

# WATER PUPPETRY AND PEASANTS' LIFE IN VIETNAM



Nguyen Thi Thuy Linh<sup>1</sup>

## I. INTRODUCTION

Water puppetry in Vietnam has recently gained worldwide fame for its lively and unique reflection of agrarian life in wet-rice villages of North Vietnam. In the past few decades touring water puppetry troupes (namely Thang Long Troupe in Hanoi) have contributed to an increased general knowledge of water puppetry. This increased knowledge is reflected, and best-stated, in its entry in Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia, as follows:

Múa rối nước is Vietnamese water puppetry. The puppets are built out of wood and the shows are performed in a waist-deep pool. A large rod supports the puppet under the water and is used by the puppeteers to



[www.vrcoll.fa.pitt.edu/....//water-puppets.html](http://www.vrcoll.fa.pitt.edu/....//water-puppets.html)

<sup>1</sup> MA Student in Southeast Asian Studies Program, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University.

control them. The appearance is of the puppets moving the over water. The practice is thought to have originated in the Red River Delta in Vietnam in the Ly Dynasty (12th century). When the rice field would flood the villagers would entertain each other using this puppet form. Eventually villages would compete against each other with their puppet shows. This lead puppet societies to be secretive and exclusive, including an initiation ceremony involving drinking rooster blood. Only recently were women allowed to join the puppet troupes.

Originating in the delta of the Red River, water puppetry is said to be invented by a deified monk named Tu dao Hanh, to whom the Thay pagoda is devoted. In the pagoda pond, there is a stage where water puppet shows are held in the ninth lunar month every year. The shows are part of a festival commemorating the hundred-day anniversary of the inventor's death. "In Dai Viet era, this art was largely spread at the court and among the people" (Nguyen Huy Hong, 1986 : 9). Surprisingly, the repertoires of water puppetry remain close to material and spiritual life in a rural village rather than having been refined and sophisticated as has occurred with other kinds of court art. This paper discusses the physical and spiritual aspects of water puppetry, and relates them to the interactions between water, rice and man, it does this in order to examine the worldview and values of the society that gave birth to such an art.

## II. PHYSICAL ELEMENTS OF WATER PUPPETRY

### 1. Performing space

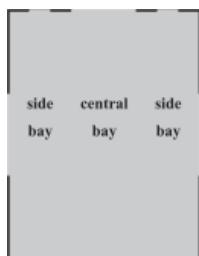
The water puppetry stage is located in the village pond and includes three main parts: (1) the manipulating room, (2) board(s) for storage of

puppets, manipulating rods, and the musicians' seating area, and (3) the show space, separated from the manipulating room by a bamboo blind. The show is carried out on the water surface in front of the manipulating room, in the area from the bamboo blind to a portico erected 10m away. The lateral edges of the show space are restricted by two bamboo fences or two rows of puppets called "camping along the road". However, some times the characters ramble out of the defined space approaching the audience in a surprising and amusing way.

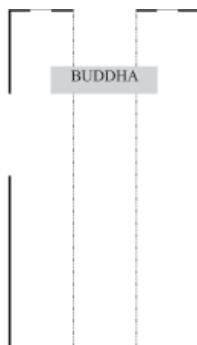
The stage may be built permanently or erected temporarily for the show. The permanent stages are made of bricks with tiled roofs. The stages at Thay Pagoda and Gióng Temple in Hanoi are comprised of these features. While the stage in Gióng Temple was changed into a stage for Cheo (folk theatre), the stage in Thay Pagoda, the most ancient permanent stage for water puppetry, remains in its original form. It has a double roof with curving tips imitating the roof of the pagoda or the communal house, both structures which were previously the centre of a Vietnamese rural village. The permanent stage is divided lengthwise into three bays. The central bay is the manipulating room with an under water floor slanting from the rear to front for easy launching. The two side bays are floored above the water surface as loading boards for puppets and props, and as an area for the puppeteers to rest. Each side bay has a lateral entrance for moving in or out of the back stage and a perforated front window for puppeteer's observation. The layout of the permanent stage - three bays, side entrances, window, and central bay left open at both ends - resembles the plan of a pagoda (figure 1.a).

The temporary stage, on the other hand, is collapsible and built of wood and bamboo with a roof painted like the tiled roof of the permanent stage. In a

temporary stage, the show space is separated from the manipulating room by a blind hanging across the stage width. A wooden platform is included at the back end for loading puppets and as a puppeteer's resting area. With a double roof and the horizontal division, the layout of the temporary stage is similar to the plan of a communal house (figure 1.b). Sometimes the temporary stage also has two small “outbuildings” for extension of the space or for entrance and exit of the puppets. However, even if this is the case, the main structure will always resemble the “three-room” – main room and two wings – architectural layout of the village communal house.

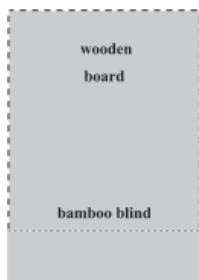


permanent stage plan



pagoda plan

Plan 1.a



temporary stage plan



communal house plan

Plan 1.b

## 2. Audience and the show

Spectators are seated on the edge of the pond, and seating is slightly sloped down to the waters edge so that those sitting in front will not obscure the view of those sitting behind. The audience includes all villagers, as well as visitors, without discrimination of age, occupation, or wealth. Water puppet shows are often held at village festivals on the occasion of New Year or at special events such as a celebration of a good harvest or the commemoration of the local genie. The show is provided free of charge and for pleasure only, thus creating a feeling of equality and pure enjoyment for the audience.

