, many aspects of imperial-era culture were eschewed in the revolutionary and war periods that followed. In the late 1970s, cultural remnants from the distant past began to re-emerge. Widespread collective amnesia, sometimes forced by re-education camps, and a mass exodus of political refugees allowed for a semblance of peace following the conflict.²⁵⁹ Historical continuity and a perceived “oneness” of the nation were important to affirm a tenuous national unity. Mainstream media and scholarship, which the state administered (and still does today), illuminated the folk and rural elements of Vietnamese histories and created historical continuity.

Within this global process, the semiotic frame surrounding *ca trù* shifted. A quiet generation of artists and connoisseurs passed away, along with the memory of the music of *hát ả đào* (singing of songstresses or courtesans). “*Ca trù*,” by the end of the twentieth century, had become the preferred nomenclature and a catchall term for the practices rooted in both folk and elite culture.

²⁵⁹ This aligns with notions discussed in Ricoeur’s *Memory, History, Forgetting*.

Vietnamese historians agree that, following the 1945 August Revolution, *ca trù* had been denigrated as culture of *phong kiến* (feudal) times and was associated with social illness of the colonial period.

“For a long time after 1945, the activities of *ca trù*, formerly refined and elegant, were misunderstood and were compared to activities that lacked wholesomeness in some urban singing cafes, and this is why society denied and expelled the activities of *ca trù*.”²⁶⁰

Because of the music’s bad reputation, no woman dared admit she was a songstress. They were forced into new professions.²⁶¹ Nguyễn Xuân Diện sympathizes with the music’s fall from grace:

“Previously famous *đào kép* [singers and accompanists] were suddenly shunned... Recall our *cô đầu* who had to fear. Recall *hát ả đào*, and think of our *thú ăn chơi* [enjoying wine, women, and song]²⁶² that was ruined, damaged in custom, culture, and morals... [as] the negative reputation of *ả đào* activities spread throughout society.”²⁶³

In rare instances of recollection, elderly people today recall that the music was restricted or banned. Historians, however, give the impression that it was shunned socially, not by decree.²⁶⁴ In either case, songstress or red-light districts were decadent remnants and disgraceful marks of colonialism. Red-light districts were places where women were degraded, and socialism, in the view today, was fundamental to the liberation of women from the bonds of feudalism and colonialism.

The year 1945 is a convenient date to mark the decline of *ca trù* because of overwhelming societal change that occurred afterward. In Vietnamese periodization, this year is

²⁶⁰ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật*, 19.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

²⁶² *Ăn chơi* in an older meaning denoted “to engage in debauched lifestyle,” as in *nghề ăn chơi* (“the profession of prostitute”). Usage is ambiguous, and authors today use it to mean: “Enjoying the company of women who sing.”

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

important because of the August Revolution, after which Hồ Chí Minh declared independence. The state was just forming, however, and revolutionary leaders were working to establish a new government and prevent famine. Cultural matters were not yet entirely in the foreground. In addition, experiences in these early years of formation varied greatly according to geography, as leadership included holdovers from the colonial administration, older literati, and communist revolutionaries.²⁶⁵ Former literati, urban intellectuals, and colonial collaborationists were recasting themselves in the new ideology, but the practices of courtesan entertainment did not disappear immediately, as singing sessions apparently continued at least into the late 1940s when, in Hanoi, intellectuals still participated in *ca trù* singing sessions. It is worth noting that such activities may have been under the political umbrella of the French-backed emperor, Bảo Đại, not the communists who fought the First Indochina War against the French. (Emperor Bảo Đại returned in 1949 from exile to become head of state of the Associated State of Vietnam under the aegis of the French).²⁶⁶

In this time, communists in the north increasingly became politically aligned with their northern neighbor, China. In the 1950s, as the communists fought the French and southern Vietnamese, symbolic battles were fought in the public sphere in the north, and the state moved

²⁶⁵ David Marr, “Beyond High Politics: State Formation in Northern Vietnam 1945-1946,” in *Naissance d’un État-Parti: Le Viet Nam depuis 1945: The Birth of a Party-State: Vietnam since 1945*, edited by Christopher E. Goscha and Benoît de Tréglodé (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2004); see also, from the same volume, Shawn McHale, “Freedom, Violence, and the Struggle over the public Arena in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1945-1958.”

²⁶⁶ Nguyễn Văn Mùi of the Thái Hà discussed in vague terms performances continuing after 1945. A friend of mine living in Hanoi named Nguyễn Quý Đức, a well-known author in Vietnam and abroad, mentioned that his grandfather Nguyễn Khoa Toàn was involved in singing sessions during this time, under the political umbrella of Bảo Đại. Useful overviews of this complex political period are provided in Michael Leifer, *Dictionary of the Modern Politics of Southeast Asia* (Routledge, 2013).

toward inflexible policies on arts and culture.²⁶⁷ Norton writes that after the Vietnamese defeated the French in 1954 in the north, any remaining singing houses in Hanoi were shut down due to “corrupt” practices.²⁶⁸ With a differing view, Le Tuan Hung writes that revolutionaries after 1945 wrote in the popular *ca trù* poetic form of *hát nói*, thus the music perhaps was not banned during this time. But he hedges by saying that he learned to write *hát nói* in his high school, which of course did not mean there were “*ca trù* activities” in literature class.²⁶⁹

In any case, the nation, indeed, began to turn away from “*xã hội cũ*” (old society), as one consultant of mine framed it, during the late 1940s and into the 1950s. Part of this was due to the rural land reform of the mid-1950s, the goal of which was to redistribute wealth from traditional elites to peasants. The land reform was accompanied by social reforms and led to bitter disputes between new classes that were jostling for power. The reforms led to thousands of executions during the campaign. The traditional elite class was overturned and a new ruling class, loyal to the new center of power, was recruited and trained. Politically, the central administration style of governing was not a significant departure from the imperial-era regime, but there was increased organization and control.²⁷⁰

After the 1954 defeat of the French, those in the north who feared political or religious persecution fled south. Nearly a million moved from the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam to the southern Republic of Vietnam, as the country was split in two.²⁷¹ The poet and

²⁶⁷ See McHale, “Freedom, Violence, and the Struggle.”

²⁶⁸ Norton, “Singing the Past,” 32.

²⁶⁹ Le Tuan Hung, “Traditional and Modern National Music in North Vietnam,” 63.

²⁷⁰ Edwin Evariste Moise, “Land Reform in China and North Vietnam: Revolution at the Village Level” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1977). I am also indebted to several friends in Hanoi for discussing this period.

²⁷¹ Peter Hansen, “Bắc Đì Cú: Catholic Refugees from the North of Vietnam, and Their Role in the Southern Republic, 1954-1959,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4, no. 3 (2009): 173-211.

independent *Nôm* scholar Nguyễn Quảng Tuân was in this migration. Born in 1925, he has written extensively on Vietnam's literary history and has received recognition for his work from the Vietnamese *Nôm* Preservation Foundation.²⁷² The musicians and connoisseurs with whom Stephen Addiss researched *hát ả đào* in the 1960s in Saigon were also in this migration. The anti-erudite social milieu of the mid-1950s socialist north was a contributing factor to the music not being performed in the north during this time.²⁷³

The migration complicates arguments for present-day distinctions between the north-to-south cultural divide, as people from the northern region brought their distinct aspects of culture to the south. This included northern pronunciation of Vietnamese along with mixed accents, which can be heard on the streets of Hồ Chí Minh City (formerly Saigon and still called “Saigon” by Saigonese people). Northerners tend to deny that any version of this music exists in the south. When I visited Nguyễn Quảng Tuân in Hồ Chí Minh City, he said that he had recently heard *ca trù*, although it was not by any means a popular diversion.

In the north, in the years after the defeat of the French, Nguyễn Văn Mùi, in his eighties at the time of my fieldwork study, said that his family was involved in radio broadcasts of *ca trù* in Hanoi in 1956 and 1957. The memory stood as a point of pride in his personal history.²⁷⁴ This broadcast, an early attempt to revive the music or repair its reputation, may indicate there was a break from not only a ban but from the taboo as well. This change may have been connected to

²⁷² He has written extensively on *ca trù* poetry and on the seminal poem to Vietnamese literature called “The Tale of Kiều.” Some of his work on *ca trù* includes: Nguyễn Quảng Tuân, *Ca trù thú xưa tao nhã* [Ca tru, elegant delight of the past] (Nhà xuất bản tổng hợp thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2003); *Cung bậc tri âm* [Knowing the voice of a tone] (Nhà xuất bản tổng hợp thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2007); and *Ca trù thơ nhạc giao duyên* [Ca tru: poetry and music meeting and exchanging] (Nhà xuất bản tổng hợp thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2008).

²⁷³ Stephen Addiss, personal communication, 2013.

²⁷⁴ Nguyễn Văn Mùi, personal communication, 2010.

the government's efforts to correct the excesses after the bloody land reform campaign. It could be that the narrative of the music being universally shunned immediately following 1945 is misleading. Nguyễn Văn Mùi, who said he worked as a driver and a mechanic through this period, noted that his family had performed for special occasions such as *ngày giỗ* (ancestor death anniversaries)²⁷⁵ before the music's public re-emergence later. The family invited family guild members and close friends to perform in private. He told me that the famous singer Quách Thị Hồ participated in these family performances. Though it may have been illegal or socially unacceptable to play during this time in the north, they continued to keep some of the tradition alive. Today, the government praises musicians retroactively for, as it is phrased in the media, *giữ gìn văn hóa đặc sắc* (maintaining the distinctive culture) throughout this period.

Scholarly discourse from government-operated publishing houses in the north created a public backdrop for *ca trù* in the 1980s. In the mid-twentieth century in Saigon, however, publishing had continued on the topic. In 1960, Trần Văn Khê published a series of articles with the title “Hát ả đào” in the periodical called *Bách khoa* (Encyclopedic), summarizing Vietnamese and French colonial-era writings.²⁷⁶ In 1962 in Saigon, Đỗ Bằng Đoàn and Đỗ Trọng Huề published their book that outlined *ca trù*'s history and gave annotations of important poems in Romanized Vietnamese.²⁷⁷ In the vein of instructional books from the 1920s and 1930s, this served to translate archaic poetry for Romanized Vietnamese-literate readership. Stephen Addiss

²⁷⁵ A “*ngày giỗ*” can also be used to remember and honor the founder of a profession.

²⁷⁶ Trần Văn Khê, “Hát ả đào,” in *Bách Khoa* 81 (May 15, 1960); “Hát ả đào II,” in *Bách Khoa* 82 (June 1, 1960).

²⁷⁷ Đỗ Bằng Đoàn, Đỗ Trọng Huề, *Việt-nam Ca-trù Biên Khảo*.

noted that he and Phạm Duy in the 1960s helped to organize a singing session for the community of musicians in the south.²⁷⁸

It seems very likely that the reason these works on a northern singing genre were published in Saigon in the 1960s was because it was the only place they could be published. By this time, the genre seems to have been suppressed in the north. *Ca trù*, alongside other non-revolutionary music and art forms, would be drowned out by the war into the 1970s. Interestingly, Trần Văn Khê's article used the term *hát ả đào*, and, two years later, in their book, Đỗ Bằng Đoàn and Đỗ Trọng Huề used *ca trù*. This was the turning point in terminology, as thereafter *ca trù* remained the dominant moniker, likely influenced by Đỗ Bằng Đoàn and Đỗ Trọng Huề's work serving as a significant reference.

After the Second Indochina War (the Vietnam War, in the American view) ended in 1975, *ca trù* had a chance to re-emerge in the north. Nguyễn Xuân Diện notes that this was only after society learned it was in danger of being lost.²⁷⁹ In 1976, Trần Văn Khê raised its profile when he returned to Vietnam from France, where he had done doctoral work in musicology. In Hanoi's Khâm Thiên area, a former red-light district, he recorded Quách Thị Hồ, who had started from a young age to learn *ca trù* songs from her songstress mother.²⁸⁰

The international attention of an overseas Vietnamese scholar such as Trần Văn Khê was a productive frame for the 1980s revival. Equating media and scholarly attention with inherent cultural value became a recurrent theme in Vietnam's economic reform period from the 1980s, and nationalism also became important to the social milieu surrounding the music's rebirth.

²⁷⁸ Stephen Addiss, personal communication, 2013.

²⁷⁹ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật*, 18

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 90. As the Hỏa Lò or "Hanoi Hilton" war museum represents, American bombs had leveled the area of Khâm Thiên Street.

Quách Thị Hồ's name and the image of an elderly songstress became synonymous with authenticity in *ca trù* singing, and *ca trù* became synonymous with authenticity in revived imperial-era Vietnamese culture.

The political landscape still reverberated in this time with decades of war. In the late 1970s, Vietnam intervened in the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia, and engaged in a border dispute with China. Times were difficult on an everyday level throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. Stories of personal accounts from the period give the sense that grinding out a basic existence was the general preoccupation, as it had been for decades. The Ethnology Museum in Hanoi in fact commemorated this difficult time, called *thời bao cấp* (subsidy period), with an exhibit in 2006 (thereby praising the state's 1980s reforms). Modern conveniences were unavailable to most, and the food allotted by subsidies for larger families was spread thin. These factors point to why an ancient, erudite form of declaimed poetry would re-enter public awareness rather slowly.

Setting the stage for *ca trù* as a nationalist symbol in the north, a volume of essays was published in 1980 about a village near Hanoi called Lỗ Khê, the birthplace of *ca trù* as a ritual practice. The book emphasized roots in ritual practices of the folk of the imperial-era village. It linked *ca trù* to the politically resonant theme and patriotic tradition of resisting foreign aggression. One part tells of the revolutionary leader Hồ Chí Minh, or Uncle Hồ as he is called with affection, visiting the village in the Lunar New Year celebrations of 1964.²⁸¹ Hồ is simultaneously a symbol of the revolutionary tradition, the values and customs of imperial Vietnam (those that had been relevant to the framework of Vietnamese communism as it

²⁸¹ Trần Tiến, Nguyễn Xuân Khoát, eds., *Hát cửa đình Lỗ Khê* (Sở Văn Hóa thông Tin, Hội Văn Nghệ Hà Nội, 1980), 128-130.

developed),²⁸² and the spirit of modernized Vietnam. The book also references the story of the fifteenth-century songstress who helped defeat Chinese invaders.²⁸³ These stories have contributed to the lore surrounding *ca trù* and its position in society and history, adding to the weight of *ca trù* as a nationalist symbol. These examples illustrate how stories, myths, legends, and sites of memory—containing sonorous motifs such as resistance to aggression and national unity—can become integral to nationalism.²⁸⁴

A collection of poems that is important for singers today, edited by Ngô Linh Ngọc and Ngô Văn Phú, was published in the 1980s.²⁸⁵ Ngô Linh Ngọc was a *ca trù* connoisseur. Members of the Thái Hà Ensemble mentioned a personal connection to him. In Nguyễn Xuân Diện’s book, published decades later, Quách Thị Hồ, the most prominent singer in *ca trù*’s re-emergence, is portrayed in a photo alongside Ngô Linh Ngọc, who is playing the praise drum. At the edge of the frame of the photo is a microphone. Ngô Linh Ngọc was apparently involved in a recording of Quách Thị Hồ; this may have resulted in the album that the Musicology Institute released later or may have been the session in 1976 with Trần Văn Khê. In any case, there was a community of proponents for *ca trù*’s re-emergence, and Quách Thị Hồ, Ngô Linh Ngọc, Trần Văn Khê, and the Thái Hà Ensemble were central to it.²⁸⁶

²⁸² Huỳnh Kim Khánh, *Vietnamese Communism: 1925-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

²⁸³ In addition, the Trung Tâm Nghe Nhìn (The Audio-Visual Center), which is now the Hãng phim truyền hình Việt Nam (Vietnam Television and Film Company), made a film about *ca trù* in 1984, using this same village as well as featuring Quách Thị Hồ.

²⁸⁴ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật*, 90.

²⁸⁵ Ngô Linh Ngọc, Ngô Văn Phú, *Tuyển tập thơ Ca trù*. Note this has a preface by Nguyễn Xuân Khoát, who had written previously on *ca trù*. Two of his articles are re-published in a *ca trù* source reader: “Âm nhạc lối hát ả đào” (Music in courtesan singing) and “Hát ả đào” (Courtesan singing), in *Ca trù nhìn từ* [Ca trù seen from many directions].

²⁸⁶ Trần Văn Khê has a personal essay about this period on his website. See Trần Văn Khê, “Cuộc gặp gỡ NSND Quách Thị Hồ của GS Trần Văn Khê” (Meeting People’s Artist Quach Thi

In 1988, the singer Quách Thị Hồ was named a People’s Artist of Vietnam for protecting and preserving a cultural asset of the nation. This marked a turn away from negative associations and a move towards the music being a distinguished practice that deserved reverence. In media today, she is framed as a famous singer who worked in singing houses of the imperial era.

“In 1930, she left for Hanoi [from her home of Ngọc Bộ, xã Long Hưng, huyện Văn Giang, Hưng Yên], and became a manager of a singing house called Vạn Thái on Bạch Mai Street. She became a successful and famous *đào nương* [songstress] along with other singers like Nguyễn Thị Phúc. After the August Revolution [in 1945], after [the nation] already had kicked out the French, she went to sing in Vĩnh Yên, Phú Thọ, Thái Nguyên.”²⁸⁷

As groups began performing publicly in the 1990s, the Thái Hà Ensemble became the most influential. They are a family of musicians who have been in the profession of *ca trù* for seven generations.²⁸⁸ Nguyễn Xuân Diện writes that they have been invited to many countries, and that they were the first modern *ca trù* musicians to perform abroad since the music’s revival.²⁸⁹ (The Thái Hà also told me that a family member went to Hong Kong to perform in 1927. They have a digitized copy of a recording that was made at this time, but I was unable to gain access to it). The ensemble has received recognition from the state for their contributions to the preservation of Vietnamese music, and their recordings are available commercially overseas through companies such as Amazon and iTunes.

Ca trù performances grew as the music became more widely known through the 1990s. As a generation of elderly musicians and connoisseurs passed away, *ca trù*’s history slowly

Ho), www.tranvankhe.vn (accessed August, 2013).

²⁸⁷ Quỳnh Chi, “Chương trình nghệ thuật đặc biệt tưởng niệm NSND Quách Thị Hồ” [Special art program recalling People’s Artist Quách Thị Hồ] in *Lao Động* (January 14, 2011), <http://laodong.com.vn/Van-hoa/Chuong-trinh-nghe-thuat-dac-biet-tuong-niem-NSND-Quach-Thi-Ho/16269.bld> (accessed online August, 2013). This is my translation.

