

## Chapter VI

### The State, Musicians and Memory Battles in Modern Vietnam

*Ca trù* music exists because individuals continued to perform privately as patronage systems and institutions of previous eras disappeared in the twentieth century. This leads to questions concerning what kept *ca trù* alive; what made it a prominent cultural feature “worth preserving” in the last twenty to thirty years; how this “preservation” has been carried out; and how has this all been portrayed publicly. In this chapter, therefore, I examine issues that were recurring in my fieldwork and that created the foundation for many of the inquiries of this dissertation. This included the nature of state culture brokers and their role in publicly portraying culture; the role of foreign organizations in the brokering of culture; the cultural amnesia and “patriotic nostalgia”<sup>380</sup> parallel to the revisionist outlook of state culture brokers; and the esteemed class of *nghệ nhân* (art people), who maintain tradition regardless of economic benefit. After discussing these issues, I return to the family of the Thái Hà and consider female agency in the modern songstress tradition and in relationship to history. A young singer is currently reinventing what it means to be a *đào nương* (songstress), and this is possible because the modern songstress in performance can resist historical chauvinism rooted in Vietnamese pasts.

On the one hand, state institutions and mechanisms, through a not entirely organized effort, project a vision of the past and present in collective memory, in a sense curating the

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<sup>380</sup> Norton uses this phrase to characterize attitudes toward *ca trù* since the 1980s. See Norton, “Singing the Past,” 30.

selections of images and imaginaries available for public consumption. Foreign institutions such as UNESCO, as well as foreign researchers such as myself, also become ensnared in this curating. By way of example, one “shadow in the field,”<sup>381</sup> which I left, was a handful of Vietnam Television (VTV)-produced features on *ca trù*.<sup>382</sup>



*Picture 7: Filming for a “reality” television show. Văn Khuê sits on a sedge mat and prepares for a performance while the cameraman takes a shot of me, the foreign student.*

On the other hand, in terms of the artists who perform *ca trù*, the story of *ca trù* in society, that is to say in their community, is different from the images available for public consumption in the media or as portrayed by academics through state publishing houses. *Ca trù* for them is an intimate affair of family and friends and a way of connecting with previous generations of musicians, and it may be considered a cognate of ancestor worship practices. The

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<sup>381</sup> Gregory Barz and Timothy Cooley, eds., *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>382</sup> My interest in the area of media coverage of *ca trù* stems from my time working at *The Viet Nam News* as an English-language editor, and from my lasting fascination with the language of state propaganda.



music is a chance to redefine through each performance the past, present, and future of the tradition, which more and more is unencumbered by the negative associations of the past. It is a chance for the songstress to re-center the elitist and patriarchal traditions of the past around her ideas of femininity as constructed through her performing practices. *Ca trù* thus becomes a conduit for constructing modern notions of femininity and of battling a long history of patriarchal subjugation in the songstress tradition and oppression in society at large. This is expressed musically, as the female singer ultimately controls the performance and forges the words of men from previous eras into a melody of her own. Concomitantly in Vietnamese society at large, women increasingly gain power and influence in the entrepreneurial economy as well as in the sphere of state institutions, which in Vietnam overlap.

### ***State Culture Brokers***

Considering the praise for preservation efforts that is offered to Quách Thị Hồ and groups such as the Thái Hà, the promotion of *ca trù* for UNESCO recognition, and the steady stream of related academic and mass media publications, it seems clear that the re-emergence of *ca trù* has been given government support. There has been a widespread campaign to raise awareness and involvement. State agendas, however, have altered the social milieu surrounding the music and have influenced how it is perceived, because history and culture are filtered through academic institutions that are largely overseen by the state.

My usage of the phrase culture broker differs somewhat from previous anthropological studies. The term traditionally has meant an individual who could be the go-between for local communities and national institutions; this has involved hybridized identities and modes of

communication.<sup>383</sup> This interlocutor exists in Vietnam. But culture broker has also been used to describe the people involved in any facet of publicly representing culture, such as museum curators or scholars. In Vietnam, this kind of broker also exists. Rather than being situated between local and national, rural and urban, or traditional and cosmopolitan communities, these brokers reside in the state or national institutions as scholars, historians, or ethnographers. They communicate a local vision of society through state-operated publishing houses. This image of the nation trickles down through propaganda mechanisms, such as the mass media as well as public loudspeaker systems, and back again to the local. This local vision, over time, can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

An introductory text on Vietnamese music gives a glimpse into problematic taxonomies created by culture brokers working in state institutions. In *Âm nhạc Việt Nam* (Vietnam's music), the history of Vietnamese music is divided into two main "streams:" *Âm nhạc dân gian* (folk music) and *âm nhạc bác học* (learned music). The authors defined "*âm nhạc dân gian*" (folk music) as a ubiquitous body of musical works without known authorship,<sup>384</sup> adopting a globalized (or Euro-centric) worldview. In this view, folk music is the *dòng chủ lưu* (primary stream) in Vietnamese music history, and it provided the foundation for the development of the *âm nhạc bác học* (learned music). The metaphor of historical "stream" gives the history a natural quality, and the taxonomy illustrates a history perceived as linear. This linearity is combined with the idea of culture developing over time. This may grow from a local conception of Social Darwinism (the misapplication of evolutionary theory to the social world), which leads to a view

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<sup>383</sup> Clifford Geertz, "The Javanese Kijaji: The Changing Role of a Cultural Broker," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2, no. 2 (1960): 228-249. An earlier usage Geertz credits this term to Eric R. Wolf, "Aspects of Group Relations in a Complex Society: Mexico," in *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 6 (1956): 1065-1078.

<sup>384</sup> Nguyễn Ánh Nguyệt, ed., *Âm nhạc Việt Nam*, 26.

of historical narrative being an inevitable forward progression or evolution. This is reflected pervasively in many recently written histories of *ca trù*.

The authors stress the dichotomy of learned and folk and note that, in Vietnamese folk music, vocal music had developed most impressively. Therefore, a scholar of music would do well to focus upon *dân ca* (folk songs).<sup>385</sup> In this dichotomy, I would argue, *ca trù* is in an unusual position: of *bác học* (learned) influence in most recent history, as it connects undeniably to the literary heritage of learned men and, in more distant history, of *dân gian* (folk) origin as a practice in village spirit worship. The latter has been revived and reinvented since the founding of a club in Lỗ Khê village, outside of Hanoi, since 1995.<sup>386</sup> The Thái Hà, in contrast, perform some of the village repertory, but their style comes primarily from the learned traditions of *hát cửa quyền* (singing for the powerful) and *hát cung đình* (singing at court), entertainment spheres which overlapped in terms of performing practice and which used (or inherited) village repertory.<sup>387</sup> Embodied in modern *ca trù*, then, are the learned and folk histories. These images of *ca trù* have been at odds with one another since the music's re-emergence.

State culture broker agendas take more obvious shape in the mass media, and they appear to take cues from scholarly discourse. In the media, frozen-in-time traditions serve to create a face of the nation and also to reap tourism revenue. These traditions also serve in propaganda campaigns wherein images of historical sites, traditional arts, and Communist Party and state leaders and activities are shown alongside one another, in order to assert unity—a unified vision

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<sup>385</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>386</sup> Alienor Anisensel, “Canter le ca trù au village.”

<sup>387</sup> Nguyễn Văn Mùi, Nguyễn Văn Khuê, personal communication, 2009-10. The same songs were also performed in *nhà hát* (singing houses), but the family did not discuss their family history with reference to singing houses.

of the people, their arts, the Communist Party, and the state. The arts in this context are usually framed as *nghệ thuật dân gian* (folk or people's arts).