## 3. Puppets and characters

The puppets are made of wood that is locally available and can be attained without any cost. The most common material is the wood from fig trees that can be found easily near household garden ponds or somewhere in the village. The fig tree is a “whole using up” – its leaves can be used for pigs’ feeding, its fruits can be salted and used to supplement a rice diet, and (among other purposes) its trunk can be used for puppet production. The wood is light, water resistant, and easy to carve when still fresh. The size of the puppets vary from 0.3m to 1m and weigh about 5–15kg. A puppet has two parts – the body and the base. The body, with its carved clothing and often non-separated lower limbs, emerges on the water surface and is supported by its base. Some puppets that can float by themselves, like fish or dragons, need no base. Inside the body and under the base, the rod or string control system is hidden. The control system is either by simple “rod” or a more complicated “string” system. The water surface provides an ideal environment for enlivening the show and concealing the control system underneath.

The artisan carves the wood to shape a puppet according to his imagination or images of things around him. The manipulation of the puppets viewed from a distance does not allow for complicated or internal expressions. Therefore, characters of water puppetry “wear” symbolised expressions and have a single characteristic appearance e.g. kind versus wicked, rich versus poor, happy versus sad, and so on. Through the way they look, and the way they “dress”, the spectators can easily identify the characters’ occupation, emotion, and social rank. Sometimes the puppets are covered with lacquer to increase their beauty and resistance to water. Whether made by the hands of an amateur or professional artisan, the puppets always have the beauty of simplicity. Moreover, under the influence of oriental philosophy, the artisans often follow the ideal image of Buddha to transplant characteristics to the puppets. Such characteristics include long ears for longevity, a smiling face for happiness, round face for healthiness, and a big belly for kindness. This philosophy has transformed into a folk saying “big ears and broad face”, which is believed to be the symbol of being blessed with a long life and good career.

Water puppetry characters can include human characters representing different social strata e.g. peasants, mandarins, tutors; super-natural characters such as Buddha and fairies; or animal characters e.g. the four sacred creatures- dragon, unicorn, tortoise and phoenix. The only typical character of water puppetry is Teu, whose name may come from “Téu” or “Tiéu” and means “humourous”. Teu is the emcee and joke maker of water puppetry. Teu’s look varies slightly depending on the guilds that produce him, and this means he may have bare chest or a vest, and may or may not have funny hair locks. Nonetheless, his appearance is always identical to a village

boy wearing a loincloth, and he always looks happy, healthy and free from life's sorrows. Teu's job is to introduce the programme, review the events in the village, and make comments or jokes about things against "common sense". Teu is an imaginary character, and evidence for this is provided in his prologue. One such example being Teu's prologue of the Thang Long Water Puppet Troupe:

Teu, came here from Heaven, exiled down here for stealing a persimmon. Seeing that this society is full of complicated problems, I must wade in to try to sort out these entanglements.

In another variation Teu's prologue shows the interaction between the audience and the emcee signifying a close relation between this character and all the villagers. The "conversation" between him and the audience is a replica of "singing" communication, where songs are exchanged between boys and girls in the village festival.

"Oh my brothers!" He shouts.

"What is it?" Replies a chorus.

"Must I introduce myself?" He goes on.

They respond: "Of course you must! Otherwise how do we know by what name to call you?"

.....

"Once upon a time," Teu proceeded, "I lived in heaven, in the garden of medicinal plants. Everyone called me Vong. Later, when **water and fire came to live in harmony**, they gave me the name Teu in this troupe"

The chorus became more insistent: "Oh Teu, don't speak too much. If you know a song, sing it!"

Teu sings: “People bathe in the pond of their village. Whether the water is limpid or muddy, it is always nice to bathe there.”

(Tran van Khe, 1996 : 230)

As Teu does not belong to this world, where human deeds will be judged by heaven, he is free to mock the village without being offensive. Furthermore, he represents the desire for free speech of the “low necked – small mouthed” – the peasants – who are subject to many social evils.

#### 4. Stories, music and literature

Most of the stories depicted in water puppet show are portrayals of daily routines such as going to the field, ploughing, harrowing, transplanting rice seedlings, catching fish and tending ducks. The main theme revolves around wet-rice cultivation and the lifestyles based around it. Routines include working on the rice field, raising and catching animals to supplement vegetables in the diet, worshiping and playing. Historical stories are also included in the skits reproducing some brief extracts from national heroes’ lives, such as the Trung Sisters, Lady Trieu and Le Loi in the story of Sword Return Legend. The stories depicted in water puppetry also include excerpts from Tuong (classic theatre) and Cheo (folk theatre). Due to heavy borrowing between these two genres the excerpts are mainly stories from Chinese history.

In water puppetry there is no manuscript, thus all the stories are illustrated in either grouped scenes or single scenes. Before and after a water puppet show there are always “ritual scenes” as the ceremonial part of opening and closing the show. In Table 1, which lists the ritual and single scenes that may be included in a performance, historical excerpts are left out

in order to give a “clearer” picture of the agrarian life that is reflected in water puppetry performance.