²⁸⁸ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật*. Diện also emphasized this in a lecture-performance at L’Espace Cultural Center in Hanoi during the period of my fieldwork.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

became recalled only through texts, through visual representations, the mass media, and the material aspects and musicality of staged performances. With increased attention from the media, *Quản lý văn hóa* (Cultural Managers), from international organizations, and from researchers (Barley Norton did MA thesis fieldwork with the Thái Hà Ensemble in this time), *ca trù*-centered festivals occasionally appeared. One occurred in Cổ Đạm in 1998 and another in Hanoi in 1999.²⁹⁰ In 2000, a performance took place at the Văn Miếu Quốc Tử Giám (the Temple of Literature) in Hanoi. Another similar event occurred in Thành Hóa in 2005. Nguyễn Xuân Diện writes, however, that such occasions did not satisfy the expectations of those who adored the music, and reminded them only of how much had been lost.²⁹¹

As noted in their 2005 annual report, the Hanoi office of the Ford Foundation funded a gathering of musicians in Hà Tĩnh and Hanoi, which drew twenty *ca trù* clubs from various provinces.²⁹² The foundation's annual report describes the purpose of the grant:

“To hold a festival to revive the performance traditions and contexts of Ca trù singing, a highly sophisticated musical form associated with Vietnam's pre-revolution literati.”²⁹³

This event included a class held over a period of several months, in which they taught basic *ca trù* song types, such as *hát nói* (sing-speak), *gửi thư* (sending a love letter), *hát giai* (melody), *hát ru* (lullaby), *hát xâm huê tình* (a type borrowed from itinerant musician tradition), and *ngâm thơ* (declaiming poetry), which is the repertory that many performers today know.²⁹⁴ Nguyễn Thị Chúc, who lives in Hà Tây province outside Hanoi, and who often performs with the Thăng

²⁹⁰ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật*, 93.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ According to their site, it was a \$66,800 grant. “Ford Foundation Annual Report” (2005), 135. See the PDF of the document at: <http://www.fordfoundation.org/pdfs/library/ar2005.pdf> (accessed August 19, 2013).

²⁹⁴ Nguyễn Văn Khuê, personal communication, 2009.

Long Guild, was also involved in teaching in this course. Phạm Thị Huệ, the founder of the Thăng Long Guild, studied with the Thái Hà at this time as well.

Attention continued to increase throughout this decade. In 2005, Nguyễn Xuân Diện gave a lecture about the art and history of *ca trù* at the Ethnology Museum in Hanoi, and again at the first international conference on *ca trù* in Vietnam in 2006. Some of the papers delivered at this conference were later published.²⁹⁵ In the beginning of the volume, it states that the Ministry of Culture granted permission to the Musicology Institute to organize the conference and to build a file on *ca trù* for submission to UNESCO for recognition as an intangible heritage.

Nguyễn Xuân Diện has noted that musicological research was lacking in this conference. He writes that the music needs to be collected, researched, and preserved because it is a “*vốn quý văn hóa của dân tộc*” (cultural asset of the nation).²⁹⁶ He considers *ca trù* “*ca nhạc tính phòng*” (chamber music) and “*di sản văn hóa đặc sắc*” (cultural heritage of distinction and excellence).²⁹⁷ This language is typical of academics in Vietnam on the topic of cultural heritage, and this filters into the mainstream through the media, although many prefer the nomenclature of *âm nhạc dân gian* (folk music) instead of *ca nhạc tính phòng* (chamber music). When pressed on this issue, however, Nguyễn said, it is “*phức tạp* [complicated].” The English cognate, indeed, is emphasized in everyday speech among cosmopolitan, multi-lingual Vietnamese. Ambivalence is pervasive in many contexts and formats in Vietnamese culture and language, and this example is part a larger cultural phenomenon, comfort with ambiguity.

²⁹⁵ Đặng Hoàng Loan, Phạm Minh Hương, Hồ Thị Hồng Dung, eds., *Tóm tắt tham luận: Hội thảo quốc tế ca trù 2006* (Hanoi: Bộ Văn Hóa Thông Tin/Viện Âm Nhạc, 2006).

²⁹⁶ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật* 19.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

Discursive Backgrounds to Ca trù's Re-emergence

The re-emergence of *ca trù* was prepared by discourse in which the music was buttressed as a symbol of nationalism, was connected to the revolutionary tradition, and was linked to an uncontaminated past. The result was an image of historical continuity. Various works on the history and poetry of *ca trù*, published from the 1980s onward, were important to projecting into public memory a continuity of tradition. Nguyễn Xuân Diện's book, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật*, raises a poem that provides a good example through which to examine this. The poem is by Trần Huyền Trân (1913-1989), and it serves to bridge the mid-twentieth century when *ca trù* was dormant.

Trần Huyền Trân was involved with the *Thơ mới* (New Poetry) Movement, which began in the 1930s, and lived in the Khâm Thiên area, along with Nguyễn Tuân, the author of the novella *Chùa đàn* (Instrument Pagoda). Trần Huyền Trân fought with the Việt Minh, and after 1954 worked in Vietnamese theater. Posthumously in 2007, the state awarded him the “Giải thưởng nhà nước về văn học nghệ thuật” (National Award for Literary Arts).²⁹⁸ Nguyễn Xuân Diện notes that the poem was written for the songstress Quách Thị Hồ when she thirty years old (1939).²⁹⁹

The voice of the poetic narrative is that of an audience member in a performance during the 1930s. The nostalgic poem in Nguyễn's seminal book on *ca trù* helps to build a connection between imperial-era elegance in courtesan culture and the late-twentieth century Vietnam People's Artist Quách Thị Hồ, all through the words of a patriotic literary figure.

²⁹⁸ Posthumous details can be found in recent news publications. He was also apparently involved in *chèo* musical theater and plays later in his life. For early writings, see the excerpts in the popular book: Hoài Thanh and Hoài Trân, *Thi nhân Việt Nam: 1932-1941* (Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Học, 2005). This was originally published in 1942.

²⁹⁹ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật*, 86-7.

*Tự cổ sâu chung kiếp xướng ca
 Mênh mông trời đất vẫn không nhà
 Người ơi mưa đấy?
 Hay sênh phách
 Tay yếu gieo lòng xuống chiếu hoa...
 Thôi khóc chi ai kiếp đọa đày
 Tỳ bà tâm bóng mây³⁰⁰*

*Ancient melancholy of our generation's songstresses
 Vast sky and earth still not home
 Is that rain?
 Or the castanet
 Small hands sowing seeds in the heart down upon a flowered sedge mat
 Shedding tears, life was mistreated
 The tỳ bà [pipa lute] casts a shadow on the mind³⁰¹*

The poem describes the physical setting of a singing session, including a sedge mat upon which performers sat.³⁰² The scholar Nguyễn Quảng Tuân explained to me that patrons usually perched on wooden daybeds, and musicians sat below on the floor, an arrangement reflecting social classes.³⁰³ The sedge mat is an important material aspect of the performing practice as well as everyday life today (although the western sofa and dining room table are creeping into more common use to replace the sedge mat). Another important material aspect mentioned in this poem is the *phách* (bamboo or rosewood idiophone, here called a castanet). The rhythms of this instrument bind the musicians and the audience-drummer. The music-as-water metaphor is characteristic of Vietnamese poetics, in which the timbre of the *đàn đáy* and other plucked stringed instruments is frequently likened to babbling brooks and mountain streams. The reference to *tỳ bà* (the Chinese *pipa* lute) could mean this lute was interchangeable with the *đàn*

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 86-87. It is unclear if Quách Thị Hồ would have performed this or if it was merely an ode to the art.

³⁰¹ Translated by Bretton Dimick.

³⁰² This is a mat called *chiếu* in Vietnamese that is weaved of sedge. It ubiquitously adorns the floors of Vietnamese homes as a space to have tea, dinner, or a musical performance.

³⁰³ He is the elderly scholar of poetry who I had the good fortune to visit during my fieldwork; his books I have cited above.

đáy (three-stringed lute), but it is more likely a reference to the seminal poem, “Tỳ bà hành,” the “rice bowl” of the songstress house. This is a classic standard that only accomplished *ca trù* artists today perform. Trân’s poem stresses the importance of the singer and her relationship with the audience members. She could sow seeds in his heart, and the singing session was an intimate experience.

The music represented as “ancient melancholy” gives a sense of the poet’s nostalgia for what the melodies might have meant in the elevated practices of imperial-era Vietnam; this aligns with nostalgia expressed by others in the 1920s to 1940s (see Chapter Three). A longing for a time without colonialism is expressed in the phrase “earth and sky still not home.” In a sense, the poet is looking into the past and also imagining a future without a French presence.

The poem’s presence in Nguyễn Xuân Diện’s work connects literary and musical cultures of the past with the musical culture today. The poem casts *ca trù* in the light of Vietnamese patriotism, framed as longing for a land of one’s own. Nguyễn further connects *ca trù* and the rejection of colonial rule in the following description of the colonial era.

“Alongside *hát ả đào* in the capital city’s singing cafes, political prisoners sat in imperial prisons behind colonialist bars—determined communist fighters who loved their country and enjoyed *hát ả đào*. After leaving and recovering from the cramped space of imprisonment, they called to assemble the masses for revolution... for the day of victory.”³⁰⁴

The link between *ca trù* and the revolutionary tradition of resisting foreign influence and aggression was necessary for its re-emergence in the public light. The 1980s book on the birthplace of *ca trù*, which I discussed above, also served this end.³⁰⁵ The tradition of publishing

³⁰⁴ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử và nghệ thuật*, 87. Such a remark is unusual in his work. Given that Vietnamese academics do not often have the luxury of dissent, I suspect an editor may have influenced this.

³⁰⁵ Bùi Xuân Phải, ed., *Hát cửa đình Lỗ Khê*.

related to *ca trù* in this vein places the music in the light of nationalism, and this continued well into the period of the music's revival. Since the year 2000, many reports and books on *ca trù* have been published. This included to some extent Nguyễn Xuân Diện's general introduction and his study of Sino-Vietnamese documents (originally his doctoral dissertation), published in 2000 and 2007, respectively.³⁰⁶ His work is among the only original research based on Hán Nôm documents, and is an invaluable and original study. Much of the newer writing rehashes his work, the book *Việt Nam ca trù biên khảo*, and other mid- and early-twentieth-century accounts.

Works since *ca trù*'s re-emergence have also included a book of source readings;³⁰⁷ a collection of essays about poetry and history;³⁰⁸ various provincial reports of from 2001 to 2007;³⁰⁹ and a twice-published volume of *hát nói* (sing-speak) poetry.³¹⁰ The provincial reports have been published, it is worth noting, by local Culture and Information Offices, the Ministry of Culture and Information, the Institute for Culture and Art Studies (under the Ministry of

³⁰⁶ Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử and Góp phần tìm hiểu*.

³⁰⁷ Thanh Việt, ed., *Ca trù nhìn từ nhiều phía*.

³⁰⁸ Đặng Hoàng Loan et al, eds., *Đặc khảo Ca trù Việt Nam*. This was published by the Musicology Institute in Hanoi and contains essays about history, music, and poetry.

³⁰⁹ The following are the reports I came across, and they largely reiterate the same information as the scholarly works cited in this dissertation. Phạm Bá Chính, ed., *Báo Cáo: Kết quả thực hiện chương trình mục tiêu quốc gia năm 2007: Bảo tồn và phát huy vốn văn hoá phi vật thể nghệ thuật ca trù Hà tây* (Hà Tây province: Sở văn hoá thông tin hà tây, 2007); Phạm Băng Tâm, ed., *Chương trình mục tiêu quốc gia sưu tầm, bảo tồn di sản văn hoá phi vật thể: Ca trù Đào Đăng (Huyện Tiên Lữ, tỉnh Hưng Yên)* (Hanoi: Bộ Văn Hoá Thông Tin, Viện Nghiên Cứu Văn Hoá Nghệ Thuật, 2001); Lê Tất Vinh, ed., *Công trình nghiên cứu sưu tầm nghệ thuật ca trù đồng môn xã Hòa Bình, huyện Thủy Nguyên, thành phố Hải Phòng (Thực hiện chương trình quốc gia về văn hóa năm 2002)* (Hải Phòng: Sở Văn Hóa Thông Tin Thành Phố Hải Phòng, 2002); Nguyễn Ánh Nguyệt, Hoàng Trường, eds., *Kỷ Yếu Hội Thảo Ca trù Thanh Hóa* (Hanoi: Bộ Văn Hóa Thông Tin, Viện Âm Nhạc, 2006).

³¹⁰ Vi Thanh Hoài, ed., *Thơ Hát Nói: Xưa và nay* [Hat Noi Poetry: Before and Now] (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản văn hóa dân tộc, 2003); *Thơ Hát Nói: Xưa và nay* (Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản văn hóa dân tộc, 2005). The 2003 edition has a lengthy preface by Nguyễn Xuân Diện about the history of *ca trù*, whereas the later edition has a noticeably abbreviated version.

Culture), and the Musicology Institute. These served, in essence, to build a bibliography in preparation for submitting a file for UNESCO intangible heritage status.

In addition, Nguyễn Quảng Tuân has published editions of poetry, with guidance on poetic forms, including *hát nói* (sing-speak),³¹¹ which has become an often-performed song type, as the poetic form is flexible. Limited by the scarcity of musical repertory due to its twentieth-century dormancy, the genre benefits from the endless creation of new songs within song types; this makes the freeform features of *hát nói* particularly attractive, and anthologies of poetry in Romanized Vietnamese thus become wellsprings of new songs (see Chapter Five).

Similar to this poem discussed cited in Nguyễn Xuân Diện's book, a book from 2010 discursively bridges the period of silence in *ca trù*'s history. Called *Ca trù Hà Nội trong Lịch sử và hiện tại* (Hanoi Ca tru in History and Modernity),³¹² it reviewed the work of previous scholars, including Đỗ Bằng Đoàn, Đỗ Trọng Huề, and Nguyễn Xuân Diện. Included was Trần Kim Anh's Romanized Vietnamese translation of "Nhạc Biên," the chapter on music from the early nineteenth century collection *Vũ Trung Tuy Bút* by Phạm Đình Hồ, which I discussed in Chapter Three. *Ca trù Hà Nội trong Lịch sử và hiện tại* provides accounts of the early twentieth century through the 1960s, and selections by famous writers such as Vũ Bằng, who referred to Khâm Thiên as the "Literary center of Hanoi," and Nguyễn Tuân, the above-mentioned author of the novella *Chùa đàn* (Instrument pagoda), which also portrays courtesan singing.³¹³

The photographic layout of the *Ca trù Hà Nội trong Lịch sử và hiện tại* (Hanoi Ca tru in History and Modernity) projects a continuity of tradition through imperial and modern times.

³¹¹ Nguyễn Quảng Tuân, *Ca trù thú xưa tao nhã; Cung bậc tri âm; and Ca trù thơ nhạc giao duyên*.

³¹² Nguyễn Đức Mậu, ed., *Ca trù Hà Nội trong Lịch sử và hiện tại* (Nhà xuất bản Hà Nội, 2010).

³¹³ Norton also refers to this novella in "Singing the Past."

Photos portray troupes from the early twentieth century alongside the Thăng Long Guild (founded recently), as well as the Thái Hà Ensemble in 2005 and a course on *ca trù* singing from 2007. The photo in the binding pages centers upon Phạm Thị Huệ of the Thăng Long Guild; she has at this point become an iconic public songstress figure.

The book represents poetic tradition as well. One section serves as an anthology of *Hát nói* poems, beginning with works by Nguyễn Bá Xuyên (1759-1822) and continuing through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A few poems within the patriotic tradition from more recent history are worth noting: “Chào mừng giải phóng Thủ đô” (On the occasion of the capital’s liberation), which is dated 2004 for the fifty-year anniversary of France’s defeat in 1954, and “Chào mừng Đại hội Đảng” (On the Occasion of the Great Communist Party Assembly).³¹⁴ These are further examples of situating *ca trù*, ostensibly, within the narrative of patriotism. Another poem was written to celebrate the one-thousand-year anniversary of Hanoi: “Vui đón ngày Thăng Long 1000 Tuổi” (Happily meeting the day Thăng Long (Hanoi) turns one thousand).³¹⁵ Such works promote the music in the current social and political environment. In this frame, resisting foreign aggression by celebrating the continuity of Vietnamese history, the history of a long-unified Vietnamese nation, becomes important to the music’s position in society. In essence, gestures like this attempt to assuage collective anxiety over the periods of colonialism and revolutionary war.

Although the poetry represented in *Ca trù Hà Nội trong Lịch sử và hiện tại* goes back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the majority of the examples come from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The book includes thirteen poems by Dương Khuê

³¹⁴ Nguyễn Đức Mậu, ed., *Ca trù Hà Nội*, 514-515.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 554.

(1839-1902), such as the famous “Gặp đào Hồng đào Tuyết” (Meeting the songstress Pink and Snow), the early twentieth century is sparsely represented. The book in theory could provide focus on *Lịch sử và hiện tại* (history and modernity), as the title would suggest, but instead leans heavily toward the *hiện tại* (modernity) of *ca trù* poetry. This serves to fill the period of *ca trù*'s waning (after the 1940s) with poetry. Many of the poems represented in this book have never been performed. They bear a political imprint contemporary to their composition in the latter half of the twentieth century. The keywords for bibliographical categorization in the front matter of the book summarize the cultural framework within which this has all been revived in modernity: “*Ca trù, nhạc dân tộc, Hà Nội,*” which translates to “Token songs, national music, Hanoi.”³¹⁶

Ensembles Today

Even with the modest revival of the last twenty to thirty years and increased attention from the state and the academics therein, during my fieldwork period (2007 to 2011), the music has been in a precarious position, with few performers and a limited and static repertory. Diversity in what could be called the “musical ecosystem” of the *ca trù* community has suffered. I borrow this notion from the field of conservation biology, wherein it has been observed that ecosystems with greater biological diversity tend to be stronger. Exploring this analogy momentarily, the Thái Hà Ensemble, in the landscape of *ca trù*'s revival, has been in a sense the “keystone species.” In conservation biology, the keystone species is not as profuse as some others in the system. But it has been theorized that, without keystone species, the system may fail or suffer greatly in an amount disproportionate to the population of the species. This metaphor of

³¹⁶ Ibid.

the “keystone” comes from masonry: A keystone is a wedge-shaped piece of stone at the top of an arch. Without the keystone, the arch falls.³¹⁷

The repertory in the twentieth century shrank, and has been mostly static since its revival. Musicians surmise that more than one hundred *thể cách* (manner, style)³¹⁸ existed in former times; now they only have around thirty, and the musical styles of different ensembles have remained similar. The repertory that individuals kept alive is represented in performances today. This includes works from ritual and entertainment spheres. In any given performance, a few *lục bát* (six-eight syllable) forms are performed, as are poems in *hát nói* (sing-speak) form. The pride of the repertory, and the concluding poem for many singing sessions, is “Tỳ Bà Hành.” There has been no institutionalized system of patronage or sufficient advocacy to breathe life into and expand the musical community, and *ca trù* most often is packaged for tourist dollars or state celebrations.

My first experience, however, with live *ca trù* performance was in a different context. During the summer of 2007, I was first conducting preliminary dissertation fieldwork, and I visited the Thái Hà at their home (on June 16, 2007) for a private performance. There was really no other option for hearing them within a specific timeframe, as they did not perform anywhere on a regular basis at that time and still do not today.

Their home is down an alley off of Thụy Khuê Street, near Hồ Tây (West Lake) in central Hanoi. I would get to know the area well over the coming years, living only a mile from them at one point during my fieldwork. To get there, in the summer of 2007, from my home on Nguyễn

³¹⁷ Jonathan Adams provides a broad, accessible, and informed introduction to these ideas in his book, Adams, *The Future of the Wild: Radical Conservation for a Crowded World* (Beacon Press, 2006).

³¹⁸ In usage, this means simply “a way of performing.” *Thể* means “body, group, class,” and *cách* means “pattern, standard, form, style, skeleton.”

Công Trứ Street (named somewhat auspiciously after the poet-scholar who is credited with the invention of *hát nói* poetry), I had to drive through Ba Đình Square (where Hồ Chí Minh lies in his mausoleum) and past the large yellow army and government buildings in the city center, which are adorned throughout the year with red banners announcing national events and campaigns.

