“Súy Vân Feigns Madness”: Canonisation and Creativity in Vietnamese Music Theatre

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Abstract

This article explores the canonisation of chèo music theatre in Vietnam since the early twentieth century. Focusing on the reform of the classical chèo play “Súy Vân,” it examines the confluence of factors—the political and cultural currents and the networks of actors—involved in canon formation. In this historical account of canonisation, chèo is positioned within an enlarged conversation about tradition, in which tradition is understood as a space for creativity that has recourse to the past while undergoing continual transformation. Moving beyond the canon, questions about the nature of tradition and artistic creativity in Vietnamese music theatre are also explored through analysis of recent experimental work by the artist Soỉn X.

I am the mad Súy Vân, I do not hide anything
Although I am mad
I am an invaluable genius
It is rumoured that I sing beautifully and dance strangely

Chẳng giấu gì Súy Vân dại là tôi
Mà tuy dại dột tệ
Tôi thần tài vô giá
Người ta đồn tôi hát hay múa lạ

...	...
Who has made this wall that traps me?	*Bởi vì ai rào giậu ngăn sân*
Due to my wedding vows being broken	*Mà trong lỗi thề*
I have turned mad	*Tôi điên cuồng rồ dại*

This song text is taken from the extract "Súy Vân Feigns Madness," ("Súy Vân Giả Dại") as performed by the Vietnam Chèo Theatre in Hanoi in December 2018. After these words, the actress playing the role of Súy Vân performs a sequence of songs and dances that express the character's erratic, volatile state of madness. "Súy Vân Feigns Madness" is one of the most famous extracts of the Vietnamese music theatre genre called chèo. Through the musical dramatisation of her story, Súy Vân has become a well-known character with an enduring presence in the national imagination. A measure of how Súy Vân has seeped into popular culture can be seen in reality television shows. In programmes like "Vietnam's Got Talent" (2014) and "Familiar Face" (Gương mặt thân quen, 2018), young contestants have performed the "Súy Vân Feigns Madness" extract in the competitions.[1]

Performances of Súy Vân today are presented as "classical chèo" (chèo cổ). Yet the play was forged in its current form through a thorough process of reform and canonisation in the latter part of the twentieth century. The first performance of "Reformed Súy Vân" ("Súy Vân Cải Biên") by the Vietnam Chèo Theatre took place in 1962. The inclusion of the term "Reformed" in the title acknowledges the significant changes that were made to the theatrical narrative compared with previous versions, but it was later dropped as it took on the status of a classical play.

Focusing on "Súy Vân," this article explores how classical chèo plays have become canonised as exemplary models worthy of being sustained into the future. The formation of canons is dependent on a diverse array of agents who are invested in authorising particular repertoires and practices. Critical examinations of canonisation have brought into relief the ideologies and practices of exclusion and inclusion at play in the perpetuation of repertorial and disciplinary canons (Citron 1993:22; see also Bohlman 2004; Harris 2008; Rogers 2022). In the case of chèo, the repertorial canon has largely been propagated by the government-run troupes and training programmes first established in the mid-twentieth century (Vietnam Chèo Theatre 1996; Trần Việt Ngữ 2013; Nguyễn Thị Tuyết2001). Scholarship in Vietnamese on chèo by practitioners and researchers, which I draw on in this article, has also contributed to the authorisation of the canonic repertoire.

The reform of chèo in the twentieth century is entrenched in an opposition between tradition and modernity. This frame continues to shape

[1] See the performances by contestant Hà Thu on "Familiar Face" (https://video.afamily.vn/tap-12-guong-mat-than-quen-2018-xuy-van-gia-dai-nsut-thuy-ngan-ha-thu-55848.chn) and young contestant Đức Vĩnh on "Vietnam's Got Talent" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oe-WugdW9W0).

discourse on the development of music theatre. Scholarly and public debate about the future direction of chèo has largely focused on attempting to identify what traditional characteristics should be preserved and what elements should be modernised (e.g., Theatre Institute 1995). Such enduring, familiar terms of reference are hard to reshape. Understandings of the history of music theatre have been forged in terms of the modernisation of tradition, not just in Vietnam but also in other countries in Asia and elsewhere.[2] Such interpretations make it difficult to approach the "development" of chèo outside of these terms of reference. Yet scholars who have theorised tradition in different cultural and historical contexts have long questioned its opposition with modernity. Such questioning has sought to free tradition from being defined as "a resistance to modernity" and to enable an "enlarged conversation about tradition" (Phillips 2004:25).[3] In such an enlarged conversation, "tradition becomes a newly complex, open-ended subject" (Clifford 2004:152); it becomes a means of thinking about the forward-looking trajectory of practices that spring from tradition.

This article aims to contribute to such an enlarged conversation, where tradition is understood as a space for musical creativity that has recourse to the past while undergoing continual transformation. Within this frame, the canonisation of chèo in the twentieth century becomes less about the incessant march of "modernity" and more about understanding the confluence of factors—the political and cultural currents and the networks of actors—at work in the historical transformation of artistic practices. In my efforts to map out the ideological frameworks involved in canon formation, I pay attention to these actors and their creative practices, highlighting the values that have governed theatre practices at different historical moments. As they sought to devise new techniques and styles of performance, reformers introduced new ways of making theatre for the stage and changed musical aesthetics, combining global influences from theatre forms beyond Vietnam with local approaches indebted to the past. While much of this article is imbued with historical perspectives, the enduring contours of canonisation, its boundaries and exclusions, are also revealed through an examination of a contemporary theatre work titled "Two Ladies Nguyệt Cô" ("Hai nàng Nguyệt Cô") devised by the musician Nguyễn Xuân Soṅ, who I will refer to by his stage name, Soṅ X.

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[2] Matthew Cohen's historical study of theatre in colonial Indonesia (Cohen 2016), Andrew Killick's research on *ch'angguk* in Korea (Killick 2010) and Jonathan Stock's study of *huju* in Shanghai (Stock 2003), for instance, elaborate, in different ways, on widespread discourses about tradition and modernity in the historical development of theatre in Asia.

[3] The enlarged conversation envisaged by Mark Salber Phillips would "dissolve the simple binary of tradition and modernity which for so long has distracted those who have tried to come to grips with this concept …. Once this false opposition is set aside and the problem of tradition ceases to be defined as a resistance to modernity, tradition becomes again a means of raising essential questions about the ways in which we pass on the life of cultures—questions that necessarily include issues of authority as well as invention, practice as well as interpretation" (Phillips 2004:25).

The field research for this article was conducted during five trips to Vietnam from 2017 to 2023. During fieldwork, I gathered primary and secondary texts, observed and videotaped rehearsals and performances of "Suý Vân" and other plays, and spoke with practitioners and scholars. Fieldwork was mostly based in Hanoi, where I spent most time with the Vietnam Chèo Theatre (Nhà Hát Chèo ViệtNam), which was established in 1951 and currently has a total membership of nearly 200 people. I also made visits to the provinces of Thanh Hoá and Thái Bình, where I witnessed performances and talked to musicians at both professional and amateur levels. The "National Talent Competition for Young Professional Performers of Tuồng and Chèo" held in Thanh Hoá City, which I attended from the 9 to 13 August 2017, was a valuable opportunity to gauge regional differences in the performance of the canonic repertoire by professional troupes from across the country. As the title of the competition indicates, it featured two of the main Vietnamese music theatre genres: chèo, which is often referred to as folk or popular theatre, and tuồng classical opera, which is known as hát bội in central and southern Vietnam.[4] The state-run infrastructure of music theatres in Vietnam includes separate troupes for chèo and tuồng, but Soṇ X's work "Two Ladies Nguyệt Cô" pointedly eschews this separation by bringing together influences from both genres. To gain insights into how Soṇ X devised "Two Ladies Nguyệt Cô," I attended rehearsals over several weeks leading up to the premiere at the Hanoi New Music Festival on the 20th of December 2018.

The canonisation of chèo is part of a broader process of reform which has had a wide-reaching impact on Vietnamese music traditions. During the late colonial period in the early twentieth century, the reform of music theatre was influenced by the influx of European spoken theatre and was driven by a desire to modernise.[5] Chèo had long been part of the fabric of village life in northern Vietnam and was performed by itinerant troupes in village yards across the Red River delta, but performance styles were changed and adapted to suit the new theatres that were opening in Hanoi and other urban centres in northern areas. The adaption of chèo for urban stages in the early twentieth century can be seen as the antecedent of the more systematic canonisation of classical chèo in the wake of the communist revolution in 1945. The government of the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), which was established by the Vietnamese Communist

[4] The term opera, rather than music theatre, has often been used for tuồng in part because of its links with the nineteenth century court of the Nguyễn dynasty and associations with classical/high culture (see Wettermark 2017:19–21).

[5] In the early twentieth century, around the time that moves were first being made to modernise chèo in northern Vietnam, a new form of music theatre called cải lương ('renovated theatre') emerged in southern Vietnam, drawing on theatrical forms and cultural ideas from diverse Vietnamese, Chinese and French sources (Trần Văn Khải 1970). The processes of canonisation discussed in this article are not unique to chèo, but comparison with other forms of Vietnamese music theatre like cải lương and tuồng/hát bội is not included here. Little research has been published in English on cải lương and its music, but for discussion of some political issues see Nguyen (2012). The PhD theses by Wettermark (2017) and Tran (2017) are the main sources in English on tuồng/hát bội. These theses include valuable historical information, although they do not specifically focus on canon formation.