**Table 1: Ritual scenes - single scenes**

**“Ritual” scenes:**

Teu’s prologue — Tue’s dance

Hoisting flags

Puppets coming on stage to open parasols

Camping by the road side (forming the side lines of the performing space)

Mice burning sycamore leave or Tutles burning sycamore leave (burning firecrackers)

**Single scenes:**

Rice farming	Life	Festival	Fascinating scene
Rowing	Catching parrots/	Flag raising	Fairy climbing a
Ploughing	snake/ rats/ birds	Beating a drum	bridge
Harrowing	Catching fish and	Raising the	Fairy creeping into
Pulling up rice	prawns in a handnet	couplets	a pipe
seedling	Fisherman drawing	Planting pennants	Fairy ridding a fish
Transplanting rice	his net	Setting off	offering flowers
seedling	Meeting a snake	firecrackers	Fairy ridding a
Scooping water	while catching frogs	Panting and	dragon
Cutting grass	Felling banana trees	pulling out flags	The raft fairy
Harvesting	Climbing a tree	Offering betel	The boat fairy
Husking rice	Pasturing buffalos	rolls and tobacco	The water fairy
Pounding rice	and flying kites	Palanquin	Fairies as song-
	Pasturing buffalos	procession	stresses

and cows	Lantern march	Dance of the fairies
Spinning silk	Dragon dance	
Weaving	Unicorn dance*	Dragon flying
		Dance of tortoise
<u>Life and society</u>	<u>Games/</u>	Pelican dance
Fighting a tiger	<u>competitions</u>	(Unicorn dance)*
Up onto elephant	Wrestling	Somersaulting
down onto hammock	Swinging	Merry-go-round
Warship	Human ladder	Tightrope-walking
Gambling	Climbing a	Man taking out his
Smoking opium	human ladder	intestines
Worship	Jumping through	
Welcoming the gods	a circle	Buffalo creeping
Praying for rain	Somersaulting on	into a pipe
Five-direction funeral	a ladder	Snake breathing
march	Buffalo fighting	fire
Invoking spirits	Shuttlecock	Raven offering
Necromancy	tossing	Buddhist pennants
Collecting for charity	Fighting with	Snake dance
Statues casting	sticks	Spring ramble of a
Bell casting	Submerging a	snake-like monster
Council of village	ball	
elders	Cock-fight	
Fishing boat	Horse racing	
Merchant ship	Rice cooking	
	competition	

Nature

Mouse climbing a tree  
 Fox catching a hen  
 Otter catching fish  
 Buffalos and cows  
 Snake chasing the ducks  
 Dog chasing rats  
 Cormorant catching fish

The music in water puppetry has a rhythm keeping function rather than being a distinctive musical genre of its own. Percussion instruments such as drums play the main role in creating a festival atmosphere for the show and are accompanied by other traditional instruments such as the bamboo xylophone, bowed two-string fiddle or banjo-shaped lute. All these instruments provide live music for the show. Firecrackers add to the excitement roused by the drumbeats, and provide sound and scenic effects. Although some water puppet scenes are accompanied by songs, the songs are not distinct to water puppetry shows.

The literary texts in water puppetry are used mainly for introducing the scenes. Some scenes are introduced by Teu before staging, such as in “Farming Activities” by the Thang Long Troupe

Let me tell you about the rice field,  
 the village enclosed in emerald green bamboo,

the sound of a flute floating above the back of a buffalo.

Those who still miss the Homeland, come back.

(Thang Long Water Puppet of Hanoi, n.d.)

Sometimes, the literature follows the scene as an annotation, for instance in the scene of Le Loi's boating, the "Legend of Restored Sword Lake", also by Thang Long Troupe

This lengthy sword has helped me before,

It defeated ten thousand of invaders.

Now in piece the magic sword is returned to its owners

and this lake will be remember as Hoan Kiem

(Thang Long Water Puppet of Hanoi, n.d.)

A water puppet show expresses a clear message, not necessitating words to make it understandable. Furthermore, with an outdoor stage of poor resonance and dominance of the noise of drumbeats and festival-goers, the puppeteers in the manipulation room or the musicians are not likely to be able to cite the literary text effectively enough to be heard. Nonetheless, there are literary texts that are used in water puppetry. They are usually common legends, folk poems or verses that have been verbally transmitted from generation to generation and are known by all villagers. Even when the text is an improvisation, it always mobilises the simple and typical symbols from folk tales or common stories of Tuong or Cheo. Besides the role of introducing the story, the words or even the songs are added to water puppet show to increase interaction with the audience – for example to provoke the audience's participation in responding to Teu's calling or to sing along. (see *Teu's prologue quoted above or listen to songs in Thang Long Water Puppet of Hanoi, n.d.*)

## 5. Puppeteers and guild

Water puppetry is performed by ordinary villagers to entertain their co-villagers. Thus the organization of water puppetry artisans into a guild reflects village relations, including family, professional or neighbouring ties. Contributing to the village water puppet guild is a pleasure rather than a duty. Examples of contributions include giving a plank for the stage platform, finding a trunk of wood for puppets, donating strings and pods for manipulating system, or beating the drum. Any villager who can devote time, material, and labour for producing and manipulating the puppets can join the guild. There is no discrimination for membership; although in the past women were prohibited from joining the guild. Because the show is performed free of charge, participating in water puppetry is not a means of earning a living. The puppeteers have to work double- on the field from dawn to dusk for their living and extra work for production of the puppets as well as practicing and rehearsing. The guild completely relies on its members' contributions in both material and human resource forms. Moreover, the state of being a member of the guild is an honour that is recognized by the granting of a seat in the village temple or communal house. Because of this quite a large number of guild members cannot perform but just donate properties or money. For example, in the case of Nguyen guild (Nguyen Xa commune, Dong Hung District, Thai Binh Province), only half of the members engage in professional puppetry activities out of a membership of 70–80.