The performance that evening in 2007 began with Thu Thảo, the daughter of the main lute player, Nguyễn Văn Khuê. She sang a poem in *hát nói* (sing-speak). Between songs, the group explained the various elements of the music and offered interpretations of the poetry. Thu Thảo's cousin Kiều Anh performed *xâm huê tình*, a song type borrowed from the tradition of itinerant musicians. The rest of the family remarked that these two were only teenagers but were already great singers. The main singer, Thúy Hòa, performed “Tỳ Bà Hành,” the most difficult song in the repertory, which utilizes the musical building blocks of many song types. *Bác phẩm*, *hát giai* and *hát ru* (opening piece, “melody,” and lullaby, respectively) were performed, and following was more discussion about the technique and theory surrounding the music.³¹⁹

A group that formed in the 1990s was the Câu lạc bộ Ca trù Hà Nội (Hanoi Ca trù Club). I have heard them called the Bích Câu Club, after the area in which they perform. By the time I began fieldwork in 2007, the singer Lê Thị Bạch Vân was giving regular performances at a Buddhist Pagoda on Cát Linh Street in Hanoi (just west of the historic Temple of Literature). Having such an historic site for a regular performance seemed a cornerstone of identity for this group and others, an arrangement that the Thái Hà Ensemble had not found.

³¹⁹ I began studying with them that summer, and I returned during the summer of 2008 and again in the fall of 2009 for the next two years.

At the Cát Linh Pagoda, performers received cash gratuity from the audience while performing. The drum player's participation was presentational, as he was a member of the club, in contrast to the imperial period, when the drum player paid for the right to participate and thereby demonstrated intellectual prowess. In the pagoda, guests offered cash on a platter in front of the stage, which was on the floor of the main building. The elderly singer Nguyễn Thị Chúc (who performs with the Thăng Long Guild) told me years later that, in the singing house context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, bamboo tokens had been replaced by direct cash payment, in opposition to the ritual contexts of ancestor worship houses, which used tokens to represent gratuity. In retrospect, I surmised that the Bích Câu Club was trying to recreate this custom.

Staged like many performances, the audience at the pagoda sat opposite the lute player, singer, and the drum player. A small anteroom off the stage area provided a less formal environment to regular guests. They enjoyed tea, cigarettes, fruit, and sat more comfortably at a table. A television airing a runway fashion show was muted in the background.

A man videotaped the performance in the pagoda and the surrounding scene. I was told he was making a documentary. This became a recurring pattern. When I went to meet with people who studied or performed *ca trù*, there were often cameramen making documentaries or television programs. Such programs air regularly on Vietnam Television (VTV)'s many channels and cover a variety of topics, disseminating folklorized representations of national culture.

Returning to Hanoi to conduct dissertation research in the fall of 2009, I was invited by the Thái Hà to a performance to celebrate the Mid-Autumn Festival (the performance was on October 4, 2009). The performance took place outdoors in a private rock garden, with the patio area of a building on the property serving as a stage (see below). People gathered around on mats

spread out on the ground and enjoyed fruit, tea, wine and beer as the program unfolded.

Following the Thái Hà's performance, another group performed a folklorized version of *lên đồng* (spirit possession music).³²⁰



Picture 3: The Thái Hà performing at private garden, October 4, 2009. From left to right, Nguyễn Văn Mùi, Nguyễn Thúy Hòa, and Nguyễn Văn Khuê.

I returned to this rock garden twice, later that year. The first time was to participate in a “reality” television program, at the Thái Hà’s request (we were filmed on November 10, 2009). Several takes involved me entering another small building on the property, where Văn Khuê and Văn Mùi awaited, in the same dress as in the image above. I was arriving for my “weekly lesson.” The producers told me to come in, bow to my teachers as if this were our custom (it was not), sit down and go over a few song types we had been working on. They interviewed me separately, later in the day, after filming the family performing. Another reality program later involved me learning alongside several young Vietnamese women, “students” of the Thái Hà,

³²⁰ Norton, *Songs for the Spirits*.

whom I had never met. I never saw the results of either of these documentaries. (Norton had a similar experience doing fieldwork in the 1990s).

The next time I went to the rock garden was on the occasion of a Vietnamese-American poet named Xuân Mai visiting (the performance was on November 16, 2009). While there is no longer the *nhà hát cô đầu* (courtesan singing house), in essence they recreated a salon-style performance. The Vietnamese poet was visiting Hanoi, and had hired the Thái Hà to sing her poems. They used the same rock garden venue, although they performed in a small building instead of outdoors. Fewer than twenty people attended, and it was a candle-lit, intimate performance. We sat in two rows, facing one another and looking toward the performers at one end of the rectangular space. On cushions on the floor, guests were again served fruit, tea, beer, and wine. People were free to enjoy the refreshments, speak softly, and smoke cigarettes as the performance ensued. Socializing while music is being performed is not uncommon. At classical music performances at the Hanoi Opera House, I have seen on more than one occasion people take a telephone call.



Picture 4: The Thái Hà perform at a private performance for a visiting poet in 2009. This was the only performance I had seen where the poems were written out and in front of the singer, because she had not seen the texts beforehand.

During the course of the performance (shown above), Thúy Hòa and her neices, Thu Thảo and Kiều Anh, performed some of the traditional repertory as well as original poems composed within the *hát nói* form by the visiting poet. In this instance, they read from a written text, as they had just been presented with the new poems and did not have time to memorize them. They created new songs on the spot.

The layout reminded me of family gatherings in Vietnam for holidays, such as the Lunar New Year. They simply added poetry declamation. The poet seemed very pleased with the performance when I spoke to her several days later, shortly before she returned to the US. It had been a wonderful opportunity for her to reconnect with her cultural heritage and to hear her poetry performed.

Later in the winter of 2010, I attended a Thăng Long Guild performance, which was part of a salon concert series at the US Ambassador's Residence (on February 3, 2010). I was impressed by the Thăng Long's influential networking abilities. In the performance, they mixed *ca trù* songs in the program with "Central Highland Dancing," *Quan họ* (northern folk singing), as well as a court music piece for *đàn nguyệt* (moon lute) and zither. The *ca trù* songs comprised the basic repertory that the group had learned from the Thái Hà Ensemble. Guests were seated in chairs, and were given refreshments before. Afterward, we were given a chance to mingle with the artists and their director.

The primary singer of the Thăng Long, Phạm Thị Huệ,³²¹ had started the Thăng Long as a *câu lạc bộ* (club) but, during my fieldwork, it changed to a *giáo phường* (guild). Phạm Thị Huệ studied in the traditional music department of the Hanoi Conservatory (now the National Academy of Music). The group is mainly comprised of Phạm Thị Huệ and two older members,

³²¹ She was not present in this evening's performance.

the aforementioned Nguyễn Thị Chúc, a relative of the Thái Hà, and Nguyễn Phú Đệ, an older lute player from Hải Dương.³²² But, on occasion, they borrow from the village of Lỗ Khê (the “birthplace” of *ca trù*) notable young performers named Nguyễn Văn Tuyền and Phạm Thị Mận.³²³ These players from Lỗ Khê also studied with the Thái Hà in the course in 2005 and with local musicians in Lỗ Khê.

The Thăng Long have a website with video content and a link to the short documentary on *ca trù* that is featured on UNESCO’s website. They have innumerable YouTube videos, many posted by tourists who have attended their regular performances. The informational materials on the website stress the millennium-long history of *ca trù*, to which the name Thăng Long speaks. It is the old name of the capital Hanoi, founded in 1010 under the Lý Dynasty. The brief history of the genre on their website gives a nod to “singing parlors” of the past (i.e., courtesan singing), but the music is framed foremost as “ceremonial.”

They present themselves online as viewed favorably by the respected scholar Trần Văn Khê, who is quoted as saying *ca trù* is a “unique folk genre... a part of our cultural heritage.”³²⁴ His commentary, positioned as such, serves to emphasize the way they understand and practice the music and lends legitimacy to the group.

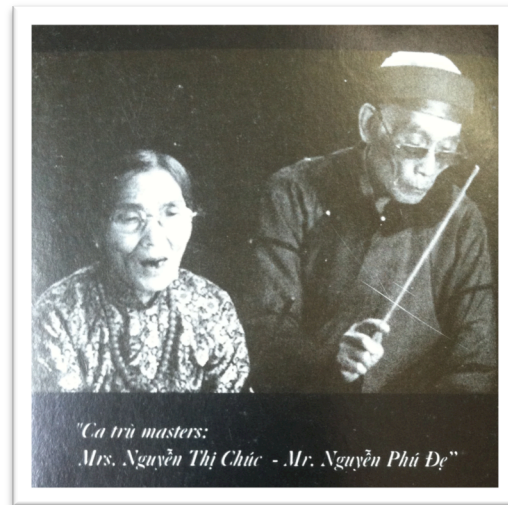
The presence of elderly musicians in the Thăng Long’s performances and promotional materials (see below) offers further authenticity. The *đình* (tutelary spirit worship house) that the Thăng Long uses for weekly performances was renovated in time for the one-thousand-year

³²² Nguyễn Văn Mũi, personal communication, 2009-10.

³²³ A French scholar, Alienor Anisensel, spent a good deal of her fieldwork time working in this village with the older generation of musicians as well as the younger musicians who live there. See Anisensel, “Canter le ca trù au village.”

³²⁴ This is located in the “About us” tab with the title “Trio preserves ancient folk art,” <http://www.catruthanglong.com/About-us/trio-preserves-traditional-folk-art.html> (accessed August 19, 2013).

anniversary celebration of Hanoi in 2010. Performing in an historic worship house of Hanoi's Old Quarter gives the impression that they are performing an ancient folk ritual.



Picture 5: A piece of the Thăng Long Guild's promotional materials, showing the singer Nguyễn Thị Chúc and lute player Nguyễn Phú Đệ playing the trống châu (praise drum).

Many other historic sites were also renovated before this celebration, such as the ancient royal citadel and historic gates around the city. The area around the *đình* that the Thăng Long Guild uses, the Old Quarter just north of Hoàn Kiếm Lake, is full of residences, markets, and small businesses. Since Vietnam re-opened to the world in the 1990s, foreign tourists have flocked to the narrow alleys and streets for the feeling of timelessness and the sense of authentic culture and to experience the crowded bustle of everyday living in an ancient city of Southeast and East Asia. Enjoying the music, theater, and water puppetry in the area is now an integral part of the experience, and *ca trù* has gained a place in this sampling of Vietnamese cultures. The Thăng Long Guild and its online presence give *ca trù* a robust and easily found profile for foreign tourists. With a place for regular performances, the Thăng Long Guild could be valuable in promoting lesser-known groups as well.

The Thăng Long Guild has revived the participatory elements of the drum, teaching audience members how to praise with the drum as part of the performance. The drum's role has changed, though, as it has become a symbol of the scholarly praise-drummer of imperial Vietnam. The cultural studies scholar Bùi Trọng Hiền expressed to me his enjoyment of learning to praise with the drum. His opinion was that the feeling of the music was more important than understanding poetics, as Vietnamese audience members usually find the poetry archaic, and foreign tourists who do not speak Vietnamese do not understand. Others, such as the scholar Nguyễn Xuân Diện, have expressed opinions contrary to this assertion—the performance is born from interacting poetry and music, and the appreciation of this interaction is fundamental to connoisseurship.

About a month after the performance at the US Ambassador's residence, the Thái Hà performed at the French Cultural Center L'Espace (on March 10, 2010). Nguyễn Xuân Diện gave an introductory lecture on the music, history, and poetry. In his lecture, he noted that *ca trù* was “a meeting of poetry and music;” he was a proponent comprehending both. Thus a varied set of opinions on the music and poetry still exist today, as they have in the past.

The lecture was translated in real-time for French speakers, the custom at L'Espace. The cultural center, whose programs vary widely in terms of content, is situated between Hoàn Kiếm Lake and the Hanoi Opera House on Trang Tiền Street, a central area and tourist hot spot of Hanoi. This was one of the best staged, attended, and planned performances I had been to, as Nguyễn Xuân Diện also introduced poetic content and the philosophy of the music, and prepared a brief text summary of *ca trù*'s history and significance in society. The stage was adorned with relics of ancestor and tutelary spirit worship, and incense was burning throughout the performance. The family entered dramatically in a procession wearing traditional *áo dài* (long

tunics), and Văn Khuê began the performance with a court music song titled “Tấu nhạc Cung đình,” which historically was performed by men. He later told me this was a song he recently had begun performing. A summary was handed out with program notes, along with text of some of the poems to be performed, including those poems whose titles are listed below.

Bắc phân (Opening piece)

Hồng Hồng Tuyết Tuyết (The Songstress Pink and Snow)

Gửi thư (Sending a love letter)

Hát giai – hát ru (Melody – Lullaby)

Ba mươi sáu giọng (Thirty-six voices; excerpts from many modes)

Tỳ Bà Hành (A lengthy poem from Chinese origin)

Following the Thái Hà’s performance at L’Espace, it became clear that the Thăng Long, using a recording, had learned and begun performing repertory perceived as public domain, which the Thái Hà had first publicly performed at L’Espace that night. The Thái Hà, clearly dissatisfied by this, had no channels for response. Intellectual property law is a budding field in Vietnam, and laws in general are not well implemented. This example may illustrate a fundamental issue undermining *ca trù*’s revival, a dearth of intellectual property protection. While in some instances a lack of protection can allow for quicker dissemination and growth of music and culture, in these circumstances the lack of protection de-incentivizes pedagogy and performance for one of the primary wellsprings of *ca trù* tradition in modern Vietnam, the Thái Hà Ensemble.

In the past, a guild’s practices were transmitted in a patrilineal pattern. This meant that if you were male, and you had a daughter and a son, then you could teach everything you knew to them both. But your daughter could not teach her children, because she would marry into another family. She, however, would teach your son’s daughter to sing. The practices were taught to the daughters and sons of your son only, in summary, and your daughter’s daughter could not learn. This kept the repertory and practices, a kind of currency, within the patrilineal line. Nguyễn

Thúy Hòa, of the Thái Hà ensemble, explained this to me, and added that her family today interpreted the custom with flexibility because of limited interest and students. But she did mention that recording and reproducing repertory without permission was an unacceptable practice.

These performance and publishing rights problems are exacerbated, perhaps caused, by the status of the music as *âm nhạc dân gian* (folk music). This widespread framing of the music points to a gap between imperial-era customs and modern laws. While *ca trù* may have emerged among the fifteenth-century Vietnamese “folk,” a few noteworthy things have occurred. The music was institutionalized in guilds and professionalized in aesthetic, social, and economic ways. Customs were developed for the transmission of repertory in families. The music became a chamber music for elite consumption, and then Vietnam became a nation-state with a market economy and modern law.

A similar lineup of songs as that of the L’Espace performance was used in a performance for the commemoration of the UNESCO recognition (on April 16, 2010). It was near L’Espace at the French-built Hanoi Opera House. It included *Quan họ* (northern folk singing), which also was recognized in 2009 along with *ca trù* as an intangible heritage. I received an invitation through the sponsor of my visa, the Vietnam Institute of Culture and Art Studies under the Ministry of Culture. Another similar program occurred at the opera house, later in August, preceding the millennial anniversary of Hanoi in 2010. It was titled “Đêm Ca trù Quan họ Xuân: mừng 1000 năm Thăng Long – Hà Nội” (A night of Ca trù and Quan họ: Celebrating 1000 years of Thăng Long – Hà Nội). The program for the latter listed the order of performance as written below.

Tấu nhạc Cung đình (from palace singing repertory), sung by Văn Khuê with the **Thái Hà Hát giai** (“melody”), with lute performance by Nguyễn Phú Đệ with the **Thăng Long Hát thét nhạc**, sung by Nguyễn Thị Chúc with the **Thăng Long Chơi Hồ Tây** (Play at West Lake), *hát nói* sung by Kiều Anh with the **Thái Hà Gặp Xuân** (Meeting spring), sung by Phạm Thị Huệ with the **Thăng Long Tỳ bà hành**, sung by Nguyễn Thúy Hòa with the **Thái Hà Mùa hát bỏ bộ** (from palace singing), performed by the **Thăng Long**

The order of the program is significant. The Thăng Long Guild alternated with the Thái Hà, splitting the program more or less evenly, and though Thúy Hòa performed the “hardest piece” of the repertory, “Tỳ bà hành,” the Thăng Long performed last. Nguyễn Thị Chúc, who is a relative of the Thái Hà, performed with the Thăng Long, as she usually does. This was a similar arrangement of songs as the April performance at the Opera House. They performed works that are from palace singing (*Tấu nhạc* and *Mùa hát bỏ bộ*), tutelary spirit worship singing (*hát giai* and *thét nhạc*), as well as from the entertainment spheres of *hát cửa quyền* and *hát ả đào* (the rest of those listed above).³²⁵ Following this first half of the performance came another half celebrating *Quan họ* (northern folk singing).

In the UNESCO celebration program at the Opera House, after all the singing was done, Vietnamese officials and a representative of UNESCO made speeches to commemorate the occasion. Representatives from the provinces where the music had historically resided ascended the stage, where they formed a line across the stage and received plaques to certify intangible heritage status for their respective regions. The musicians, who had spent the previous hours performing and a lifetime “*giữ gìn*” (“maintaining,” as the media often phrases it) the music for which these provincial representatives were receiving plaques, stood in the background, mostly hidden from view. From the audience, I could see them, adorned in their traditional costumes.

³²⁵ The repertories are interconnected, as Nguyễn Xuân Diện notes in *Lịch sử nghệ thuật*.

An occasional head reached over the line of black-suited shoulders of the provincial representatives as the photographic opportunity proceeded. This was slated into the program: “*chụp ảnh kỷ niệm*”—“take pictures to commemorate.” Each representative received recognition and a plaque in turn. This image perfectly summarized the relationship of the state and the local in Vietnam, where Party and government come first, and the relative position of the arts is incidental to the Party’s representation. The image spoke also to the question of who owns tradition, and exposed the role of an international organization in the brokering of tradition, and issue I return to in Chapter Six.

Chapter V

Singing Poetry in a Tone Language: Text, Tone, and Tune

In the preceding chapters I have covered the history of *ca trù* to the present. In this chapter, I explore the musical and textual elements of *ca trù* performance in detail, based on my ethnographic research from 2009 to 2011. I discuss the music- and language-centered logic of *ca trù*, focusing on the intersection of music and text in the declamation of poetry in a tonal language. In *ca trù*, performers break the rules of the logic to create heightened aesthetic moments. Exceptions to the logic are what make the performance interesting to the artists and to informed listeners. Historically, these would have been special moments for the praise drum player, a connoisseur of language and an amateur musician. Today, these moments may be significant and evocative to initiated audience members, of which there are still too few. One's ability to learn and to manipulate the rules, such as the singer's use of word tones in creating melody, comprises one's identity as an able artist.

This chapter includes discussions of poetic form, the process of creating melody from text, the relationship of voice and lute parts, and also focuses on the *hát nói* (sing-speak) mode of music and form of poetry, which originated in the Lê Dynasty. Other elements here include the singer's use of the *phách* idiophone, which holds the ensemble rhythmically together, and the praise drum, through which one comments on the performance. The drum's role in the past was considered a form of audience participation. Today, however, it is played by a member of the

ensemble and is included as a symbol of the past more often than as a conduit of audience participation.

In my fieldwork,³²⁶ my primary contact with the Thái Hà Ensemble was the lute player Nguyễn Văn Khuê. He and I developed a phrase to describe what I was doing in field research: “*Học để nghiên cứu*” (study in order to research), which indicated I did not intend to reach professional performance level but sought to learn enough to understand the performance practice, in a variation of participant-observation.³²⁷ I spent time working with Văn Khuê as well as his sister Nguyễn Thúy Hòa, the group’s main singer and arguably the most knowledgeable living *ca trù* singer. I also conducted research through Nguyễn Văn Mũi, their elderly father, a delightful and distinguished patriarch who plays the praise drum and *đàn đáy* lute.

