

Modernizing Traditional Performing Arts in Vietnam – *A View From Tuong Theater*

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Abstract⁺⁺⁺

In the past, *Tuong* theatrical performances were an art form of the royal court of Vietnam. In modern times, it is performed to public audiences by Vietnam's National *Tuong* Theater and in local theaters across Vietnam. With its long performances, ancient vocabulary unfamiliar costumes and makeup, the *Tuong* art form struggles to modernize and remain attractive to audiences. In this article, Vietnam's National *Tuong* Theater is examined to explore how Vietnamese traditional performing arts have modernized since the state implemented the reform policy and market economy. It also considers steps Vietnam's National *Tuong* Theater has taken to customize traditional plays and renovate the shows to match the demands of modern audiences. An evaluation of their achievements and recommendations for revitalizing the *Tuong* art form for contemporary Vietnamese society is provided.

Keywords: Vietnamese *Tuong* Theater, *Tuong* Arts, Vietnam, Cultural Renewal, Cultural Preservation

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⁺⁺⁺ Note: We regret that some characters and their accent symbols are not properly represented by our font family in this article.

Preface

Since 1986, with the comprehensive renovation of economy, politics, and social spectrums, the Communist Party and the Government of Vietnam have changed their awareness and policies on developing the culture and spiritual traditions of the nation. These traditions reflect both national identity and modern social adaptations in relation to major structural changes towards a market economy. The *Tuong* Theater, which is a significant traditional Vietnamese performance art, was formerly a 'high' art performed for the royals which has spread within broader society. However, after 1986 *Tuong* began to lose its popularity and was at risk of becoming extinct.

Vietnam's cultural industry is flourishing, and traditional cultural materials are being actively used to create products and other income streams. *Tuong*'s cultural materials are now used by young artists in their art projects. Due to its very specific characteristics and the important symbolic cultural meanings associated with the art in Vietnam, attempts to innovate an ancient form such as *Tuong* while preserving its cultural roots face significant challenges. If changes are not carefully executed, there is a risk of distortion of the art form which can interfere with perceptions of its basic artistic values. We choose a modern approach to cultural renovation because of the creative orientation of artists and because bringing *Tuong* closer to public audiences will bring this art to life.

Based on this foundation, we focused on modernization paired with preservation. Our motives to investigate further in this situation include:

- We acknowledge the aesthetic and philosophic values of *Tuong* and reject the argument that the content and aesthetic values of it are outdated. These are the concerns we wanted to investigate in the efforts of maintaining the existence of traditional *Tuong* in contemporary Vietnamese society.
- On the other hand, as representatives of the young generation of Vietnam, we are exposed to a variety of new forms of contemporary art which we admire. Therefore, we are concerned about the competitiveness of the traditional *Tuong* in a situation where many other kinds of artistic performances exist. The competition is strong with readily approachable content that attracts diverse audiences.
- Finally the existence of the *Vietnamese Theater of Tuong* (51 Duong Thành Street, Hoàn Kiem District, Hà Noi) has led to the introduction of weekly activities that aim to preserve, develop, and advertise the cultural values of the *Tuong* to Vietnamese people and international tourists. This is recognized as an important step in Vietnam's policies of cultural preservation. We would like to investigate specific initiatives of the theater as well as the attitude of Vietnamese people towards this art form while assessing the success rate of such initiatives and suggesting new methods to save the *Tuong* art form from being forgotten and abandoned.

To date most academic researchers have only compiled anthologies and essays about the *Tuong* Theater. These documents provide insights for a comprehensive

understanding about this art form. Some popular and typical research directions include the investigation of *Tuong*'s origin, its meanings, characteristics, and core values.

The main sources in the published research are as follows: *The Origin and the Art of Tuong* (Su tích và nghệ thuật hát bội) by Mai Linh and Đoàn Nong (1942), *Primary Examination of the History of Tuong* (So khảo lịch sử nghệ thuật tuong) by Hoàng Châu Ký (1973), *Tuong (Hát bội)* by Mai Linh and Huỳnh Khắc Dung (1968), *Basic Aspects of the Music of Tuong* (Những vấn đề cơ bản trong âm nhạc tuong) by Lê Yên (1994). While these provide insights for a comprehensive understanding of this traditional art form, there is no contemporary research into the preservation struggles of the *Tuong* art form in modern society, apart from the occasional minor mention in newspaper articles.

Within this context, the efforts of Vietnamese young people to preserve *Tuong* are highly appreciated. For example, the existence of a *Tuong* art project called *Vevehatboi*, along with Den Vâu - a popular Vietnamese rapper who learned how to perform the *Tuong* on a TV show illustrate this point. Although the project's fanpage has yet gained widespread attention, it has achieved some success in advertising *Tuong* via social media. TV channels have also created documentaries covering this art form and the solutions available to preserve it. Additionally there have been reproductions of traditional scenes from *Tuong* created by indie actors.