During fieldwork, I observed a public campaign that was an apposite example. Preceding the lunar New Year in 2011, and shortly after the one-thousand-year anniversary of Hanoi in 2010, the campaign asserted an historical continuity from the imperial era to the present (as did the 2010 celebration of the one-thousand-year anniversary of Hanoi). The campaign was located outside the ancient citadel in Hanoi. The citadel had been refurbished and was re-opened as an historic site preceding Hanoi's one-thousand-year anniversary. The phrase "*xưa và nay*" (the past and now) was written between two sets of images in a series of banners that stretched across more than thirty yards of the citadel's outside wall. On the left, from "former days," were colonial black and white photos of historic areas of Hanoi. On the right, from the "present," were photos of arts and musical performances today as well as state officials shaking hands in front of busts of the revolutionary leader "Uncle Hồ" (see below for a representative public image of Uncle Hồ).

In the campaign on the citadel wall, the progression of images illustrated how traditions and history are selected and concretized by state culture brokers. An image from today showed the Thăng Long Guild performing in a *đình* (tutelary spirit worship house). The progression of images was strikingly similar in content to those in the aforementioned book, *Ca trù trong lịch sử và hiện tại* (Ca trù in history and modernity). Both demonstrated how curated images and texts could exclude traditions and individuals in the process of constructing continuity and unity of tradition and history.



*Picture 8: An image of Uncle Hồ holding a child, portrayed upon the backdrop of a dove, whose eye is the yellow star of the Vietnamese flag. This was roughly two stories high, and when I took this photo, it was on a building on the corner of Hoàn Kiếm Lake in the central tourist district. The sign below the image says “Establishing again the land of our country, ever more dignified, larger, and beautiful.”*

Official celebrations and campaigns sponsored by the state have a concretizing effect on culture in collective memory. As celebrations and campaigns project a continuity of tradition and oneness of the extended family of the Vietnamese nation, culture is figuratively sold to the public. This is all tied to the larger strategy of a one-party authoritarian state to maintain support from the nation. Parallel to such nationalist campaigns, in the folklore-for-cash mentality of the tourism industry, culture becomes commodified in tokens of national identity, sold to tourists.

In the 2010 celebration to commemorate the millennial anniversary of Hanoi, the state and its media organizations constructed an air of nationalism throughout the capital and projected this through the media. Straining to project a post-war unity through the celebration, state culture brokers established an imagined communion of Vietnamese oneness through a campaign on the history of the one-thousand-year-old unified kingdom. Below is an image of preparations for this celebration next to the central Hoàn Kiếm Lake.



Picture 9: A screen near Hoàn Kiếm Lake counts down to the one thousandth anniversary, next to a stage area being built for the celebrations, around a commemorative statue in a style of socialist realism. Such statues are everywhere in the cityscape and adorn Vietnam's countryside.

The actual anniversary was a debacle of overcrowding in the city center, with little substantial or meaningful celebration. The next day, news media covered the traffic jams and attendant smog clouds, which asphyxiated and left unconscious motorbike drivers in the worst areas. Large budgets yielded stages with enormous televisions, balloons, and colorful lights, but it was widely suspected and not reported that much of the state-allotted budget went directly to state officials. Ceremonies and performances of traditional arts including *ca trù* had been by invitation only for government officials. Hanoians I knew stayed home.<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>388</sup> For a general overview of the event, see: Seth Mydans, "As Hanoi Marks 1,000<sup>th</sup> Birthday, Some Are Cynical," *New York Times*, October 9, 2010, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/10/world/asia/10hanoi.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/10/world/asia/10hanoi.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0). An example of the Vietnamese-language coverage on the day after the celebration was a first-person account, which was republished widely, of the horrendous traffic that Hanoi experienced: Lê Anh Tuấn, "Kinh hoàng một đêm kẹt cứng ở Mỹ Đình" [Frightened one night, caught in Mỹ Đình], *Dân Việt* [The Vietnamese People], October 11, 2010, <http://danviet.vn/thoi-su/kinh-hoang-mot-dem-ket-cung-o-my-dinh/17157p1c24.htm>.

Leading up to the celebration, during 2009 and 2010, a shift had occurred in the language surrounding *ca trù* ensembles. They went from being *câu lạc bộ* (clubs) to *giáo phường* (patrilineal, imperial-era guilds). Established *ca trù* clubs, even if not comprised of families, even if not descended from guilds, began to take the designation *giáo phường*. Nobody used *câu lạc bộ* any longer. By saying, “We are a *giáo phường*,” groups gained legitimacy through association to the kingdom’s long history: They rebranded themselves within the civic imaginary surrounding the Hanoi celebration preparations. This was a rapid and widespread re-negotiation of the memory landscape of *ca trù* and Vietnam’s history, which directly affected perceptions of group identity and tapped into larger tropes of Vietnamese nationalism.

Around this time, I was surprised to find that *Quản lý văn hóa* (Cultural Manager) was a career track that culture scholars might pursue. Academia, political institutions, and tourism seemed intertwined. Efforts by institutions such as the Musicology Institute and the Ministry of Culture and Information—which later became the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism—to ingratiate traditional culture with global institutions such as UNESCO demonstrated a political and economic agenda that was bound to the tourism industry.<sup>389</sup> With economic growth as a central goal to maintain public support, culture-turned-commodity suffered in compromised authenticity and historical veracity. A poignant example is the stasis that *ca trù* has experienced since its re-emerged into public view.

In the first few months of my fieldwork (2009-2011), UNESCO declared this music an “Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding,” the same year that *quan họ* (northern folk singing) received intangible heritage status. The Musicology Institute and the

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<sup>389</sup> The full title of the Ministry changed in recent years from the “Ministry of Culture and Information” to the “Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism.” It could be said that the Ministry’s purpose is to create a face for the nation, a collective identity of Vietnam.

Ministry of Culture were the prominent institutions that promoted the music. The declaration, for all intents and purposes, had no influence on the art's vitality during my time in Vietnam, as few groups other than the Thái Hà studied the music enough to know the extant repertory. A system of local support for regular performance and pedagogy seemed not to have developed.

The Vietnamese government had decided in 2002 to attempt to promote *ca trù* through UNESCO. The main agencies responsible for implementing the proposed plans were the Musicology Institute of the Vietnam National Academy of Music and the Ministry of Culture. The nomination materials had promised tens of thousands of dollars for programs to restore historic sites, and to promote *ca trù* in schools and in its historically native provinces. Such programs have not been implemented, to my knowledge. This is confirmed by a recent newspaper article, which noted, “The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism should take some blame for not issuing any directives on preserving and protecting this national treasure.”<sup>390</sup>

In the nomination form Vietnam submitted to UNESCO for *ca trù*'s recognition, it was noted that folk artists were required, by a 2001 law, to preserve the cultural heritage: The repertory is perceived as public property that musicians are required by law to preserve. A video on *ca trù* that the Vietnamese Musicology Institute created in 2008 (with direction from the musicologist Trần Văn Khê) is available on UNESCO's website on *ca trù*.<sup>391</sup> The Thái Hà Ensemble is shown performing but not identified by name, illustrating further the problems of ownership. As “nameless folk musicians,” they are subsumed as symbols in an imagined national communion. If the group's identity is “nameless folk ensemble,” ownership of the music and the

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<sup>390</sup> See, for instance, Nguyen Trinh, “World status gives 'ca tru' no respect at home,” *Thanh Niên News* (August 8, 2013). <http://www.thanhniennews.com/index/pages/20130808-world-status-gives-ca-tru-no-respect-at-home.aspx> (accessed August 19, 2013).