The knowledge expressed herein was garnered with these musicians in a collaborative experience, and this study would not be possible without them. The conclusions that follow reflect my entire experience of fieldwork. The more fundamental aspects of the study were presented to me in the Thái Hà’s traditional mode of pedagogy, learning through aural transmission and imitation. Many conclusions were observed in analysis, and these represent distillations of my fieldwork experience.

Văn Mũi, who was in his early eighties when I began studying *ca trù*, is an autodidact of poetry and history as well as a tinkerer, and is fond of playing old French tunes on a self-modified lap steel guitar. Unlike ancient times when the drummer “praised” the singer with his playing (and his money), Văn Mũi is a member of the ensemble; he performs the historical role

³²⁶ I first began working with them in the summer of 2007 and continued in the summer of 2008 and the fall of 2009 to the spring and summer of 2011.

³²⁷ The word *nghiên cứu* (research) became a good friend, as being *nghiên cứu sinh* (a “research student,” meaning graduate student) was a well-received status. A culture of valuing intellectual pursuits, rooted in imperial Vietnamese literati culture, thrives in pockets of Hanoi.

of audience-participant in a presentational manner. The economic relationship has shifted, from between the paying participant and the ensemble to between the paying audience and the ensemble, which includes a drummer. In some instances, the drum is omitted entirely from the performance. Many insist, however, that without the drum, it is not authentic *ca trù*.

Văn Khuê, the group's main lutist, works for the army in, as he explained to me, a traditional music office. He is responsible for organizing performances on important days such as national holidays. His brother, Tiến, is also proficient on the lute, and he was once primary lutist, but now works full time running a recording studio.³²⁸ Văn Khuê's daughter, Thu Thảo, and his niece, Kiều Anh, who were both teenagers at the time of my research, often sing with the group.

The group's primary singer, Thúy Hòa, is considered the most proficient and talented *ca trù* singer in Vietnam. When she was young, Thúy Hòa studied with the renowned singer Quách Thị Hồ, among other singers. Thúy Hòa explained to me that Quách Thị Hồ was not within the patrilineal line of the Thái Hà. This meant that, according to imperial-era customs, Quách Thị Hồ may not have learned some of the Thái Hà Ensemble's repertory from the previous generation in the mid-twentieth century, and thus could not teach it to Thúy Hòa as a young singer. (It would not surprise me to learn that she knows repertory that she does not share with the public, field researchers such as myself, or other musicians, for fear of intellectual property being stolen).

My research with the group was comprised of weekly lessons with Văn Khuê, his father, Văn Mùi, and sister, Thúy Hòa. I learned how to play the lute, drum, and idiophone and to sing. I designed a research schedule in consultation with these three members of the group, so that I would move systematically through a representative repertory, including the song types *hát nói* (sing-speak) and *gửi thư* (sending a love letter), which I discuss here to illustrate the main points

³²⁸ This information was accurate at the time of the research, 2009-2011.

of *ca trù* practices. I also studied, to varying extents, the song types *bác phẩm* (opening piece), *ngâm thơ* (poetry declamation in an old style), *hát giai* (“melody”)³²⁹ and *hát ru* (lullaby), two types usually performed in tandem, and *hát xẩm huê tình* (which means literally “to sing for a profound flower of love”), a borrowing from itinerant musician traditions.

Demonstrating the process of singing in a tonal language, and the relationship of voice and accompanying lute melody, has been my main challenge in this analysis. While studying with this group of musicians, I recorded the *khuôn* (model) performances as they taught them, in most cases memorized them as a performer would, and transcribed them in order to discuss and illustrate examples. In the majority of cases, transcriptions involved collaboration and feedback from the performers.³³⁰ Transcriptions are naturally not intended for pedagogical purposes, but are provided for the theoretical consideration of the reader, in order to demonstrate specific aspects of the music. The pitches in this singing and lute-playing tradition are not fixed. The lute is tuned relative to the singer’s voice, and the modes are not well tempered. The spaces between the frets of the lute, for example, are about twenty cents short of a whole step in a well-tempered scale. In some modes, performers alter the pitches from this point, either up or down twenty to forty cents.

I use Western notation in transcriptions. My lute teacher Văn Khuê read Western notation and also sometimes used fixed-*do* solfège. This led to my earliest transcriptions being based from middle C (C4), although the pitch of the lowest note on the lute was usually from a fifth to an octave below this. I have, since then, moved the base pitch of the lute to A below middle C

³²⁹ “*Giai*” translates as “melody,” as in *giai điệu* (melody). The Vietnamese Nôm Preservation Foundation, a valuable resource for Vietnamese etymology, indicates that it also could relate to a type of model Chinese writing.

³³⁰ I have not made recordings available. I recorded under the auspices of research and non-commercial use. In addition, the ensemble has released several commercial recordings.

(A3) in the transcriptions, in order to remove flats from the key signature, which looked confusing. In the solfège used here, *me* is approximately *mi*-flat and *se* is approximately *si*-flat. Where two registers are represented, apostrophes on the solfège syllables indicate a lower register.

On Musical Creativity in Ca trù: Creating Melody from Text

I begin here with a wide frame of reference, because while the musics of the world differ greatly, we still tend toward similar base structures as a species creating “humanly organized sound.”³³¹ Music tends to accomplish similar things the world over, although outlooks and orientations toward these base structures vary. Even with the fracturing, re-combining, and hybridizing of musical cultures under the haphazard influence of globalization, cultures oscillate toward and away from one another in style, as do people’s manner of conceiving of and producing music. As Bruno Nettl has written, although the nature of musical creativity and improvisation differs across the world, subjects as disparate as classical European and classical Indian music can be viewed within the same lens, in their manner of creation.³³² Musical materials must be learned, practiced, and mastered. A “composition” is born. “Revisions” occur. In one context, a composer uses notation to create and a performer learns and plays the composition. In another, the composition is born through live performance in the spontaneous or quick incorporation and recombination of melodic phrases, skeletons, or riffs, and through invention of new material, along the lines of improvisational genres such as jazz and bluegrass.

³³¹ John Blacking, *How Musical Is Man?* (University of Washington Press, 1973).

³³² Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-one Issues and Concepts* (University of Illinois Press, 2005), 30-31.

In improvisatory music, revisions are made as one moves away from and towards various musical goals along the way, and only at the end of performing is a “work” done.

Ca trù can be viewed as an improvisatory performance, where the addition of a text in a tone language provides guideposts in the improvisation. Poetic forms correspond to musical modes, or sets of pitches established through convention. Conventions are taught orally, meaning by listening to and imitating a teacher. The musical materials are summarized in melodic *khỏ* (strophes), which are melodic fragments that both the singer and lute accompanist learn before anything else.

In performance, the singer is presented with a poem, sometimes only moments before performing, and embarks on a musical realization of the text, which frequently she has already memorized, but this is not always the case. She uses the word tones as a guide within the musical mode, while her accompanist creates a suitable musical backdrop or *không gian* (“space”). Roles are traditionally gendered, women singing and men accompanying. The lute player’s improvisation is similar in theory to the classical Indian, jazz, or bluegrass musician because, ideally, he recombines melodic materials and invents new melody for novel performances. “Suitable” is defined by the tastes of the ensemble, which traditionally was a family of musicians. In this case, the performance becomes a multi-faceted expression of family identity and a means through which a family spends time together and thereby bonds socially and musically.

Thúy Hòa, the singer for the Thái Hà Ensemble, expressed that the more intimate the relationships between the players, the better they would perform. Husband and wife, brother and sister, or father and daughter are good combinations, in her view. Through necessity, many

ensembles today scrape together repertory and performers, and performers do not have these relationships, so the Thái Hà is an exception.

Language and Music

In studying *ca trù*, the issue of language and music manifests in fascinating ways. Some previous studies have provided analyses of tone languages affecting the realization of texts. In the field of ethnomusicology, discussions of language and music often have orbited the mediation of language in discourse about music. Language is necessary for many of our understandings of music and also unnecessary to other understandings. The latter are musically expressed or experientially known, or they are emotive qualities associated with organized sound and ambient social experience.³³³

From the viewpoint of cognition scholars, language and music both involve acquisition from an early age of “learned sound categories.”³³⁴ While a cohesive system in language and music may develop, the use of language and music often varies from one opportunity to the next (i.e., *langue* and *parole* in Saussurean linguistics). All depends on context, and this aspect of language and music allows for change over time. Many different types of language and music systems are possible, though they tend to have the same or similar cognitive functions.

In this view, the aspects that comprise music and language systems are not physical objects but “psychological entities” which vary, as anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have been writing for some time, from culture to culture.³³⁵ Most cultures are interrelated with others,

³³³ Charles Seeger, *Studies in Musicology*; Turino, “Signs of imagination,” and *Music as social life*.

³³⁴ Aniruddh D. Patel, *Music, Language, and the Brain* (Oxford, 2008).

³³⁵ Ibid.

and are impossible to view as discrete or pristine in the modern world.³³⁶ Language and music systems, however, are tightly bound in the minds of individuals raised within a culture, and these types of systems are experienced in similar ways.³³⁷ Music from outside one's system sounds strange, like a foreign language.

To conservatory students in Michigan, for example, the music of Vietnam sounds “out of tune.”³³⁸ Even Vietnamese people in Vietnam who are unfamiliar with *ca trù* may think it odd. Broadly speaking, *ca trù* does not have much cultural traction due to its unfamiliar sound and performing practices, unfamiliar because it is a still-reviving tradition from the past. Like adaption and acculturation in language systems, it may take Vietnamese society some time to re-acclurate to lost-and-revived traditions.

Viewing the “psychological entities” that comprise language and music systems as particles of “learned sound categories” helps to level the field between language and music, and to demonstrate that the systems are interconnected. A particularly interesting place to examine the interconnectedness of the learned sound categories of language and music systems is at their intersection in singing in a tonal language. The musical negotiation of linguistic pitch in *ca trù* singing occurs, for a native Vietnamese speaker, as a near-instinctual process once the modes and singing techniques are learned.

When I took *ca trù* singing lessons from Thúy Hòa along with another student who was Vietnamese, I watched the process of learning for a native speaker, which was markedly different from my own experience. Although I had more formal training in music, the other

³³⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minnesota Press, 1996).

³³⁷ Patel, *Music, Language*, 216-217.

³³⁸ I experienced this in a Vietnamese music ensemble at the University of Michigan. Performance majors were bothered by what they perceived as “out of tune” instruments.

student's native speaking skills naturally lent her an advantage in the creation of song in this format. When given a new text, she developed more quickly an intuitive feel for how the melody could be formed within a modal framework, pointing perhaps to the structuring role of learned sound categories of the Vietnamese language in the creation of melody, at least in this context.

The ability of tone language to structure learned sound categories in the mind is not a new observation. In a study of conservatory students in China, where tone language is spoken, and students in the United States, where tone language is much less common, there was a higher incidence of absolute pitch (the ability to recall and name frequencies) among students in China, and in another study a higher incidence was found among students in an American conservatory who spoke a tone language versus those who did not.³³⁹ Tone language, which uses pitch to communicate meaning, in theory creates structures in the mind for better remembering pitches and the relative distances between them.

In the context of *ca trù*, singers use the relative structures of word tones in conjunction with schemes of learned musical pitches (musical modes). The structures provided by Vietnamese word tones, more firmly rooted "sound categories" in the mind of a native speaker than for a non-native speaker, would of course aid in this process. The Vietnamese student's local musical system also helped her learn more quickly; she adopted the musical modes so quickly that I surmised she was aurally familiar with them already.

³³⁹ Diana Deutsch, Trevor Henthorn, Elizabeth Marvin, and Hong Shuai Xu, "Absolute pitch among American and Chinese conservatory students: Prevalence differences, and evidence for a speech-related critical period," *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 119, no. 2 (2006): 719-722; and Deutsch, Diana, Kevin Dooley, Trevor Henthorn, and Brian Head, "Absolute pitch among students in an American music conservatory: Association with tone language fluency," *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 125, no. 4 (2009): 2398-2403.

In non-tone languages such as English, inflections can affect the meanings of words. “Inflection” means, in musical terms, the change in the melody or pitch contour of a spoken syllable. We can use inflection to impart sarcasm and irony, for instance. Yet the inflection is not bound to strict conventions of word tone usage as in a tone language. In a non-tone language, inflection cannot change the meaning of a word from “ghost” to “mother,” whereas in Vietnamese, “*ma*” with a level tone means “ghost,” and “*má*” with a rising tone means “mother.” This fundamental aspect of tone language is a central point of my musical inquiries.

Below are listed the word tones of Vietnamese, written in the Romanized system. The word tones are indicated by diacriticals that represent tones, as shown in the table below; “*không*” just means “no” and has no diacritical indicator. I have listed the symbols for diacriticals on vowels to the right. The diacriticals in the lefthand column that are not included in the righthand column indicate differing pronunciation of vowels in Vietnamese (for example, *a* and *ã* or *o* and *ô* have different pronunciations).

<i>Tone name</i>	<i>Pitch contour</i>	<i>Diacritical</i>
<i>Không</i>	<i>flat (no tone)</i>	<i>(none)</i>
<i>Sắc</i>	<i>high rising</i>	<i>á</i>
<i>Ngã</i>	<i>broken rising</i>	<i>ã</i>
<i>Hỏi</i>	<i>low rising</i>	<i>ô</i>
<i>Huyền</i>	<i>falling</i>	<i>è</i>
<i>Nặng</i>	<i>sharp falling</i>	<i>ạ</i>

Figure 3: Word tones in Vietnamese.

To illustrate what is entailed in speaking in a tone language, let me rely on an anecdote. In learning Vietnamese, it was difficult, as a native English speaker, for me to finish a question with a word that had a *huyền* (falling tone). I was used to raising the pitch at the end of questions. Early in the process of learning, if the word concluding a question had a level or dropping tone, my English-language brain would speak what in Vietnamese was *sắc* (high-rising tone). This

would change the meaning or give no meaning to the last word. As I began to overcome this rather basic hurdle and hear the tones in speech for myself, rather than being told by a teacher, I wondered further how one could intelligibly communicate meaning in a song and how melody must be treated to do so. It was difficult to imagine a world in which every melody was dictated by word tones.

In the aesthetic of *ca trù*, in most cases, however, I found that the tones of the language indeed dictated the contour of the melody, at least giving a base structure to the melody. Linguistic tones guide melody in other musics of the world, such as in Cantonese opera.³⁴⁰ Although many singing genres even in Vietnam eschew word tone for musical tune, or do not have an established convention surrounding the language-based transformation of text into melody (pop music is a widespread example).³⁴¹ Meaning is transmitted in lyrics therefore by semantic contextualization. “*Anh yêu em*” (I love you) is a common enough example from popular music. This phrase can be adapted to a variety of melodies because it would be difficult to confuse for another phrase, regardless of how it is realized in melody.³⁴² *Ca trù* performing practices, however, entail conventions of realization, in terms of the relationship between tone language and melody.

Much research has been done on tonal languages and singing, by ethnomusicologists as well as by linguists. There appear to be a few common (or universal) approaches people use to handle the issue of word tones and melody. On one side of a spectrum, people adhere to word

³⁴⁰ Patel, *Music, Language*, 216. Bell Yung, *Cantonese Opera: Performance as Creative Process* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³⁴¹ Listening to popular music on the radio and to music projected on public loudspeakers in Hanoi for years, I would venture a guess that most singing in Vietnamese does not adhere strictly to the guidance of word tones.

³⁴² The growing hip-hop scene in Vietnam would be another fascinating place to look at these aspects of music and language.

tones strictly, and on the other side they ignore them completely. In between, there are many gradations of ambivalent treatments of word tone and musical tune. *Ca trù* leans toward the side where people adhere to word tones, with occasional moments where the logic is broken.

In a linguistic study of songs and speech in the Shona language in Zimbabwe, Murray Schellenberg analyzes the up-down motions of transitions between syllables in speech as compared to song. Acoustical analysis led to the conclusion that there were parallels in contour between spoken and sung versions of the same words.³⁴³ A useful distinction in this study is its approach to melody as a series of transitions between syllables rather than as a series of notes or pitches.

Reading Bell Yung's study of Cantonese opera performing practice, I find parallels with *ca trù* in terms of the approach that singers use and also in terms of modality, at least on the surface of things. This is understandable, given geography and history.³⁴⁴ In Cantonese opera, a few methods exist of realizing text in song, and Yung makes useful distinctions between these methods. In some song types, a singer takes a fixed set of pitches (a mode or scale), and adapts a poem's contours to the pitches in song. In other song types, singers adapt the word tones of a text to fixed tunes. Poetic forms in classical East Asian writing often had specific guidelines on the pattern of word tones. Historically, musical tunes and the word tone schemes of poetic forms developed as conventions alongside one another. In other words, in the decision to transition from one pitch to the next (many decisions equaling a melody), the determining factor would be

³⁴³ Murray Schellenberg, "Singing in a Tone Language: Shona," *Selected Proceedings of the 39th Annual Conference on African Linguistics*, ed. Akinloye Ojo and Lioba Moshi (Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project, 2009): 137-144.

³⁴⁴ Yung also analyzes the tendencies towards certain pitches within musical modes by graphing the frequency of pitches used in tunes, a fascinating approach to this type of study.

a word tone and, given a consistent word tone pattern in a type of poetry, the melody or tune type of one poem would be similar to the next.

As such, in *ca trù*, in poetic forms with strict word tone schemes, melodic realizations yield the same or a similar melody from one poem to the next. In the Vietnamese context, performers do not think of this melody as a defined “tune type,” as they would in Yung’s analysis. In theory, however, they could be viewed in a similar light. In the context of *ca trù*’s history, Yung’s assertion regarding the historical development of the word tone scheme of a strict poetic form *alongside* the development of a fixed tune would make sense. Along similar lines, the more freeform features of *hát nói* (sing-speak) poetry seems to have made it of utility in the history of *ca trù*, especially given the recent history of repertory loss.

Poetic Form: The Basis of Ca trù Songs

Hát nói (literally “sing-speak”) is a flexible poetic form used in *ca trù* singing. It combines elements of Chinese poetry with freeform features. As a general rule in Vietnamese culture today, people tend to express an identity in contrast to or in opposition to China, and this poetic form is no exception. Scholars and musicians agree that, while it uses some Chinese tradition, the form is uniquely Vietnamese. The poem I discuss in detail, “Gặp Đào Hồng Đào Tuyết,” is the most famous and popular of *ca trù* poems and provides an apt socio-cultural backdrop for *ca trù*’s re-emergence, as the poem symbolically connects *ca trù* to a long history of resistance to foreign influence.

The poem is remembered today as representing a moment in the nineteenth century, when the author of the poem, a scholar named Dương Khuê, criticized the king for not resisting the French invasion. The historical moment is instilled in the poem through the story of a missed

opportunity of love between a man and a beautiful songstress. In the story, the man enchants the girl at a young age, but he chides her because she is too young. Her name is Hồng (Pink or Rose), denoting the dainty disposition of the young songstress (a comparable expression might be the “flush of youth”). Later in life, she grows into a beautiful young woman, and the man, now elderly, falls in love with her in turn, but she chastises him because he is too old. At this point, her name changes to Tuyết (Snow).