Due to competition between the water puppet guilds from different villages, all guilds try to protect their competitiveness by developing techniques for producing the puppet and manipulating system in secret. Upon being recruited, a new member is made to take an oath of secrecy by drinking

rice wine with rooster blood, representing human blood for establishing kinship-like binding. The oath is taken by solemnly swearing against the man's family and three generations of offspring. Conformity to the oath of secrecy is so serious that a man would rather take the knowledge with him to the other world rather than reveal it to his brother who belongs to another guild. This restriction confines the approach of learning water puppetry performance to practical observation and imitation and during the show the puppeteers coordinate and communicate by using code language or gestures that have been defined amongst themselves. On one hand the secret keeping habit in water puppetry once put the art on the edge of disappearance. This was during the wartime when many artisans fell down in the battlefields. On the other hand, secret keeping helps promotes diversity in creating the manipulating mechanism.

The organization of water puppet guilds also reflects the village feudal social structure influenced by Chinese Confucianism. This is in two aspects — the gender imbalance and the social status of the whole guild. Regarding the gender issue, the theory of Confucianism defines men as homeowners, and the females role in the family is dependent on the male role by submitting to the morale “be obedient to your father when still single, to your husband when married, and devoted to your son when widowed”. Most of the guild members are mature men, the family leaders, who decide labour distribution and resource allocation within the households. In this way, they set aside the time and materials to be contributed to the guild. Furthermore, as a woman would move to her husband's home after getting married women were not allowed to join the water puppet guild, in order to prevent them from bringing the secret to outsiders. Another reason for exclusion of women from participating in water puppetry was health. Standing in waist-deep muddy and bitterly cold

water, the puppeteers endured water-borne diseases, rheumatism, leeches and other difficulties in order to practice their craft.

Owing to its non-commercial nature and the value of self-sacrifice for others happiness, water puppetry has been honoured in the community. The guilds bear the village name e.g Nguyen guild from Nguyen Xa commune and Dong guild from Dong Cac commune in Dong Hung District, Thai Binh province. As the communes' reputations fluctuate with the ups and downs of the guilds of that land, the guilds are esteemed as highly as any administrative organization. They are also entitled with highest respect as in the old Vietnamese villages the feudal rulers used to be considered to be the "parents" of their ruling object and in this "ancestor worshiping" society the notion of respecting somebody as ones father or mother is the utmost admiration.

## **II. SPIRITUAL ELEMENTS OF WATER PUPPETRY**

### **1. The center of village social and cultural events**

Apart from being an excellent form of entertainment water puppetry also possesses spiritual elements. Whether it is permanent or temporary, the water puppet stage has an exterior shape resembling that of the pagoda and the communal house, both structures previously the central point of material and spiritual life of rural Vietnamese villages.

In the olden days the village communal house, commonly called the village temple, was an all-in-one centre for social and cultural activities. It was not only the administration office but also the justice office, and the meeting place for happy and sad events including hearing cases of dispute, adultery, pre-marital pregnancy, mobilizing village farm hands, commemorating the local genie and deities, and for other rites and festivals. In front of

village communal house, there was always the village pond – a non-detachable organic part of rural life. Even in their gardens households have their own ponds. Whether it is formed naturally or artificially the pond is a source of supply of earth for raising the house floor to avoid the flooding that occurs every year. It becomes a reservoir for irrigation in dry season and for cooling in hot summer days. The plants and fish in the pond are also a supplement to the diets of people and domestic animals e.g. duckweed is used for pig feeding and fish for feeding ducks or even the family. Above all, the village pond and communal house form an ideal area for providing weather protection for villagers; an area where they can rest their limbs and backs after hours working under the blazing sun or wading under drizzling rain. It also provides a nice open space for village festival activities. Unlike the communal house, a pagoda is a more sacred place; it is where the villagers come with happiness and sorrows, and to wish for good things not only for themselves but also for others.

Being shaped like the two most important buildings in the village and being located in the village pond, the water puppet stage and the natural elements around form a microcosm manifestation of the three worlds. The sky and trees, and the fairy and dragon dance in the show symbolize the above world. The stage and plants in the pond, the people, and the characters in the show represent this world. The reflection in the water represents the underworld.

## **2. A miniature of the village festival**

More than a still reflection, water puppetry is a miniature of the village festivals. Festivities in Vietnamese villages are often held for New Year

celebrations, for praying for rain or for the rain to stop, for socialization with other villages for pooling manpower and so on. Normally after the harvest a festival is organised for thanks giving and to wish for favourable weather promising good crops in next agricultural cycle.