<sup>391</sup> See: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/USL/00309> (accessed April 25, 2013).



potential monetary earnings from the music as a privately owned intellectual property are also denied them.

UNESCO's description of *ca trù* reflects the generalized perception of *ca trù* in Vietnam today, which, ostensibly, stems from the file that the Vietnamese government submitted to UNESCO for *ca tru*'s intangible heritage status:

“Folk artists transmit the music and poems that comprise Ca trù pieces by oral and technical transmission, formerly, within their family line, but now to any who wish to learn. Ongoing wars and insufficient awareness caused Ca trù to fall into disuse during the twentieth century. Although the artists have made great efforts to transmit the old repertoire to younger generations, Ca trù is still under threat due to the diminishing number and increasing age of practitioners.”<sup>392</sup>

People I met during fieldwork generally were impressed that I had even heard of *ca trù*. Most were shocked that I studied it. It was something that they believed they “ought to know about.” A few people expressed that the subject was irrelevant and that I should study something else, such as pop music. *Ca trù* scholars (not the musicians) were usually influenced by the ideological imprint of state involvement in the promotion of the music, and they usually tried to steer my research accordingly. One scholar, who had complete authority over renewing my research visa at the time, insisted that I spend more of my time with the “younger” generation.

Young people only experience this past through texts, media, and very rarely through oral accounts. The numbers of those who have direct memories of the early twentieth century are thinning, and my conversations about the past with them often ran aground quickly. The new generation generally recognizes “*ca trù*” as vaguely ceremonial, tied to traditional beliefs, rising out of the folk, and distantly related to the time of Confucian scholars, reflecting the manner in which the history is curated by state culture brokers.

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<sup>392</sup> UNESCO, “Ca tru singing,” <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/USL/00309> (accessed September 12, 2013).

State agendas, filtered through culture brokers, have influenced the way the music is perceived broadly in the public sphere. This is visible in the media as well as scholarly works and in the manner in which the music has been promoted to UNESCO and framed within state celebrations. In the memory battles in the cultural landscapes surrounding the music, musicians are denied their identity, and, instead, are represented as “nameless folk musicians.” In the next section, I contextualize these issues by examining cultural amnesia.

### *Cultural Amnesia and Patriotic Nostalgia*

In his article on *ca trù*, Norton discusses the novella *Chùa đàn*, which the famous author Nguyễn Tuân completed in 1946, after the August Revolution. The work gives portrayals of singing sessions in the imperial era, and Norton argues that the story pits *ca trù* against colonialism and evokes nostalgia for rural tradition. The remaking of *ca trù* in the present, he writes, is tied to disputes over public memory. In what Norton calls “patriotic nostalgia,” twentieth-century writers put the blame for the downfall of the music on colonials.<sup>393</sup> Patriotic nostalgia and widespread cultural amnesia go hand in hand. Relating this to Ricoeur’s thoughts on the memory battle of history writing, cultural amnesia and the attendant patriotic nostalgia are based within a “civic imaginary” that is built for the purpose of amnesty after conflict, and in this imaginary, the political sphere is constructed on a foundation of forgetting of the possibility of dissent.<sup>394</sup>

Nostalgia is important to the social milieu of *ca trù*. Elements of the music, imagined as appropriate to the aesthetic and ethic of “*ngày xưa*” (the ahistorical “former days”), have been,

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<sup>393</sup> Norton, “Singing the Past.”

<sup>394</sup> Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 454.

traditionally, maintained in the music's revival. Elements of "former days" are visible in staging, costuming, and other material aspects of performance, such as the sedge mat upon which performers sit, the traditional long tunics and headdresses that they wear, as well as the musical instruments themselves. The lute is a point of nationalist pride because it is "uniquely Vietnamese," which Trần Văn Khê notes in his 1960 article on the topic and about which many have since concurred.<sup>395</sup>

The idiophone that the singer Nguyễn Thúy Hòa of the Thái Hà uses provides another interesting case of an object of memory. As she made it herself, it symbolizes self-empowerment, strength, and ingenuity under difficult circumstances, qualities of Vietnamese femininity perceived as perennial. These were useful qualities to promote during wartimes, as the propaganda poster below illuminates.<sup>396</sup> The modes and poems from "former days" have little resonance with Vietnamese today, but are perceived as coming from an authentic Vietnamese past, and nationalist agendas are infused into their interpretations.

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<sup>395</sup> Trần Văn Khê, "Hát ả đào."

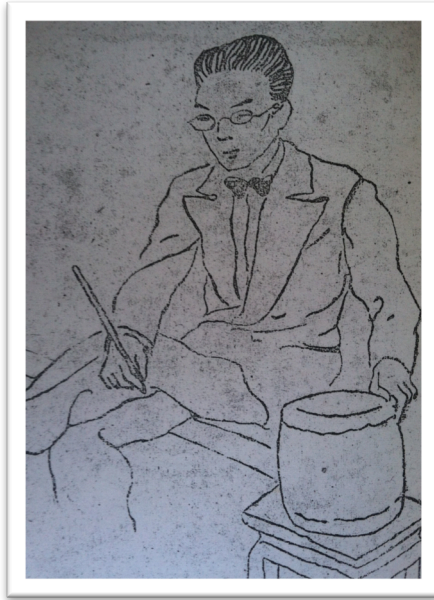
<sup>396</sup> Many such posters, available for sale at tourist shops, portray women holding an assault rifle in one hand and a baby in the other.



*Picture 10: The caption reads: “We will win, our enemies will lose!” The enemies, portrayed below the woman carrying an assault rifle, include the “colonialist French,” “the USA,” and “the expansionists,” meaning China. This also vividly represents the trope of the female warrior of the past and the quality of feminine strength in modern Vietnam.*

A film based on the novella *Chùa đàn* (Lute pagoda) in some ways contributed to the collective imaginary around *ca trù*. In 2002, a Vietnamese director named Việt Linh released a film adaptation called *Mê Thảo Thời Vang Bóng* (The Time in Me Thao Hamlet). The film and the novella portray a colonial-era *nhà châu hát* (singing session house) in the urban center of Hanoi, giving the impression that some were of better quality than others and reflecting a general understanding today. As in writings from the 1920s and since the 1980s, the music is portrayed as having fallen prey to social and economic currents. In some houses, though, virtuous singers still created elegant melodies for noble guests, as in olden times.

In the film, the main character is a visitor to the city, who is brought to a refined singing session. He is a mandarin in the western dress of a white suit. He sits at the same physical level as the singer and lute player, who sit on an elegantly carved daybed. The mandarin is reminiscent of the patron portrayed on the cover of the 1933 manual for praise drum playing (below).



Picture 11: The cover of the 1933 manual *Học đánh châu* (*Learning the praise drum*).

In the past, the patron sat on a daybed and the musicians below on the floor, an arrangement reflecting social class. The film depiction symbolically elevates the musicians, at the same level as the patron, raised in social status to exalted bearers of Vietnamese tradition, whose musical property, like land in modern Vietnamese law, belongs to everybody and also to nobody: “*The people*” own the homeland, but *actual people* must buy long-term leases from the government.

The singing session begins and ensues, with the mandarin playing the drum, until a wealthy Vietnamese drunk interrupts. He stumbles in, also wearing a white suit, representing the colonial-era playboy and opportunistic collaborationist. The drunk is looking for a woman’s company and makes advances on the songstress. The lute player kindly asks the drunk to leave if he seeks a *đào rượu* (“wine courtesan”). This is significant, as it relies on and embraces the historical distinction between “wine” courtesans and “singing” courtesans, which was nostalgically created in writings from the 1920s and 1930s as well as in recent writings (as I

discussed in previous chapters). The drunk pulls out a revolver and the lute player rushes to wrestle the drunk to the ground. A shot is fired and the drunk is killed. The singer's virtue is violently defended, which sets in motion the drama of the remainder of the film.