In this article the *Vietnamese Theater of Tuong* - which is situated on 51 Duong Thành street, Hoàn Kiếm district, Hà Nội, the University of Social Sciences and Humanities Hanoi, the area of Hoàn Kiếm Lake, and the residents in the Old Quarter surrounding the theater comprises the research area and respondents. The chronological range of this research is from 1986 until March, 2019.

When considering the modernization of *Tuong Theater* the successful adaptations and innovations of prior traditional art forms to increase contemporary audiences were examined. Survey results and assessment of the modernization of traditional arts will also be viewed from the perspective of the actual investment in infrastructure and the level of interest of the people towards the theater as well as the performances. In fact, the modernization of the traditional arts in Vietnam is a matter that has been considered for a long time, but its implementation has faced many difficulties, such as but not limited to analyzing the tastes of the audience and devising ways to initiate reasonable changes. The theater's modernizing activities themselves are only in the initial phase and are experimental.

In the authors' opinion, the modernization of traditional art in general and the *Tuong* in particular should be based on many indirect factors such as the aesthetic tastes of the people, the investment of the state and the cost of self-sufficiency of the theater (its viability), the spirit or passion for craft, the desire to learn and open (expand) the creativity of the traditional artists.

Introduction

Performing Arts in Vietnam and the Representativeness of *Tuong*

The performing arts are a core element in Vietnamese culture. Its existence can be seen in relation to social, cultural, and economic factors of Vietnamese society. Although the forms of performing arts do not evenly co-exist within historical periods of Vietnam, they do not stand apart from the socio-political ideologies and the spiritual foundations of specific periods.

Within each historical period, performing arts in Vietnam have been divided into different categories. During ancient times, there were crowd dances/singing and discourses of legends. From medieval times onward, new forms were created and richly developed. After the colonization under Chinese regimes from 179 BC to 938 AD and on the foundation of regional culture and cultural integration, new forms of performing arts such as the *Tuong* and *Cheo* were introduced.

In general, the performing arts in Vietnam are diverse in their manifestation. Each has unique characteristics yet they share similarities with other regional and international forms of artistic performance. One of those similarities is the fact that all forms of performing art in Vietnam are to demonstrate the thoughts and wills of the Vietnamese, who are the community authors of these art forms. Some forms such as the *Tuong*, *Cai Luong* or *Ca Tru* do have specific individual composers who are highly popular – and in some cases populist. These forms of art are attached to festivals and religious ceremonies, which indicate the social customs and practices of the people. For example, in the folk songs which are sung along rivers in the middle regions of Vietnam as a form of entertainment, the rhythm of the songs is intended to match the tempo of a sailor sailing his boat, and the narrative content refers water related images such as fish, nets, rivers, and boats.

The Vietnamese Origin and Identity in *Tuong*

Tuong is also known as *hat boi* or *hat bo*, is a traditional art form performance of Vietnam whose origin remains controversial. According to historical documents soldiers of the Chinese Yuan dynasty were captured as prisoners of war during the Tran dynasty. One of these captives was a singer named *Ly Nguyen Cat*. He was introduced to the royals and was assigned to teach the *Tuong* to maids. Due to the many similarities between the Vietnamese *Tuong* and the Chinese Peking Opera, many consider the *Tuong* having Chinese origins and spread to Vietnam during the 18th century. And from these roots it transformed as it spread across the country.

In an article titled *Hat boi*, it is suggested that *Tuong* has existed since the first *Le* dynasty, which is equivalent to the period around the end of the 10th century and the beginning of the 11th. Specifically, a Chinese singer named *Lieu Thu Tam* came to *Hoa Lu* (the capital of the first *Le* dynasty) in 1005 and performed various forms of Chinese singing. The singer was recruited by emperor *Le Long Dinh* and was assigned as music teacher for maids.

The theories regarding *Tuong*'s external Chinese origins have a clear foundation. In comparing Vietnamese art forms to Chinese ones, many similarities can be easily spotted, despite some basic differences. Looking at the integration levels of South-east Asian culture, the Vietnamese culture has engaged and integrated with many different ones, including those from China. Many researchers claim that there exist two forms of cultural integration between Vietnamese culture and Chinese culture: forced integration and voluntary integration.

Based on the story of *Ly Nguyen Cat*, we can see that *Tuong* was a product of voluntary integration, which created a foundation for many changes and creative adaptations by the Vietnamese later on. Despite the similarities that *Tuong* shares with the Peking Opera, the traditional elements of Vietnamese traditional performances, religious dances, and royal performances in the songs and dances of *Tuong* are undeniable. Differences also exist in the costumes of the performers. For example, the boots of the *Tuong* have round soles, while the boots of Chinese art forms have flat ones. *Tuong* also uses a different kind of axe, which is similar to an ancient Vietnamese tool.