The theme, of course, is the passage of time and missed opportunity (on the older man’s part). Her name change is framed in terms of the man’s stages in life, from spring to winter, not in terms of her own life, early spring to summer, which reflects the gendered frame of reference of patriarchal society. The story is draped over widely known history, wherein the girl represents Dương Khuê, who advises the king to resist the French incursion in the nineteenth century, and the man represents the king.³⁴⁵ The poet symbolically assumes a female role amidst his critique of power, which is an example of Vietnamese literary transvestism.³⁴⁶

In *hát nói* poetry, there are no syllable requirements in terms of numbers of syllables per line, except for lines five and six. There is otherwise a free rhyme scheme and framework of word tone patterns. The basic eleven-line form has variations that include adding or taking away four-line strophes, writing lines of excessive syllables (i.e., more than eight), and adding couplets in *Lục bát* (Six-eight), a form with alternating six and eight-syllable lines.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁵ Thái Hà Ensemble, personal communication, 2009-10.

³⁴⁶ On this topic in the Chinese context, see: Martin W. Huang, *Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2006); and Maija Bell Samei, *Gendered Persona and Poetic Voice: The Abandoned Woman in Early Chinese Song Lyrics* (Lexington Books, 2004). Stephen Addiss’s 1973 article provide a translation of this poem into English. See Addiss, “Hat a dao: The Sung Poetry of Northern Vietnam.”

³⁴⁷ See Nguyễn Quảng Tuân, *Ca trù thơ nhạc giao duyên; Ca trù cung bát tri âm; Ca trù thú xưa toa nhã*.

The basic *hát nói* form has eleven lines. Lines five and six are written in an older form originating in what is called *Thơ Đường* (Tang Dynastic-era poetry). In the context of *hát nói* poetry, the lines are seven or eight syllables long. These two lines are called “*câu đối*” (paired sentences), and they are in opposition in poetic content and word tone patterns. They are usually written in erudite *chữ Hán Nôm* (Sino-Vietnamese) vocabulary. Four-line *khổ* (strophes) come before and after this couplet, and three final lines add to eleven.

Hát nói is performed with an introductory two- or four-line poem, which is called the *mưỡu*.³⁴⁸ This is in *Lục bát* (six-eight-syllable) form and it describes the main idea of the poem that follows. Word tone patterns follow according to two categories in older styles of Vietnamese poetry. What are called the *bằng* tones include: *huyền* (falling) and *không* (no tone); the *trắc* tones include: *sắc* (high rising), *ngã* (rising broken), *hỏi* (low rising), and *nặng* (sharp falling).

Bằng	Trắc
<i>huyền</i>	<i>sắc</i>
<i>không</i>	<i>ngã</i>
	<i>hỏi</i>
	<i>nặng</i>

Figure 4: Tone pattern divisions.

In *lục bát* poetry, the first line is six syllables, and the second is eight syllables. The pattern of tones is represented below, each letter representing a syllable. The letters correspond to the tone categories from above: “b” to *bằng* and “t” to *trắc*. Lower case letters indicate the interchangeability of *bằng* and *trắc*, although the indicated tone is the standard from which deviations are made.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁸ Nguyễn Quảng Tuân noted this was an older spelling of *mẫu*, which could mean model or head. It can also indicate a temple, shrine, or imperial court.

³⁴⁹ I am indebted to the independent scholar Nguyễn Quảng Tuân for observations on poetic form.

b B t T b B
b B t T b B b B

Within this word tone pattern, the *sixth* syllable of the first line rhymes with the *sixth* syllable of the second line, and the *eighth* syllable of the second line with the *sixth* syllable of the third line. This pattern continues as written vertically so the *eighth* syllable of the second line, the *sixth* of the third line, and the *sixth* of the fourth line would all rhyme. Below, the pattern of the rhyme scheme is portrayed in bold text.

b B t T b **B**
b B t T b **B** b **B**
b B t T b **B**
b B t T b **B** b B

This rhyme scheme is visible in the example below; the *muõu* is usually performed before the *hát nói* poem “Đào Hồng Đào Tuyết.” On the right, I have included the examples of changes to the above-outlined word tone scheme of *lục bát* poetry. The rhyme scheme is underlined and in bold text.

Muõu

Ngày xưa Tuyết muốn lấy ông
Ông chê Tuyết bé Tuyết không biết gì
Bây giờ Tuyết đã đến thì
Ông muốn lấy Tuyết Tuyết chê ông già.

*Ago, Tuet wanted to marry the man
He chided her, said she knew nothing
Now she is grown
He wants to marry her, she chides him³⁵⁰*

Changes to bằng-chắc scheme

lấy
tuyết ... biết
đến
Muốn ... tuyết

³⁵⁰ Translated by Bretton Dimick.

The word *muốn* in line four is an example of completely ignoring the word tone scheme. There is an exception here to rhyme scheme as well. The first two lines adhere to the form, *ông* rhyming with *không*. The second layer of rhyme scheme begins with *gì* and continues with *thì*. But the rhyme scheme breaks form with *chê*, which in theory should follow *gì* and *thì*.

The basic *hát nói* form is much looser than *lục bát*, and the possibility for musical variation within *hát nói* has made it important to poets and musicians. In *lục bát*, less melodic variation tends to occur. Poetry in this form usually produces similar melodies between one poem and the next, because of the stricter word tone scheme. The *muỗi* introduction to *hát nói*, however, often varies in melody quite a bit. It could be that the melodic flexibility in relation to word tone scheme is, at times, more determined by the mindset (and the established conventions) of the singer than by the structure of the word tone scheme.

Lines five and six of the basic *hát nói* typically are in an ancient classical form. The conventions of these lines stem from what are summarized in terms of tone structure in the following charts. The first chart is *luật bằng* (the *bằng* rule), and the second is *luật trắc* (the *trắc* rule). We can determine the rule by the second syllable of the first line, and the pattern that follows is either *bằng* or *trắc* rule.

<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>
<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>B</i>
<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>T</i>
<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>
<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>T</i>
<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>B</i>
<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>T</i>
<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>

Figure 5: *Luật Bằng* (*Bằng* rule). The highlighted syllables represent the rhyme scheme within this form called “*Vân Bằng*” (rhyme *bằng*).

<i>b</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>B</i>
<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>
<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>T</i>
<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>B</i>
<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>T</i>
<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>
<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>T</i>
<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>B</i>

Figure 6: *Luật Trắc* (trắc rule). The highlighted syllables represent the rhyme scheme within this form called “*Vân Bằng*” (rhyme bằng).³⁵¹

As in the previous example of *lục bát* (six-eight syllable form), lower case letters indicate flexibility and upper case letters indicate rigidity. Some important features should be noted. The tone scheme in the last syllable of each line in both forms is such that the first, second, fourth, sixth, and eighth lines end in *bằng*. The pattern in the second column of *Luật bằng* is B-TT-BB-TT-B. This is mirrored in the second column of *Luật trắc*: T-BB-TT-BB-T. The third and fourth lines and the fifth and sixth lines are paired lines, and their tone patterns are mirrors of one another. Lines three and four of the *luật Trắc* are extracted below for a closer look.

3.	<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>T</i>
4.	<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>B</i>

Note that the syllables oppose one another vertically: Syllable one of line three is “*b*” and of line four is “*t*,” and so forth across the form. In poetic practice, the meanings of the words usually are mirrors of one another as well—sky and land, sun and moon, and so forth—in the *âm dương* (Vietnamese for *yin yang*) worldview. The manner of writing opposing paired lines in the *hát nói* form borrows from this for lines five and six. In writing *hát nói*, a Vietnamese poet in the

³⁵¹ Further forms are explained with alterations to rhyme scheme and tone scheme in Nguyễn Văn Ngọc, *Nam Thi Hợp Tuyển* (Poetry compilation) (Hanoi: Xuất bản bốn phương Viện Giáo Khoa, 1927). This work represents an effort to educate Romanized Vietnamese readership in classical poetry in the 1920s.

past would show knowledge of classical Chinese poetry and would also be free to demonstrate a Vietnamese composition style in the rest of the poem. In terms of modern Vietnamese nationalism, this could be seen as the poetic negotiation of an identity distinct from Chinese influence. Lines five and six of “Đào Hồng Đào Tuyết” and their tone pattern are below.

5. Ngã lãng du thời quân thượng thiếu
 6. Quan kim hứa giá ngã thành ông

5.	<i>t</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>t</i>
6.	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>

This reflects lines three and four of the tone patterns in the form *luật bằng* (or lines five and six of the form *luật trắc*), as outlined in the figures above. When performed, this line is elaborated upon significantly with the use of non-semantic syllables and melodic variation. Below is an example of how Nguyễn Thúy Hòa of the Thái Hà Ensemble adapts these lines to melody (I discuss the musical mode in more depth later in this chapter).

The figure shows two staves of musical notation in treble clef. The first staff corresponds to line 5 of the poem: "Nga-ã lãng- du thời quân thượng thiếu ư hừ hừ". The second staff corresponds to line 6: "ừ_ hừ_ ư quan kim hứa_ ư giá_ ư ngã_ ư thành ông-ng". Above each note, an arrow indicates the pitch direction: up (↗), down (↘), or level (→). The notes are connected by slurs, and some have horizontal lines underneath, likely indicating tone duration or breath marks.

Figure 7: Lines five and six of "Đào Hồng" adapted to melody. Arrows indicate direction of word tone. Rhythm is not considered in this transcription and notes are given equal duration for viewing simply the pitch and word tone negotiation.

Arrows above the staves, in the figures above, indicate the pitch-wise direction of word tones. Note that the word tones usually agree with the pitch movement of the melody. An

exception arises in the syllable “*thời*,” which means “time,” an important element in this poem. The singer may sing from G to A, rising in musical pitch and going against the falling word tone. The singer, however, may also divide the word “*thời*,” spreading it from A to G and follow it by singing “*i*” from G to A, as shown below.



Figure 8: Dividing syllables to accommodate melodic variation.

Similarly, “*Ngã*” is divided “*nga-ã*” in the first line, and the last syllable of line six, “*ông*,” is divided. The syllables are performed clearly first and then are elaborated upon. For instance, “*ông*,” meaning “man,” is begun on G, and a closed-mouth “*ng*” vocable brings the melody back to A. The second line has many non-semantic syllables that make it more musically interesting, such as in the introduction, where a melisma outlines the fundamental pitch A. Following is “*Quân kim*” sung on A. The syllables of “*hũa*” and “*giá*” are sung in agreement with their linguistic pitches from A to C, with a return to A on the open-mouthed, non-semantic syllable “*ư*.”

In performance, the neat symmetry of parallel lines is transgressed for a more interesting musical line through the use of word tone contour changes as well as non-semantic syllables, but the word tones provide a basic structure and starting point for the melodic line. This balancing act is part of the musical game of *ca trù* singing that makes it “*hay*” (good or interesting), the most common adjective I heard performers use. Within the rules of musical realization, playfulness persists. I believe this speaks to the interaction of written and oral traditions, especially with the added element of word tones. It may also grow from or co-exist with the

everyday playfulness in culture surrounding the Vietnamese language, in which pun and wordplay through word tone manipulation is common.

Musicians in imperial times were for the most part illiterate, as they were of low social status, without the economic and temporal resources to learn classical Chinese writing. It is argued in Vietnamese histories that perhaps one or several members of a guild could read script languages and the rest would memorize the poems.³⁵² This might account for some practices of declamation that demonstrate this distant relationship between the written (texted) and the oral (performed). Singers also substitute synonyms that sound better with surrounding words because of more suitable word tones or alliterative potential, or because they prefer vernacular diction. Sometimes they may simply make mistakes in recalling text.

Singers are also free to change word order. This can be accomplished by singing the last syllables of the line followed by the line from start to end, and a number of other ways. In the introductory *murôu* of “Đào Hồng,” the singer Quách Thị Hồ recombines the line “*Ngày xưa Tuyết muốn lấy ông*” (“In former days, Tuyet wanted to marry the older man”) to create “*xưa ngày, ngày xưa, Tuyết muốn lấy ông*.”³⁵³ The re-arranged couplet is below:

Xưa ngày, ngày xưa, Tuyết muốn lấy ông (eight syllables)
Ông chê Tuyết bé Tuyết không biết gì (eight syllables)

Changing the word order means more time spent musically on this line of poetry. “*Xưa ngày ngày xưa*” has wonderful symmetry and alliterative quality; the changed word order can be translated as “ancient days, former days,” which emphasizes further the irrevocable passage of time, the main theme of the poem. It allows the listener more time to appreciate the words in a

³⁵² Bùi Trọng Hiền, “Không gian văn hóa.”

³⁵³ This is a recording in the Thái Hà’s personal collection. I have no details on the recording itself, but the group uses the recording as a reference for learning repertory and technique.

different order, making also the six-eight poetic form into a couplet of eight-eight in performance. The melodic shape of the line within such a rearrangement also benefits from extension and elaboration.

The female singer has the power of shaping the poetry of men in song. She controls most musical aspects of the performance, and can change the word order and add words at her discretion. Exceptions exist to the rule of melody accommodating clear enunciation of word tones. Word tones in performance can be changed if there is a word written twice. Later in the poem “Đào Hồng,” the line “*Khéo ngậy ngậy dại dại với tình*” (Clever, stupid with love) provides such an example. The second “*ngậy*” and “*dại*” are given different tonal inflection and therefore melodic realization, varying the melodic line to make it more interesting (I explain this aspect in more detail below).

Such musical-poetic play occurs in the play of everyday language in Vietnamese. Words and tones are frequently recombined or changed for humor. One example of this in speech is the change of the emphatic particle “*mà*” (emphatic particles have no meaning in use except to emphasize the weight or importance of the sentence they conclude). This is added to the end of sentences in colloquial speech to emphasize meaning. The *huyền* (falling tone), indicated by the grave on the word “*mà*,” is replaced for further emphasis or for humor by a kind of spoken melisma, rising, falling, and rising again. On a socio-linguistic note, this way of saying *mà* in Hanoi can be seen as parody of “countryside” speech, and may reflect Hanoi-centricity and elitism. Rural Vietnamese are perceived as *lạc hậu* (backward), though many urban Hanoi families are not “old Hanoi” but originate from the *quê* (country) within the last few generations,

and derive a sense of identity from their family's home village, even if they make fun of the *nhà quê* ("country bumpkin") type generally.³⁵⁴

Crafting Song From Poetry

Having provided a sample of the musical practices, I now delve further into this manner of realizing and accompanying text in song. The first music that singers and lute players learn in traditional *ca trù* pedagogy (according to the Thái Hà's method) is the musical strophes of the lute accompaniment to *hát nói* (sing-speak), which are called *năm khổ đàn* (five lute strophes) or *khổ* (strophes). A lutist uses these as the basis to accompany *hát nói* (song-speak) poetry. Singers sing the melodies using loosely an imperial-era solmization system for stringed instruments. The basic melodies from *hát nói* are used in other modes as well.

The modes of *ca trù* are not well tempered, and the pitch range is always relative to the voice of the singer. If the lute player tunes the instrument too low, the evenly spaced frets allow the lute player to ascend and accommodate the vocal range of the singer.

Long ago, both the male lute accompanist and the female singer could sing in *hát nói*. If a man performed, it was called *Hà nam* or *nam xướng* and the woman performing was called *Hát nói* or *nữ xướng*. More recent history has seen only the female songstress performing this type of song and most of the repertory, a few exceptions being in recently revived court repertory.³⁵⁵

The basic form, which I discuss here, has eleven lines and is called *đủ khổ* (sufficient strophes). The form is preceded in performance by *mưỡu* of two or four lines in *lục bát* form, to

³⁵⁴ Such alterations to language can exist in microcosmic proportions in a group of just a few friends, e.g., several mothers I know do not understand much of what their children say.

³⁵⁵ Nguyễn Văn Khuê performed a rare piece of *ca trù* song repertory for male voice at L'Espace French Cultural Center in a 2010 performance.

introduce the main theme or story. The variations include the following: *Dôi khổ* (excessive strophes) has more than eleven lines; *gối hạc* has an extended, long and twisting line within the overall form; *mưỡu hậu* has a *lục bát* (six-eight) form strophe inserted before the first line. *Hát nói* originated during the period of the Lê Dynasty and thereafter became a primary form of singing in *ca trù*.³⁵⁶

To learn to accompany *hát nói* singing, the luteist first learns musical strophes that are transcribed in the figure below, and then memorizes a *khuôn* (“model”) arrangement of these strophes. This provides the basis upon which future accompaniment in this mode is developed. In Vietnamese, the word *khuôn* also denotes the woodblocks used in traditional printing, and this image reflects how this works in practice. Each melodic strophe—using “*khuôn*” as in “woodblock” analogously—would thus be a “woodblock” from which many prints can be made. *Khuôn* could be conceived of also as an elaborate pattern of “learned sound categories.” In terms of semiology, *khuôn* is the *type* from which *tokens* are created.

Singers learn to sing the lute strophes, and thereby learn to sing within the mode (at least this is the method used by the Thái Hà Ensemble). Lute players in turn learn to sing poetry, although to a lesser extent than singers do, in order to internalize the “woodblock” melody of a song type and to become acquainted with the poetic form. Therefore, a close connection between lute and voice parts is structured into the pedagogy as well as the performance. Lute players and singers also exchange ornamentation, consisting of melismatic embellishment, much of which mirrors the linguistic tones and stems from the pronunciation of these word tones in song.

A transcription of the “*khuôn*” (model) performance of the five *khổ* (melodic strophes) for *đàn đáy* (three-stringed lute) is below.

³⁵⁶ Đỗ Bằng Đoàn, Đỗ Trọng Huề, *Việt-nam Ca-trù Biên Khảo*, 65.

Figure 9: The basic melodic strophes for the đàn đáy lute in the hát nói mode. The *khô* are labeled with names that Nguyễn Văn Khuê uses. Variations in terminology, however, arise among players. Performers do not think in terms of measures or use notation. Measure markings and transcriptions, which are approximate static representations of fluid practices, are portrayed for the sake of analysis.

The last three measures are a variation of the first three measures, the strophe called *khô sòng đầu* (alternatively spelled *sòng đầu*). Measures thirty-one to thirty-three are a variation of the *khô sòng đầu* in the higher register. In discussing the first and last strophe, *khô sòng đầu*, Văn Khuê uses the verb “*về*” (to return, as in returning home), giving this melodic phrase a feeling of coming to rest back at the beginning, and providing the structure with a cyclical sense. Playing more than one note at a time on this lute is rare, and usually it marks the beginning or end, as in the *khô sòng đầu*.

You can hear the basic strophes or some version of them in commercial recordings of *hát nói* poems, such as that released by the Thái Hà Ensemble. In their recording and in

performances, they perform the first four strophes usually in a straightforward manner before the singer begins in order to give the singer a footing in the lute player’s style, tempo, and relative pitch range. In the fourth strophe, the singer enters with the first line of poetry.

It may seem as if there is overlap in much of this terminology because subtleties and duplication exist around the subject. In Vietnamese, one word used for “mode” is *làn điệu*. In usage, the *hát nói* “mode” is called “*làn điệu hát nói*.” *Hát nói* is also a poetic form. Complicating this basic idea are what performers call “*cung*.” In this *làn điệu hát nói* (sing-speak mode), there are two “*cung*.” *Cung nam* and *cung bắc*.

The majority of the basic melodic material, in “*cung nam*” and “*cung bắc*” (south and north modes, respectively) in this song type, is tri-tonic in practice. Starting in *khỏ giữa*, the pitches used include only *do me so*. In *khỏ giải* and *soòng đầu*, *fa* is added, so that it appears tetra-tonic. In the performing practice of improvisation, another pitch is available, *se*, making the song type overall pentatonic.

In practice, the two *cung* in *hát nói* are two registers of pitches in which fingering patterns and the resulting relationship between the notes are altered; *nam* is lower in pitch and *bắc* is higher, but they overlap as shown in the following figure.