Revising the history, the performing practice, and the significance of *ca trù* has been a battle over competing memory in the civic imaginary of post-war Vietnam. The songstress's tainted reputation left a valuable cultural heritage teetering on the edge of extinction. This was part of a larger struggle over representations of Vietnamese women in general as well as representations of the historical place of Confucianism vis-à-vis the roles of men and women in society.

The historian Hue-Tam Ho Tai writes about public images of women available for remembrance in Vietnam today. Her description highlights difficult cultural landscapes for women in the pursuit of global economic integration. Memory is socially constructed in this view, and these are publicly visible debates of the portrayal of women.

Anyone who has ridden from the Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City airports understands the following excerpt well.

“Billboards beckon foreign investors and tourists with images of a friendly, peaceful country in which local tradition combines harmoniously with the global economy. Popular magazines, meanwhile, peddle a vision of even younger womanhood enmeshed in a consumer culture that cannibalizes war memorabilia in the quest for throwaway chic.”<sup>397</sup>

Such billboards portray women in traditional dress selling any number of products, and a profusion of fashion magazines accomplishes the same. Along the lines of Hue-Tam Ho Tai's study, I began thinking in fieldwork about ideals of femininity that were visible in modern

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<sup>397</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Faces of Remembrance and Forgetting,” in *Country of memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, 167-68.

Vietnam. Different types are publicly available in token examples in everything from romantic artistic renditions of the countryside girl in the rice field to kitsch statuettes of women wearing long tunics (see below) and carrying various product that are for sale in the ubiquitous tourist shops.



*Picture 12: On the left is an example of a kitsch statuette of a Vietnamese woman carrying products through the urban landscape; to the right, an actual example.*

I would add the virtuous songstress to the category of women in “local tradition.” The songstress has become a token bearer of imagined pasts, carrier of the local traditions as they try to blend harmoniously with the global economic system. The public image of the songstress is very often the picture of the main singer of today’s Thăng Long Guild, Phạm Thị Huệ. She is portrayed as playing the *đàn đáy* (three-stringed lute), which was traditionally played by men. Performing the *đàn đáy* is an act of feminist and egalitarian or socialist defiance of traditional gender hierarchies. The singer for the Thái Hà, Nguyễn Thúy Hòa, provides another image of the songstress, more traditional because she does not play the *đàn đáy* and instead plays the *phách*. In both cases, they are portrayed as virtuous and reserved. They wear traditional dress, which speaks to long-standing Vietnamese tradition and collectively held notions of feminine beauty.



*Picture 13: Left: Phạm Thị Huệ of the Thăng Long plays the đàn đáy. Right: Nguyễn Thúy Hòa of the Thái Hà plays the phách. These images are taken from the aforementioned text, *Ca trù trong lịch sử và hiện tại* (*Ca tru in history and modernity*).*

Reflecting the virtuous image of the songstress, terminology today shows distance from negative reputations of the past. After reading about the eroticism of courtesan practices in the imperial period, I was surprised to hear members of the Thái Hà refer to their daughters, sisters, and nieces as “songstresses” or “courtesans.” The reformed ideal image of the songstress had been tailored to current society. To consider one’s daughter, mother, or grandmother within this tradition, one would have to reinvent the way one conceived of it. Negative associations have long since dissolved. This was perhaps the fundamental reason for reframing the music’s past.

The consolidation of terminology describing the many pasts of *ca trù* represents another revisionism and reinvention of the genre. The categories for varied histories, singing in the ancestor worship house, for the powerful, in the royal palace, and in the singing house, provide neat divisions for historians today. In terms of the history of the songstress in Vietnam, the experience of a female singer in the countryside would have been different from the singer in the urban sphere or the one performing for the emperor in Huế. *Ca trù* is an image of modern



invention that incorporates all these pasts under one umbrella. This may be the most fundamental aspect of the cultural amnesia surrounding the genre.

An overseas Vietnamese man brought this into full relief when I introduced him to my research project. He had not lived in Vietnam since the 1970s, and had never even heard of “*ca trù*.” He immediately recognized, however, the designation of “*hát ả đào*,” vaguely identifying it as a seedy type of music from a previous generation. He had presumed it was an extinct tradition. Another overseas Vietnamese man in his fifties, who had lived in the US since the 1980s, also referred to it as *hát ả đào*. On finding out about my project, the first thing he mentioned was that “*ả đào*” (courtesans) in the early twentieth century were, in fact, prostitutes who worked in opium dens which, in his view, was an unfortunate development in this history. During my time in Vietnam, this never happened. Nobody ever freely discussed these aspects of the music’s past. These two understandings date to before the revival and revisionism of the 1980s. This points to the influence of, or in this case the lack thereof, revisionist discourse on memory. These men, living overseas since the music’s revival, were not subjected to the din of revisionist discourse surrounding songstress traditions.

These examples also speak to the underlying issue of power relations in the production of historical narratives and the resultant imprint on collective memory. Ricoeur writes that use and abuse of memory occur because of the fundamental problem of memory and historical texts, that they represent something no longer present.<sup>398</sup> In the collective amnesia that presupposed the moniker change to “*ca trù*,” have historical narratives been excluded? And by what agents or for what purposes? State institutions today create historical narratives and disregard cultural

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<sup>398</sup> Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*.

minorities, including performers today as well as historical actors such as courtesans of the imperial period.

“*Ca trù*” in collective memory is a type of singing that is unencumbered by the negative history of the last century and a half, when courtesans were subject to their patriarchal patrons’ whims; ambiguous eroticism imbued the culture and poetics of salon-style performances; the music was performed in seedy districts of explicit prostitution; and polite society shunned the music. In effect, the unpleasantness of the imperial, colonial, and war periods was excised. What is left is the “*ca trù*” visible on television and in print media today: A virtuous singer sits between a learned-looking elderly man, who plays the participant drum, and a serious-minded younger man, who improvises on the lute (see image below). Behind them often are the accoutrements of ancestor worship: Joss sticks and fruit offerings on ancestor altars. The scene looks ancient, elegant, and important.



Picture 14: A clip from the weekend edition of the paper *Quan đội nhân dân*, showing Mrs. Bạch Vân’s club performing. The headline reads, “*Ca trù Việt Nam ‘needs urgent protection.’*”<sup>399</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> Xuân Hà, “*Ca trù Việt Nam: cần được bảo vệ khẩn cấp,*” *Quan đội nhân dân*, June 22, 2008.

Society moved on from associating the music with the ambiguity surrounding playboys who held the drum in the *phố cô đầu* (songstress districts)<sup>400</sup> and the *cô đầu* who worked there, and the economic, social, and musical relationships between the players and audience are drastically different today. Although history is usually written in texts, history is also projected into collective memory through the staging of performances. I found that often musicians would discuss performances, behaviors, and customs wherein recalling or perhaps imagining the past defined the practices in the present. History was written through the selection, performance, and interpretation of musical practices.

State culture brokers infuse the public sphere with ideas of the past of *ca trù*, and this has been tied to larger battles over public representations of the past. These representations serve to buttress nationalist identities in the present. Such representations of the past come in the form of patriotic nostalgia and embrace widespread collective amnesia. The songstress is recast in the trope of historically situated feminine strength and virtue, the two being mutually supportive.