Party following the end of the Franco-Vietnamese War in 1954, implemented a series of reforms of tradition as part of the war effort and the nationalist project of building a new socialist society.[6] This included efforts to eliminate any content in theatrical stories deemed to be tied to French colonialism and the feudal system of the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945). After the end of the Vietnam-America war in 1975, the communist-led government of the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam established an extensive infrastructure of music theatres across the whole country, although chèo troupes were confined to northern areas. State-run troupes have been instrumental in the formation of the classical chèo canon and the production of "new chèo" (chèo mới) plays. The corpus of new plays, which have been written since the 1950s, is vast and lies outside the scope of this article, but classical chèo has maintained a prominent place in the repertoire into the twenty-first century.[7]

As Vietnam has become integrated into the global economy, following the implementation of the Renovation Policy (đổi mới) initiated in the late 1980s, state support for chèo has continued despite the significant cultural and economic change that has ensued from several decades of rapid economic development. The place of chèo in contemporary society was a central issue addressed at a conference held in Thái Bình City in November 2023 titled "Safeguarding and Promoting the Folk Performance and Art of Chèo in Contemporary Society." This conference, which I attended, was organised in preparation for the official nomination of chèo theatre for inscription on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2024. UNESCO inscription will likely influence the future trajectory of chèo. Although the complex issues relating to the heritagisation process will not be elaborated here, much of the debate at the Thái Bình City conference bore the hallmarks of the tradition-modern binary.[8] This would seem to suggest that enduring questions about what constitutes the chèo tradition after decades of modernisation look set to continue to inform safeguarding policies into the future.

This article adds to the small amount of scholarship in English on chèo.[9] The first section examines the drive to modernise chèo during the late colonial and communist periods in the mid-twentieth century. It discusses how chèo stories, prior to canonisation, revolved around flexible, quasi-independent skits by archetypal characters. As part of the canonisation process, the creation of theatrical

[6] The Vietnamese Communist Party has had several different names in its history but for simplicity I only use the current name.

[7] Many of the first new chèo plays produced in the DRV in the 1950s and 1960s focused on supporting the war effort. After 1975, new plays have addressed a range of social, historical, national and political themes. For discussion of trends in new chèo see, for instance, Trần Minh Phượng (2015) and Trần Việt Ngữ (2013:860–83).

[8] The conference proceedings published in Vietnamese (Vũ Thị Hằng and Hoàng Thị Thu 2024) include my chapter, "Should Chèo Music Theatre be Safeguarded as Intangible Cultural Heritage?: Some Critical Reflections on Canonisation and Creativity".

[9] Despite the importance placed on music theatre in nationalist narratives of the arts in Vietnam, little research on chèo has been published in English. Apart from some short introductory texts published in Vietnam (e.g., Hữu Ngọcand Lady Borton 2005; Đình Quang et al. 1999), one of the few sources in English on chèo is Lauren Meeker's journal article (Meeker 2015).

narratives based on skits was superseded by the writing of scripts, which fixed stories into a linear narrative. After setting the broader historical context, the second section examines the play "Súy Vân," highlighting how certain values relating to morality and gender relations were an important focus of reform. To move beyond portraying canon formation as an abstract, faceless process, my account pays attention to the different actors and institutions involved in the reform of the play during the early and mid-twentieth century. The third section takes a closer look at the musical transformation of "Súy Vân." Reflecting on the colloquial metaphor of "sticky rice with beans", it explores how performers combined new musical innovations, including the introduction of a conductor and composer, with preexisting forms of creativity. The fourth section steps outside the canon to discuss "Two Ladies Nguyệt Cô" by Soṇ X. This contemporary work combines theatrical elements from chèo and tuồng with live electronics, video art and improvisatory techniques. While the piece makes use of two canonic characters—Suý Vân from chèo and Nguyệt Cô from tuồng—it also challenges conventional conceptions of Vietnamese music theatre. Bringing together diverse practices in new ways, Soṇ X's music theatre raises questions about the nature of tradition and artistic creativity.

The Canonisation of Chèo

Debate about the historical development of chèo and its future direction has typically been framed in terms of how to balance the traditional and modern (see, for example, Trần Minh Phượng 2015; Trần Đình Ngôn 2014; Trần Việt Ngữ 2013; Đinh Quang Trung 2009).[10] A key dilemma has been: how can the "essence" (tinh hoa) and "national identity" (bản sắc dân tộc) of chèo be retained while performance practices are changed to suit the contemporary context and tastes of audiences? Chèo is by no means unique in this regard.[11] Although the tradition-modern binary is, arguably, a tired and unhelpful analytical frame that obscures more than it illuminates, it is pervasive in many debates about Vietnamese culture. But anxieties about the future direction of chèo have been particularly acute. Books and articles in Vietnamese about chèo, penned by directors, musicians, scholars and critics, include much soul-searching about the quality, vitality and sustainability of chèo (see, for example, Trần Việt Ngữ 2013; Theatre Institute 1990, 1995, 2005). One might even go as far as to say that the history of chèo in recent decades has been marked by a recurring sense of crisis, which stems from worries about the art losing its cultural relevance. Its waning appeal to audiences has been ascribed to numerous factors, including rapid cultural change and increasing competition from other forms of entertainment in

[10] The Vietnamese discourse on tradition versus modernity has been populated, on one side, by terms like 'tradition' (truyền thố ́ng), 'classical' (cổ), 'preservation' (bảo tồn), 'maintenance' (giữ gìn), 'revival'/'restoration' (phục hồi) and 'inheritance' (kêthừa). On the other, the main terms have been 'moḍernity' (hiệṇđại), the 'new' (mới/tân), 'development' (phát triển), 'reform' (cải biên) and change (biếṇđổi).

[11] See the volume edited by Đào Mạnh Hùng (2003) for extended discussion of how 'national identity' has been promoted in the 'development' of chèo and other forms of Vietnamese theatre.

the media age. The quality of many new plays has also been questioned. Despite some notable successes, critics have accused some new plays of going so far from tradition that they have "lost the identity of chèo" and even that they threaten to "destroy chèo" (Trần Minh Phượng 1995:17). But what constitutes the identity of chèo? What are its distinctive characteristics?

In Vietnamese scholarship, chèo's unique characteristics are often linked to the historical performance practices of itinerant troupes, known as gánh chèo, which existed before performances were staged in proscenium arch theatres (Trần Việt Ngữ 2013). Before the onset of revolution and war in the mid-twentieth century, these groups were known to travel across northern Vietnam to perform at village festivals and other special events. With stage props limited to what could easily be transported, the stage consisted of rattan mats laid out in a village communal yard, with audiences huddled around on three sides. Such outdoor performances were based around improvised vignettes or "skits" (trò). Skits were based on the behaviour of archetypal characters rooted in everyday rural life. The main archetypes in chèo, around which classical chèo is still oriented, are "good" (chín, lit. "mature") and "incorrect" (lệch) lead characters (both male and female), jesters or clowns (hề), elderly men (lão) who are typically good-natured, and malevolent elderly women (mụ) (Nguyễn Thị Nhung 1998:29–35). There are numerous characters within these broad categories, and scholars have wrestled with how to classify them. Hà Văn Cầu, for instance, has devoted a book to delineating and documenting the many types of jester (hề) (2005b).

The idea of storytelling through loosely connected skits is quite different from that of a scripted play with a set, linear narrative. Skits convey a "plot" or "story" (tích), and an engaging story is considered to be the "soul" or "heart" of a skit (Trần Bảng 2015:77).[12] Rather than determining a fixed narrative arc, skits provide outlines within which stories are shaped. Renowned artists in itinerant groups were known for their ability to embody particular archetypal characters and to spontaneously elaborate the "core of the skit" (thân trò). Drawing on different musical styles, they were adept at expanding or shortening skits in response to the reaction of the audience. Skits not strictly tied to the development of the main story could also be added. Performers were expected to weave in "subsidiary skits" (trò phụ), which deviated from and enriched the central story, in order to "enthuse the eyes and ears" of the audience (Hoàng Kiều 1990:24).

From a musical perspective, skits were elaborated through a rich repertoire of songs and styles of heightened speech connected to archetypal characters. The literature on chèo music paints a picture of creativity in which performers extemporise words within flexible melodic frameworks and freely choose songs to sustain the flow of the narrative (e.g., Hoàng Kiều 1974; Bùi Đức Hạnh 2006, 2004). This improvisatory mode of performance fundamentally changed as chèo was canonised during the early and mid-twentieth centuries. The requirement to closely adhere to canonic scripts largely curtailed the scope for going on

[12] The relationship between skits and stories is summed up in the saying, "The story is translated into a skit, through the skit the story is expressed" (Tích dịch nên trò, qua trò hiển tích), see Trần Bảng (2015:76–77).

narrative detours through extending, shortening and reordering skits. As performers were no longer able to adapt and modify performances according to the context and interaction with the audience, the performance-audience dynamics of chèo were radically changed. In her article on the Thị Mầu character of the classical play "Goddess of Mercy—Thị Kính" ("Quan Âm Thị Kính"), Lauren Meeker (2015) discusses how the shift from village performances to the professional stage altered the relationship between performer and audience. Meeker argues that as the audience came to assume the position of a witness, chèo ceased being a form of social communication based on performer-audience interaction (2015:153).