However *Tuong* is not simply a copy. Its existence in both the royal and folk life reflects a continuation of its basic dance choreography, while transforming it into a stage performance with strict rules. Although the engagement and integration between Vietnamese and Chinese culture was inevitable, the ancient Vietnamese forms of dance needs to also be taken into consideration.

The Vietnamese Theater of *Tuong* in the Current Social Context

The Performance Facilities of the Theater

In this report, we focus on investigating the facilities of Hong Ha Theater at 51 Duong Thanh street, Hoan Kiem district, Hanoi. This location is the main venue for performances by the *Vietnamese Theater of Tuong*.

The theater consists of three floors, with stairs on the sides of each floor. The main stage is in the middle with side entrances. The stage is decorated with symbols in the form of dragons, phoenixes, and golden thrones. The second floor is an exhibition area with a traditional customs room. An altar is located its middle where the artists usually pray before performances. The third floor has offices for theater officials.

The 395 seat theater is designed in an elegant and reserved manner comprised of wood and velvet. The arrangement of seats ensures a clear view for all whether close or far. The main theater consists of two levels. The first level includes seats from row A to row N, with row A as the one closest to the stage. The second level includes rows from A to E, the technical is between row A and B, and the facilities for sounds and lights are behind row E. On the sides of the second level, there are to rows titled G at which end lie the colorful lights required for stage animations.

In front of the main stage, there is an area situated lower than stage level for musicians. The main stage is rectangular with an area of 60 square meters. The

dressing room is an area just as large 6 meters off the left, with mirrors and lights for applying striking makeup.

We randomly interviewed 10 artists who were working at the theater. Six reported the facilities were acceptable, but need more improvements while the other 4 said the quality of the facilities were good enough.

Characteristics of the Performers

As we observed, the artists, especially the older ones were very serious and professional when it came to performing on stage. In the dressing room, we observed their actions were quick, careful, and joyful. At the time, the theater had 9 artists titled People's Artists, 27 artists titled Outstanding Artists, and many young and potential artists. We conducted a random interview of 10 artists at the theater and found that 8 out of 10 were formally trained at an university, 1 out of 10 graduated from college, and 1 out of 10 had a bachelor degree in playing traditional musical instruments from the Vietnam National Music Academy. A survey of what their background was and reasons they were performers resulted in the following chart.

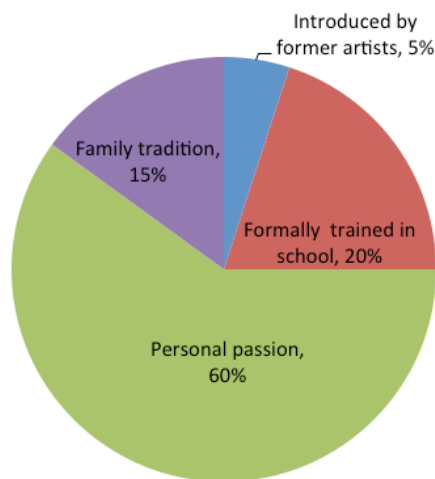


Figure 1. Performer's background and reasons for their career selection.

It is clear from the survey results that the spirit of performing plays a major role in both older and new performers as they cited personal passion, family tradition or sought out formal training related to the arts.

Additionally there are economic pressures to consider as 8 out of 10 interviewed artists stated that they need to hold another job to survive. Sixty percent has been or is currently or expected to be in the future, a trainer. Twenty percent are actors or work in other contemporary art industries while 15% desire to pursue academic research. This left 5% self employed.

The Audiences' Interest in the Theater

What follows is the results from a survey of 50 random audience members who watched a play called "Moc Que Anh Giving in the Tree" on February 24th 2019;

some were citizens living in the old quarters of Hanoi around Hoan Kiem lake, and others were students attending the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi.

A 100% of the respondents had never received any information about the *Vietnamese Theater of Tuong* from their relatives or tourists visiting Hanoi. The demographics of these 50 random respondents were as follows: 27 were 15 to 20 years old, 10 were 20 to 30 years old, 4 were 50 to 70 years old, and 3 were over 70. Consequently the survey findings reflect the under 30 demographic's (74%) view on the *tuong* in general and specifically the traditional *Tuong*.

When respondents were asked about the location of the *Vietnamese Theater of Tuong*, only 34% gave the correct answer. Among the 66% that gave the wrong answer, 30% mistook the *Vietnamese Theater of Tuong* for the *Water Puppet Theater* and 16% thought it was the *Vietnamese Theater of Cheo*. Moreover 20% did not know, while none mentioned the *Cai Luong Central Theater*.