I explore these ideas further in the next section, with further focus on the artists in society, and address problems of musical ownership in modern society and of portrayals of the artists themselves as guardians of tradition that the nation owns but individuals cannot.

### ***Nghệ Nhân (Art People) in Modern Society***

Honoring predecessors in *ca trù* music is a long-standing practice in the imperial-era rite called *hát thờ tổ* (singing to pray to the founders of the profession). This is not performed through rites of worship any longer, to my knowledge, but, in a sense, such a ritual is performed

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<sup>400</sup> *Phố cô đầu* (songstress district) was synonymous with *làng chơi* (red-light district), just as *cô đầu* could mean courtesan, songstress, or prostitute.

in each musical performance. Performers recall predecessors through musical practice, and remembrance through performance becomes a method of worship. This is analogous to praying to revered ancestors, a ubiquitous practice in Vietnam. The music thus becomes an expression of identity that is contingent on a perceived continuity with remembered precursors. Văn Mùi said that one main reason he kept performing *ca trù* was that his father had supported him with music. In a sense, he was repaying this debt.

The family of the Thái Hà inherited their tradition from the class of professional musicians in the imperial era; going back generations, they have a history of scholars in the family as well. Both aspects of the past are points of pride.<sup>401</sup> Traditional musicians and artists today, in cases where they are afforded their identity, are esteemed. This respect can be profound, and the class of artists is now known as *nghệ nhân* (art people).

*Nghệ nhân* usually have no affiliation with institutions such as universities. Often they have no formal training, as defined by these types of institutions. They are usually involved in traditional art or music that they preserved, revitalized, and reformed since the 1980s. They “carry the torch”<sup>402</sup> of Vietnamese traditions—tokens of Vietnamese national identity, and the carriers of these tokens often receive certificates and honorific titles from the government, such as the *People’s Artist* Quách Thị Hồ. Society relinquishes the responsibility of preserving tradition and hands over the concomitant cultural capital involved in doing so. In this period of rapid economic development, these “art people” are guardians of culture.

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<sup>401</sup> Nguyễn Xuân Diện, *Lịch sử nghệ thuật*. The author of this book also mentioned this long history of the family at his lecture that preceded the Thái Hà Ensemble’s performance at L’Espace as well.

<sup>402</sup> Recent news about the young singer Kiều Anh actually translates this metaphor into Vietnamese.

There are many disparate ideations about culture, from the spheres of collective to individual and from culture broker to the “art people.” The concept in Vietnamese of *văn hóa* (culture) is applied widely, as in English. The concept is seen as a category of material or material production, knowledge, practice, art, or way of being. It is something that is managed, preserved, and documented by scholars and culture brokers of the state. But culture is lived and breathed by the *nghệ nhân*. These are, however, two distinct realms. To culture brokers of the state, culture is not an emergent social process that changes, but is something about which to create reports and registers, in order to hand these up the bureaucratic food chain and to create a paper trail for culture. Actual culture, at the local level, as *nghệ nhân* live and embody it, is an emergent social process and not a static category, even if the government culture brokers and many people view it in this way.

The general trend toward renovating old forms of culture has transpired alongside the liberalization of the economy since the 1980s.<sup>403</sup> Print and televised journalism frequently cover traditions that were on the verge of disappearing sixty years ago, but were pulled from the brink by a few devotees, these art people. *Ca trù* artists are portrayed in the media as maintaining, guarding, or protecting the music. The idea of maintaining culture is popular in the media, where terminologies such as “*nghệ thuật dân gian*” (folk art), “*âm nhạc dân gian*” (folk music), and “*âm nhạc truyền thống*” (traditional music) abound. This cognitive framework has a concretizing effect on culture in the collective sphere. The specialists of Vietnamese culture, art people, are perceived as maintaining tradition in the way that a museum maintains a curated collection or a

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<sup>403</sup> Arguably, this may have begun in the early twentieth century, when books and manuals began to be published to inform Romanized Vietnamese readers of older literary traditions.

library maintains the discourse of humanity. It could be that art people are conceived of by society as culture curators.

A byproduct of *ca trù*'s treatment in today's popular culture is that the music has lost its status as a performance practice that an individual can acquire or own. Given the esteem and media exposure afforded to the class who might benefit economically from owning the "culture," this is ironic. This is also unexpected because *ca trù* as a commodity has antecedents dating to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the rights to perform songs were commodified and sold by guilds. The dominant idea that *ca trù* is "folk property" is analogous to land law in Vietnam: The homeland belongs to the people, but, in practice, nobody can own land.

Recording technology compounds the issue of ownership for musicians, as people can record repertory inexpensively from live performance, and thereby can reproduce a facsimile for economic gain and social status. Performing *ca trù* in public makes the repertoire public domain in this sense, and musicians cannot contend that they own performing practices and arrangements of songs, as there is no feasible legal infrastructure to support such an argument.<sup>404</sup>

The idea of *owning* music is rooted, of course, in the view that music is a product or commodity. Today, this stems from presuppositions of the world in which we live, where things have value if you can sell them (a band has not made it unless they have recorded; a composer's work is a score). In this framework, *ca trù* could be considered a commodity, as performers are paid to perform, record, and teach. Even if performing *ca trù* gives a group cultural capital, few

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<sup>404</sup> Vietnam is a party to the Berne Convention (an international treaty on enforcing copyrighted works), but enforcement of intellectual property protection in Vietnam is very difficult. I am indebted to my wife, Alyssa Worsham, who worked as an attorney in this area at Baker and McKenzie's Hanoi office during my fieldwork period, for this and many other observations in the legal realm.

earn a living from *ca trù*. Members of the Thái Hà and the guild in Lỗ Khê village<sup>405</sup> have other sources of income. The Thăng Long group, in the opinion of some, exist to make money in the tourism industry, which is considered a lowly use of this cultural heritage.<sup>406</sup>

For the Thái Hà, my distilled understanding is that they perceived *ca trù* as having an inherent value regardless of financial matters because it is an old family tradition, because it demonstrates old ways of thinking about music and poetry from past ages, and because it connects the present generation with past ones. This separates the culture from the economic realm; that is to say, the economics of performing *ca trù* are not necessarily important to these performers. Watching the seriousness with which Văn Khuê taught his daughter Thu Thảo reminded me of how important the music, and passing the music on to the next generation, was to his family. This further points to the idea that the performance of *ca trù* itself is a kind of analogue to ancestor worship; remembering predecessors and being remembered are fundamental aspects of life in a nation that worships its ancestors.

Another central reason the Thái Hà continues to perform and has continued so long without apparent economic gain, is that the process of creating the music—the process encompassing the physical, psychological, and social elements that go into playing instruments, singing, and listening—is deeply gratifying. As we focus on histories, social milieu, musical style, and so forth, this is a constituent part of making music that we sometimes miss in music scholarship. In the many manners in which music can be categorized, viewing it as a process or a pleasurable activity instead of just a product is useful for explaining the trajectories of music that

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<sup>405</sup> Anisensel, “Canter le ca trù au village.”

<sup>406</sup> They also provide performing work for elderly musicians on a regular basis, which could be viewed as a positive result.

survives drastic social change. But viewing *ca trù* tradition as a commodity, in terms of intellectual property protection, could also have its use.

In terms of this genre and its position in society, economic impetus and legal protection of intellectual property might help the music begin to thrive. It could incentivize performance for groups concerned with knock-off performances. The contrary argument could be made that limiting access to the repertory through producing oppressive legal structures surrounding intellectual property would only decrease the viability of the music by stifling its dissemination. Other impetus to perform, other than economic, certainly exists, such as preserving family heritage, remembering the past, and guaranteeing continuity with the future; music as a category of social life and as a pleasurable process is another important feature of *ca trù* for the “art people.”