The historical factors that led to a shift from skits to scripts, from participant to witness, are worth exploring in more detail. The move away from itinerant groups towards a more static system of troupes performing in theatres in urban centres took place in two interconnected waves. The first wave in the early twentieth century was spearheaded by the director Nguyễn Đình Nghị (b.1884–d.1954). The second was led by communist cultural cadres; it began during the First Indochina War against the French from 1945 to 1954 and gathered pace following the establishment of the Chèo Research Committee (Ban Nghiên Cứu Chèo) in 1958.

Nguyễn Đình Nghị was well versed in the culture of itinerant troupes. He sought them out while growing up in his home province of Hưng Yên (Southeast of Hanoi) and while working as a producer in Hanoi from 1914 onwards (Trần Đình Ngôn and Trần Văn Hiếu 2011). His initial productions, which came to be known as "civilised chèo" (chèo văn minh), transferred the repertoire of itinerant musicians to the urban stage. The term "civilised chèo" aligns with a civilisation discourse linked to ideas about social evolution, the progress of human society and national sovereignty, which were in vogue amongst intellectuals in Vietnam and other countries in Asia in the first decades of the twentieth century (see Tai 2024). But "civilised chèo" did not constitute an abrupt break with the past. Some costumes and aspects of staging were altered to suit the performance context of urban theatres, but the style of music performance was little changed. Nguyễn Đình Nghị's innovations continued with the creation of "renovated chèo" (chèo cải lương), which was showcased in regular performances at the Sán Nhiên đài theatre in Hanoi from 1924 until 1932 (Phạm Mạnh Phan 1944:961; Trần Việt Ngữ 2013:399–415). Explaining the difference between civilised and renovated chèo, Nguyễn Đình Nghị remarked in a published interview, "From 1923 I wrote renovated chèo, which realistically expressed the modern psychology of the characters, but all the lyrics of the songs were classical. This was different from civilised chèo in that all the scenes and songs [of renovated chèo] are written down. The performers must memorise the play and not improvise and speak incorrectly…." (Phạm Mạnh Phan 1944:961). With renovated chèo, then, plays were fully scripted, and deviation from the text was not permitted.

Nguyễn Đình Nghị's productions emerged in the context of a developing urban scene of international spoken theatre. Following the opening of the Municipal Theatre in 1911 in Hanoi, now known as the Hanoi Opera House, plays by French authors like Molière, Corneille and Racine were introduced. Traditionally

Vietnamese dramatic performances always involved music and song, but in the 1920s and 1930s, Vietnamese writers started to write spoken theatre (Gibbs 2000; Wilcox 2006). Vietnamese commentators have highlighted how Nguyễn Đình Nghị was influenced by such "western" (thái tây) influences (Trần Việt Ngữ 2013:391; Trần Đình Ngôn and Trần Văn Hiếu 2011). His work looked outward to encompass the "civilised", "modern" culture of the world and inward to reflect the everyday lives of local people. To appeal to the developing urban middle class, his innovations included simplifying the language of texts and encouraging a more realistic, less stylised performance style with less exaggerated movements. In a manner somewhat reminiscent of a variety show, some of Nguyễn Đình Nghị's productions incorporated accessible and humorous songs from different genres. His aim was to make a trip to the theatre an enjoyable, entertaining evening full of laughter and surprise.

In addition to appealing to audiences through comedy, Nguyễn Đình Nghị's plays had social and moral agendas. He described the edifying role of his theatre in the following terms, "All the plays I have arranged focus on how to live a good life; they make use of refined lyrics, songs and laughter to uphold a culture that awakens morality in people's hearts and minds" (Phạm Mạnh Phan 1944:961, 964). In practice, the morality of renovated chèo often upheld conventional models of filial piety and righteous behaviour while renouncing some "backward" customs (Trần Việt Ngữ 2013:427). In the case of one of his most famous plays, "Mad Because of Love" ("Điên vì tình") from 1929, which is based on the Kim Nham/Súy Vân story, Confucian-influenced moral codes of filial piety are largely kept intact (Vũ Thuý Ngần 2011; Trần Việt Ngữ 2012:28–32).

The musical arrangement of "Mad Because of Love" comprised traditional songs but with an expanded instrumental accompaniment. Instruments such as the 36-string dulcimer (đàn tam thập lục), the 2-string moon-lute (đàn nguyệt) and the vertical bamboo flute (tiêu) were added to the core ensemble of percussion (drums and cymbals), horizontal bamboo flute (sáo) and 2-stringed fiddle (đàn nhị) (Trần Việt Ngữ 2013:436). The musical directions in Nguyễn Đình Nghị's scripts are brief; they mostly consist of song titles written next to specific lines of the text. But such indications were sufficient to provide clear pointers to the knowledgeable musicians he was working with. For them, sticking to the script meant it was no longer an option to make choices about which song to perform at any particular moment or to extemporise new words, as was done in the itinerant tradition. In "Mad Because of Love" only chèo melodies are featured. But in other plays Nguyễn Đình Nghị included regional folk songs and melodies from other types of Vietnamese music theatre as well as novel items, like songs from French and Chinese sources (Trần Việt Ngữ 2013:436).

During the First Indochina War, chèo was employed to garner support for the war effort against the French. When the Franco-Vietnamese war started in 1945, key figures in the "renovated chèo" movement relocated to Thanh Hóa province south of Hanoi, and Nguyễn Đình Nghị wrote plays that supported the fight for liberation, including "Ascending the path of resistance" and "Increase production" (Vũ Hồng Đức 2011:50–51). As war continued, the Vietnamese Communist Party moved to harness the power of traditional theatre. The Party's policy was established after a debate about music theatre was held in 1950 in the communist-controlled northern

region of Việt Bắc. Focusing on the three main genres of Vietnamese music theatre, chèo, tuồng, and cải lương ("renovated theatre") from southern Vietnam, the debate considered whether or not music theatre should be maintained, and how it could be put to the service of socialist ideology.[13] Compared with tuồng and cải lương, which were criticised as feudal and depraved bourgeois art respectively, Party cadres argued that chèo's roots in village life and its ability to express people's everyday emotions made it useful as a vehicle for propaganda to support the war effort and to promote socialist ideals. The concluding statement of the debate recommended ditching old plays with a "backward feudal ideology" and creating new plays that supported the resistance against colonial rule (Ninh 2002:112). This was achieved through inserting new content within the framework of older stories and writing new plays. Following the debate and the formation of the DRV in 1954, music theatre troupes were established as part of the new communist-led cultural infrastructure. In this revolutionary context, the 5 member Chèo Research Committee—Trần Bảng (leader), Bùi Đức Hạnh, Hoàng Kiều, Hà Văn Cầu and Hồ Ngọc Cẩn—was set the task of implementing Party policy. The Committee aimed to correct, reform and rewrite plays to make them suitable for the new socialist society.[14] This included efforts to establish a canon of classical chèo that was distinct from the arena of "new chèo" (chèo mới). Although this article does not consider new chèo, the large number of new plays written since the mid-twentieth century have not been canonised in the same way as classical works. Arguably, a small number of new plays, which have become popular enough to be staged repeatedly over many years, might be considered as part of a parallel canon of new chèo, but this has not been clearly defined.

A 1976 publication by Committee member Hà Văn Cầu (1976) titled "A Collection of Classical Chèo" includes seven plays: "Quan Âm Thị Kính," "Trương Viên," "Lưu Bình—Dương Lễ," "Kim Nham," "Chu Mãi Thần," "Tôn Mạnh—Tôn Trọng," "Từ Thức."[15] These plays have eponymous titles based on the names of the main characters. The published scripts are an amalgam of skits by well-known artists, with some revisions and added supplementary material by one or more authors. In a long preface to the volume, which discusses the sources used for the compilation, Lộng Chương acknowledges that the texts of skits vary when performed by different artists. He also notes that some skits can be used interchangeably in different plays (Lộng Chương 1976:20). The challenges such variation poses to authoritatively documenting texts are acknowledged, but the book nonetheless performs a canonic function by presenting the compilations as a form of chèo "literature" (văn học) (Lộng Chương 1976:15). Subsequent publications of different versions of the classical plays similarly serve to delineate a canon of texts (see Trần Việt Ngữ 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014). To delve further into the formation of the classical canon, I now turn to the play "Súy Vân."

[13] For more discussion of the different positions taken by delegates at the debate, including the musician Văn Cao, see Ninh (2002:90), and in relation to tuồng see Wettermark (2017:97–101).

[14] See Trần Bảng (2017) "Trò chuyện với GS Trần Bảng về vở chèo 'Súy Vân'" http://nhahatchèovietnam.vn/tro-chuyen-voi-gs-tran-bang-ve-vo-chèo-suy-van/.

[15] In this collection, the "Súy Vân" play is referred to by its older name "Kim Nham".