A village festival is always composed of two parts: the ceremonial part paying homage to the local genies and deities, and the festive part to entertain the whole village. The first part is similar to any ceremony in a Vietnamese village, where flags and parasols are used as praising sets and symbols of power. Sequences of rapid drumbeats announce the beginning of the festival, and firecrackers are lit to mark the opening or ending. Depending on the purpose of the festival appropriate rites will be implemented e.g. praying, offering sacrifices, statue ablutions or processions. The second part of the festival includes games and shows such as wrestling, swimming competitions, catching ducks, cooking rice competitions, swinging, human chess, and Cheo or water puppet shows.

Like a real festival a water puppet show also has a “ritual” part starting with drumbeats signalling the commencement of the show, and then a hoisting of flags, opening of parasols and burning of firecrackers for the opening and ending. It even includes the rites of the festival, for example in the scene of “praying for rain”. The second part of a water puppet show is equivalent to the festive part of a festival. It can be a reproduction of daily activities, an excerpt from Tuong or Cheo, or a historical story. However, the most amazing thing about water puppet shows are the festival scenes (Table 1 -festival). While on the edge of the village pond and in the pagoda or village temple court the real festival is happening and games and competitions are taking place, in the village pond water puppetry is producing an “on site live show” of the ongoing festival. The sights and sound of drumbeats, firecrackers, and festival-goers

on the side of the pond mingle with the reflections and sounds reverberating on the surface of the water to generate a *déjà vu* effect just like an echo of ones' previous life, this life and the afterlife.

### III. WATER PUPPETRY AND AGRARIAN LIFE

Water is not just an element that gives the water puppetry a “magical” look, it also reflects the whole world around wet-rice farming life whether inside a water puppetry show or in real life. Water in a wet-rice civilization such as Vietnam is associated with the concept of nation. Water plays a decisive role for the gain and loss of rice crops and human life and property and thus it is the source of both nourishment and destruction.

#### 1. Water and the concept of “nation”

In Vietnamese language the word for nation/country and water is the same – “nu’ó’c”. This is not a coincidence; the concept of nation is generated from the idea of being “in the same water”. This concept is evident in the terms used for Vietnamese people living inside and outside the nation, and also for foreigners. “Ngu’ò’i trong nu’ó’c”, “ngu’ò’i ngoài nu’ó’c”, and “ngu’ò’i nu’ó’c ngoài” respectively mean “people inside the water” and “people outside the water”, and “people of the outside water”. The Vietnamese people have many ways to refer to their nation, however the words always include the meaning “water” e.g. “đất nu’ó’c Việt Nam” (land and water of Vietnam), “non nu’ó’c” or “non sông” (“mountain and water” or “mountain and river”). Another endearing way to address the “home country” by national leaders and ordinary people is “nu’ó’c nhà” (home water). Moreover, the “state” is identical to “nhà nu’ó’c” (house of water). As such, the concept of “water” in

the nation is used not only in reference to territory but also in reference to those powers ruling the country. That's why when the country is dominated the Vietnamese become “mất nu'ó'c” (losing water). In comparison to “mất nu'ó'c”, “mất đất” (losing land) is nothing, the latter is merely an individual matter that can be solved at a local court. Due to the equivalence of the concepts of “water” and “nation”, the deed of betraying the country is accused as a crime of “bán nu'ó'c” (selling water). This term is still taboo up to present day and anyone actually selling some kind of water has to find an alternative term to use. For example, “water supply” is called “cấp nu'ó'c” and in areas where the centralised water supply system is not available, people who sell water in tanks carried by bull-carts use a sign saying “đổ nu'ó'c”, meaning “refilling water”. Moreover, in Vietnamese society people have to adjust their behaviour in accordance with social norms. If somebody violates the social norms, that person will be laughed at by “làng nu'ó'c” (“village and country” meaning the entirety of the public). The notion of “water” resembling “nation” is also used with positive meaning e.g. “đựng nu'ó'c” (constructing the nation), “cứu nu'ó'c” (saving the nation), “yêu nu'ó'c, thương nòi” (love the nation and the people). In the conception of nation “water” implies the territory, the ruling power, and loyalty or disloyalty to the whole people “in the same water”.

## 2. Triangulation of water - rice - men

In wet-rice farming life completely relies on water. The rice plants need to stand in water to grow, however, if the water floods to half the height of the plants, they will die. As such a scheme of water level regulation is required and this is achieved through scooping water into the rice field, connecting the

ditches to canals or other water courses for irrigation and constructing drainage systems. As an essential part of rice cultivation water plays the most important role – “first water, second fertilizer, third hard-work, fourth strain” or “without water, without fertilizer, diligent work becomes useless”.