As only 34% of the respondents knew the correct location, there appears to be deficits in the theater's publicity and advertisement efforts. Furthermore, apart from the *Vietnamese Theater of Tuong* there are hardly any others offering the *Tuong* in Hanoi. The level of interest in this particular art form appears very limited.

The fact that 30% of the respondents mistook the location of the *Vietnamese Theater of Tuong*, for the *Water Puppet Theater* is understandable as most traditional art forms lack patrons. But more importantly, the *Water Puppet Theater* attracts large numbers of international tourists through its cooperation with tour agents and it is at a desirable location near Hoan Kiem lake.

Additionally the fact that many respondents mistook the *Vietnamese Theater of Tuong*, with the *Vietnamese Theater of Cheo* or gave no answer at all indicates a generalized lack awareness and name – place recognition.

This data reflects the confused nature of information the public has regarding the *Tuong*. Furthermore it is difficult for most people to differentiate Vietnamese traditional forms of art such as the *Tuong*, *Cheo* and *Cai Luong*. However, it is certain that the *Cheo* has a wider spread than the *Tuong* and especially the traditional *Tuong*.

At the theater, we asked 10 random artists to predict the percentage of Hanoi residents who know the address of the theater. Seven predicted 10%, while 2 predicted 30% – 50%, and only 1 predicted over 50%. These results mirror the point that even the artists understand there is a lack of the public's awareness of the *Tuong* and the traditional *Tuong*.

From asking the performers about the reasons for low attendance, we concluded that there are two main ones. The first being the existence of many new competing entertainment art forms and contemporary audiences are enticed away by them. Secondly, each audience age group has different expectations towards

Tuong, which makes it hard to offer one each weekend for all ages. The middle-age and older people tend to prefer the historical and traditional plays, while young people tend to like the newer and wittier ones.

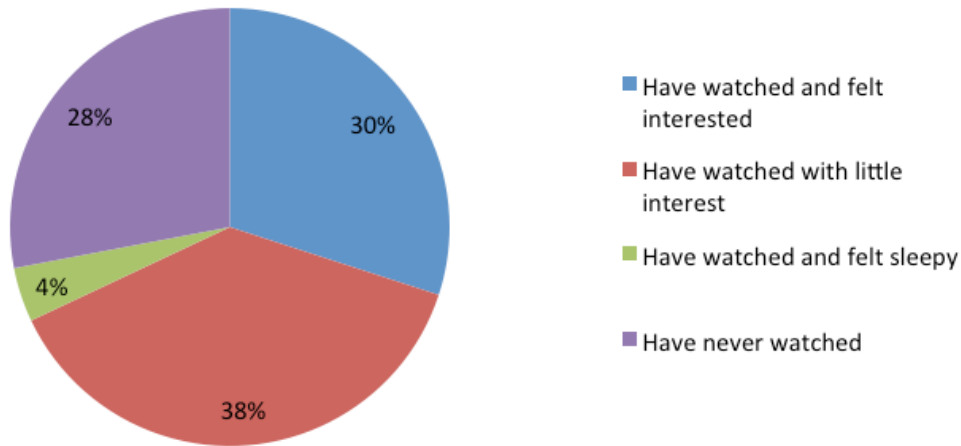


Figure 2. Public's exposure and response to traditional *Tuong* performance. Seventy-two percent of population has had some exposure to a *Tuong* performance.

Efforts to Renew and Bring Traditional *Tuong* Closer to Contemporary Audiences

Efforts to Renew the Traditional *Tuong*

In the introduction, the traditional *Tuong* was briefly introduced and below discusses the efforts of the theater to renew this art form.

The “Moc Que Anh Giving in the Tree” play and the modernization efforts it underwent for contemporary audiences will be examined. The performance observed was held at 8pm on February 24th 2019 and is a classic proper play of *Tuong* of interest to both scholars and the general public.

Due to the rules of *Tuong*, the process of renewing it can be complex. In the investigation, we received precise answers from many experienced artists. In general, the reformation of the traditional *Tuong* to newer forms cannot be easily executed as even changes in minor details need to be considered very carefully. On the other hand, *Tuong* is the combination of many different art forms. Therefore, the preservation of aesthetic elements of *Tuong* has to work in relation with each other. For example, to change a step in a dance requires changes in orchestration, especially the drummer as it only takes one wrong beat for the dance to turn awkward and strange. Similarly, a mask consists of several layers of meaning and cannot be changed due to the combination of artistic rendering and the study of facial elements. Good looking characters with a calm manner have always had a white face and the violent, hot-tempered characters have long black faces – these and other numerous conventions can not easily be altered.