"Reformed Súy Vân": Morality and Gender

The "Reformed Suý Vân" play ("Suý Vân Cải Biên") is based on the classical story "Kim Nhạm," the name of Súy Vân's husband. In his study of the genesis of the story, Trần Việt Ngữ traces 14 different scripts, the earliest being Nguyễn Đình Nghị's "Mad Because of Love" in 1929 and the most recent written in 2001 (Trần Việt Ngữ 2012:15–17). Here I consider the rewriting of the play in 1959 by the Chèo Research Committee, which names Hàn Thế Du as the scriptwriter. With
their rewrite of the story, the Committee aimed to heighten the dramatic arc based on the complex and volatile psychological and emotional state of Súy Vân (Trần Bảng 2015:191–225). This version is still performed today by the Vietnam Chèo Theatre, and a synopsis is provided in the Appendix.

Reforming the morality of theatrical narratives was an important part of the Chèo Research Committee's remit. Morality in skits is most directly addressed in sharp, witty comments from comic characters like the jestors (hề) and old men (lão). Under the veil of laughter, their commentary often wryly satirises conventions, poking fun at social hierarchies and the hypocrisies of the upper classes, and expresses humanist sympathy for people's everyday hardships. In reformed plays, comic satire lost much of its critical bite. When it is included, it is carefully directed at safe topics in line with the Vietnamese Communist Party's policies. In Hàn Thế Du's script, for instance, there are scenes in Act 3 and 4 that align with the Party's campaign to eradicate "superstitious" beliefs that was initiated in the 1950s: in Act 4, a spirit priest attempts to exorcise Súy Vân from the curse of madness, and the priest is presented as a silly "superstitious" character; In Act 3, two jesters ridicule spirit possession rituals known as lên đồng (see Norton 2009).

Gender relations, which are often addressed in chèo stories, were a prominent target of reform. In the case of "Súy Vân," patriarchal views about polygamy were reshaped. In pre-revolutionary versions of the story, Súy Vân is portrayed as an "incorrect woman" (nữ lệch) who rebels against the idea that distinguished men like Kim Nham could have "5 wives and 7 concubines" (năm thiếp bảy thê). She is blamed for not faithfully serving her husband when he decides to take a second wife and for betraying him by having an affair with a man called Trần Phượng. This view is largely retained in Nguyễn Đình Nghị's script. But in Hàn Thế Du's version, Súy Vân is portrayed as righteously resisting polygamy and gender inequity in marriage. She refuses to dutifully accept being the "first wife," and, after Kim Nham marries for a second time, she falls into the arms of Trần Phương in a moment of despair mixed with hope for a new life. In the "feudal" society of the Nguyễn dynasty, women did not have the power to divorce their husbands, so she resorts to feigning madness in an attempt to force Kim Nham to divorce her, so she can start afresh with Trần Phương. Unfortunately, however, Trần Phương is not what he seems. Although he presents himself as heartbroken man of learning, he is an untrustworthy womaniser who has no intention of marrying Súy Vân. In Hàn Thế Du's interpretation, Súy Vân is not such a blameful character, as she is unfairly tricked.

The representation of gender relations in Hàn Thế Du's script is linked to the new "Law on Marriage and Family" in 1959. Around that time, theatre troupes

were tasked with devising plays that promoted the new law and modifying the attributes of archetypal characters deemed contradictory to it (Trần Việt Ngữ 2012:43). The new laws on marriage and family are not mentioned directly in the "Súy Vân" play, but the implication is that women in the new socialist society would be freed from the oppressive marriage system of feudal society. This is just one example of how the morality and representation of gender relations in classical chèo were shaped by political priorities during a particular phase of socialist-led nation building.

The two main categories of archetypal female characters in chèo, the "incorrect woman" (nữ lệch) and the "mature woman" (nữ chín), are discussed by Lauren Meeker in relation to the play "Goddess of Mercy—Thị Kính" ("Quan Âm—Thị Kính"). The most famous scene in the play features the "incorrect" Thị Mầu who is "flirtatious, immodest, greedy and immoral," who is contrasted with the "mature" Thị Kính, who is "morally upright" and "self-sacrificing" (Meeker 2015:142). Súy Vân is an interesting case because she sits between the two archetypes. In contrast to pre-revolutionary versions of the story that portray Súy Vân as incorrect, in the reformed play, she is positioned as a "mixed woman" (nữ pha) with elements of both incorrect and mature. There is sympathy for Súy Vân being tricked by malevolent characters, while at the same time her behaviour stretches beyond the self-sacrificing, compliant woman. Her relationship with Trần Phương is not without moral ambiguity and her outlandish, erratic behaviour breaks with gendered norms. Entangled in a web of patriarchal expectations, Súy Vân's only option is to feign madness in a desperate attempt to free herself. There is no redemption in her tragic suicide at the end of the play.

The representations of female archetypes in chèo are connected to changing gender relations in the past. But in what ways do the socialist-led reworkings of gender archetypes in both "Súy Vân" and "Goddess of Mercy—Thị Kính" speak to women today? Meeker argues that in watching Thị Mầu "young women can admire the expressive and rebellious behavior of the character" and can "map their own complex and often conflicted desires onto her character" (Meeker 2015:152–3). Major changes to the style of performance, Meeker contends, have resulted in Thị Mầu becoming a modern subject rather than an archetype, a character in a "western dramatic sense," who dares to act and defy social norms. Such shifts are also evident in Súy Vân. Mixing archetypes, Súy Vân takes on a unique boundary-crossing identity as an individual with her own subjectivity. In my exchanges with audiences at "Súy Vân" performances, I often heard comments about her character standing out from others in chèo due to her striking image and erratic behaviour that flouts gender conventions (see Figure 1). When I discussed Súy Vân with Trần Thu Hiền, who sometimes performs the role at the Vietnam Chèo Theatre, she compared Súy Vân's efforts to shape her own future with women's struggles today. She remarked, "In order to find happiness, I think young women must demand it for themselves. If there are difficult situations that young women cannot bear or suffer any longer, they must take steps to try and overcome them so they can find their own happiness. But if they cannot change the situation, then they can break free like Súy Vân, so they are free to find happiness themselves. In the past, Súy Vân dared to go against society, but

Figure 1. Trần Thu Hiền from the Vietnam Chèo Theatre (Nhà Hát Chèo VIệtNam) playing the role of Súy Vân. Image by Nguyễn Hoàng.

today this is much more normal" (pers comm, Trần Thu Hiền, December 2018). While much has changed in the decades since Súy Vân was first performed in the 1960s, Hiền suggests that her predicament and rebellious spirit are one that still resonates for women today.

"Sticky Rice with Beans": Composition and Creativity in "Súy Vân"

The musical approach taken in the "Reformed Súy Vân" play has been noted as a "turning point" in the history of chèo (Trần Vinh 2011:287). The musicians at its nexus were Hoàng Kiều, who composed a score written on 5-line staff notation using equal tempered tuning, and Minh Lý who arranged sequences of traditional songs to suit the script. The introduction of music scores for chèo plays was a major departure from previous ways of performing music. However, the combination of Hoàng Kiều's score and the choice of songs by Minh Lý has been held up as a model of how to combine new approaches with traditional forms of creativity (Nguyễn Thị Thanh Phương 2017:114; Trần Vinh 2011:287).

The metaphor "sticky rice with beans" (xôi đỗ) is used by chèo musicians to encapsulate the idea of achieving a good balance between the traditional and the modern. Trần Vinh's book *The Music of Chèo*, which is based on his first-hand experience of being an instrumentalist at the Vietnam Chèo Theatre from 1956 until his retirement in 1999, explains the metaphor in the following terms, "'sticky rice with beans' implies that you must keep the traditional, the original

and this should be the principle or core of creativity … you should not distort or lose what is affirmed as chèo" (Trần Vinh 2011:307–8). In Trần Vinh's view, Hoàng Kiều's score combined with Minh Lý's arrangements successfully added beans to the sticky rice without overwhelming it (Trần Vinh 2011:316). Guided by this metaphor, chèo musicians have endeavoured to integrate new ways of performing with traditional forms of creativity.

The score by Hoàng Kiều draws on his knowledge of tradition, partly gained through the research he conducted as a member of the Chèo Research Committee, and on techniques he learnt during his compositional studies at home and abroad in China. Based on my reading of the score, it consists of three main categories of music: (1) new arrangements of traditional melodies; (2) incidental instrumental music; and (3) newly composed songs. The score is for larger forces than was customary. Around this time, the chèo ensemble was expanded and formally divided into four sections of bowed strings, plucked strings, wind and percussion (Trần Vinh 2011:295–6). Hoàng Kiều's score includes some songs for male and female choruses and parts for newly added, low-pitched instruments—for the European "cello/bass" and the modified low-pitched 2-stringed fiddle (hồ trầm). The introduction of the score also meant that, for the first time in chèo's history, a conductor was called upon to coordinate the enlarged ensemble.

Hoàng Kiều is credited as the composer for the play, even though his score only makes up a small proportion of the music performed.[16] Most of the songs are from the traditional repertoire, although they are performed in new ways. Historically, itinerant artists had license to choose and sequence songs to effectively convey the feelings of archetypal characters. This process of arranging songs is about finding distinctive ways of setting lyrics to melodies and sequencing songs for particular characters and dramatic moments. Minh Lý was reputed to have a deep understanding of the conventions of song arranging.[17] This was made clear in an interview I conducted in September 2017 with Diễm Lọc, the actress who played the role of Súy Vân in the first production in 1962. At our meeting in her home in Hanoi, Diễm Lọcemphasised Minh Lý's creative contribution to the first production and explained how skilfully she chose songs to fit the new script.