<i>Cung nam</i>	<i>do'</i>	<i>me'</i>	<i>fa'</i>	<i>so'</i>	<i>(se')</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>me</i>			
<i>Cung bắc</i>			<i>fa'</i>	<i>so'</i>	<i>(se')</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>(fa)</i>	<i>so</i>	<i>(se)</i> <i>(do)</i>

Figure 10: An outline of the pitch ranges of two “*cung*.”

Two registers, which are divided by changing hand positions on the lute’s fret board, are outlined above from low to high in solfège. The middle *do* (in bold) corresponds to A above middle C (A4) in my transcriptions. I indicate the lower range with the addition of an apostrophe. Pitches in parentheses are not represented in the basic melodic strophes of the lute, but are

available for improvisation. The pitches *fa' so' se' do me* overlap in the middle, although the timbre changes, as they are played at different places on the fret board (as on other stringed instruments).

The figure below portrays how a player would finger this on the strings (columns) and frets (rows) of the lute. Note the overlap in pitches between the two positions. In the transcription of the five basic strophes above, *fa'* and *se'* in the higher position and the highest *se* and *do* are not used, but they are available for improvisation once the lute player learns the basic strophes and how to perform them with a model song.

Fret	Low	mid	high
1	<i>do'</i>	<i>fa'</i>	<i>se'</i>
2		<i>so'</i>	<i>do</i>
3	<i>me'</i>		
4	<i>fa'</i>	<i>se'</i>	<i>me</i>
5	<i>so'</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>fa</i>
6			<i>so</i>
7		<i>me</i>	
8			<i>se</i>
9			<i>do</i>
10			

Figure 11: Pitches on đàn đáy fret board for *cung nam* and *bắc*. *Nam* here is outlined in bold text and *bắc* is highlighted.

The three strings of the đàn đáy lute are tuned in fourths, and the frets are approximately a whole step apart. The even spacing of frets allows the lute player to move up or down and use the same fingering whether the singer's vocal range is higher or lower. This is different from, say, the đàn nguyệt (moon lute), a two-stringed lute more widely used in Vietnam. The frets of the đàn nguyệt are spaced unevenly, so that the base pitches of the frets spell a pentatonic scale of *do re fa so la do, et cetera*; various performing practices in Vietnam vary the order, timbre,

ornamentation, and spacing of these pitches. Pitches can be bent, as with the *đàn đay*, by using the deep frets, which are portrayed below.



Picture 6: Left: *Đàn đay* lute (on the left) and *đàn nguyệt* (on the right); right: closer view of fret boards.

Learning the language of *ca trù*, students learn a representative model poem to become fluent in *hát nói*. The Thái Hà Ensemble uses the poem “Đào Hồng Đào Tuyết” for this purpose. The figure below shows the organization of the lute strophes in this model performance. In the left-hand column, I indicate the line number and whether it is in the *cung nam* or *cung bắc*, which I abbreviate CN and CB. The two *cung* performed by the lutist form a pattern oscillating between *nam* and *bắc*.

In performance, the melodic strophes *khỏ soong đầu*, *khỏ giữa*, and *khỏ róc* serve as the introduction to the *hát nói* poem, and these come after the *muõu* performance (which is not included in the table below). The singer begins as the lutist *khỏ lá đầu*, as shown in line one in the figure below. Lines one through seven are performed at a slow tempo, lines eight and nine are faster, and lines ten and eleven are the slowest. This results in an arc of change, an overall

temporal shape recognizable to familiar listeners. Included below at the far right are the times (in minutes and seconds) of a sing-speak poem that the Thái Hà recorded and commercially released. The faster section comes and goes quickly, and the whole poem is performed in less than five minutes.³⁵⁷

<i>Khổ soong đầu, khổ giữa, and khổ róc</i> (instrumental introduction)		
1. CB	khổ lá đầu	Slow
2. CN	khổ giải second half of khổ giữa	
khổ róc (instrumental solo)		
3. CN- CB	begin with khổ soong đầu on cung nam finish higher on cung bắc	
4. CB	khổ giải on cung bắc (the same pitches as on cung nam), “khổ đàn” (half of khổ giữa, then khổ róc)	
5. CB	khổ lá đầu	
6. CN	khổ giải, return to khổ soong đầu	
7. CN- CB	the same as lines 2 and 3, then khổ soong đầu announces a tempo increase	Fast 3:26
8. CB	last half of khổ lá đầu repeated three times at quicker tempo	
9. CB	the khổ lá đầu from line 8 continues	
10. CB	tempo slows with variation of khổ là đầu	Slower 3:43
11. CN	khổ giải, return to khổ soong đầu	End 4:26

Figure 12: The khổ róc at the end of lines two and four are free sections for the lute wherein the singer takes a break. The lute improvises on pre-learned melodies.

A practiced lute player improvises on this structure, maintaining the appropriate *cung*. Knowing the poem, and where one is within the poem, is therefore important, so memorizing the poem is necessary. One must keep in mind the memorized *khổ* (melodic strophes), the *khuôn* (model), and the corresponding *cung* (register) in the structure of the poem.

³⁵⁷ The Hanoi Ca Tru Thai Ensemble, *Ca tru: Music of North Vietnam* (Nimbus Records, 2001).

Văn Khuê noted that the challenge of playing the lute well was holding this ideal performance in his mind while simultaneously improvising on it. He described this with the Vietnamese term *biến hóa* (to change or alter into something else or into a different state). In speaking of the past, he surmised that guilds probably had their own signature models, their badges of identity, and their own styles or variations of changing the model. In contrast, many performers today learned the model performances from Văn Khuê and the Thái Hà Ensemble.

I heard Văn Khuê and his brother Tiên compare this to jazz. Similar to improvisation in other spheres, playing this lute entails the elaboration of basic themes. But instead of chord changes and a rhythm section, once the melodic improvisation ensues, the lute player only has the cognitive impression of the basic themes and the framework of the poetic declamation. Much of it is rephrased, recombined, pre-learned melody. Like in other kinds of improvisation, performers learn through the acquisition of technique and by cobbling together over time a collection of melodic fragments or skeletons. Performers learn to know what they can and cannot play for the desired effect through trial and error as well as by learning the music of other musicians. Conventions of style and taste, learned through listening and invented through playing, dictate how far “out” one can go from model performances.

In *ca trù*, there is of course no vertical harmony to think about, and there are only two melodic lines, voice and lute. It is heterophonic at times, in that the lute and vocal melodies sometimes come together, mirror, or echo one another. How the lute player supports the voice is established through conventions that are learned by ear and felt out over time between players. In his studies, Addiss analyzed this aspect of anticipated and echoed melodies. He found that the

lute and voice can both anticipate and echo one another.³⁵⁸ I observed this as the result of close connection between voice and lute pedagogy, as both learn one another’s parts. In addition, players seek to imitate one another in melismatic inflection and ornament, a point I address further on in this chapter.

Similar to jazz, *ca trù* musicians discuss going out and returning to the main melodic strophes, and the pitches and melodic fragments available therein—an essential pragmatism, perhaps, of humanly organizing improvised sounds. In creating a good musical *không gian* (space) for the singer, Văn Khuê often stressed that one must *về* (return) from *ngoài* (outside) toward the ends of phrases and lines, in order to end with the singer. The strophe of *khỏ lá đầu* provides a good example of this. There are many different styles, Văn Khuê emphasized. Below, again, is the basic version.



Figure 13: *Khỏ lá đầu* on its own.

The pitches include, from low to high, *so do me so*. The practiced lutist expounds on this tri-tonic moment. The figure below illustrates the mindset toward pitches available to a lute player in the melodic strophe of *khỏ lá đầu* within the metaphor of “in” and “out.” In lessons, Văn Khuê demonstrated going *ngoài* (“outside”) and *về* (“returning”). In effect, what he

³⁵⁸ Addiss, “Hat a Dao, the Sung Poetry of North Vietnam;” and “Text and Context in Vietnamese Sung Poetry: The Art of Hát ả Đào.”

performed was adding to his vocabulary both pitch and range, from the *fa* below the low *so* to the *do* above the high *so*.

The metaphoric understanding of “*ngoài*” extends to conceptions surrounding the family, where the matrilineal side is “*ngoài*” (outside) and the patriarchal side is “*nội*” (in), reflecting a history of gendered power relations. Similarly, geographic orientation uses this dichotomy, as the diagram below could also illustrate urbanites *nội* the city and the countryside *ngoài* the city. I suggested the comparison of understandings to Văn Khuê in a lesson. He laughed momentarily, and then began using this metaphor to illustrate to me what he meant: “I am going outside the city here; I am returning to the city here.”

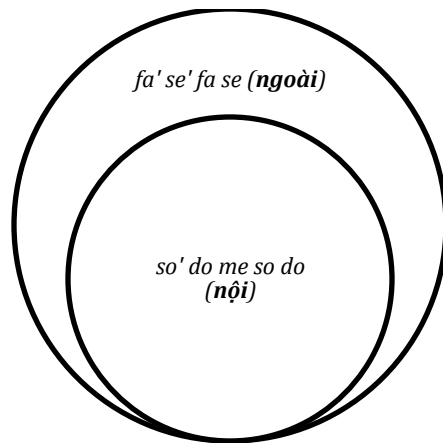


Figure 14: A stacked Venn diagram of “inside” and “outside” pitches as conceived of in *khỏ lá đầu*.

What this means in terms of singing and lute interaction is that, by going “outside,” Văn Khuê creates tension momentarily with the singer’s declamation, and then he resolves this tension. He summarized this aesthetic process as “Hút về” (to take up and to return).³⁵⁹ The resulting pitches available for improvisation within the framework of this melodic strophe, and of *cung bắc*, are represented below.

³⁵⁹ *Hút* in everyday usage means to take up or inhale, as in *hút thuốc lá* (smoke a cigarette), and *về* means to return, as in *về nhà* (to return home).



Figure 15: Pitches available to a lute player for improvising in “*cung bắc*.”

Another spelling of this with solfège could be: *Do re fa so se do re fa so*, a common permutation heard in Vietnamese singing. But the fundamental pitch in the performing practice is here represented by A above middle C, which is why I have kept this as “do.” Pitches in parentheses above are “out.”

Whatever melody he creates within *khỏ lá đầu*, Văn Khuê usually ends the phrase in the same way, with the following melodic fragment from the original.



Figure 16: Last melodic fragment of *khỏ lá đầu*.

The pitches available for improvisatory exploration in *cung nam* are summarized in the following example, where the notes in parentheses are “out.”



Figure 17: The pitches available in “*cung nam*.”

In *hát nói*, there is movement away from and always back in the direction of the lower and fundamental register of *cung nam*, where the lute player begins and ends in the *khỏ soong*

đầu; usually, in this part, variation does not obscure recognition of the melody. The oscillation between two sets of timbres and available pitch patterns is essential to the sonic texture. The second and third strophes, illustrated below, provide examples to examine *cung nam* more closely.



Figure 18: *Khô giữa* and *khô róc*.

In these two strophes, *khô giữa* and *khô róc*, the pitches of the model include *do me so do me*. This includes only the three pitch classes of *do me so*. Again, here, the notes of *fa* and *se* are considered “out,” in the context of improvisation in the strophes *khô giữa* and *khô róc*. *Khô giải* and *khô sòng đầu* (below) are also in *cung nam*, and include the pitches *fa* and *se*.



Figure 19: *Khô giải* and *khô sòng đầu*.

This illustrates what players mean by “*cung*” in the context of *ca trù*. In *hát nói*, which utilizes the two *cung*, *nam* and *bắc*, it appears that *cung* means “register” or “range”—it is the same pentatonic scale in terms of pitch classes. This, however, is too simplistic and ignores the performers’ perspectives.

In *ca trù*, “*cung*” also implies a hierarchy of pitches that are “in” and “out” of the melodic strophes, which are played within respective ranges (although *khỏ giải* provides an exception because it is played in *cung bắc* at times). The melodic strophes, and the melodic fragments that they comprise, are implicit within the conception of “*cung*,” but this is determined within the context of a particular song type. In other types, as I will show, different *cung* can be differentiated in ways other than by register alone. But, for now, I will continue by showing what *cung* means to the singer in *hát nói*.

Voice and Lute

The singer and lute player’s ranges tend to mirror one another as the song progresses line by line. This is not defined by a strict formula that performers plan together. In analyzing the poem “Đào Hồng Đào Tuyết,” however, I found that the lutist and singer’s registers tended to correspond in range from one line to the next. Lutist and singer came together, too, in melodic fragments and their manner of embellishment. As the Thái Hà singer, Nguyễn Thúy Hòa, noted, the singer and lute player become synced over time and with experience, and the closer the ensemble, the better the performance. This is why, in her opinion, families create better performances. The idea is that singer and lute player learn repertory from elders, and, over time, while practicing and performing, they exchange musical phrases and create their standard versions of poems. They improvise within this framework, and the standard version is what

constitutes their family’s *khuôn* performance within the living generations of players. Their way of performing is their unique style and their badge of identity.

The tendency of mirrored registers is portrayed in the table below. When the voice stays between *do* (A) and *so* (E) in a line of poetry, the lute tends toward *cung bắc* (higher) and when the voice stays between *fa’* (E’) and *me* (C), the lute tends toward *cung nam* (lower). This is not a strict rule, but there is a tendency. The overall vocal ranges and lute registers relate to one another as illustrated below.

“Voice <i>nam</i> ”			<i>fa’</i>	<i>so’</i>	<i>se’</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>me</i>				
Lute <i>nam</i>	<i>do’</i>	<i>me’</i>	<i>fa’</i>	<i>so’</i>	<i>se’</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>me</i>				
“Voice <i>bắc</i> ”						<i>do</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>fa</i>	<i>so</i>		
Lute <i>bắc</i>			<i>fa’</i>	<i>so’</i>	<i>se’</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>fa</i>	<i>so</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>do</i>
Pitches ³⁶⁰	<i>A’</i>	<i>C’</i>	<i>D’</i>	<i>E’</i>	<i>G’</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>A</i>

Figure 20: Ranges of voice and lute in *hát nói*. Apostrophes indicate pitches lower in range.

As introduced above, singing technique includes adding non-semantic syllables for melodic embellishment and the negotiation of linguistic tones, mostly at the end of lines although sometimes in other parts as well. The most common open-mouthed syllables are “*u*” (pronounced “uh) and “*hu*” (pronounced “huh”), to which various linguistic tones are applied in melodic negotiation. “N” indicates a closed-mouth, nasalized utterance. Much of the singing also uses a glottal-stop vibrato. This is accomplished, as Thúy Hòa explained it, by the same physical action as repeatedly and rapidly clearing one’s throat. This vibrato is the most distinctive feature of *ca trù* vocal practice. Called *nảy hát*, or literally “blossom singing,” this quality of singing is

³⁶⁰ These are the pitches as represented in transcriptions in this dissertation.

the first thing a newcomer to *ca trù* notices. It is mirrored by a vibrato that is nearly constant in the lute player’s technique.

In the first line of “Đào Hồng,” written below, the first word is sung rising from *so*’ to *do*, against the grain of the word tone,³⁶¹ which is *huyền* (a falling word tone). At the end of the line are included nonsense syllables to extend the line and melody, “*ư hự hừ*.” These sound ambiguous when performed, as Thúy Hòa noted, like crying and laughing at the same time, which characterizes the mood of *ca trù* poetry.

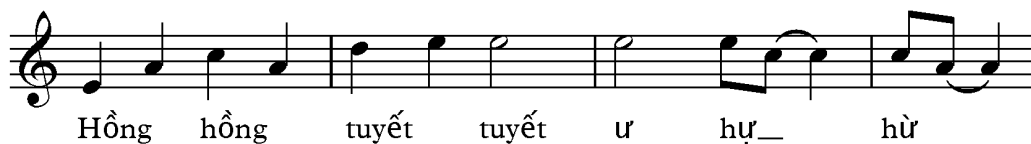


Figure 21: Line one of “Đào Hồng Đào Tuyết.” Transcriptions of vocal parts are based on the typical way of singing that Nguyễn Thúy Hòa teaches.

The range of voice here includes the whole of the normal vocal range for this song. The first syllable, however, may also be sung in agreement with the word tone, leaving the second to go against the grain. The general rule for repeated syllables is as such—one of them should be performed with the grain of the word tone, and the other may be used to embellish the melodic contour. A variation of the first two syllables is below.

³⁶¹ I use “grain” as in a grain of wood, meaning simply the pitch-wise direction that a word tone travels through time, i.e., up, down, down and up, and so forth. This is not entirely in the sense discussed by Roland Barthes, but the notion “against the grain of the word tone” did occur to me as I reflected on Barthes’ writing. See Barthes, “The Grain of The Voice,” in *Image Music Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976).



Figure 22: A variation on the repeated syllables “Hồng hồng.”

In this version, the singer would not go to the low *so*. This would mean the line was performed using the pitches *se’ do me fa so*. The lute in this line plays correspondingly in the higher range of *cung bắc*. This first line alone is not an entirely convincing example of related pitch ranges because of these variations, but for every rule in *ca trù* singing there are exceptions. The next line is given below.



Figure 23: Line two of “Đào Hồng.”

The word “*nào*” in this line provides an opportunity to discuss again the manner of breaking apart syllables for melodic embellishment. This is done in order to create more melodic contour, and to enunciate a word tone correctly within a freer melody. As the example below shows in more detail, two syllables are created from one, and they are sung in such a manner that the second syllable, sung in transition from *fa’* to *so’*, creates a rising tone on the vowel particle of “*áo*.” Thus the problem of enunciating the word correctly is overcome, as the singer creates a non-semantic syllable with the second half of the word and adds melodic variation.



Figure 24: Dividing syllables in melody.

In this line, the lute player is in *cung nam*, where the pitch range is *do' me' fa' so' se' do me*. Note the voice tends downward into this range as well, and the melodic contours are, in fact, mirror one another, as shown below.

The image contains two musical examples. The top example is a single staff in 4/4 time, labeled 'Khô giải'. It features a melodic line with a descending contour: a dotted quarter note, an eighth note, a quarter note, a half note, a quarter note, an eighth note, a quarter note, and a half note. The bottom example consists of two staves. The top staff is labeled 'Voice' and shows the lyrics 'Mới ng-ày nào u -u' with a melisma on the syllable 'u'. The bottom staff is labeled 'Lute' and shows a bass clef with a melodic line that mirrors the voice's contour. A bracket labeled 'divided syllable' spans the first two notes of the lute part. A note in the second measure is marked 'press in fret'.

Figure 25: The *khô giải* lute fragment above, and below a variation with voice melisma mirroring it. In the lower example, I have moved the lute to an F-clef, closer to the actual pitch range of a *đàn đáy* lute's low register. The lute player plays E-G-E as an ornament in the second measure by pressing into one fret, as noted.

The shape of the ornament in the second measure of the lute part above, E-G-E (*so' -se' -so'*) mirrors the melisma created in the vocal part on the non-semantic syllable “u.” This example illustrates a moment wherein the lute player and singer come together in melisma for the effect of a heterophonic relationship, as they are iterating versions of the same melody.

As I mentioned earlier, in pedagogy, to learn the musical mode, singers today learn the lute *khô*—including the pitches of the mode and the subtle tendencies in melodic formation and ornamentation. The lute player usually learns some singing technique. This creates a close link between voice and lute parts. The lute player likewise imitates ornaments created by the musical negotiation of linguistic tones. The example above demonstrates the lute playing A to C (*do* to

me), which echoes the rising word tone over “*mới*” as it is sung within the modal framework. The strategies in lute accompaniment and vocal word tone negotiation in melody therefore influence one another in moments such as this.

