

Water Puppetry In The Red River Delta And Beyond: Tourism And The Commodification Of An Ancient Tradition

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Abstract: This article seeks to examine the interplay between the rise and development of the international tourism industry and the production of culture in the performance of Vietnamese water puppetry. Although tourism has indelibly altered this traditional art form, it is also responsible for the rejuvenation and continued existence of water puppetry. Rather than simply dismissing contemporary enactments as inauthentic representations, we problematize notions of cultural authenticity. Indeed, increasing global integration does not simply result in the elimination of cultural diversity but rather provides the context for the production of new cultural forms that are marked by local specificity.

Keywords water puppetry; tourism; commodification; cultural authenticity; Vietnam

Water puppetry (known in Vietnamese as *múa rối nước*) traces its origins to eleventh century C.E. villages in the Red River Delta area of northern Vietnam. These rural populations believed that supernatural forces controlled all aspects of their lives and the natural environment. Water puppetry may have been devised as a way to satisfy these forces, as well as a form of entertainment, using whatever could be found in the surrounding area.¹ Ponds and flooded rice paddies after harvest were the stages for these impromptu shows. The performance of water puppetry reflected how northern Vietnamese villagers adjusted to the landscape through economic as well as cultural practices.

Contemporary performances of water puppetry occur in waist-deep pools of water, which serve both as the stages of the performance and as a means of concealing the control mechanisms.² Performances today occur in one of three venues: ponds in rural villages where staging areas have been set up, portable tanks built for traveling performers, or specialized buildings where pool stages have been constructed. The puppets, carved out of certain types of wood and covered with a lacquer finish, tend to be anywhere from 30 to 100 centimeters in height and typically weigh anywhere from 5 to 15 kilograms.³ A large rod supports the puppet under the water and is used by the puppeteers, who are normally hidden behind a screen, to control them. Thus, the puppets appear to be free-standing figures moving over the water.

The connections between Vietnamese water puppetry and important aspects of religion and spirituality in northern Vietnam have manifested over the centuries in various components and dimensions of the water puppetry performance.⁴ The plays have historically depicted scenes of life in rural northern Vietnam, often featuring fantastic creatures from Vietnamese mythology alongside characters such as farmers, townspeople, and the ever-present emcee/jester “Teu.” From the physical structure of the stage—being tied to the village pond and communal house—to the symbolic meanings behind ritual scenes of performance, water puppetry is deeply rooted in the religious values of agrarian life in

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northern Vietnam. As one French critic noted, “Water puppetry is the soul of the Vietnamese rice field.”⁵ As a theatrical performance unique to this region of Asia, water puppetry has come to be a time-honored tradition with deep associations to the culture and peoples of northern Vietnam.

Vietnamese water puppetry belongs to a larger family of object-performance theater common throughout much of Asia, falling in a genre consisting of rod or stick puppets, including the *wayang golek* of Java.⁶ Often tracing their roots back to centuries-old rituals of theatrical performance centered around religious or supernatural contexts, many of these forms of puppetry are thought to have been associated with “animistic worship and community rites, such as the rice harvest festivals.”⁷ Numerous genres of Asian puppetry have undergone varying periods of rise and decline in popularity, with some flourishing greatly as others wane in influence. In modern times, institutions such as puppetry troupes and festivals have been established and perform at local, national, and even international levels with the aim of “preserving” these cultural performances in the context of rapid change brought on through globalization and development.⁸ With similar goals in mind, numerous books, encyclopedias, and other forms of literature have been published, alongside art gallery exhibitions and professional tours on the international level.⁹

Academics have noticed a trend in the development in these forms of puppetry from ritualistic or religious functions to more secular ones, beginning with the influence of powerful Southeast Asian historical figures and continuing into modern times.¹⁰ During the Vietnam War, for example, water puppetry performance was used to promote the communist regime in North Vietnam.

In the ponds of Hanoi, the Vietnamese children may see enemy planes crash in flames, shot down by the heroic men of the Peoples’ Army to the accompaniment of fire crackers. The ancient theme of the dragon and the phoenix now reoccurs in modern garb, defeating enemy soldiers and sending them underground, i.e., under water.¹¹

This trend of development toward more secularized performances continues in the present day. A more recent BBC News report on the water puppetry troupe of Hai Dzuong province in northern Vietnam describes how the performance art has been used to educate villagers about numerous social issues, such as legal codes and ecological preservation.¹² The adoption of new themes in storytelling and increased orientation toward the tourist audience has also led to new representations of a “traditional culture” in this art form.