The broad expressive range of the songs Minh Lý arranged for "Reformed Súy Vân" has been celebrated (Trần Vinh 2011:311; Nguyễn Thị Thanh Phương 2017:78–82). However, prescribing the order of songs was a significant change

[16] The composition of chèo scores might seem to suggest the introduction of the 'work concept'. As Andrew Killick (2017) has discussed in relation to Korean music, the work concept can be understood, following Lydia Goehr (2007), as an enduring "original unique product of a special, creative activity", which is "symbolically represented in a score" as a "structurally integrated whole" (cited in Killick 2017:18). It could be argued that Hoàng Kiều's score for "Súy Vân" is 'an original unique product', but it does not present a 'structurally integrated whole', not least because the score is only used for short sections of the play and is interpreted quite freely in performance. During the Vietnam Chèo Theatre's rehearsals of "Súy Vân" I attended in December 2018 it was abundantly clear that the instrumentalists did not strictly follow the score or the conductor. Despite the introduction of scores, then, the influence of the work concept on chèo has been partial and limited.

[17] This process of lyrical setting and arranging song sequences is known in Vietnamese as bẻ làn nắn điệu, lit. "plucking and setting melodies".

from traditional practice. Music theatre practitioners use the term hát cưởng to encapsulate the idea of singing spontaneously by adding new words and vocal phrases in response to the dramatic context rather than following pre-learnt lyrics determined by a script.[18] The song sequences arranged by Minh Lý, however, acted against such spontaneity and flexibility. In contrast to an interactive style of performance in which artists respond to the reactions of audiences, performers could no longer flexibly choose which song to perform next. The requirement to closely follow the script also meant that singers should not ad lib new lyrics and vocal phrases during their performances.[19]

A closer look at a video recording (https://youtu.be/6zDZ0QRenIE) of the famous extract "Súy Vân Feigns Madness" as performed by the Vietnam Chèo Theatre on the 29th of December 2018 demonstrates how Hoàng Kiều's score is interwoven with Minh Lý's song sequences. In the extract, Hoàng Kiều's arrangement of the traditional song "Tò Vò" is combined with other songs in the oral repertoire and an extended drumming sequence that accompanies Súy Vân's dance, which are not notated in the score. The musical sequence is as follows: "Hát Gà Rừng" ($0^{0}00^{00}$–1.42^{00}); "Tò Vò" ($1^{0}43^{00}$–$2^{0}32^{00}$); Drumming/dance sequence ($2^{0}33^{00}$–$7^{0}02^{00}$); 4) "Hát Thiên Thai" ($7^{0}03^{00}$–$8^{0}07^{00}$); "Hát Sắp" ($8^{0}08^{00}$–$9^{0}47^{00}$); "Hát Ngược" ($9^{0}48^{00}$–$10^{0}18^{00}$).

"Súy Vân Feigns Madness," which opens Act 4, is the dramatic climax of the play. In the preceding act, Mụ Quan, an immoral petty trader who is an archetypal "incorrect woman," schemes with Trần Phưởng to trick Súy Vân into having an affair. Súy Vân is reluctant to be unfaithful to her husband Kim Nham despite her heartbreak at him taking a second wife. But Mụ Quan manages to convince her to fall into Trần Phưởng's arms by falsely portraying him as an honourable man and by pushing Suý Vân into further despair about Kim Nham's wedding to a second wife. It is also Mụ Quan who suggests that Súy Vân should feign madness as a way of freeing herself to marry Trần Phưởng.

The song that begins the sequence, "Hát Gà Rừng" or "Wild Forest Chicken Song," is humorous but is heavily tinged with "bitterness" and "lament" (Hoàng Kiều 1974:219). Sung by a female chorus off-stage, it has a lively tempo and playfully uses onomatopoeic syllables to express Súy Vân's vain hopes and her unstable state of mind as she darts from side to side, happy one moment, despairing the next. The dark frivolity of the "Wild Forest Chicken Song" is followed by Hoàng Kiều's sombre arrangement of the song "Tò Vò," which underscores the misery of Súy Vân's fate. Here, "Tò Vò" is arranged in two parts for an *a cappela* female chorus; a version of the traditional melody in the top part is supported by a newly composed alto counterpoint.[20] Conventionally, chèo

[18] For further discussion of the meanings of hát cưởng see: https://baobinhdinh.vn/643/2003/4/2817/. This term refers to specifically to 'singing' (hát) and is primarily used in relation to music theatre. In other musical contexts, more general terms like ngẫu hứng (inspiration) and ứng tác (extemporise) are often used as a gloss for 'improvisation', although there is no single, neat equivalent in Vietnamese for the English term.

[19] As discussed earlier, the requirement to strictly follow the script was first introduced by Nguyễn Đình Nghị.

[20] The counterpoint in the second part largely follows the vocal melody, although there are some variations. The intervals between the two parts include perfect fourths and fifths, adding to the solemnity of the song, in addition to thirds, sixths and octaves.

songs only have a single vocal line, so the writing of two-part vocal arrangements was an innovation. A different arrangement of "Tò Vò," which is performed during Act 1, also features two vocal parts, along with a scored instrumental accompaniment.[21]

The following dance sequence was newly devised by Dịu Hương (b.1918—d.1994).[22] The elaborate choreography, lasting about five minutes, makes use of stylised movements related to spinning silk, weaving fabric, needlework and sewing. Sharp eye movements and heightened laughter add to the portrayal of volatile emotions. Nguyễn Thị Tuyêtand Nguyễn Thị Nhung's account of how Dịu Hương devised the dance suggests her aim was to elevate the movements associated with "women's labour" to a new imaginative level to enhance the audience's sympathy for Súy Vân's plight (Nguyen Thị Tuyêtand Nguyễn Thị Nhung 2010:51–52). For the dance, percussionists improvise patterns around the basic rhythms and closely coordinate additional strikes to match Súy Vân's gestures.[23] Once the dance sequence concludes, Súy Vân sings the plaintive lament "Hát Thiên Thai" accompanied by the mellow sounds of the vertical bamboo flute. A short "Hát sắp" then introduces "Hát ngược" (lit. "Singing against" or "Singing upside down"), which concludes the sequence. Speaking to the off-stage female chorus before they start singing "Hát ngược," Súy Vân says, "Hey women and girls! It is ok when I sing with the current, but if I sing against the current it is also interesting. I will sing like that so you can hear a few phrases ok?." While the female chorus sings in response, Súy Vân continues dancing, performing movements that imitate picking things off a tree. At the end of the song, she lets out a mad scream and runs off stage.

This sequence interweaves new choreography and styles of musical performance to convey Súy Vân's emotional turmoil. The energetic choreography makes it challenging to sing while dancing, so some songs like "Hát gà rừng"

[21] The arrangement of "Tò Vò" in the first act (see https://youtu.be/kHcE1YQbJ-o) has a staggered counterpoint; the second vocal part enters 2-bars after the first, in a quasi-fugal stretto effect. The instrumental accompaniment, which is scored for nine instruments in the string and wind sections, mostly doubles the contrapuntal vocal lines. Most of the instrumental accompaniment is written out in the score, but notably it is not notated entirely: some bars between vocal lines are left blank. Traditionally, musicians extemporise two- and four-bar instrumental interludes (known as xuyên tâm and lưu không) between vocal lines and, by not notating these interludes, Hoàng Kiều's score provides space for musicians to create their own phrases in line with traditional practice. The prelude to the song on the vertical flute is also not notated, which allows the flute player to create their own introduction to the song.

[22] In an interview with the famous singer Thanh Hoài in December 2018, she recounted to me how she learnt extracts orally from Dịu Hương during her three-year training at the Central Chèo Theatre (now the Vietnam Chèo Theatre) from 1965 to 1968. Dịu Hương and Minh Lý were two key artists who worked with the Chèo Research Committee to canonise classical chèo. Others included the male musicians Trùm Thịnh (b.1883–d.1973), Lý Mầm and Năm Ngữ, and the female musician Cả Tam (1888–1971) (see Bùi Đức Hạnh 2006). Such interactions with well-known artists who were active prior to the communist revolution in 1945 underscore how the Committee sought to draw on the past in the reform process.

[23] The rhythms played during this extended dance are known as "Thi nhịp". For a transcription of some of these rhythms for an ensemble of seven drums and cymbals see Nguyễn Thị Nhung (1998:102–107).

and "Hát ngược" are performed by an off-stage chorus instead. In this way, the physical gestures of the performer on stage become detached from the vocal melody. Replacing a more holistic conception of the embodied enactment of roles, which combined voice, appearance, dance and gesture, new choreography has led to dance increasingly becoming a form of "illustration" (minh h o ạ) of the drama (Meeker 2015:148). From a reformer's perspective, Dịu Hương's choreography served to increase the audience's ability to connect with "the inner feelings of the character" (Nguyen Thị Tuyết and Nguyễn Thị Nhung 2010:52). But by positioning the dance as an illustrative spectacle to be admired from a distance, modes of performer-audience interaction and the subjectivity of the performer on stage were fundamentally changed.