In the next section, the world of the musicians themselves is explored further with a focus on the modern songstress tradition as a platform from which to challenge historically situated stereotypes and gendered power structures.

### ***Resisting State Hegemony and Historical Chauvinism in Song***

*Ca trù* is a living tradition in the hands and minds of *nghệ nhân*, and not a concretized object in the museum of Vietnamese culture curated by state brokers. Disparity exists between state representations and the *nghệ nhân*'s conception of the music as a living practice. In this living practice, the songstress also has agency and power in defining her performance. Even while acting out roles from previous periods, singing poems that represent a history of chauvinism, and embodying historically gendered conceptions about performing practices from



previous periods, the songstress still ultimately grasps the authority to decide what *ca trù* is, what it means, and how it sounds.

Elements of *ca trù* music today reflect the social classes and the gendered hierarchies of imperial-era society. As introduced in Chapter Two, Vietnam is essentially patriarchal and connected to East Asia through the heritage of Confucianism. The status of female agency has been a point of contention among scholars of this history. This has centered on a tradition of scholarship begun in the mid-twentieth century, in which authors traced Vietnamese history dating back to a matrilineal era, through the patriarchy of Confucianism and, finally, culminating in socialist egalitarianism. The question of bilateral succession patterns in imperial Vietnam has become a primary point of contention. A central point of inquiry has been whether or not Vietnamese women historically enjoyed more autonomy than their counterparts in the rest of East Asia. The historian Nhung Tuyet Tran has challenged the old thesis that Vietnamese women did historically.<sup>407</sup>

It could be argued that women have a great deal of autonomy and power in social and economic spheres of modern Vietnam, and, just as the songstress is the *chủ huy* (conductor) of the *ca trù* ensemble, women are the *chủ huy* of home life. The songstress, even if at the periphery of patriarchal society, may always have had this agency in the economy of the performance. The male drum player is a critical part of the ensemble in social and historical terms, but he still is *subject* to the performance of the female singer. His comments on the songstress' performance, in imperial society, were not possible without training from the singer and her guild. Today, the relationship is different, as in the case of the Thái Hà group, where the drum player, Văn Mũi, is

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<sup>407</sup> Nhung Tuyet Tran, "Gender, Property, and the "Autonomy Thesis" in Southeast Asia."

the father of the singer and lute players. Yet I would argue his participation is still dominated by feminine musical agency.

In addition, the fundamental material, poetic, and sonic aspects of the music represent gendered worldviews and historically rooted gender hierarchies. In studies of aesthetics and gender, gendered concepts are those that have been imbued with meanings in terms of gender—often, relationships of power—which frequently develop in a complex hierarchical counterpoint as relationships change through history.<sup>408</sup> In Vietnam, the *âm-dương* (yin-yang) conception of the world divides the universe conceptually between *âm* as feminine and *dương* as masculine. In the context of *ca trù*, Văn Khuê noted that the solid beater of the *phách* was *dương* while the one that was made of two pieces was *âm*. Their combination in performance created a totality of sound, or *âm dương*.

This gendered worldview is applied to the creation and interpretation of poetry. In *câu đối* (paired sentences), two lines are paired in opposing word tone scheme and provide contrasting content. When I inquired about this, Thúy Hòa listed a string of examples including *sông* and *núi* (river and mountain), *trời* and *đất* (sky and earth), *ăn* and *uống* (eat and drink), *sống* and *chết* (life and death). In the paired lines of the poem called “Bathing at Đồ Sơn,” which Nguyễn Thị Chúc performs, the relationship of a virtuous woman and a poet is expressed through the metaphor of an ocean and the waves upon it:

*Bể ái mênh mang lòng thực nữ      Sea of passion vast the heart of a virtuous woman*  
*Sóng tình chan chứa dọc làng thơ      Waves of love overflowing along the poet's world<sup>409</sup>*

Notions of feminine beauty also are imbued in poetic allusions that reflect gendered metaphors of previous eras, metaphors which reflect historical chauvinism. “*Tơ liễu*” (willow) is

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<sup>408</sup> Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Gender and aesthetics: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2004).

<sup>409</sup> Translated by Bretton Dimick.

used in the poem “Đào Hồng” to describe the shape of a young woman coming of age. In *ca trù* poetry, *búp hoa* (flower bud) also is used to describe an adolescent girl. As gendered allusions from previous eras, these terms point to the somewhat bawdy side of the poetic tradition and the men who participated in it, and are also suggestive that coming of age has been redefined since the imperial era. These pasts, however, are subsumed in the songstress’s performance.

Thúy Hòa told me that *đạo đức* (ethics and morals) of previous eras which, indeed, grew from gendered hierarchies of Confucian thought and imperial-era custom, were also present in performance practices. Performers act out ethical behavior within gendered relationships of the past: Singers should not look audience members in the eye, but instead should look ahead and slightly down at the ground, in order not to arouse immoral thoughts or flirtatious connection with the patrons. In this view, the virtue of a young woman was one aspect the poet sought and enjoyed in the singing session. This relationship is acted out in performance today.

Another example involves the technique of singing. Opening one’s mouth too wide in singing was considered vulgar—which results in a nasal timbre, as the declamation is pushed through the throat and into the nasal cavity, comparable to the nasalization in *sean nós* (old-way) Irish singing. Gendered practice also finds its way into the drummer’s practice of not playing the loud head of the drum while the singer enunciates semantic syllables, meaning that the male scholar should not interrupt the woman singing. The drum’s quality of sound represents the quality of character of the man playing it, a notion packed with meaning in terms of the imperial-era practices and customs surrounding courtesan culture and the gender hierarchies therein.

The history of the singing as a courtesan’s art is an explicit locus of gendered power relations, and these gendered power relations from the past are implicit in performing practices of the present. The patriarchal hierarchy of imperial society still exists in many ways, although

the songstress and her history have been reinvented to suit the modern world. The inherent relation between gendered roles in *ca trù* performance, in terms of music, is that the songstress wields power in the musical realization of texts. This is analogous to the feminism of modern Vietnam that emerged in and has grown since the early twentieth century.

Speaking in such generalities about a history as multifaceted as *ca trù*'s may seem problematic, because the phrase *ca trù* indicates many disparate historical periods through which this music passed, each period with variegated and divergent experiences based in region, class, and "cultural spaces," as Vietnamese historians have written. The way in which this history of *ngày xưa* (the ahistorical former days) is recalled and discussed as "*ca trù*" flattens these categories and multifarious planes of history, geography, and social experience. Regardless of what "actually happened," this is often how the past takes shape in recollection today.