Vietnamese water puppetry has recently gained worldwide fame for its lively and unique reflection of agrarian life in wet-rice villages of northern Vietnam. As water puppetry has gained popularity among tourists, modern practitioners have altered key components of their performances in terms of both content and format in order to appeal to Western tourist audiences.¹³ For example, stories specifically about day-to-day living in rural Vietnam incorporate or appear alongside other stories featuring more “universal” topics such as romance and courting. The stories have been significantly shortened as well to maximize the number of performances in a day. Popular representations of other cultures have also influenced Vietnamese water puppetry. Cowboy hats have been included as props in some shows, and stories about the war between the Vietnamese and the French have been incorporated into troupes’ repertoires as well.

RED RIVER DELTA

Located within the Hải Phòng province in the Red River Delta area of northern Vietnam, Bảo Hà is a farming village with a celebrated tradition of carving that has recently emerged as a destination appealing to “cultural tourism.” It is thought by some to be the birthplace of puppetry in the region, owing part of this reputation to a venerated statue of unknown antiquity (most informants suggested it to be anywhere between three and seven centuries old) housed in one of the communal temples. This statue is capable of movement via a series of concealed mechanisms, which enable the statue to rise from a seated position to standing when a particular door is opened, and is connected to certain ritual ceremonies conducted in the temple or in front of the nearby communal pond.



Figure 1: Working in the Rice Paddies. Photo by Sam Pack

The people of Bảo Hà derive their primary income from farming, but several among them have looked to other forms of work as alternative or supplementary occupations. Some have turned to commercial endeavors, oftentimes opening shops in a section of their homes, while others have found professional work as teachers or local government officials, and still others have recently started to find some success as artists and performers. This artistic success is mostly found in the carving of wood sculpture and in the performance of Vietnamese water puppetry. In the past, these art forms most likely served more ritualistic or leisurely roles in the village. Today, with the interest from international tourists presenting emerging opportunities, the people of Bảo Hà have also been able to use these arts as both a means to sell locally crafted goods and performances and as a way to attract investments from the government and companies in the tourism industry.

In 2002, the Vietnamese government granted Bảo Hà 800 million dong (VND), or roughly \$40,000, to develop the basic infrastructure necessary to accommodate tourists. This investment quickly followed the organization of the village water puppetry troupe in 1999 and can be considered along the lines of a much larger series of government spending on the “preservation” of intangible culture heritage. Earlier, in 1983, the Vietnamese government began to call for villagers to actively preserve and develop water puppetry.¹⁴ These

efforts often relied upon an image of an “authentic,” “pristine,” or “premodern” culture in order to appeal to cultural tourists from the “modern” world seeking “authenticity.”

Bảo Hà became a tourist destination for both domestic and foreign visitors in 2000. International tourists mostly come from the countries of the United States, France, Great Britain, Russia, China, Japan, and Korea. The foreigners usually do not interact with villagers because they cannot communicate; however, as one informant noted, the villagers and tourists “still love each other.” Community members assert that they are very happy with the influx of tourism and they welcome tourists when they come to the festivals or water puppetry shows. Many think it is a good opportunity for foreigners to learn about festivals in Vietnam as well as cultural activities of community members.

The most obvious effect of tourism on life in Bảo Hà is an increase in the standard of living. Tourists spend money to buy statues, see water puppetry shows, and offer money at the temple. One resident claimed that “this village could not have developed like it has without water puppetry.” When tourists purchase carving statues, they ensure that the craftsmen remain employed, so the local people directly benefit from the service they provide for the tourists.

Water puppetry shows are performed numerous times throughout the year, during certain festivals or as tourist companies schedule them. The troupe routinely performs for local villagers during New Year festivals and anniversary celebrations of the local temple and communal house. During these festivals, performances are enacted that may have upwards of twenty individual stories in them. However, performances arranged for tourists (both domestic and international) are more compact and have fewer distinct episodes. While the Bảo Hà troupe often performs locally in outdoor ponds, temples in nearby villages, or special stages created for tourist performances, they also tour other cities throughout Vietnam and perform in venues such as the Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi.

TOURISM IN VIETNAM

As Vietnam raises its global profile as an economic force, the government is also promoting the country, not coincidentally, as an international tourist destination. Vietnam has developed tourism in recent years due to the new foreign policy, which is to

implement consistently the foreign policy line of independence, self-reliance, peace, cooperation and development; the foreign policy of openness and diversification and multi-lateralization of international relations. Vietnam proactively and actively engages in international economic integration while expanding international cooperation in other fields. Vietnam is a friend and reliable partner of all countries in the international community, actively taking part in international and regional cooperation processes.¹⁵

In the 1980s, the country started to open its doors to the international tourism industry and sought to capitalize on the vast potential revenue that could be gathered from foreign travelers. Government funds were used to, and still continue to, facilitate construction projects such as paving roads, building community pavilions, improving existing buildings, and providing villages with more elaborate stages for performances. The objective was to make villages designated as “cultural” or “tourist destinations” (sites recognized by the Vietnamese government as having some form of “traditional culture” that needed to be preserved and could be utilized as features of “culture tours” in the developing tourism industry) more appealing to international tourists from locations such as North America or Europe.