The strains of rice grown in the paddy field are plain rice and sticky rice. The first strain is more abundant and productive; hence it is cooked for daily meals called “cơm” (rice). The latter is less productive and can only be grown one crop a year, but it is more tasty and fragrant. Owing to these properties, it became the food for worshiping and feasting and is used in the forms of “cơm nếp” (sticky rice) or “bánh chưng, bánh dày”. “Bánh chưng, bánh dày” is comprised of a square of rice and a circle of rice which represent the earth and sky and which is used at Tet time. Rice farming work is hard and continues from dawn to dusk, this day to the next day, from seeding to harvesting. The farmers have to get up so early and go home so late that they are exposed to “once of sun, twice of mist”. Despite enduring so much hardship, the farmers are still not sure whether or not they will be able to get their hands on the rice grains because of the annual flooding. Putting in a full-energy effort and whole-hearted hope finally when the farmers get the rice they treasure it as “a grain of heaven jade”. The value of the rice is reflected in behaviour that requires that if somebody drops the rice out of the bowl while eating that person is supposed to pick it up and eat it. If they do not do this it is believed that someday the person will not be blessed with rice. Rice is also a yardstick of judging people’s performance. If somebody is good for nothing, that one will be become “not rice, nor porridge”. As farming is heavy manual work the people need a full stomach for energy and they always prefer eating rice. As porridge is thin the porridge eater will feel hungry soon and can not continue to work. As a result people only eat porridge when they

do not have to work or when they are ill. Furthermore, if a pot of rice is spoiled by too much water, it will become porridge – a person of “not rice, nor porridge” is rubbish. Rice is not only a measurement of conduct but also the “material” strength of a farmer “người sống về gạo, cá bạo về nước” (men owe their life to rice as fish owe their boldness to water). Although rice is a product of men’s hands it is regarded with gratitude for providing of the food of life.

The lives of Vietnamese peasants can not be separated from water and rice so that when asking whether someone has had a meal or not, Vietnamese people say: “did you have rice and water yet?” Most often, the Vietnamese villages are self-sufficient. The villagers grow their own rice, catch fish, frog and clams in ponds to supplement the vegetable diet, and raise ducks that find their feed in the pond or in the rice field after harvesting. The villagers wade in the muddy field for rice day after day, for this crop and the next crop. When coming of out of the field, they splash into the ponds or other water bodies for bathing, fishing and collecting duckweed. For their whole life they are standing in water and when they die their remains will be soaked in water for a few months per year during the flooding reason as in the saying “dipping skin in living and bones after death”. Water is a symbol of homeland for people who live far away, as is reflected in the folk saying “people bathe in the pond of their village. Whether the water is limpid or muddy, it is always nice to bathe there”. Earning their living by rice farming which is completely dependent on water and annual flooding, the peasants have a two-sided attitude to this natural factor – gratitude for nourishment, and fear of destruction. Water is the metaphor of both good and evil e.g. to show generosity people say “as good as a bowl full of water”, however, to talk about the most scary calamity they say “disaster by water”.

### 3. Peasant's worldview and values through water puppetry

A French critic said “Water puppetry is the soul of Vietnamese rice field”. His comment is straightforward because water puppetry content is so close to life in a Vietnamese rural village that it is as real as seeing people doing household chores, farming, and natural things like dogs chasing rats. More than a realistic picture of rural life, water puppetry also reflects the worldview and values of wet-rice peasants through the scenes of life, festivities, and make-believe (Table 1).

In water puppetry, it is obvious that the Vietnamese peasants practice “mother” veneration, which is the deed of believing, admiring, praising and venerating the goddesses who are associated with natural phenomena such as sky, earth, water and forest. Those goddesses hold the power of creation, of regulating the universe, and providing protection for living subjects. Sometimes human beings are also praised as a “mother” god e.g. a queen or princess to whom the people owe the teaching of cultivation when she was living or protection when she had left this world. This custom is demonstrated through a grouped scene named “three worlds combined”. The scene represents the veneration of “three mothers” – “Mother of Heaven”, “Mother of Forest” and “Mother of Water”. As their names suggest, each of them rule over separate territories. They are worshiped in pagodas and in family homes under the Buddha image or on a separate shrine. The Mother of Heaven sits in the middle wearing a red scarf, Mother of Forest is on the left with a green scarf, and Mother of Water is on the right with a white scarf. The highest among them is the “Mother of Heaven” who is localized as Madam Lieu Hanh<sup>2</sup>. The natural surroundings, the water puppet show and water reflections are also a symbol of the three worlds.

<sup>2</sup> She is believed to be the second principal of fairies in heaven, being exiled to earth for breaking a jade cup, and being born in a Le family in Phu Giay, Vu Ban, Nam Dinh in 1557 – where she is worshiped.

Cult of fertility is an aspect of the village festival whose purpose is to wish for an abundant harvest, many offspring and the breeding and multiplying of all things. As a miniature of the village festival the water puppet show reproduces the cult of fertility in the scenes of swinging and phoenix dance. The rite of fertility is an old custom in Vietnamese spiritual life that can be traced back to the Bronze age. For example the lid of the Dao Thinh jar is attached with replicas of four human couples in courting positions and the decoration on Hoang Ha drum includes pairs of birds with one sitting on top of the other. The cult of fertility in Vietnamese spiritual life is manifested in the veneration of the reproductive symbols of male and female together e.g. arrow and bow, “banh chung and banh day” or Mr. and Mrs. Khiu. In combination with natural worship, it is materialised in the worshiping of natural stone pillars or cracks of stone on a mountain slope.