Phách (Idiophone), the “Conductor”

The element that binds the two performers together in improvisation is the *phách*, which, as Văn Khuê explained, acts as the “*chỉ huy*” (conductor) of the ensemble. In teaching singing, Thúy Hòa uses written versions of poems organized line-by-line over rhythm as represented by onomatopoetic syllables: “D” stands for *dúc* (pronounced “zoop”), a roll; “F” stands for “*phách*” (pronounced “fack”), a single stroke of one beater; and “C” stands for “*chát*” (pronounced like “cat” with a hard “ch” at the beginning), a stroke of both beaters. The basic rhythm represented by “*dfff-f-ff-f-dff-dff-cff*” undergirds the lines of the performance of *hát nói* poetry. Each letter equals in this system of writing a beat, and dashes are rests of equal value. In western notation, each hand written on one staff, this first pattern can be represented as follows.

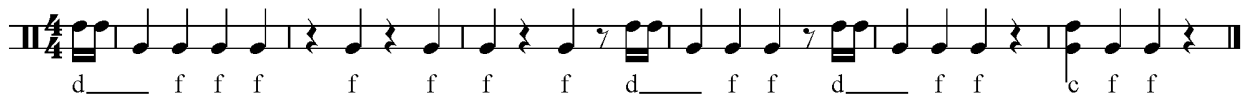


Figure 26: Basic *phách* rhythm used during sung lines of poetry in *hát nói*. The onomatopoetic syllables that Thúy Hòa uses are written below the percussion staves.

The singer adapts this to undergird the number of syllables in each line. A longer line is underlined by two repetitions of this pattern and, sometimes, with a shorter line, this rhythm spills from one line into the next. The singer also learns the rhythm of the *đàn đay* strophes but, during declamation of lines, generally stays within this rhythm. There is another rhythm for instrumental sections as well (which I discuss later).

Below is an approximation of the *phách* rhythm as it fits with the first line of the poem “Đào Hồng Đào Tuyết.”

The image shows two systems of musical notation. The first system is for the first line of the poem: "Đào Hồng Đào Tuyết." The Phách part is on a staff with a 4/4 time signature, showing rhythmic patterns with notes and rests. The Voice part is on a staff with a treble clef, showing the melody. The lyrics are written below the voice staff: "Hồng Hồng Tuyết tuyết ư". The Phách part has dynamic markings: d, f, f, f, f, f, f, f, d. The second system is for the second line: "hự ừ hự". The Phách part has dynamic markings: f, f, d, f, f, c, f, f. The Voice part has notes corresponding to the syllables.

Figure 27: *Phách* and Voice parts for the first line of “Đào Hồng Đào Tuyết.”

An important aspect to note, while looking at these transcriptions, is that the durational values of the notes represented here change from one performer to the next, and even from one performance by one performer to the next. A wavering tempo is so prevalent that I wondered, as a first-time listener, if this song type was meterless. This stems from its roots in language and stophic arrangements of musical materials, rather than roots in, for instance, dance music, where a strong downbeat and backbeat and regular meter can be advantageous.

Thúy Hòa writes this same line for students in a manner that the following example shows. The important thing, in Thúy Hòa’s view, is that this *khỏ phách* lands in this pattern somewhat evenly spaced underneath the syllables as they are uttered.

<i>Voice</i>	Hồng	hồng	tuyết	tuyết	ư	hự	ừ	hự
<i>Phách</i>		dfff	f	ff	f	dff	dff	Cff

Figure 28: Nguyễn Thúy Hòa’s method for notating and teaching *phách* rhythm with poetry.

The rhythm of the *phách*, providing structure over which to declaim a line of poetry, also communicates the rhythmic structure to the lute and drum players. Another basic *phách* rhythm in *hát nói* mode is illustrated below with the lute strophe *khổ róc*, which provides an instrumental solo in the *hát nói* form. The instrumental section is called “*lru không*” (literally “to keep space”). The “*f-fcff*” rhythmic formation at the end is a phrase of conclusion that is used throughout the song type. The drum, which I discuss further on, often coincides with this “*f-fcff*” rhythmic formation to punctuates the lines.

The musical score for Figure 29 is presented in three systems. The first system shows the Lute part (treble clef, 4/4 time) and the Phách part (bass clef, 4/4 time). The second system continues the Lute part with a slur over the first two measures and a fermata over the last measure. The third system shows the Lute part with a fermata over the last measure and the Phách part with a fermata over the last measure. The Phách part has dynamic markings 'f' and 'c' at the end.

Figure 29: Strophe of *róc* with *phách* and lute.

Singers vary the basic rhythms according to personal style by omitting and adding strokes and making subtle changes to tempo and rhythmic emphasis (coming ahead or behind where the listener would expect the next beat—as in playing with a “swing”). A singer’s *phách* variations constitute part of her creative identity and they reflect her pedagogical background—they resonate the way in which she learned and from whom she learned.

In learning the lute and drum parts, traditionally played by men, Vãn Khuê, Vãn Mũi, and Thúy Hòa all emphasized that I must follow the female singer’s rhythmic structures and thereby fit within her declamation. Delving momentarily into considerations of gendered roles, it could be argued that the singer’s rhythm instrument gives her control over the men in the performance.

While *phách* style is a badge of identity, during performance the *phách* also represents an alteration to the typical gendered hierarchies of patriarchal Vietnamese society.

The materiality of the instrument itself is also significant in personal ways to Thúy Hòa. She made her own from bamboo, in an older fashion than the ones current instrument makers produce from rosewood. She showed me one day how she made it. She bought green chunks of bamboo from the market, cut them with a kitchen cleaver to isolate the best pieces (those with the smallest canal running lengthwise on the interior of the halved bamboo pieces), and skinned and shaped these with pieces of broken glass (she smashed a wine bottle in a plastic bag to create these tools). She then dyed the result for color, with tea made from fresh turmeric root, and dried it. The result was her unique *phách* timbre. Most are produced from rosewood, and have a different sound. The unique sound and the object underline her status as one of the best living *ca trù* singers. The fact that museums and research institutes approached her to buy the *phách*, to put in collections, further emphasized this symbol of her coveted artistry. Her instrument is featured on the cover of Nguyễn Xuân Diện's book, something Diện proudly pointed out to me.

On the nature of “Cung”

Addiss researched the topic of modes in this genre in the 1970s and wrote that “*nam cung*” (five modes or registers) of *ca trù* can be outlined by building a pentatonic scale on each degree of the original pentatonic scale.³⁶² What he described is, in practice, the movement up the fingerboard of the lute. The pentatonic scale he describes, *do re fa so la*, is a different spelling and permutation of the scale as it is practiced in *hát nói*, *do me fa so se*.

³⁶² Addiss, “Text and Context in Vietnamese Sung Poetry,” 207.

In Norton's study, based on work since the 1990s, he writes that musicians of the current generation could not define the five different *cung*, and that Vietnamese scholars had defined the *cung* in vague terms, which is what I have confirmed myself. Norton cites the authors of *Việt Nam Ca trù biên khảo* (Norton's translation):

“Cung nam is even in a low register
Cung bac is solid in a high register
Cung huynh is sticky and fast
Cung pha is plaintive and quirky
Cung nao is oblique and is used to move from one *cung* to another.”³⁶³

In his analysis of the song type *bác phản*, Norton describes three separate modes with the pitches that follow, and declares that the transposition of *nam* and *bắc* to a different pitch may create another *cung*: “*Nào*.” He bases this on the assertion in *Việt Nam Ca trù biên khảo* that *cung nào* is used to move from one *cung* to another.³⁶⁴ This is summarized below, and I have added solfège summaries (in moveable and fixed-Do systems):

Nam: G Bb C D F (do me fa so se)
Nao: C Eb F G Bb (fa le se do me – or – do me fa so se)
Bắc: D F G A C (so se do re fa – or – do me fa so se)

Figure 30: Three Cung, as discussed by Norton.

These are “transpositions” of the same pentatonic scale, each built from a different note of the original scale which, here, is *do me fa so se*. The intervallic pattern is the same for each (in terms of western tuning, the pattern is, approximately: minor third, whole step, whole step, and minor third).

Addiss described this intervallic pattern as well, spelling it in a different permutation as *do re fa so la*. This spelling of the intervallic pattern corresponded to other discussions of

³⁶³ Norton, “Singing the Past,” 37.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

Vietnamese modal theory, in which the spelling of *do re fa so la* has often been used. Sometimes this mode is expressed with the Vietnamese solmization *ho xư xang xê cồng*,³⁶⁵ of which I learned while studying in Hồ Chí Minh City (Saigon) with the multi-instrumentalist and renowned scholar of music, Nguyễn Vinh Bảo. The solmization system *ho xư xang xê cồng* is more prevalent among southern and central musicians, and the Thái Hà do not use it. The well-known Vietnamese music scholar, Phạm Duy, also spelled the intervallic relationship as *do re fa so la* in a Vietnamese-language article, as well as in his English-language book.³⁶⁶ The two permutations of these five pitches classes map onto one another as written below in a fixed-Do solfège.

<i>Norton</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>re</i>	<i>fa</i>	<i>so</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>do</i>
<i>Addiss and Phạm</i>	<i>re</i>	<i>fa</i>	<i>so</i>	<i>la</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>re</i>

Figure 31: Two spellings of a pentatonic scale.

Phạm writes out the entire system used in *ca trù* in a fixed-Do system (see below). I take issue with this spelling because it does not pay attention to the fundamental pitches of each mode, the manner in which musicians approach the performing practices, and the way in which these modes map onto the *đàn đáy* lute in practice (*Nam*, for example, in practice is spelled *do me fa so se do me*).

<i>Nam</i>	<i>do re fa so la do</i>
<i>Bắc</i>	<i>re mi so la si re</i>
<i>Nao</i>	<i>fa so si do re fa</i>

³⁶⁵ In Norton's earlier publication he also starts from this point of discussion, building upon Trần Văn Khê's discussion of *hát nói* from 1962. See Norton, "Ca trù: A Vietnamese Chamber Music," 60; Trần Văn Khê, *La musique*.

³⁶⁶ Phạm Duy, "Ca nhạc phòng," in *Ca trù nhìn từ nhiều phía*, 221; and Phạm Duy, *Musics of Vietnam*.

<i>Pha</i>	<i>so la do re mi so</i>
<i>Huỳnh</i>	<i>la si re mi fa la</i>

Figure 32: Phạm Duy's spelling of the five *cung*.

In Norton's discussion of the nature of *cung*, he suggests that the distinguishing factor between *bắc* and *nam* is the relative pitch level. This is what I initially thought when approaching the song type *Hát nói*, where this seems to be true. In *hát nói*, *cung nam* is lower in pitch range than *cung bắc*.

The whole issue of “*cung*” is complicated, however, if we consider another song type in which three *cung* are present. In the song type *Gửi thư* (sending a love letter), a third “*cung*” is added again to *nam* and *bắc*. The registers of *nam* and *bắc*, however, are different in pitch range from where they are in the song type of *hát nói*. In practical terms, the fingering of *cung nam* is usually built on the fretboard at the first fret. Here, it is applied to the fourth fret, and the *bắc* fingering is applied to the second fret. The third *cung* in this song type is the same fingering as *nam*, but it is applied one fret above on the fifth fret. Thus it is essentially the same “scale” as *nam*, in terms of the intervallic relationships of pitches and the relativity of the fingering pattern to a fundamental pitch. In the context of performance, it provides a marked contrast, a movement from one set of pitches to the same pattern of pitches built one step higher. The evenly spaced frets of the lute enable the same fingering to create the same intervallic relationships in the scale. (This is summarized in figures below).

The basic lute part for the *gửi thư* form is outlined in the transcription that follows. It is strophically organized with a short introductory section. The poetry is organized in four-line strophes and, as indicated below, the lute follows accordingly, using the basic outline represented below as a guide. The poetry is generally in *song thất lục bát*—a form in which quatrains are built on a pattern of seven, seven, six, and eight syllable-lines. But as Đỗ Bằng Đoàn and Đỗ

Trọng Huệ note: “sometimes lines and words are added here and there for clarity of meaning” (exceptions to rules abound). The sample model form they provide in their text, for instance, has alterations. This anonymous poem also is the model poem used by the Thái Hà. The four quatrains in the example provide in this volume, which follow the introductory line of “*Bút hoa thảo tình thư một bức*” (which simply announces the poetic form, “sending a love letter”) have the following syllabic content.

8787/ 8677/ 7778/ 7777³⁶⁷

To describe different ways of playing the strophes, such as *lá đầu* and *róc* in this song type, Văn Khuê used the word “*kiểu*” (meaning model or pattern). This is noted in the transcription below. In addition, while discussing the *Gửi thư* song type, Văn Khuê called the register that was lower in pitch “*Nam*” and the one that was higher “*Bắc*,” as he did in *Hát nói*. The *nam* and *bắc* fingering patterns, I realized later, were reversed in register from the *Hát nói* patterns. It could be that Văn Khuê was mistaken about the labeling of *cung* in this song type. It could also be that the “system” of “*cung*” is not consistent, which is why musicians sometimes have a difficulty defining the *cung*.

The figures that follow the transcription illustrate the patterns of fingering for *gửi thư* alongside those of *hát nói*. The pitches assigned to these fingering charts correspond to the transcriptions (A below middle C as the lowest available on the *đàn đáy* lute). In the figures, the left hand column indicates the fret number. Gisa Jahnichen, in an article on the *đàn đáy lute*, has recently used a similar “tablature” approach in visualizing lute fingering.³⁶⁸ In the fingering figures, the fundamental pitch of each *cung* is highlighted and in bold text.

³⁶⁷ Đỗ Bằng Đoàn, *Việt Nam Ca trù Biên Khảo*, 67.

³⁶⁸ Jahnichen “Uniqueness Re-examined: The Vietnamese Lute on Đáy re-examined.”

Observing the relationship of the fundamental pitches in the pattern of surrounding pitches, I would note that what Văn Khuê called “*nam*” in *gũri thur* has a pattern of pitches, with respect to fundamental pitch, as *bắ*c in *hát nói*, and what he called “*bắ*c” in *gũri thur* has the same orientation as *nam* in *hát nói*. He called the third *cung* “*phú*,” which perhaps is a variation of terminology from “*pha*.” This *cung* in basic form only includes the pitches E A B E (*so’ do re so*). *Se’* is added in improvisatory performance. If spelled in terms of previous scholars’ works (using fixed-Do solfège), with the lowest lute fret as “*do*,” the three *cung* can be represented as follows. Syllables in bold text represent the “fundamental” pitches.

<i>Nam/bắ</i> c:	<i>Re so se re</i>
<i>Bắ</i> c/ <i>nam</i> :	<i>Fa</i> <i>la se do</i> <i>fa</i> <i>la</i>
<i>Phú/pha</i> :	<i>So se do re so</i>

This presents a different picture in practice from the theoretical building of scales on the notes of a foundational five-note scale, and certainly points to the problematic nature of defining *cung*.

Fourth fret, Khô soong đầu

Khô giữa

8 Khô róc

16 Khô lá đầu, gửi thư style

23 Fifth fret, lư không, róc in gửi thư style
Cung phũ

30 Second fret, Khô lá đầu

37 Fourth Fret, Khô lá đầu, gửi thư style

44 Khô lá đầu, gửi thư style

Khô giữa

51 Fifth Fret, khô lá đầu, gửi thư style

57 Fourth Fret

Ends of four line strophe cycle; return to another instrumental break on Khô róc (mm 27, then back to mm 32)...

Figure 33: Gửi Thư Form, basic Đàn Dây part.

Gửi Thư Form

2nd fret

Văn Khuê called this Nam

E is “fundamental”

	1	2	3
1			
2	B	E	
3			B
4		G	
5			
6			
7...			

4th fret

Văn Khuê called this Bắc

D is “fundamental”

	1	2	3
1			
2			
3			
4	D	(g)	
5		A	D
6	F		
7			F
8...			

5th fret - Phú (pha?)

A is “fundamental”

	1	2	3
1			
2			
3			
4		(g)	
5	E	A	
6		B	E
7...			

Hát nói Form

1st fret

Nam

A is “fundamental”

	1	2	3
1	A	(d)	(g)
2		E	A
3	C		
4			C
5			
6			
7...			

5th fret

Bắc

A is “fundamental”

	1	2	3
1			
2			
3			
4	(d)	(g)	
5	E	A	(d)
6			E
7...		C	
8			(g)
9			A

Figure 34: Fingering charts of đàn đáy (three-stringed lute) in three “cung” of gửi thư song type and two “cung” of hát nói song type. Notes in parentheses are usually not included in model melodic strophes but are available for improvisation. Fundamental pitches are highlighted and in bold text.

The notion of “in” and “out” applies also in the context of *gửi thư*. In the figure above, the lowercase “g” in parentheses could be considered a transitional pitch between *cung* (as in the “out” pitches D and G in the *Hát nói* song type, also lowercase and in parentheses here). Furthermore, to describe this transition between *cung*, and also the transition between song types, Văn Khuê used another term, “*Luỡng tính*,” which means “hermaphrodite.” Thus, in the transition between “*cung*” as well as “*làn điệu*” (mode), a third hermaphroditic mode can be born between the two, in which pitches from both are available to the lute player for improvisation. This gendered conception of the modality of *ca trù* is certainly fascinating, and fits within the gendered *âm dương* (feminine-masculine) worldview, which applies throughout the universe to paired dichotomies that form whole conceptions. In the musical transition between a place of *âm* and one of *dương*, there is one of *âm dương*, and this comprises a special moment in the music, an in-between and ambiguous improvisatory space for the lute player as well as the singer. This also again points to a larger phenomenon in Vietnamese culture, comfort with what we might conceive of as ambiguity. Approaching this concept in music, the phenomenon of ambiguity could better be phrased as a “wholeness,” as it embodies both fundamental aspects of the universe.

It is worth noting also that the seamless transition between song types, such as from *hát nói* to *gửi thư*, comprises a third way of performing. It is called “*thể cách*,” meaning “the way.” (In Norton’s studies of the music, he uses the term *thể*, which perhaps derives from this). In usage, *hát nói* is a *thể cách*, *gửi thư* is a *thể cách*, and *hát nói* with *gửi thư* following is yet another *thể cách*.

The notion of “*cung*” is important to the performing practice because it gives both lute player and singer structures of actual sets of pitches in which to improvise, even if these structures are difficult for us to define in theory. In the *gửi thư* song type, in practice, to summarize the above figures and transcriptions, the three *cung* may be outlined as follows from low to high in terms of *cung* register. *Hát nói* is given below for comparison.

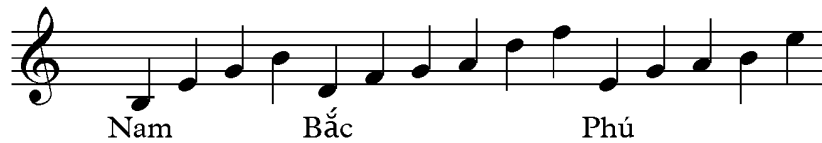


Figure 35: *Gửi Thư* "Cung."

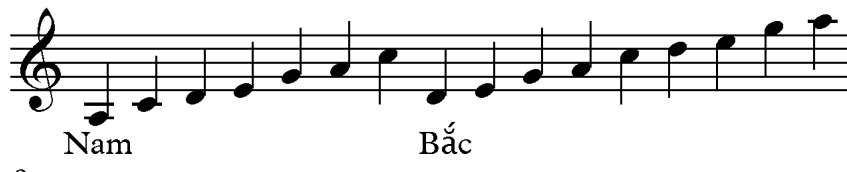


Figure 36: *Hát Nói* "Cung."