As Thúy Hòa described, the drum player in salon-style performances for elite consumption controlled little musically. In this *ngày xưa* (former days), even if the drum player wrote the poetry and economically supported the performance, he ultimately gave control of the lyrics over to a female singer. Although he had the praise drum and could comment on her declamation, she made every decision about the declamation, and she and her family taught him music appreciation. During performance, social hierarchies were momentarily suspended. This points to the notion of liminality, which Victor Turner discusses in the context of ritual practice.<sup>410</sup> The musical experience thus was a medium through which the social hierarchy of patron and songstress was disregarded in the moment of performance. This resulted in unions of marriage, in fact, between patron and songstress over the course of Vietnamese history. Laws

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<sup>410</sup> See Victor Turner, *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure* (Cornell University Press, 1977).

from the Lê period address this topic, and such a union was in effect a conduit for a woman of low standing to ascend in social class within the sociocultural environment of imperial Vietnam.<sup>411</sup>

In the past and today, only through the songstress' aesthetic decisions does song emerge. Văn Mùì noted that, in the past, patrons hired the guild to teach them the conventions of the music in order to participate through the drum. Văn Mùì asserted, the music was for the wealthy. But the drum player's claim to agency was in his knowledge of poetry, and his prowess and identity in performance was based on his knowledge of language, not music. Văn Mùì noted that the clear and round sound of the drum called the performers to attention, and perhaps this is true for his family. Viewed musically, the singer's *phách* hails the drum player into correct performance. He becomes subjugated in the performance as a participant and not a leader.<sup>412</sup>

I borrow the idea of hail from Louis Althusser's discussion of ideology, the state, and individuals. Individuals are hailed by ideology to become subjects, in that they are subjugated by the state. Althusser describes the process in simpler terms, as when an individual is hailed by somebody yelling, "Hey, you!" Individuals in this case instinctively recognize they are the ones being hailed, turn to respond, and thereby become the *subjects* of the hailing. This conception lends itself to the musical negotiation of gendered power relations between the female singer's *phách* and the male participant's drum, as the singer subjugates the drum player (as well as lute player) with the *phách*. Thus, this object and its sound are important. The songstress's decisions regarding tempo and melodic realization of poetic text command the entire performance, hailing the drum player and lutist into *her* performance. The drum player holds the important role

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<sup>411</sup> Đỗ Bằng Đoàn, Đỗ Trọng Huề, *Việt Nam ca từ biên khảo*.

<sup>412</sup> See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (1968)," in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Blackwell Publishing, 1998).

socially, and he was dominant in patriarchal imperial society, but his role in terms of music is minor, as discussed in Chapter Five. He follows according to the rhythmic patterns established by the *phách*, and the male accompanist on the lute also follows the *phách*.

The singer wields the authority, and she may always have. In history, courtesan singing would have been a conduit for a woman of low standing to ascend social class and become the wife and perhaps also the mother of a scholar-bureaucrat in the imperial administration. In the early twentieth century, the salon-style performance was, arguably, a location for newfound female agency within the periphery of patriarchal subjugation. Today, although the singer performs within the material, poetic, performative, and sonic gendered conceptions that she inherits within this tradition, she still has the control in “hailing” both the male drummer and male lutist in performance and also in subjugating the poetry of men from former ages to *her* melody.

In the remainder of this chapter, I turn to a discussion of a specific singer of the younger generation who is creating anew what it means to be a songstress.

### *A New Generation of Songstresses*

Nguyễn Kiều Anh, a prominent member of the new generation in the music’s rebirth, has been portrayed in a series of recent talent shows. In 2012, the young singer from the Thái Hà Ensemble performed on *Vietnam’s Got Talent* with her uncle, Văn Khuê. This reinvented in the public sphere what it meant to be a songstress and created space for innovation and change. In addition to issues discussed above, regarding intellectual property, widespread conceptions of the music, and problems of owning “folk” property, innovation and change have been slow because

many performers and their advocates have focused on preserving a singular and imagined tradition, keeping the repertory static, even while the practices are largely improvisatory.

Televised performances on this show by Kiêu Anh included the typical arrangement of *ca trù*: Lute player, singer, and drum player sitting on a sedge mat on the floor in traditional dress, with several microphones arranged around them to amplify the relatively quiet music. In a later performance, she wore modern clothing, as did her uncle Văn Khuê—not the long silk tunics they usually wear. The two sat in chairs in front of microphones, and she set her *phách* on her lap instead of on a sedge mat. In the part of the performance in which lutist Văn Khuê had a free solo section, the cameras cut to backstage, where Kiêu Anh’s father was waiting; the production thereby ignored the male lutist’s center-stage moment of heightened improvisatory expression. Because nobody held the praise drum, the participatory element was not represented: The praise drum was replaced by a new audience of three celebrity judges, a studio audience of mostly young Vietnamese, and a nation of television viewers. The production of the show, for whatever reason, meant that many elements of tradition were left aside, and the focus became Kiêu Anh, the modern *đào nương* (songstress)-as-diva.

When she finished singing, the judges asked why she had chosen to perform this music. She said that while she enjoyed other music, including “*nhạc pop, R&B, và nhạc jazz,*” and had studied other traditional music, *ca trù* had been in her family for generations. The judges gave her high marks and complemented both her and her uncle for their abilities. “*Anh ấy đánh đàn rất hay*” (he plays the lute very well), one said.<sup>413</sup> The judges speculated that this was a step in the right direction of developing a broader audience for the music, as the performance would

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<sup>413</sup> *Đánh* means fight and *đàn* means stringed instrument, which is a wonderful way of conceiving of playing an instrument.

inspire young people to explore the world of traditional Vietnamese music. In this case, the culture broker was Kiều Anh herself, though it was mediated by a television show. But through this mediation she attracted a wider audience.

In a more recent performance on the same talent show, Kiều Anh performed a song categorized with the English-language phrase “world music,” incorporating some of her *ca trù* vocal technique, such as *nảy hát* (“blossom singing,” the distinctive *ca trù* vibrato) into the performance. She danced, sang, played the *đàn tranh* (zither), and wore fashionable clothes, hairstyle, and makeup. At one point, she broke into singing in English, demonstrating a cosmopolitan aspect to her reinvention of the songstress image.

Below are two images of Kiều Anh, the first from when she was in her early teens, in traditional dress. To the right she is portrayed performing on the talent show more recently. The contrast is certainly striking.



*Picture 15: Kiều Anh as a young songstress in traditional dress on the left and as a rising pop star diva on the right.*

In recent correspondence with her aunt, Nguyễn Thúy Hòa, in response to my query about Kiều Anh’s involvement with the talent show, Thúy Hòa wrote:



“Kiều Anh has combined *ca trù* with other kinds of folk music to create a new music and introduce it to a younger audience, and they like it. In combining two streams of music, she has made a true traditional music [*âm nhạc truyền thống*] and she has been very open to receiving the opinions of our family and close family friends. The family is very happy and is supportive of Kiều Anh and thinks that she has given *ca trù* a new color and a new life.”<sup>414</sup>

The Thái Hà offer support to this young singer as she, in utilizing the tools of her family tradition in new contexts, embarks on a nationally televised singing career. It is clear the music for them, ultimately, is a family affair. It is also clear that Kiều Anh’s reinvention of what it means to be a songstress in modern Vietnam is a work in progress.

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<sup>414</sup> Nguyễn Thúy Hòa, personal communication, 2013. Translated by Bretton Dimick.

## Conclusion

Examining the music and history of *ca trù*, I have sought to explore the larger questions of why we write history and why we perform music. History as a written discourse is always doing some kind of work in representing the past—often the past is reorganized to support an agenda of the present. In the context of the discourse and music in the landscape of *ca trù*'s revival over the last thirty years, undergirding nationalism and promoting national unity has been one objective. As a symbolic force in nationalist discourse, the music has reflected an imagined history, as nationalism itself is an imagined communion. Longevity and continuity in this case are tantamount to authenticity in culture. Scholars write that this is “*âm nhạc dân gian*” (folk music), although its precursors could as easily be framed as “village festival music” and “Vietnamese art song.” The dominant political ideology has come to influence the music history, and state culture brokers have projected in discursive constructions an image of folklorized *ca trù*.