Similar to masks, the costumes are not changeable. A scarf is a “ribbon” consisting of several layers of meaning, and so are the accessories. Items like swords, hammers, axes and flags have figures on them reflecting the era of their birth. For example, in the past many performers used to wrongly interpret the horse whip for

the horse itself. However in the *Tuong* the horse whip is an unique tool, reflecting a traditional aesthetic in action. In comparison with *Dong Ho* paintings, we know that people are drawn to colorful objects. From an entertainment perspective a wide range of colors captures the audiences' attention and creates a joyful spirit when the actor uses it in depicting horse-riding actions.

When considering costumes and makeup, we view that it is a contradiction to create an entire reformation for the traditional *Tuong*. So regarding this aspect, the theater has instead focused on just changing the materials of the costumes and only renewed non-aesthetic details so that the performer can move easier. For example, the size of the boots may be increased yet the shape of the boots and the resulting agility of every single movement on stage remains unchanged. The materials of the costumes are changed due to many reasons as described below:

- First, the materials are chosen to be more suitable for the environment. In the old days, the traditional *Tuong* was performed outdoors under varying climate and surroundings. Nowadays, most performances take place in theaters, with the support of lights, consistent stage and velvet curtains. Therefore, materials such as synthetic polyester instead of real animal fur are adopted. The costumes are made by machines, which can render the details more precise and balanced. Shiny fabrics with bright colors are adopted as they are suitable for the stage and offer better visibility to large audiences. When *Tuong* moved away from an art form for the elite, it needed to adapt to be compatible with the market economy, even though it is still supported in part by the Government.
- Secondly, some changes in costumes were required to work better with the performer's movements and stage settings. The stage is made of wood and decorated with carpets in some areas. Therefore, when the actors kneel and move on their knees, the costumes have to be durable and short enough in some places and long enough in others i.e. with more ergonomic construction to facilitate actors' movements while still preserving a traditional appearance and effect.
- Thirdly, changes are needed to entice the audience. The hats are in general, required to be the same – as changing the shape of them will cause changes in their meaning. However, the size of the hats or some small details can be changed. The shape of masks are not changed, but their makeup materials are altered to be compatible with the effects of stage lighting. Similarly the actors have to adjust their makeup as well to have the desired effect under artificial lights.

To summarize, the changes in the costumes and makeup are mostly due to the changes brought about by being inside on a stage. Another area concerns the adaptation of modern technologies to draw more attention to the performers. This is one crucial point that can assist in bringing the traditional *Tuong* closer to contemporary audiences and especially the young people.

The traditional *Tuong* is not known for exaggerating sounds or lights due to the original performance environment was small. Moreover such exaggeration of light and sound can prevent the actors' from portraying the original meaning accurately. However, with the larger inside venues many new amenities needed investigation and integration.

However, the new arrangement of the stage and the ability to amplify or exaggerate sounds and lights became a double-edged sword as it creates more pressure for the actors. The process of speaking and singing lines in the traditional *Tuong* are complex, and not all the sounds are clearly pushed out of the mouth and off the tongue. The tones of vocalization can now be exaggerated with the use of microphones and speakers, introducing unintended and/or altered frequencies. Technology might not always be able to reproduce precisely the sharpness of the actors' voice. In some cases, the actor might not be able to deliver the full meaning of their lines with some technological pairings.

The choreography of dances are not likely to change, but may instead be simplified. In the case when the actors are to deliver figurative or religious performances and non-spoken scenes, the movements will be simplified to its foundational meaning. The performer may even add a few lines so that the audience can fully understand the scene when body language alone is unable to deliver such content. In general, traditional dances will not change as these tend to interact more with the orchestra, meaning that they follow a musical beat. This is especially true in the fight scenes. The actions are dramatized like real action and are termed "partially figurative."

The singing of *Tuong* follows the traditional "five tones" rule. The requirements regarding voice and tones are strictly followed by the artists. The use of figurative indication is adopted flexibly. Instead of focusing on the main character only, the director allows other characters to have small actions so that the stage is not "dead."

Plays' scripts do not belong to the theater, but to the Government. Therefore, any changes in scripts need careful review and prior approval from the Government. From the side of the theater, there are efforts to change the scripts. Some old vocabulary, if not too unfamiliar, will be preserved, while some of the older and hard to understand lines are revised. The script follows the Asian dramatic plot model where it is rooted in emotional struggles that move to a protagonist-antagonist struggle. The traditional scenes are combinations of active relationships and therefore are not able to be cut. With that being said, and knowing that long play length (at around three hours) is one of the negative mental aspects that deter audiences, simplification is desirable, but remains modest. For the newer wittier *Tuongs*, where there is less restrictions on words, the modification of scripts are easier. The performers can add some lines, while abiding by the rules and maintain their close syncopation with the orchestra.