The second category of music included in Hoàng Kiều's score, incidental music, includes short instrumental pieces for the opening of acts and for interludes within acts (to accompany actions made by characters on stage and so on). This was a new development. Previously, instrumentalists used melodies from the extant repertoire to bridge different scenes or skits. An example of incidental music by Hoàng Kiều is the item "Opening to Act Four" ("Mở Màn IV").[24] This short piece evokes a frenzy of excitement in anticipation of the climax of the story, the "Feigning madness" sequence, which follows. A fortissimo strident melody using the Dorian pentatonic scale, scored mostly in unison with additions of thirds and fifths, evokes a hurly-burly atmosphere in preparation for Súy Vân's entry on the stage. When the lights go up and she emerges laughing loudly, she stands alone on the stage, dwarfed by a backdrop image of a gigantic spider web (see Figure 1). The bluster of the fortissimo melody and crashing cymbals in the first section wind down, in the final bars, to a tremolo static E-minor chord, paving the way for Súy Vân's opening vocal recitative.

A song called "Đợi chờ" ("Waiting") is the only example in Hoàng Kiều's score in the final category of newly composed song.[25] It is performed at the end of Act 5, just before Súy Vân commits suicide by jumping in the river. "Đợi chờ" is thought to be the first "composed song" (ca khúc) written for chèo (Trần Vinh 2011:291). One of its striking features is the grave, low-pitched vocal line sung by a male chorus. This makes the song distinctive compared to the traditional repertoire, yet some of its musical characteristics, such as the extended melismas on the vowel "i" between words of the song text, are reminiscent of typical chèo vocalising. Although Hoàng Kiều composed just one new song for the play, it set a precedent; it was the start of the widespread practice of writing songs for plays (pers. comm, Hạnh Nhân, 5 September 2017).[26]

Trần Vinh provides a fascinating first-hand account of how musicians at the Vietnam Chèo Theatre first engaged with Hoàng Kiều's score. He reflects on how musicians, including himself, negotiated the relationship between composer and

[24] For the Opening to Act IV see: https://youtu.be/L54qLk2mgPU.

[25] To hear the song "Đợi chờ" ("Waiting") see: https://youtu.be/AJyF1-fN0RM.

[26] In the interview I conducted with the well-known composer Hạnh Nhân, he said he had composed songs for more than 300 new plays and that normally it took him just one week to complete a score for a play.

performer.[27] Many instrumentalists found it challenging to marry the prescriptive intervention of a score with traditional forms of "embellishment" (trau chuốt) (Trần Vinh 2011:294). Over time, Trần Vinh says instrumentalists found a "'key' to open up artistic creativity" ("'chìa khoá' mở cửa sự sáng tạo nghệ thuật") (Trần Vinh 2011:295). This involved musicians flexibly embellishing the melodies outlined in the score in ways that suited the idiomatic playing styles of different instruments, while still adhering to the main requirements of the score.[28] In the context of considerable reform, then, chèo performers drew on established creative practices to achieve an appropriate mix of "sticky rice and beans."

Despite such efforts to maintain improvisatory techniques of embellishment, significant changes to the performance context limited the extent to which artistic creativity could be "opened up" in many other aspects of performance. As we have seen with "Suý Vân," artistic creativity in performance was changed in numerous ways. To recap, these changes included the standardisation of the script and song sequences, the introduction of illustrative choreography, the disembodiment of the on-stage performer's voice, the prescriptive use of musical notation, and the loss of intimate performer-audience interaction as a spur for improvisation. Such reforms curtailed the scope for performers to shape theatrical narratives in the course of performance. They resulted in a creative shift from performers to non-performing directors—including the scriptwriter, the composer, the choreographer, and the music arranger—who determine many aspects of the theatrical experience in advance. The processes of canonisation have therefore promoted a conceptualisation of creativity based on more individualised forms of authorship and led to a more predetermined and fixed theatrical outcome.

Many of the ideas and metaphors that Vietnamese musicians use to discuss creative processes in performance extend across different traditions, although there are some differences in emphasis and the use of terminology. Alexander Cannon's ethnography of đờn ca tài tử in southern Vietnam includes detailed reflections on the creative metaphor of adding "flowers and leaves" (hóa la) to a "frame" (chân phương) (Cannon 2022:106–38). The metaphor of adding flowers to a melodic framework is used widely by Vietnamese musicians in different contexts, and it has similarities with the creative techniques of embellishing chèo melodies discussed above. Cannon's far-reaching study reveals how ideas of creativity play an important role in efforts to sustain tradition and push it in new directions. Creativity, in Cannon's account, is a means through which musicians engage with, and resist, various forms of "development". Offering a critique of Euro-American models of creativity, Cannon explores how đờn ca tài tử musicians "sustain and preserve their stake in Vietnam's future course as they perform

[27] Commenting on the roles of composer-performer, Trần Vinh notes, "Writing a score is the job of a composer, while the performance relies on the creativity (which is not a small contribution) of the performer" (Trần Vinh 2011:294).

[28] Trần Vinh (2011:294) provides a short transcription, using 5-line staff notation, outlining how additional embellishment might be added to a scored melody for the vertical bamboo flute (tiêu). Such embellishments were also demonstrated to me by the current tiêu player in the Vietnam Chèo Theatre, Phạm Văn Doanh, in a meeting at his home in Hanoi on 4 December 2018.

within local models of creation and react to—and occasionally reject—global models of creativity" (2022:32). Cannon argues that musical creativity mediating the global and the local is "reparative and recuperative" (2022:217). "Creativity, or sáng tạo," he argues, "repairs and enables a return to Vietnamese roots that have been interrupted by war and imperialism" (2022:29).

The contexts of southern đờn ca tài tử and northern chèo are different in many respects, but musicians in both traditions have strived to retain deep-rooted forms of artistic creativity in their interactions with global influences and their engagement with discourses of "development"' and "modernisation." They have drawn on ideas from the past to recuperate the flexible, improvisatory properties of tradition in the face of significant change. Nonetheless, some musicians remain concerned about how the reform of chèo has restricted their scope to forge new creative paths. Partly in response to such concerns, the work of Soỉ X, to which I now turn, offers challenges to the canon and entrenched ways of practicing Vietnamese music theatre. Soỉ X's works might seem like a radical departure from tradition. But their experimental ethos springs from a re-evaluation of the history of creativity in Vietnamese music theatre and a recuperation of practices that existed prior to canonisation.

Challenging the Canon: "Two Ladies Nguyệt Cô" by SơnX

The state-controlled infrastructure of professional theatre troupes maintains a strong hold over chèo. Within these troupes there is little scope for musicians to deviate from established modes of performance. The percussionist and composer Soỉ X is one of the few artists to create new works of music theatre that question the status quo. He originally proposed to produce "Two Ladies Nguyệt Cô" with the National Tuồng Theatre in Hanoi when he was working there in 2011. Despite support from some of the members of the Theatre, however, he was ultimately unable to gain permission from the Theatre's leadership. Frustrated by creative restrictions within the state-run system, Soỉ X later resigned from the Theatre. Throughout his career, Soỉ X has straddled the state-run and independent sectors. He has been a member of several government-led theatre troupes in Hanoi while at the same time taking up opportunities to pursue independent projects. Growing up in a family of professional musicians, Soỉ X studied from a young age with renowned percussionists of music theatre. He started his professional career as a percussionist at the Vietnam Chèo Theatre in 1989, where he worked for five years. He left to join Company Ea Sola, led by the Vietnamese-French artist and choreographer Ea Sola, and he toured with the company internationally until 2002. This experience was formative. For Company Ea Sola's celebrated dance-drama productions like "Drought and Rain," Soỉ X was given creative freedom to produce music drawing on diverse global and local influences.[29] Towards the end of his time with Company Ea Sola, Soỉ X started to create his own music theatre works. The thwarting of his creative ambitions within the state-run sector has meant that most of his own work has been

[29] For more on Ea Sola and the Ea Sola Dance Company's theatrical productions see Eisner (2014).

produced as an independent artist. After his unsuccessful attempt to stage "Two Ladies Nguyệt Cô" with the National Tuồng Theatre in 2011, it was not until 2018 that the opportunity arose to devise the piece for the Hanoi New Music Festival.

In 2020, I made a 10-minute interview-based film about Soỉ X titled "The Future of Tradition," which was commissioned by the British Council in Vietnam.[30] The film features shots of rehearsals and the premiere performance of "Two Ladies Nguyệt Cô." In the interview segments, Soỉ X introduces the ideas that shaped the work and reflects more broadly on understandings of tradition in contemporary Vietnamese society. The following analysis of "Two Ladies Nguyệt Cô" draws on the interview I conducted for the film as well as other conversations I had with Soỉ X during visits to Vietnam in 2018, 2020 and 2023.

The opening of "Two Ladies Nguyệt Cô" evokes a wild forest scene. In semi-darkness, mysterious figures wearing large animal heads made of glistening coloured paper wander around the stage. As the "animals" clear from the stage, the audience is presented with two "ladies" standing opposite each other in front of a video screen. The slow-moving visual backdrop, created by the artist Nguyễn Trinh Thi, is projected in black and white.[31] It features images of mountain landscapes and some abstract images by the composer John Cage, as well as shots of a thick smog engulfing the Hanoi cityscape. The two ladies on the stage wear different costumes. One is dressed as Nguyệt Cô from tuồng opera, and the other wears the garb of the Súy Vân character. The two characters on stage begin to interact through movement. A haunting, eerie musical soundscape is provided by a laptop musician using Abelton Live and four instrumentalists playing a kèn shawm, a đàn bầu monochord and an assortment of percussion.[32] The interactive dance of the two actresses concludes with them returning to their original standing positions, facing each other. The end of the performance is marked by silence. A masked man emerges from the quiet darkness of the stage. Gazing intently at the audience, he miraculously switches between masks with quick flashes. The final switch reveals the artist's real face.