This has served to ignore generally the period in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the semiotic frame and performance context shifted around courtesan practices in Vietnam. In the move of the courtesan singer from the salon-style performance for elite consumption to the more ubiquitous urban singing house, it is difficult to tell if the eroticisms surrounding courtesan singing fundamentally changed or not; however, widespread changes in perception certainly ensued. Authors of the time nostalgically recalled the elegant and refined

practices of previous epochs. The revisionism in the music's revival, after the 1980s, could be traced to this nostalgia of moralistic authors in the early twentieth century, who sought to “restore” elegance to the social milieu of the courtesan. Many in the early twentieth century thought it was the fault of the patron, and that the character of the patron had declined. He had failed in his responsibility to “cultivate the garden” of courtesan singers.

Vietnamese periodization of *ca trù* history shows decline after Hồ Chí Minh declared independence from the French, following the “August Revolution” of 1945. This periodization, while attractive, may not be accurate in terms of singing houses, as singing sessions it seems continued into the early 1950s. In addition, while reform of the 1950s and war thereafter meant the music was no longer publicly available in singing houses, performances continued in private.

The music was cast out of public society in the mid-twentieth century, and the nation emerged a unified communist state after decades of war. In the 1980s, the state created a market economy. In the memory battles entailed in establishing amnesty and a unified Vietnam, the semiotic frame surrounding *ca trù* shifted again, as direct memory of the imperial period faded and was replaced by the reconstruction through texts of the historical past. This has been a multifaceted process, and has involved state culture brokers, propaganda, and mass media.

Viewed through a broad lens, the reinvention of the music and its history in the public sphere affects how the music is treated and perceived in society. In some instances, the past has also been reframed through musical performing practices. Political ideology and public perception, however, do not dominate the music as a performing practice. Individual perceptions of the music and its history are varied, and competing memories, which are often excluded from the hegemonic state-filtered public discourse, are maintained in private. This recalls the pithy phrase from imperial Vietnam: “*Phép vua thua lệ làng*” (the king's rule stops at the village gate),

a saying that indicates the disparity of law and practice, or nation-state and individual. The village gate in modernity could be conceived of as one's front door.

In the music as a social practice of individual musicians, remembering and embodying the tradition and musical style of one's precursors provides a format for the social experience of recalling the past and honoring it. It also provides a setting to express a family identity in the present and to guarantee continuity with the future. In this expression of a family identity, the *đào nương* (songstress) finds a place to constantly reinvent her tradition. The reinvention of her tradition has become an act of feminist resistance against historically rooted patriarchal hierarchies, common stereotypes, and the historical subjugation of the courtesan singer class, as she has the authority in the forging of words from previous eras into melodies of her own.

As state culture brokers have constructed discourse and memory battles have ensued in the broad cultural landscape, in a separate sphere the musicians have continued to practice their traditions, remembering the past and honoring their predecessors. Their orientation to music is for the process, not the product, and their practices constitute a part of social life rather than economic life, even if legal protection for their intellectual property could be of use. In collective ideations of Vietnamese culture, the music is static, a museum piece, but among these *nghệ nhân* (art people), the music is a living tradition, something through which they can forge their identities and commune with one another musically. I will conclude this dissertation by describing a lesson with the Thái Hà Ensemble in order both to illustrate this last point and to leave the reader with this ensemble's view of the music.

### ***Afterword: An Afternoon with the Thái Hà***

Vietnamese language involves a pronoun system that revolves around family relations. If you hail a male motorbike taxi driver on the corner, he immediately becomes your brother.

Conversing with the patriarch of the Thái Hà Ensemble, Nguyễn Văn Mũi, I referred to him as *ông* (grandfather). Văn Khuê was *anh* (older brother), and Thúy Hòa was *chị* (older sister). At *ông* Mũi's home, one afternoon in January, we had a group lesson that involved all parts of the ensemble. We sat, as usual, on a sedge mat over a concrete and tile floor.

The sedge mat was important to the performing practice, as were sweat and effort. Thúy Hòa had observed that playing the *phách* at first was hurtful to the tops of your knuckles: To use the beaters effectively, you had to strike your knuckles on the rough surface of the mat, which toughened them over time. Similarly, Văn Khuê had noted that his body would be very tired after a good performance. The breathing technique of the singer they had both compared to the fullness of yogic breathing (the kind that students of yoga learn is called *ujjayi* breath). It was a physically demanding performance practice, and this was a point of pride.

That day in January, Văn Mũi's wife, whom I referred to as *bà* (grandmother), served us bitter green tea in the small, green porcelain cups that are ubiquitous in Vietnamese homes. We sat in their modest home's main living area next to their ancestor worship altar on which rested pictures of deceased family members. Various traditional instruments hung on the wall. An oil painting hung above a heavy wooden table, which offered seating to guests with less flexible hips. The painting represented the colonial-era singing house.

Thúy Hòa had been in recent weeks showing me percussion and vocal techniques, and I had begun to learn the drum part with her father. As Văn Khuê had repeatedly said in previous lessons, the *phách* was the conductor. It tied the parts together. Learning how to sing had removed the shroud of mystery surrounding the *phách*; they had said all along, "Listen to the *phách*," but did not explain what to listen for. Listening for the downbeat alone did not suffice.

Thúy Hòa was teaching a fellow student named Lý, whom I called *em* (little sister). Lý lived alone, which some consider even today unusual for an unmarried young woman. She had accelerated ahead of me in the process of learning our first song, and Lý and Thúy Hòa focused on learning two lines at a time while I worked on the drum forms with Văn Mũi, who simultaneously played the lute. But after a while he tired of playing and traded with me.

Trying to accompany *hát nói*, I became confused in the middle. The model performance that Văn Khuê taught did not quite fit with the way that Thúy Hoà was singing. Another younger brother named Tiến was present, listening and sitting next to another brother of theirs, Thắng, whose daughter is the singer named Kiều Anh. Thắng plays, but not with the proficiency of his brothers, and Tiến, a great player, does not play much because he runs a recording studio in a flat upstairs from his father's home.

Văn Mũi and Thúy Hòa asked Tiến to demonstrate the section I was confused about. Tiến said he had not played for some time but his fingers still remembered. He said he studied from age twelve and could not forget the music if he tried. He sat down and began to play in a way they later described as *tự do* (liberal or free), which did not help me understand any better how the model performance fit within the other parts. This phrase would later be necessary for me to understand the independent scholar Nguyễn Quảng Tuân when he said the early twentieth century was *tự do quá* (too free).

Tiến said after he finished playing that you have to abandon the models and to play according to feeling. But he said you always have to pay heed to the singer's rhythm, even in a liberal or free style. After demonstrating he was warmed up, and suggested they perform another song. They relaxed into the social rhythm of a family accustomed to impromptu performances.

Tiến played in a free style in the next song, almost so that it diminished his sister's declamation. But, as he said, he listened attentively to her rhythm, throughout watching the beaters of the *phách*, her knuckles striking concrete. In the end, it was Thúy Hòa's song, and he was creating a suitable space for her. Thúy Hòa told me in a lesson later that the music was better when family members played together because of their close emotional connection, because they could better understand one another's musical gestures and thoughts.

The Thái Hà's tradition, in a tightly knit family experience, reflects the tradition of the imperial-era musical guild. Music as social life is music as family life. As in moments that I had experienced next door at Văn Khuê's house when he had accompanied and taught his daughter, Thu Thảo, it was clear that the tradition was alive in their hands, minds, and voices, as a shared social and musical experience and as a way of communing with one another and their shared past. Representations of their ancestors were present in the form of photographs on their ancestor altar, but also were present in the musical practices that they had inherited. This seemed, in some sense, a microcosm of the music as a symbol for nationalism, the nation being an extended Vietnamese family. The Thái Hà's experience, however, was distant from the agendas of state culture brokers, the taxonomies of scholarly institutions that I would spend years after reading. Their social and musical experience was far from the Vietnam I had read about.

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