The Vietnamese also practice ancestor worship, worship of local genies or deities and Buddha veneration. Water puppetry reflects well this combination. The scene of “a palanquin procession” where the statue of a deity is carried to the left side of the stage and then replaced with a Buddha image is a testimony of the saying “deity first and then Buddha”. In real life the custom involves organizing a procession which transfers the statue of a deity from the temple to the pagoda for one night as an act of honouring. Originating in rural rice field villages, water puppetry not only reflects the life of the living but also the perception that there is “dead among the living” wet-rice peasants. It is believed that after death the deceased person will join the ancestors and protect the living members of the family. The concept of life is not linear but cyclic; one has a previous life, this life and an afterlife. The life cycle is determined by karma which is a belief that whatever one does in this life one will get it all back in the next life. The concept of karma can be interpreted as

the rule of “cause and effect” as is reflected in the saying “plant that tree and will get that fruit”. Or it can be understood as if one does good in this life that person will be a king, mandarin, or rich person in the next life, if not he or she will be reincarnated as an animal or person with a suffering life.

The scenes “worshiping” and “funeral march” reflect ancestor worship and cyclic lives. The real life funeral march is performed so that the dead can be “released” from this world to join their ancestors or to reincarnate to a new life. In Vietnamese society family ties would linger as far as five generations on both maternal and paternal sides and they determine a person’s position in the village. Previously piety was at the core of ancestor worship and this was confirmed by Confucianism which defined that “piety must be the first qualification of a man”. Subsequently, the family-line’s reputation depended on their conduct and taking the exam to become a mandarin, an undeniable way to bring fame to the family, is a life-long dream of many. The scene of “a triumphant return of a scholar” in water puppetry mirrors this practice.

Beyond depicting present beliefs and ritual practices, water puppetry links back to the myths of Vietnamese origin, totemism and nature worship practiced by ancestors. The presence of dragons and fairies in water puppetry recalls the myth of Vietnamese origin which says that Vietnamese people are a Dragon and Fairy race. The following is a myth taught as a historical lesson in present Vietnamese primary school. The story says that around 2800BC Lac Long Quan, a personage of dragon birth from the sea got married with Au Co, a fairy descendant. She gave birth to a pouch with a hundred eggs that hatched into fifty girls and fifty boys. Because of their different race they had to separate. Lac Long Quan took fifty girls to the sea, Au Co brought fifty boys to her home in the mountain. Hung King, the first king of Vietnam was one of their sons. Before parting, Lac Long Quan promised his sons that if they were

in trouble they should call for him and he would come and help. His promise links to some other legends where the characters are believed to be Lac Long Quan's incarnation, such as Giong and the tortoise genie.

The legend of Saint Giong says that during the reign of the sixth Hung King, there was an old woman living alone. Upon her desire for a child who would take care of her in old age, she came and sprayed on the mountain and drank some the water there. She gave birth to a boy who did not talk, walk or laugh though he was three years old. However, upon hearing that the country was invaded, he asked his mother for nine winnowing baskets of rice and three baskets of salted round egg plants. He ate all the food, drank dry a whole section of a river and became a giant. He called for an iron horse from heaven and up-rooted a cluster of bamboo to chase the invaders away. After that he flew to heaven. This character is believed to be an incarnation of Lac Long Quan. To honour his deliverance, people built a temple named Saint Giong, where there used to be a stage for water puppetry, and they celebrate Giong festival every year.

In Vietnamese history, Lac Long Quan has reincarnated two times as the tortoise genie to transfer his power to his descendants (Keith Taylor, 1983 : 1, 22.) The first time was when the tortoise genie helped An Duong Vuong to build Co Loa citadel. The king could not finish his construction work because the land spirit destroyed his work in the night time. He prayed and the tortoise genie came to chase away the evil spirit and lent him one of his claws to make a magic crossbow. His opponent took revenge by having his son marry An Duong Vuong's daughter. The son-in-law stole the magic claw and An Duong Vuong lost his power and was defeated. As he was on his way fleeing to the sea the tortoise genie appeared and guided him to the watery realm. The second time of re-incarnation was when the tortoise genie lent

King Le Loi (1418 -1427) a magic sword to fight the invaders. After restoring the peace while the king was boating on the lake the tortoise genie came to the water surface and asked the king to return the sword. To commemorate the event Le Loi ordered the lake to be named Hoan Kiem (Lake of Restored Sword)<sup>3</sup>.

Those two legends indicate one totemic symbol of old Vietnam. Before moving down to the Hong River Delta, the ancient Vietnamese venerated the tortoise as a genie giving birth to water and earth. A highlander minority group, the Muong people<sup>4</sup>, still adhere to such totemic practice and they consider their house to be a tortoise with four poles as the legs and the front and back doors as the head and tail. The totemism of the ancient Vietnamese is reflected in water puppetry through the four sacred creatures – the dragon, unicorn, tortoise and phoenix. The unicorn of Vietnam looks more like a tiger and is regarded as a guarding power. In their homes Vietnamese folk often hang panels of a dragon and tiger on the two sides of the family shrine to scare away evil spirits. The phoenix is a variation of the stork that is very common in the rice fields and also represents the totem of Hung King (Keith W. Taylor, 1983 : 3)

#### **IV. DISCUSSION**

##### **1. An indigenous art or imperial influence**

Water puppetry in China, which was called “shui kuilei”, came into disuse long ago. In reference to the writing of some scholars (Tran Van Khe.