In the early 2000s, water puppetry was becoming a popular tourist attraction for foreign-

ers throughout the country. This coincided with the government declaring in 2002 that water puppetry was a precious Vietnamese art that needed to be cultivated once more. While professional water puppetry troupes had been organized prior to this, it was not until this period, after the era of reform and change in the late 1980s, that the art started to be used to capitalize on a growing tourist market.



Figure 2: Thang Long Water Puppetry Theater in Hanoi. Photo by Sam Pack

Evidence for the growth in popularity of Vietnamese water puppetry on a global scale can be seen in other writings besides those of contemporary academics. International tourists often describe their experiences in foreign countries on popular travel blogs. Certain websites devoted to travel experiences in Asia contain fairly detailed descriptions of travelers' observations and personal research on water puppetry.¹⁶ In reading these accounts, it is clear that the popularity of this art form is spreading among international travelers and "cultural tourists" alike. International tours also contribute to water puppetry's rise in global popularity. Starting in 1984 in France, village troupes from northern Vietnam (gradually becoming more "professionalized" over the years) began touring foreign countries in order to spread awareness of this performance art. Since then, professional troupes have begun attending festivals and going on tours in countries all across the world.¹⁷

Local tourist companies promote "rural tourism," a type of niche-market of cultural tourism that appeals to both domestic and international travelers. A popular option includes day trips to rural areas such as Bảo Hà. Clients seek the tranquility of nature, a view of "authentic" agrarian life, and the ancient cultural traditions of local villages, including water puppetry performances. In an era of increased migration to cities, domestic travelers from urban centers are drawn by similar desires, as well as their own childhood memories of life in the countryside or searches for cultural, familial, or spiritual roots.

In the village of Bảo Hà, many informants, including the cofounders of the troupe, have stated that the attraction of international tourism is the driving force behind the formation of water puppetry troupes and regular performances of the art. Informants have claimed that without the income generated by performing for tourists, villagers would never have

enough money to sustain the tradition. Local residents have recognized tourism as a viable way to increase their income and thus have more time and resources to devote to the production of water puppetry.

COMMODIFICATION

In recent years, the changes affecting Vietnamese water puppetry have been the cause of some concern for both academics and performers alike. In the past, people performed water puppetry for a variety of reasons serving both spiritual and secular purposes, such as celebrating harvests or honoring various mythological figures.¹⁸ In the present day, however, various troupe leaders, puppeteers, and other authoritative figures have claimed that contemporary performances have lost some of the connections to ancient ritualized performances associated with rural Vietnamese spirituality, such as widespread performances once put on during harvest festivals. Troupes in the present day perform more and more for the economic benefits brought on by performances for increasingly foreign audiences. As researcher Nguyen Thi Thuy Linh notes:

The changes were brought about through the government's policy on "rehabilitation" and "extension" of this unique art. International touring of various troupes helped water puppetry gain worldwide fame and provided a realistic picture of rural life in Vietnam to new audiences. However, these changes also caused some "spiritual degradation" to water puppetry.¹⁹

Linh goes on to describe the "professionalization" of the water puppeteers guild throughout much of northern Vietnam and the targeting of international tourists as an important demographic in audiences as other important factors leading to this sentiment.

Academics studying water puppetry in Vietnam often run into discussions of "authentic" versus "inauthentic" culture, which seem to be related to the rapid changes brought on by engagement with the global community. Indeed, this discussion is in no way limited to Vietnam, or even Southeast Asia for that matter. Many scholars have strived to incorporate the concept of "authenticity" into ethnographic works concerning tourism.²⁰ In fact, authenticity plays a major role in a significant amount of the earlier anthropological and sociological analyses of tourism.²¹

In *Culture on Tour: Ethnographies of Travel*, Edward Bruner recognizes performance as "constitutive of emergent culture."²² From this general orientation, one is able to examine a specific situation in the anthropological discussion of tourism:

Tourist performances represent new culture in that they have been modified to fit the touristic master narrative, have been shortened to fit the tour schedule, have been edited so as to be comprehensible to a visiting audience, and are performed regularly at set times and usually on stage.²³

Bruner further deconstructs notions of authenticity and inauthenticity as being social constructions of the present, and these terms should not be used in an analysis of culture unless the ideas are explicitly valued and engaged with by the people being discussed.²⁴ Such a dichotomy reduces a cultural production labeled as inauthentic as being inherently inferior to its "authentic" counterpart. This conceptualization enables an analysis of tourist productions, in this case Vietnamese water puppetry, as complex cultural forms that cannot be reduced to an authentic versus inauthentic binary.