"Two Ladies Nguyệt Cô" radically reworks one of the most famous scenes of tuồng theatre, "Nguyệt Cô Turns into a Fox" ("Nguyệt Cô Hóa Cáo"). The story features a female fox who cultivates powers of witchcraft over thousands of years and finally manages to obtain a magical jade with the power to transform her into a woman, Nguyệt Cô. While living on earth, Nguyệt Cô becomes infatuated with a vainglorious general who tricks her into giving him the jade. Upon losing her powers, she turns back into a fox and ultimately dies in agony. The legend is a cautionary tale about misplaced trust and betrayal in love. In Soỉ X's piece, the tragic character from tuồng theatre is paired with a "happy" Nguyệt Cô, dressed as Súy Vân. Unlike the conventional Nguyệt Cô who

[30] The film is available to view online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7FTlipFppU&t=1s. It is one of several short video stories I made for the multimedia publication titled *Heritage of Future Past —Story Collection* (Norton and Hoàng 2020).

[31] For further information about the work of the artist Nguyễn Trinh Thi see Norton (2024).

[32] The musicians who performed at the premiere were Nguyễn Thành Nam and Soỉ X (percussion), Phạm Quốc Chí (shawm), Ngô Trà My (monochord), and Lương Huệ Trinh (electronics).

despairs at being tricked into losing her magic jade, the second Nguyệt Cô rejoices at the prospect of living freely in nature as a fox again. In Sơn X's words, "I present two things on stage: One Nguyệt Cô who is miserable because she lost the jade; and the other Nguyệt Cô who no longer wants the jade and throws it away." The second Nguyệt Cô wants to discard the jade and return to nature because she sees all the terrible and unfair things in the human world. Although the two actresses' movements and dress draw on well-known archetypal characters, Sơn X wanted the audience to put aside their previous associations. He remarked, "I didn't want people to think this is Nguyệt Cô from tuồng theatre and that is Súy Vân from chèo theatre. I wanted people to understand that they were two foxes."

Whether or not the audience present at the performance understood the performers as foxes, Sơn X's intention was to transcend and reimagine two archetypical characters. The two actresses at the centre of the performance—Nguyễn Thị Tần from the Vietnam National Tuồng Theatre and Trần Thu Hiền from the Vietnam Chèo Theatre—are renowned traditional performers of Nguyệt Cô and Súy Vân respectively. Their interaction on stage makes use of the movements from their training, but gestures are reshaped to forge a new dialogue. As mentioned earlier, the movements of tuồng and chèo performers are traditionally understood to be an embodied expression of singing and the lyrical meaning of songs. For "Two Ladies Nguyệt Cô," however, Sơn X said he was interested in devising a new "language of movement" (ngôn ngữ động tác) disconnected from conventional musical and lyrical expression.[33] Such severing purposefully raises questions about the meaning of movements: What do traditional gestures convey when they are no longer tied to the expression of songs and lyrics? To what extent are traditional associations retained when gestures are reworked in new contexts?

A related decontextualisation of traditional materials is evident in the music arrangement. The improvisation incorporates rhythms and melodies from traditional music theatre, which are electronically transformed and supplemented. In one section, for instance, the rhythms used for the dance during the "Súy Vân Feigns Madness" scene are combined with the "Running Horse" ("Tẩu Mã") melody played on the kèn shawm, accompanied by rhythms on the "War Drum" ("Trống Chiến") from tuồng theatre.[34] By combining and adapting different musical elements, Sơn X sought to find flexible ways of working across conventional genre boundaries. Reflecting on the work, Sơn X said, "All the elements on stage are in dialogue with each other. The two actresses have a conversation. There is a dialogue between the musicians, between the two traditional styles of tuồng and chèo theatre, between the two actresses of these styles of music theatre, and between the new and the old. All of these different pairs are in conversation with each other."

[33] Sơn X's interest in abstracting traditional dance gestures from their usual context is also evident in some of his other theatre works like "Fall into Sleep" ("Rơi Vào Giấc Ngủ"), which was premiered at the Hanoi New Music Meeting in 2009.

[34] For further discussion of the "Tẩu mã" melody in tuồng opera see Wettermark (2017:141, 149).

In my discussions with Soỉ X he suggested that the overall narrative of "Two Ladies Nguyệt Cô" could be understood metaphorically as a reflection on the relations between human culture and the natural world. Is the "wild" environment of forests and foxes a source of solace or torment? Is human society becoming so toxic and polluting that we should retreat from it? Soỉ X also alluded to human psychology and the way people choose to live their lives. Reflecting on why he invited a masked artist to appear at the end of his piece, he suggested that people often hide behind "masks" in modern life and mused about how we might discard these masks in order to live more instinctual, truthful lives. From the contrasting dispositions of the two foxes on stage, one who rejects the human world and the other who is distraught to be taken from it, audiences are encouraged to consider alternative life paths and to question, perhaps, their priorities and choices.

Such metaphorical readings connect to Soỉ X's conceptual approach, which positions tradition as a space for experimentation. This is quite different to the predominant discourse tethered to the tradition-modern binary, which shapes the activities of state-supported theatre troupes. Soỉ X expressed frustration with prevalent ideas about tradition that inherently deny experimentation. He argued that his approach to music theatre was not "modern," but rather it returned to the more dynamic, progressive practices that existed before the communist revolution. The inability for traditional music to be responsive to new technologies, ideas and contexts, he maintained, was actually a rupture from the innovative creative practices that were commonplace in pre-revolutionary Vietnam.

Soỉ X's conception of traditional music theatre is one in which artists should have the freedom to move across musical styles and imaginatively respond to audiences and the performance context. The conscious combining of melodies and rhythms across genres in "Two Ladies Nguyệt Cô" harks back to the idea of a less differentiated, more collective, theatrical heritage. Soỉ X connected his creative approach to longstanding traditions of improvised performance in music theatre, which existed before the communist revolution.[35] He argued that the post-revolutionary tripartite division of music theatre in Vietnam into three distinct genres—chèo, tuồng and cải lương—had stifled creativity and pre- vented artists drawing on all the resources and skills available to them to engage audiences.[36]

Drawing inspiration from the flexible performance practices of the past, Soỉ X worked in close collaboration with the other musicians, harnessing and shaping their creative contributions. Without the use of a score, Soỉ X carved out a flexible musical framework, which combined the "colours" (màu sắc) of

[35] Like Soỉ X, some chèo artists highly value improvisatory skills (hát cưởng) and during my fieldwork it was not uncommon to hear older musicians bemoaning the waning of such skills among younger performers. The teaching of such skills is not a primary focus of current pedagogical practices at theatre institutes, whịch typically encourage learning songs by rote often with reference to notation (see Nguyễn Thị Tuyêt2001). The staged performances of the canon also do not demand the same quick wittedness and flexibility as impromptu performances in village yards once did.

[36] Hà Văn Cầu notes that many distinguished performers in the early twentieth century were proficient in both tuồng, chèo and other styles of theatre, and mixed them together to maximise the appeal of their performances to audiences (Hà Văn Cầu 2005a:399).

tradition. Making use of the musicians' experience of improvising in traditional chèo and tuồng performances, this framework left space for the instrumentalists in the small ensemble to respond spontaneously to the gestural dialogue between the two "foxes". New multimedia elements are also integrated into the creative framework: the aesthetics of performance are extended through live electronics and extended playing techniques used by the instrumentalists and through visual layers like the filmic backdrop and the eclectic use of masks. In our discussions, Soỉn X emphasised how Vietnamese theatre needed to be responsive to the contemporary world and the changing tastes of audiences, which have been profoundly affected by the media-saturated digital age, and the integration of multimedia elements in his theatrical productions were part of this responsiveness.

Soỉn X's conception of tradition as a space for trying out new ideas while at the same time being inspired and guided by deep-rooted forms of musical creativity chimes with established ethnomusicological understandings of musical traditions as dynamic spaces of change and transformation that are interwoven with, rather than rigidly restricted by, past practices.[37] The development of tradition in the Vietnamese performing arts is often understood to be based on "exploiting" (khai thác) tangible "materials" (chất liệu) thought to be characteristic of specific traditions, like, for example, distinctive melodies, instrumental sounds, texts, gestures, and costumes. Soỉn X, however, eschewed this notion. He suggested that the "spirit" (tinh thần) of tradition is passed on through lived experience, through people's everyday lives, rather than specific materials. For Soỉn X, then, development in Vietnamese music theatre is about striving to find new aesthetic and technological approaches to create boundary-crossing performances, which are inspired by the spirit and creativity of the past.