<sup>3</sup> It is the lake at the heart of Hanoi with a tortoise tower in the middle. There live quite a many of tortoises in that lake, they are holy tortoises, no body catch or eat them.

<sup>4</sup> Upland cousin of Kinh people, the majority ethnic Vietnamese.

1996 : 239) my hypothesis is that puppetry in China may have come from Vietnam. This is because of the following reasons. First, the art came to an end in China perhaps because it illustrated a novel picture that was “unfamiliar” and hence not “suitable” to the people and life there. Second, the name does not sound completely Chinese. The word “shui” means “water” however the word “kuilei” is not Chinese. “Kui” means a “radical” and the character “evil”. The clue suggesting the name may be in a borrowed form is the word “lei” which is only a phonetic transcription in Chinese. It could be from the word “rői”, as in “rői nu'óć” of Vietnamese water puppetry, as the Vietnamese northerners often mispronounce “r” for “l”, thus “rői” becomes “lői” which is pronounced “lei” by Chinese.

Water puppetry has a long history in Vietnam and “the epigraphic texts and ancient books make it possible to conjecture that puppet show began to be performed in Vietnam in the 10<sup>th</sup> century” (Nguyen Huy Hong. 1986 : 5 – 8). There is proof of water puppetry’s existence in the Dai Viet Su Ky Toan Thu (Complete History of Great Viet) and the stone manuscripts on the Sung Thien Dien Linh stele which describe the celebration of the king’s birthday. Whether it was invented by a monk or a collective of rice farmers, or was in vogue in the court and among the people, water puppetry remains simple and “loyal” to the peasants’ life. This gives it an advantage – despite ups and downs, changes in ruling power and war, water puppetry has not died and does not bear “traces” of Chinese imperial influence.

## 2. Water puppetry past and present

While in the course of time water puppetry has changed, still the techniques and the stories remain close to what they were in the old days. The

changes were brought about through the government's policy on "rehabilitation" and "extension" of this unique art. International touring of various troupes helped water puppetry gain worldwide fame and provided a realistic picture of rural life in Vietnam to new audiences. However, these changes also caused some "spiritual degradation" to water puppetry.

In the olden days water puppet shows were performed at special events on a stage located in a pond. The performance took place at daytime to take advantage of the light that provided a magical reflection of the environment on the water's surface. In preparation for the stage, only the bushes that obscure the audience's view were removed, the rest were left untouched. Water is a wonderful concealing environment to hide the mechanism and navigate the puppets in a lively way. Natural elements, such as trees and stage reflections, and floating duckweed and water hyacinths, transferred a soul into the puppets and created an ambivalent feeling of the real and unreal. In present time, water puppetry is performed in a water basin and at nighttime. On one hand this is convenient for touring and benefits from modern lighting techniques can be gained. On the other hand the artificiality strips away the magical limitlessness of the water puppet show but leaves it a "bare" reproduction of rural life with a vague nostalgic feeling.

Another aspect that differentiates water puppet show of the past and present is professionalisation. Unlike water puppetry of the olden days which was performed by the ordinary villagers for the enjoyment of their fellow villagers without any charge, today water puppetry is commercialized and specialized. The puppeteers receive professional training and are paid a monthly salary by the troupe management. Though the sale of tickets for entrance has wiped off the "valueless aspect" of old-day water puppetry, it does not harm the reputation of the art; moreover, it has some positive contribution to the

survival of water puppetry. For example, the artistes can now devote their time to practicing, developing new techniques and adding more stories for improvement of the performance. Furthermore with income from ticket revenue the troupes can equip the artists with protective clothing like waders to save them from water-borne diseases. The professionalisation of water puppetry has also opened a new era when women are allowed to join the troupes and the barrier of secrecy is removed. The prohibition of women membership in the old days was sometimes addressed as being for the sake of their health. However, this claim was used to avoid admitting gender discrimination of the Confucian ideology of the feudal society in the past. If farming work is taken into consideration it is clear that the excuse of health concerns is not valid; the women had to work on the field just as long as men. In regard to the excuse relating to water levels, this is not sufficient either, because the women also participated in activities that required standing in waist-deep water, such as fishing, tending ducks and collecting duckweed for the pigs.

Water puppetry of the past and present serves different target groups and different purposes. The target group of the old days were the peasants, themselves like the puppeteers, and together they celebrated the happy events around the cycle of life. They optimized their lives by reviewing them and putting them among the other worlds in the microcosm of water puppetry. Present day puppetry is separated from its target group due to the gap created by professionalization. The purpose that it serves is also far different from the previous one – all time, energy, and resources pooled into the art go toward keeping it alive. Thus water puppetry is now theatrical entertainment for theatre-goers in both urban and rural areas and for tourists. Although water puppetry has gained worldwide popularity owing to the touring of professional

troupes, in using the artificial water basin it has detached from the original values embraced in the performance when located in the village pond.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

Water puppetry is a unique and indigenous art bearing the stamp of peasant's life and worldview. Produced by farmer artisans to entertain their young and old in a self-sacrificing manner, it gained a great honour in village life. Located in the village pond it became the centre of peasant's social and spiritual life. Furthermore, water puppetry conveys in its performance all the sacred elements of peasants' lives – their beliefs and worldview. Today, water puppetry is professionalized, which has brought it world fame but also some loss of its original spiritual values.

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