In Bảo Hà, performers made several distinctions between performances put on for tourists and those that would be used in ritual contexts, such as New Year festivals. While some

local artists assert that water puppetry performance has not undergone extensive change over time, most admit that the shows performed for tourist audiences tend to be more edited than those put on for local festivals. Featured most prominently in their responses was the recognition that stories in tourist productions were essentially shorter (usually lasting 5 to 7 minutes), denser versions of the ritual productions (which were said to last up to 30 to 40 minutes), often taking what is thought to be the most appealing aspects of the performance in the eyes of foreign tourists and condensing it in order to accommodate the brief period of time the tourists spend in the village. Another frequently mentioned element of distinction is that new stories, songs, and characters are created specifically for tourist productions, whereas ritual productions typically adhered to a fairly consistent cast, score, and scene repertoire.

For the culture tourist, traveling to rural locations such as Bảo Hà in order to witness particular aspects of traditional culture can lead to some unexpected insights. Tourists have the chance to see changes that have taken place in Vietnamese society through the distinction between the portrayal of traditional agrarian life and the very brief glimpse of contemporary rural Vietnam. Water puppetry serves as a static representation of ancient art, culture, and lifestyles, but it is juxtaposed with their visit to a traditional rural village in the dynamic process of seeking to become modern. This portrayal of “traditional-within-modern,” or the “ethnographic surreal” as Bruner puts it, while at the fringe of the touristic gaze and tending to be glossed over by commercial institutions such as travel agencies, is central to the development, production, and marketing of tourist performances in villages like Bảo Hà.²⁵

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, we seek to avoid reducing the various aspects of water puppetry performances within the context of the tourism industry to simplistic binaries of authentic versus inauthentic or real versus fake and instead advocate examining them as new cultural forms being created in the frame of larger forces often associated with the utilitarian term “globalization.” To encompass almost any discussion of this term at length is beyond the scope of this essay. However, the intersection of globalization and local expressions of agency and identity has been reworked by some scholars to produce interesting conceptual tools, such as *glocalization*. Instead of the earlier fear of these broad forces in the global community swallowing and homogenizing local cultures, the changes elicited from the global level can engender new avenues for expression, re-interpretation, or incorporation of local cultural productions into a larger structure.²⁶

The local producers of water puppetry performances in Bảo Hà—the artists, musicians, and troupe coordinators—reaffirmed this notion of glocalization in many of our interviews. These individuals often claim that the influx of international tourists to their villages and the performance of water puppetry shows for foreign audiences have little to no impact on the culture of the villagers themselves. As one puppeteer stated:

Water puppetry reflects the lives and culture of people only in northern Vietnam. It doesn't matter where these performances are put on, they are still representative of traditional northern Vietnam.

This resistance to change from outside forces in the discussion of glocalization is evidence of the producers' ability to express a localized interpretation of identity within the larger frame of the emergence of culture in the international tourism industry. Glocalization readily fits into a constructivist perspective, enabling us to examine the creation and

recreation of culture in a general sense while simultaneously acknowledging the agency of the local producers themselves.

Ironically, globalization appears to engender a form of localism. Increasing global integration does not simply result in the elimination of cultural diversity but rather provides the context for the production of new cultural forms that are marked by local specificity. The “local” is usually considered to be an authentic source of cultural identity as long as it remains unsullied by contact with the “global.” But the local itself is often produced by means of the “indigenization” of global resources and inputs.²⁷ As Barber points out, the global culture is what gives the local culture its medium, its audience, and its aspirations.²⁸

However, the transition from global *versus* local to global *and* local is contingent upon having enough time to absorb and acclimate to outside forces. In fact, Jayasinhji Jhala contends that an authentic indigenous aesthetic is not necessarily located at the point of first contact, but after native groups have already domesticated and internalized new technologies and made them their own.²⁹ To a large and unexpected extent, localism challenges the imperative of globalization by compensating for the standardization and perceived loss of identity that is said to accompany it.

In this article we hope to have provided some insight into the complex processes of cultural construction and reconstruction taking place in the international tourism industry, as well as to give a brief glimpse of the fascinating ancient art of Vietnamese water puppetry as it has appeared in the specific context of Bào Hà village. We eagerly anticipate further research on water puppetry and its interaction with larger global forces such as tourism.

NOTES

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