Conclusion

This article has outlined the multifaceted processes of canonisation that have transformed the theatrical narratives and performance of "classical chèo" (chèo cổ). The reform process since the early twentieth century has involved incorporating new scripting conventions and staging techniques, partly resulting from international influences. Free-flowing, interactive performances in village yards by itinerant groups became more scripted, orchestrated and choreographed as they moved to proscenium-arch stages in urban centres. In the process, the interaction between performers and audience that was the spur for extemporised performance transformed into a more distanced spectatorship by a "new witnessing audience" (Meeker 2015:153). No longer part of the

[37] Chiming with Soỉn X's ideas, Henry Spiller describes a commonly held ethnomusicological view of tradition in the following terms, "traditional music is not something that is stuck in the past; it grows and changes…. Traditional music provides a place for people to try out new approaches to their existing values, to experiment with new ideas, and to synthesise the new with the old. Traditional music is rooted in trenchant musical processes—the general ideas about how people organise their musical activities—but is not limited to particular musical instruments, sounds, or repertoires" (Spiller 2008:xix).

performance as they once were, audiences now watch themselves; when watching the off-stage chorus of singers interact with on-stage performers, audiences are observing professional artists enacting their former role.

Following the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1954, the formation of a "classical chèo" canon was strongly influenced by the cultural policies of the new communist government. Pre-revolutionary theatrical narratives were revised and adapted to align with new imperatives concerning morality, gender relations, and other social and political issues as part of the effort to build a new socialist society. In regard to artistic practice, the canonisation process drew on both global and local influences. The artists involved in the formation of the classical canon incorporated new dramatic, performative and musical approaches while endeavouring to maintain its distinctive characteristics, drawing on elderly artists' knowledge of pre-revolutionary creative practices.

Despite efforts to link reforms to the past, new ideas about music composition and the dramatic role of music, which were ushered in as part of the concerted effort to modernise chèo in the mid-twentieth century, did not mesh easily with existing styles of performance. As we have seen in relation to the "Súy Vân" play, performers embraced reform while trying to preserve their artistic creativity. Guided by the metaphor "sticky rice with beans," the musicians involved in the first production of "Reformed Súy Vân" in 1962 drew on past models of creativity in the context of new forms of arrangement and composition. This resulted in the maintenance of some creative practices, like embellishing melodies in performance, even when instrumental parts were notated in a score. While the tradition-modern binary encourages a view of "development" in starkly oppositional terms, an enlarged conversation about tradition helps to provide a more nuanced picture of how practitioners adapt to and incorporate new ideas and practices.

Through a tightly controlled cultural infrastructure, the Vietnamese government has directed the canonisation of music theatre since the mid-twentieth century, yet the process of canonisation has not been all-encompassing. There is little space for public critique of classical plays in chèo circles, and there is very limited scope to deviate from established styles of performance, which have become sedimented within state-run troupes over many decades. However, the formation of canons has not entirely unified or standardised performance practices. Scores and scripts mean that performances are repeatable in the way they were not previously, and the Vietnam Chèo Theatre, as the country's flagship "national troupe," often presents itself as the authoritative upholder of the canonic repertory. But even in the case of canonic plays like "Súy Vân" there are some differences in the scripts and performances across the network of troupes in different regions.

The formation of a classical chèo canon has led to tradition being rooted in a repertory, rather than a creative process of making and performing that embraces new artistic, technical and narrative possibilities in conversation with a past. The repertory of classical chèo, in contrast to "new chèo," is seen by some contemporary practitioners like Soỉn X as a restrictive orthodoxy that stifles artists' ability to make creative choices when making music theatre today. As an independent artist, Soỉn X's ideas about the direction of Vietnamese music theatre are quite idiosyncratic, and they have not impinged on the maintenance

of the classical chèo canon. Yet many performers who work in the network of state-run music theatres wish to take their practices in new directions and are unsure about how to sustain the cultural relevance of chèo. Longstanding anxieties remain about how to engage audiences with performances that exhibit fresh ideas and cultural values within a political context that dictates and limits the range of theatrical narratives that are permitted on stage. Some artists, like those who freely extemporise in Soỉn X's performances, concur with his views about how the creativity of tradition has been restricted and misunderstood. And they are critical of the constraints placed on artistic creativity by a standardised, canonised repertory. Conceptually harking back to more flexible understandings of tradition exhibited by itinerant troupes, Soỉn X's music-theatre work challenges the conventions of the canon and envisages an enlarged conception of tradition as a creative space for experimentation.

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Appendix: A Synopsis of the Play "Súy Vân" by Hàn Thế Du and the Chèo Research Committee

Act 1—At Home

The first act opens with a domestic scene, Súy Vân at home, sitting at a silk-thread spinning wheel. In Súy Vân's first slow recitation, she expresses her sadness, and her longing for her absent husband, Kim Nham, who has left to study for the official state exams. This is an image of Súy Vân as a dutiful, pining wife, who works tirelessly with her domestic work. The first recitation introduces the theme of spinning silk thread and the metaphor of entangled threads, which become important as the play develops. Súy Vân introduces herself following the convention of main characters directly introducing themselves to the audience (known as xưng danh). After Súy Vân exits the stage, Kim Nham appears and introduces himself with a sung recitation. He declares that he has successfully passed his exams and has returned to his home village to celebrate. This establishes Kim Nham as an archetypal thư sinh character, a male character who is educated, virtuous and refined. Kim Nham meets his mother, Mụ Kim, who encourages him to marry a second wife. She tells her son that "distinguished men must have 5 wives and 7 concubines." This is in line with the expectations of officials in feudal society who gained power and influence through marrying into other wealthy families. When Kim Nham tells Súy Vân of his intention to take a second wife, who is the daughter of an important official, to further his career, she at first pretends to be happy and supportive to test his feelings and fidelity. But towards the end of the act she argues with Kim Nham, revealing her true feelings of anger and contempt about being subjected to the role of "first wife" and having to welcome Kim Nham's new wife with open arms.

Act 2—Inside a Pagoda

Trần Phương introduces himself as an educated man from a wealthy family, but later we find out he is not as learned as he makes out. He engages in a dialogue with his personal servant, who is a "jester" (hề) character. Through the conversation with his assistant, we learn about Trần Phương's devious character and his interest in seducing Súy Vân. The audience clearly knows Trần Phương's dishonourable intentions when, just before he goes to the pagoda to meet Súy Vân, he utters the famous spoken lines, "I wait for the bird, when the bird strays, it will be caught in the net." In the pagoda, Súy Vân prays to Buddha to seek solace after her decision to separate from her husband. Trần Phương enters and pretends to be heartbroken to gain Súy Vân's sympathy and affection.

Act 3—At a Trading Stall

This act features one of the main villains in the play, Mụ Quan, a female petty trader who is an archetypal "incorrect woman". Mụ Quan and Trần Phương devise a scheme to trick Súy Vân into having an affair. In the manner of a conniving matchmaker, Mụ Quan haggles with Trần Phương over the money she will receive for her skilful trickery. She pretends to sympathise with Súy Vân's plight while also painting a picture of Trần Phương as an honourable man who has suffered heartbreak, convincing her that his intentions are honourable. Súy Vân, however, is still reluctant to be unfaithful to Kim Nham. As part of her trick, Mụ Quan sends her buffoonish helper, called Khoèo, and Trần Phương's servant, Hề Đồng, to attend Kim Nham's wedding to his second wife. When they return drunk from the wedding, Súy Vân overhears them describing the lavish event. This sends Súy Vân into further despair and into the arms of Trần Phương. In feudal society, women did not have the right to divorce their husbands, and it is Mụ Quan who suggests to Súy Vân that she should feign madness so that Kim Nham will divorce her, leaving her free to marry Trần Phương. Act 3 also includes a comic skit between Khoèo and Hề Đồng, which ridicules spirit possession rituals, known as lên đồng.

Act 4—At Kim Nham's House

Súy Vân's feigning madness sequence is the most famous part of the play. Alone on the stage, Súy Vân performs a long sequence of melodies and dances that portray her madness. Appalled by what he has seen, Kim Nham appears and tells Súy Vân that her affliction must have been caused by evil spirits. In an attempt to remedy Súy Vân's madness, Kim Nham sends his servant to fetch a spirit priest to conduct an exorcism ritual. The exorcism is a comic farce and offers the audience light relief from the intensity of Súy Vân's torment. The act closes with a confrontation between Súy Vân and Kim Nham. If Súy Vân shows remorse, then Kim Nham offers to let her return to the fold, but she defiantly refuses to be cowed.

Act 5—A Riverside Scene on a Late Autumn Afternoon

In anguish, Súy Vân waits on the riverbank before she finally dies by drowning herself. At first, she still hopes in vain that Trần Phương will come as promised. The sombre song "Waiting," composed by Hoàng Kiều, performed in unison by a group of male voices off-stage, however, makes clear that the story is not going to end happily. Following the chorus, Súy Vân sings a lament revealing her pain as she gives up on Trần Phương coming. Hearing her sad cries, the jester Hề đồng appears. He has a letter from Trần Phương which he reads to Súy Vân. The letter indicates that he has tricked her and that he is not coming. Now there is no hope for Súy Vân. Over incidental music written by Hoàng Kiều, she speaks the famous line: "I am a lost bird." With nowhere to go she wonders hopelessly disappearing into the river, which is depicted at the back of the stage. At the close, a man carries Súy Vân's body onto the stage as a mixed chorus laments her tragic death.

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