In comparing the classic play “Moc Que Anh Giving in the Tree” performed on December 4th 2017 with a modernized version performed on February 24th 2019 the following differences were noted:

- Change in the length of the play: The most noticeable difference between these two versions of the play is their length. Although the structure of the play remained the same, the simplification and reduction of some lines and details had shortened the play from 180 minutes to approximately 120.
- Simplifying the actions: In general, the actors must not change the nature of their character. However, the dances were in sync with and supported by the orchestra. The characteristics of the actors remain the same, but the witty characters were exaggerated. In fact, many of those in attendance on February 24th 2019 actually laughed out loud. Figurative indications were deduced and the actors were always moving.
- The active use of sound and lighting effects: In regard to the settings of stage and equipment it has been long established in theater that curtains are used to move from one scene to another. Typically there would be two animated backgrounds so it is easier for the audience to follow the play. Sound effects such as birds chirping, red light imitating fire etc. were used more frequently. The fighting and dance scenes were accentuated with colorful lights as are typical techniques in modern dramas.

Prior to the official opening of the 2019 National Tuong and Folk Song Festival a free performance of a renovated “Trung Than” play was held for both the public and the evaluation council on April 10, 2019 where we conducted a review. This was a landmark showing of a shortened historical drama that preserved the original story’s content. It was renovated in the same manner as an experimental version of the “Moc Que Anh Giving in the Tree” production with modern theatrical equipment and the integration of several contemporary art disciplines.

A complete team including the staff whom edited the ancient script, the director and the graphic designer was carefully selected by the theater. They operated under the precept: Innovate, but retain as much original traditional spirit as possible. Their goal was to make use of all ideas to respectfully pair an ancient drama with the achievements of the industrial age.

Theater stages have many layers of curtains for the selective revealing of transitions. In the play this time, the curtain was nearly not needed as there was flexible use of graphics, lights and the application of traditional tactics combined with the pre-layout (the background). In addition, the battle drum’s role was strengthened, the two routes of the chicken wings passage were also fully utilized as usually only the inner path was used. There were graphics that really impressed the authors. Especially the boxes that rotated on the stage, creating the ghost’s lair and at other times used to convey the mystery of the *Cham* dancers.

Sound and lighting elements are strongly represented in the modernization of the *Tuong*. The echo-resaping audio techniques combined with a gloomy color pallet increase the spookiness of the talking ghost segment. Music in the above passages has a symmetrical beat structure, with repeating sections, while adding Western-style percussion elements take the orchestra in a quite sympathetic direction.

Contemporary and ballroom dance, with their visual and emotive effects bring these visual art elements into this epic drama. This is like a fantasy. In the author's opinion, something new is often controversial. But there is no denying that the integration of contemporary art forms bring forth more boldness and aesthetic pleasure. The choreographer has fused them quite skillfully and subtly, ensuring the essence of the ancient drama was not distorted. Basically modern "tactics" were blended with the familiar expression of expressions.

From the most recent survey, it was found that the material to dress the theater's main stage was a velvet non-glossy fabric and its use continues. However, this time there has been a rich investment in costumes. The designers added emulsion (glitter etc.) to selected fabrics/areas to capture the audience's attention under the spotlights. While the amount of non-glossy materials has increased significantly as this play was nearly continuously lit. There were ongoing color changes, ambient colored swivel lamps and ball lights that proffered a constant rushing appearance.

Efforts to Bring Traditional *Tuong Theater* Closer to Contemporary Audiences

Realizing the fact that the traditional *Tuong Theater* was in danger of extinction the theater's leaders partnered with those with organizing and advertising experience to develop some initiatives to increase the public awareness of this art form. Additionally, a review of similar proposals to support the theater from 1986 till the present was investigated, with most being within the last 5 years.

- Giving away tickets as presents: This is a method to retain two different audience demographic groups. First are the young people reluctant to spend the evening at a *Tuong Theater* performance and secondly support the loyal older patrons that have less free time and hinderances to transportation. Specifically, the theater gives away tickets to older officers, older artists, and students of universities, especially those in the social sciences and humanities from Vietnam's National University Hanoi and the Academy of Journalism etc.
- Creating tours of performances and offer self-guided directions: Actively advertise historical plays held in many regions, especially the rural areas, border regions and islands.
- Bringing traditional *Tuong Theater* into schools: In 2018, the theater successfully organized two pathways for introducing this art form to students. The first was via classroom activities such as drawing masks and acting workshops etc. The second was discounted student/family tickets advertised through the theater's fanpage that attracted a large number of high school students and their

parents. The price ranged from 100.000 VND to 150.000 VND with discounts for high school and university students.