The singer’s voice and the changes for the lute player from one *cung* to the next come together in *Gửi thư*, and are especially synced with the change to *phú*. This change from one scale to another within a song has been called “*métabole*.”³⁶⁹ While moments of the song type *Gửi thư* may be tri-tonic, such as the introduction from *soòng đầu* through *khỏ lá đầu*, or tetra-tonic, such as the *lá đầu* variation on the fifth fret, from the point of view of both the listener and the performer, this song type as a whole may be experienced as heptatonic.

³⁶⁹ Norton discusses this term, noting its origins come from Constantin Brailoiu. See Brailoiu, “Un problème de tonalité (La métabole pentatonique),” in *Mélanges d'histoire et d'esthétique musicale offerts à Paul-Marie Masson, tome I*, (Paris: Richard Masse, 1955). Norton, “Singing the Past,” 44.

The nature of “*cung*” is hard to describe but, in looking at these examples, a few noteworthy aspects emerge. In a performance-centered perspective, *cung* tends simply to indicate a change in hand position for the lute player and also for the singer’s register. This change to a new *cung* brings either a different set of pitches or a different orientation of the same pitches. The order or hierarchy of the pitches in a *cung*—as determined by the melodic *khỏ* within the *cung*—point towards a fundamental pitch as defined within the *khỏ*. These comprise the pitches available for improvisatory practices in realizing poetry in song and accompanying this realization. The order of pitches, embodied in fingering patterns, is built by learning the various *khỏ* within their respective *cung* in the performer’s mind, ear, and body. The model of *cung* order is dictated by the model form that the player and singer learn.

Cung, therefore, could be seen as a suggestion of structures for improvisatory practice instead of a strict system of modes. In theory, this was handed down patrilineally through generations in family music guilds of the past, and each family honed its own style. Mixing of familial styles in the rural-to-urban movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries might have contributed to a loss of the social structuring that the familial guild had provided to style. Considering this, alongside loss of diversity in musical expertise and experience after the 1950s, it becomes clearer why musicians and scholars have had a difficult time pinning down the essence of “*cung*.”

“Praising” with the Trống châu Drum

The musical-poetic aesthetic of *ca trù* involves also the mentality of performers approaching poems in relation to a *trống châu* (praise drum) player. I heard many times in fieldwork, and have since read repeatedly in research, that the music cannot be *ca trù* without the

drum player. I investigate this here in a dissection of the drum's cultural and musical significance. The drum is more social than it is musical, but that does not make it less necessary than any other aspect.

The drum is a relic from a past age in whose sound resonates an ideal audience-participant. That is to say its presence symbolically represents a male scholar from the past. In Vietnam, images of ancestors occupy shrines in most homes and businesses. In a similar manner, predecessors of the *ca trù* realm are present through practice, music, poetry, and the continuity of using certain material objects, such as the drum.

There no longer exists the “*quan viên*” (patron or scholar-gentry) as in the imperial-era patron of *ả đào* (courtesans). The term is antiquated, with origins in the specific historic conditions of the Vietnamese kingdom, in which a bureaucracy of scholars studied and wrote classical poetry and hired courtesans to perform their poems. *Ca trù* performers, however, still discuss the *quan viên*. He is a provider of critique that resonates in the sound of the *trống chầu* drum. In performance, a member of the ensemble symbolically plays this role and embodies this past.

In a 1933 manual on playing the drum, the author, Cuồng Sỹ (“Mad doctor”—a pseudonym), describes the manner of drum playing as indicative of a person's character:

“In the West they have a phrase, ‘Le style c’est l’homme’ [style, it is the man]... we have our own phrase, ‘Người làm sao chiêm bao làm vậy’ [whatever a man dreams of, his affairs will follow]. As such we can say: “The sound of the drum shows the character of a man.”³⁷⁰

The drum adds semantic depth to the sonic texture and resounds with the identity of its player. Historically speaking, he participated in the music without lowering himself to the social

³⁷⁰ Cuồng Sỹ, *Học đánh chầu*, 13.

level of the musicians. Social class was even reflected in the arrangement of the performers: The patron typically sat atop a daybed while he listened, and the musicians performed while sitting on the ground.³⁷¹

Today, however, the praise drum player symbolizes this history of elegant culture in the frame of a staged performance, playing a role and recalling the historical circumstances from which *ca trù* emerged. The drum's role is important in the minds of performers today, although the majority of the interplay of music occurs between singer and lute today, for the most part independent of the drum player. In other words, the drum does not have a structuring role in the musical practices as a rhythm instrument. It is a “social instrument,” and its role was defined in imperial-era society.

In the past, the social realms of the performers and the audience-participant drum player were distinct—performers in society were *déclassé* citizens and often very poor. (This concerns history of the music as entertainment music after the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). The drum player was usually wealthy and literate in *Hán Nôm* script and classical poetry. Today, the distinct social positions of audience-participant and musicians have been leveled. The audience-participant is part of the ensemble and is, in a presentational manner, acting out the role of the patron.³⁷² This makes the historical revisions to *ca trù*'s “past” particularly important.

After I studied the techniques of voice and lute, the drum seemed an afterthought, adding historical symbolism to the performance. But performers see it as integral. They consider the

³⁷¹ Nguyễn Quảng Tuân made me aware of this arrangement, which is not typically represented as such today—paintings and film representations of *ca trù* usually show artists and musicians in past ages on the same physical level in performance, such as the film *Mê Thảo: thời vang bóng* (Me Thao: Time Resounding in the Shadow) from 2002, based on the novel by Nguyễn Tuân called *Chùa Đàn* (Instrument Pagoda) from 1946. See Nguyễn Tuân, *Chùa Đàn: Tác phẩm và dư luận*, ed. Nguyễn Thị Hạnh (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản văn học, 2001).


³⁷² On presentational versus participatory music, see Turino, *Music as Social Life*.

drum as punctuation. It helps stitch the performance together. These moments of participation, however, only underline what the singer achieves with the *phách*.

The *phách* is responsible for keeping time, and the drum’s role is superficial in this regard. In other words, the drum provides little in rhythmic structuring, in that it is not integral as a rhythm instrument in the way we often think of drums. Its social function of the past, providing commentary and economic gratuity, is mostly forgotten. Today it is uncommon that an audience member or even a drum player are students of the poetry, so the Thái Hà Ensemble and select others are exceptions.

As with the other parts of the music, the drum is learned by memorizing *khuôn* (“models”), which correspond to representative model poems in each mode. Other than the patriarch Nguyễn Văn Mũi, most drum players play for show.

Below is the first line of “Đào Hồng Đào Tuyết” with the singer’s words on the first line, the melody on the second line, the *phách* on the third line, and the drum on the fourth. “O” means a strike to the drum’s head; “+” means a strike to the body of the drum. This system of writing the drum strokes I believe originated in the book on drum pedagogy, *Học đánh chầu*, from 1933. Note the manner in with the O+O pattern of the drum underlines or “punctuates” the *dff-dff-cff* concluding rhythmic formation in the *phách*.



The musical notation consists of four lines. The first line contains the lyrics: *Phách* d f f f f f f d f f d f f c f f. The second line contains the lyrics: **Hồng Hồng Tuyết Tuyết ư hự ừ hừ**. The third line contains the lyrics: so'-do me'-do fa-so so ____ so so-me me-do _____. The fourth line contains the drum notation: **Drum “punctuation”:** O + O. The drum notation uses circles (O) for strikes to the head and plus signs (+) for strikes to the body.

Figure 37: Drum punctuation in line one of Đào Hồng with voice, *phách* and drum.

The *Năm khổ trống chầu* (the five singing session drum strophes or forms) are given in the figure below. On the left are forms as written in the manual for drum players from 1933. In the second column are forms as written in the 1962 book, *Việt Nam Ca trù biên khảo*. The third column is taken from the *ca trù* aficionado Ngô Linh Ngọc's anthology of *ca trù* poetry. In the fourth column are the forms as Nguyễn Văn Mùi teaches them. There are overlaps and variations in terminology. I have grouped them together where terminology overlaps, not in the order in which they were presented in the respective sources. Each source gives several names for some of the forms, as indicated. For example, *Lạc nhận* seems to have had many names and variations. Following is a figure with English translations of the five basic forms for the drum.

<i>Học đánh châu</i> ³⁷³	<i>Việt Nam Ca trù biên khảo</i> ³⁷⁴	Ngô Linh Ngọc ³⁷⁵	Nguyễn Văn Mùi
Chính diện: +O+	Chính diện: +O+	Chính diện: +O+	Chính diện: +O+
Xuyên tâm: O+O	Xuyên tâm: O+O	Xuyên tâm: O+O	Xuyên tâm: O+O
Hạ mã: OO+	Ha mã (or lạc nhận): OOO+	Lạc nhận (or Trầm ngư or Hạ mã): OO+	Lạc nhận (or trầm ngư): OO+
Lạc nhận (or Phi nhận): ++O++O			
Trầm ngư (or Thùy châu): +O+O+O			
Quán châu: +++O	Quán châu: +++O	Quán châu: ++O	Quán châu: ++O
Thượng mã: ++O	Thượng mã (or Phi nhận): +OOO	Thượng mã: +OO	Thượng mã: +OO (line 8 of HHTT)
Liên châu: OOO	Liên châu: OOO		
Song-châu: OO	Song-châu: OO		

Figure 38: Four understandings of the basic forms of the strophes for the singing session drum player.

³⁷³ Page 16-17.

³⁷⁴ Page 132.

³⁷⁵ Ngô Linh Ngọc, *Tuyển tập thơ ca trù*, 248.

Vietnamese	English
Chính diện: +O+	Full face, for calm parts
Xuyên tâm: O+O	To pierce the heart, for melancholy parts and to punctuate well-performed phrases
Lạc nhận: OO+	The flight of the swallow diverted by the wind, for one to escape melancholy
Quán châu: ++O	To envelope a passage and put in a jewel case
Thượng mã: +OO	Upon a horse, for fast and strong passages

Figure 39: The five basic forms, their translations, and their usage.³⁷⁶

Below are further variations of these that Nguyễn Văn Mùi uses today. Those outlined in Ngô Linh Ngọc's book, not listed below, include two variations for *Quán châu*, +++O and ++++O. Variations, Ngô Linh Ngọc writes, are developed according to the feelings of the drum player about the essence of the poetry. As can be observed, the variations involve extending the phrase by adding strikes on the interior or exterior of the pattern, as represented below. There appears overlap in terminology and perhaps some confusion between them, as the *thùy châu* (in the last row) can be called *lạc nhận*, although this is a different pattern than the *lạc nhận* in row three.

Various names	Variations by Nguyễn Văn Mùi			
1. Chính diện	++O+	+OOO+	+OO+	
2. Xuyên tâm	OO+O	O++O	O++O+O	O+++O
3. Lạc nhận	OOO+	OOOO+	OOOOO+	
4. Thượng Mã – đoạt châu –	+OOO	+OOOO		

³⁷⁶ For these translations I relied on Ngô Linh Ngọc's translation in his liner notes in an album: *Việt Nam: La voix des maisons de chant* (Paris: Buda Musique, 2001).

**phi nhận – phi
ngũ**

**5. Thùy châu – O+++ (called
lạc nhận – trầm Hôi hậu)
ngũ - hạ mã**

Figure 40: Nguyễn Văn Mùi of the Thái Hà explained these as variations of the five outlined in the figure above.

In addition to these, in previous times, other patterns invited performers to sit down and begin performing, although these are no longer in usage.³⁷⁷ Most of the forms do not have extramusical meaning in terms of semantic communication³⁷⁸ and serve as variations with which the drum player may express his abilities.

Below is an outline of the model performance from the drum player’s perspective within the poem of “Đào Hồng Đào Tuyết.” The drum’s part is written below the lines of text. The drum stroke “+” mid-line can provide a sonic “comma” to the line or indicate moments to offer praise. Historically speaking, this sound, created by a strike to the side of the drum, represented the bamboo token being placed on a platter before the musicians. These tokens were traded after performance for cash. It is unclear to me if bamboo tokens were still used in the singing house of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries. The singer Nguyễn Thị Chúc seemed to think that tokens were replaced with cash in the singing houses in the early twentieth century.

Note that the OOO pattern below comes at the end of the first instrumental section and before the second one (it also comes before the entire performance). The O+O pattern provides punctuation to the end of certain lines, often corresponding with non-semantic syllables.

³⁷⁷ Đỗ Bằng Đoàn, Đỗ Trọng Huề, *Việt Nam Ca trù Biên Khảo*, 131; Norton, “Ca trù: A Vietnamese Chamber Music Genre,” 82.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

1. Hồng Hồng	Tuyệt Tuyệt	ư	ư	ư
	+ [question]	O	+	O
2. Mới ngày nào	chưa biết cát chi chi			
	+ [praise]			
Lute free section [called “đàn ra khô”]				
		OOO		
3. Mười lăm năm	thăm thoát có xa gì			
	+		O+O	
4. Ngoảnh mặt lại	đã đến kỳ tở liễu			
	+		OOO	
Lute free section				
		O+O		
5. Ngã lãng du	thời quân thượng thiếu	ư	ư	ư
	+ [comma]		O	O
6. Quân kim	hứa giá ngã thành ông			
	+ [comma]		+	[line end]
7. Cười cười nói nói sượng sùng				
	+	+		
8. Mà bạch phát	với hồng nhan chùng ái ngại			
	+			+ OOO
				[thượng mã]
9. Riêng một thú Thanh Sơn đi lại				
10. Khéo ngậy ngậy	Khéo ngậy ngậy	dại	dại	với tình
	+O+			+
	[xuyên tâm]			
11. Đàn ai	một tiếng	ư	ư	ư
	+	O++O		OOO
				[on last lute phrase]

Figure 41: Illustration of the model part for the drum in hát nói poetry as explained by Nguyễn Văn Mùi of the Thái Hà.

Comparing this model form to the one Ngô Linh Ngọc outlines (represented by the figure below), there are some marked differences. For example, in Ngô Linh Ngọc’s version of the same poem, the pattern O+O comes under semantic syllables in lines four, six, and eight, instead of under non-semantic syllables, as in Văn Mùi’s outline above. In line eight, the pattern O++O is played beneath the syllables “Mà bạch phát” and the “+” is moved to beneath the syllable “nhan.” Several “+” lie beneath line seven as well, and there is no pattern of OOO after the instrumental breaks. The last line is identical, however.

1. Hồng Hồng	Tuyệt Tuyệt				
				OO	
2. Mới ngày nào	chưa biết cái chi chi				
					+ + OOO
Lute free section [called lưu không]					
3. Mười lăm năm	thăm thoắt có xa gì				
					+ +
4. Ngoảnh mặt lại	đã đến kỳ tơ liễu				
		O	+ O		OOO
Lute free section					
					+O
5. Ngã lãng du	thời quân thượng thiếu				
					+ + ++O
6. Quân kim	hứa giá ngã thành ông				
					+ O + O
7. Cười cười nói nói sượng sùng					
					+ + +
8. Mà bạch phát với hồng nhan	chùng ái ngại				
		O	+ + O		+ OOOO
9. Riêng một thu Thanh Sơn	đi lại				
					+ + +
10. Khéo ngậy ngậy	Khéo ngậy ngậy	dại đại với tình			
					OOO O++O
11. Đàn ai	một tiếng	đương tranh			
					+ OO+ OOO

Figure 42: Illustration of the model part for the drum in hát nói poetry from an anthology of poetry by Ngô Linh Ngọc.

Ngô Linh Ngọc’s version of the model performance has similarities to the model performance in Cường Sỹ’s 1933 manual. It seems likely that Ngọc considered this as a basis for explanation in his 1987 book.³⁷⁹ The 1933 version is represented below.

1. Hồng Hồng	Tuyệt Tuyệt		
			OO
2. Mới ngày nào	chưa biết cái chi chi		
			+ + +
Lute free section [called “khổ đàn”]			

³⁷⁹ Cường Sỹ, *Học đánh châu*, 79.

					OOO					
3.	Mười	lăm	năm	thăm	thoắt	có	xa	gì		
		+		+		+		+		
4.	Ngoảnh	mặt	lại	đã	đến	kỳ	tơ	liễu		
	O		+	O				OOO+O		
<i>Lute free section</i>										
								OOO		
5.	Ngã	lãng	du	thời	quân	thượng	thiếu			
			+					OO		
6.	Quân	kim	hứa	giá	ngã	thành	ông			
		+	+		O	O	+	O		
7.	Cười	cười	nói	nói	sượng	sùng				
		+		+		+				
8.	Mà	bạch	phát	với	hồng	nhân	chùng	ái	ngại	
	O	+	O					OOO++O		
9.	Riêng	một	thú	Thanh	Sơn	đi	lại			
			+		+	+				
10.	Khéo	ngây	ngây	Khéo	ngây	ngây	dại	dại	với	tình
	O	O	O						+	
11.	Đàn	ai	một	tiếng	dương	tranh				
	+	+		OOO				OOO+O		

Figure 43: Illustration of the model part for the drum in hát nói from a 1933 instruction manual, *Học đánh chầu*.

Many styles of playing the praise drum exist, and they seem to have changed over time. Perhaps musicians, such as Nguyễn Văn Mùi, have different understandings of the practices than do amateur musicians or *ca trù* connoisseurs, of which these scholars are examples. In his explanation, Nguyễn Văn Mùi provided more nuanced understanding than these other two examples, e.g., instructing on timing the drum with the non-semantic syllables that his daughter Thúy Hòa adds at the conclusions of lines. He also described how the praise drum player should synchronize the drum with the *phách* (see the transcription above for an example of the interlocking of drum and *phách*).

Văn Mùi insisted the drum player should not play a pattern involving “O,” a strike to the drum head, while the singer declaimed words with semantic meaning, but he could play while

she performed non-semantic syllables—those phrases including syllables such “*ư ừ hừ*.” This reflected his opinion of the high status of clear enunciation of meaning. Looking at the other models above, it is worth noting this rule is not followed. For instance, the pattern “OOO” underlines semantic words in line ten of the 1933 model. Ngô Linh Ngọc’s version seems more reverent of the lyrics, although examples exist of strikes to the drum’s head during the declamation of lyrics, such as in lines four and eight. This begs the question of how much these scholars knew about the musical aesthetic, and points to difference between musicians’ and scholars’ understandings; it also points to how much it may have changed in the last thirty to eighty years.

While many different ways of playing exist, once one is learned, the drum player is meant to improvise within the framework, as with the other parts of *ca trù* performance. The drum does serve rhythmically to conclude lines of poetry, but underlines the rhythm of the *phách*, although the drum is heard above the *phách* in volume. Again, through the lens of a gender studies analysis, this might reflect the historically rooted hierarchy of patriarchal society.

The drum underlines rhythm that is already present in the practices. The drum is not entirely secure in its position in the ensemble of modern society. It was never integral musically, because in historical circumstances the player was not a musician but an amateur connoisseur of music and a poet. In former days, a musical, social, and economic interaction occurred between the musicians and the drum player. It is usually men who insist it is still important.

In practice, the drum is representative of an educated man’s dominance and prowess over the musicians—the male and female musicians-as-laborers of the past. But it is also reflective of a lingering sentiment in Vietnamese society that educated men are most important. This reflects

a continuity of gender inequality that is unexpected, given the supposed egalitarianism endorsed by socialism.

Members of the Thái Hà noted that many people today do not understand the words in *ca trù* performance, but this was important, especially for the role of the drum player. The poems are in an archaic language, not accessible to most modern Vietnamese speakers, and audience members do not play the participant drum. A performer's interpretations of poems can educate audience members, but modern interpretations of poetry, like history, are often infused or influenced with political agendas. In the following chapter, I examine the political and cultural elements of the music in modern society.