- Advertising the traditional *Tuong Theater* to international tourists: On Monday and Thursday afternoons, from 6 PM to 7:30 PM, the artists perform in the lobby of the theater. The Lion dancing teams also agreed to perform in front of the theater to attract tourists. The theater installed projectors to provide English subtitles as well as assigned supporters to give introductions and translation of the plays for tourists. According to the authors' investigation 100% of the interviewed artists reported that international tourists were very interested in the *Tuong Theater*. Ticket price ranged from \$50 to \$100.
- Connecting with potential partners: Since 2000, some theaters have created connections with tour operators, transforming the theater into a tourist attraction. Since 2016, the theater has cooperated with the managers of the Old Quarters of Hanoi to have free *Tuong* shows on Ma May street. In recent years, the theater has also cooperated with the Hanoi Opera House to perform weekly for Vietnamese and international audiences, as well as connecting with schools so that students and young people in general can be introduced to this art form.

Summary and Assessment

During our investigation we came to appreciate the efforts to renew and bring the art of traditional *Tuong Theater* to a wider audience. Currently, the *Tuong* art form remains supported by the government while at the same time co-existing in Vietnam's modern dynamic market economy where many forms of art have been turned into profitable industries. The Vietnamese Party and Government has shown a direct, ongoing interest in preserving and developing the values of the traditional *Tuong Theater*, whereas the *Vietnamese Theater of Tuong* revealed that they want to grow more independent from governmental financial support. They are motivated to create a contemporary art product suited to the needs of a wider audience to increase profit. Their efforts are admirable as it can be difficult to attract substantial audiences to the *Tuong Theater*.

In a way the current situation of the traditional *Tuong* can be compared to an artifact being preserved in the museum where it remains a curious form of art for a small group of knowledgeable patrons. We say this as our subjective judgment is that the recent *Tuong Theater* renewal efforts are simply not adequate. There has not been wide enough advertisements to enhance this art form's visibility and concerns over its preservation to contemporary audiences.

Regarding renewal of the traditional *Tuong*, the act of simplifying the play's original content is the safer and reasonable solution. However, it cannot avoid "dramatizing" it as certain characteristics of the art form are changed. The simplification of dances, songs and dialog can make it more approachable, but at the risk of diluting its original aesthetics.

We recognize that there are certain problems about introducing *Tuong* to contemporary audiences.

First the advertising process of the theater is not effective enough. The facebook fanpage of the theater only consists of approximately 500 likes with extremely limited interactions through shares and comments. For example, the avatar of the fanpage, which was updated on February 14th 2019 received a bit over 30 likes. Currently facebook is the largest social media platform both in Vietnam and internationally.

Below is a pie chart delineating the preferred forms of entertainment from a survey of 50 random respondents.

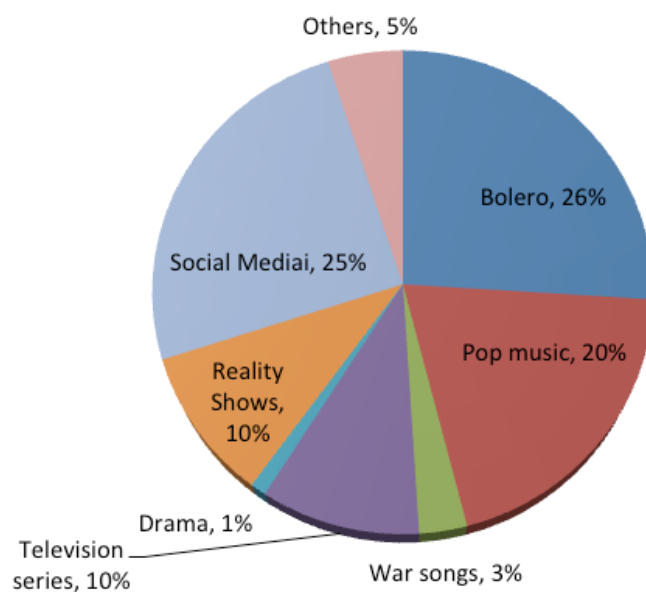


Figure 3. A breakdown of the preferred forms of entertainment from 50 random respondents.

Among 10 artists working at the theater, 9 hold the opinion that the problems lie with its public relations process and plans. Whereas only one person thinks that the problems are caused by the existing press and tour operators.

Secondly, the budget of the theater is not sufficient enough for the artists to organize and carry out long term plans for developing greater patronage. Consequently, the current initiatives are small, scattered and disconnected. This is the reason why the shows for students were cancelled, despite certain achievements in increased awareness and attendance.

Conclusion and Suggested Solutions

Challenges Facing Traditional Forms of Performing Art in Vietnam Over the Last 30 Years

In the last 30 years the performing arts in Vietnam has witnessed radical changes – including but not limited to the creation of electronic music, changes in visual arts and related technologies as well as cinematic effects. These changes pose

threats to the existence and authenticity of traditional performing arts. Through the surveys on the *Tuong Theater*, we have indicated some of the difficulties and obstacles that not only pertain to theater specifically, but are also faced by traditional performing arts in general.

Traditional forms of art and theatrical performances find themselves in a conflicted situation: Whether to preserve the core values and accept small audiences or renew themselves toward contemporary forms of art to bridge the gap for today's audiences. We hold high praise for the flexible and assertive responses from the artists of the *Vietnamese Theater of Tuong*. They have realized that it is high time something was done to support the traditional forms of performing art so they can flourish within the context of urbanization in Vietnam. Although Hanoi was not a geographical origin in the development of *Tuong* it has great potential to develop into a hub of cultural tourism. Many long-lived traditional forms of art in Hanoi have found their own motives for transformation there.

Changes to traditional art forms make for an ongoing debate in Vietnam. Many people express concerns that these methods will distort their basic aesthetic values. While they also think that these forms should be fully preserved – just like how one preserves antiques in a museum for small interest groups. However, most people concerned about this problem agree on the need for a balanced solution between preserving the art form's core values while adopting or integrating some modern methods for these art forms "to live" in Vietnam's current social context.

Tuong can be hard to enjoy. It has lived a complicated life in the past when its main purpose was to serve monarchs. Nowadays, while the modern, fast-paced lifestyle puts a value on the practicality of art, the *Tuong* focuses on artistic and symbolic acting methods, as well as discourses covering history, ideologies and social conflicts. From this foundation, it is difficult to protect *Tuong's* originality on one hand while attempting to blend it with or adapt it to the methods found in modern artistic expression on the other.

Vietnam is currently developing a sustainable, socialist-oriented, market economy. The culture industry in Vietnam, with the support of the government alongside the many start-ups of youngsters who care enough for traditional forms of performing arts has made significant progress in recent years. They have found it is important to strive for a balance between commercializing art for economic benefits and bringing traditional art forms closer to the contemporary audiences with that of the art form's historical roots. It is safe to say that, within the context of the competitiveness of consumerism and fast-paced urbanization, *Tuong* and other forms of traditional art should invest in innovations regarding modern technologies, as well as carefully evaluate and select suitable expressive methods from modern forms of art. Additionally, communication means such as those offered by multi-media, technology and social media for advertisements should be more fully utilized.

Suggested Solutions

From the result of our investigation, we would like to suggest some solutions to the problem of balancing the preservation of traditional art forms with the need for maintaining and growing ones audience.

Regarding the reformation of the traditional *Tuong*, we believe the theater should consider investigating more into the idea of street performances along with a better execution of light and sound effects. We suggest this solution since “Broadway Art” has been used by many nations to advertise their art forms to tourists. Theaters could attract more people by performing in open but small areas, which is similar to the traditional way *Tuong* was performed. Instead of focusing on small details, the theater could interact more directly with their audiences through actions such as giving presents. Although the budget is still based on governmental funding, it could be further supported by increases in the publics’ interest and ticket sales.

Regarding revising the *Tuong* for contemporary audiences. The theater could collaborate with religious facilities, especially pagodas for to the following reasons:

- First, the *Tuong* contains religious elements in its performances already. Therefore, it is reasonable to have it be performed in religious environments.
- Secondly, pagodas and temples tend to organize many festivals, which attract a wide range of people of all ages and especially the older people whom were found to be loyal *Tuong* patrons.
- Thirdly, pagodas can consistently pay artists to perform, which is more sustainable than selling tickets at a theater. The preservation of traditional art forms can also protect the Nation from cultural violations and is a meritorious endeavor which religious agencies should support.

Comparing *Tuong* with *Cheo* or *Cai Luong*, this turns out to be a productive idea. Plays of *Cheo* which are performed in pagodas are suitable for most audiences with diverse attendees; they are the highlight of the festival and boosts the artists income. In fact, this same location pairing has been initiated with *Cheo* in many northern provinces. However, the same has not yet attempted with *Tuong*. On the other hand, the theater could also cooperate with businesses, companies and private stores in their events.

Our final suggestion concerns educating students and young people about the art of *Tuong*. Schools could organize extracurricular activities that are related to *Tuong*. This initiative would serve to hopefully increase youth’s knowledge about the *Tuong* art form as one needs to know about it to love and protect it.

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Note: we regret that some Vietnamese characters are not properly represented by our font family.

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