

Quan Họ Singing in Ritual-festivals in Bắc Ninh Region (Vietnam)

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Introduction

Every year when *Tết* returns and the northern wind casts a gentle chill over the Red River Delta in the northern lowland, villages surrounding the capital city of Hà Nội once again enter the season of festivals and rituals. These activities had either been subdued or dormant following the August Revolution in 1945 until 1987, when the government officially implemented the open-door policy. Riding the wave of revivalism, ritual festivals have noticeably sprung up in northern delta villages, providing fertile ground for pre-revolutionary forms of musical practices to thrive again.

During these months of festivals, performances of *hát chầu văn* (medium-trance music), *ca quan họ* (*quan họ* singing), *chèo* (traditional popular theater), *tuồng* (traditional symbolic theater), and *múa rối nước* (water puppetry) take place throughout the region, not primarily as professional activities sponsored by the government, but as popular non-professional events supported by the local village's administration or individuals. *Hát chầu văn*, for instance, is usually commissioned by individuals or particular temples' keepers for a variety of reasons, which often combine personal appeals for health and fortune with memorial services to the residing goddesses, princes, or princesses. *Chèo* is appearing again as a troubadour tradition performed by small groups that go from village to village. *Tuồng* and *múa rối nước* usually take place only at villages where local talents are available and their performances have traditionally been part of the annual festivals. While the four aforementioned musical genres exist in many regions in the northern delta, *ca quan họ* belongs to the province of Bắc Ninh exclusively.

The Festival Season in the Bắc Ninh Region

Bắc Ninh is said to be one of the oldest regions of the Việt (Vietnamese) civilization. During the Đông Sơn era (c. 2500-2000 BCE), the Lạc Việt tribes¹ (of the Mường ethnic group) inhabited the Bắc Ninh area, which was then known as Bồ Vũ Ninh (Vũ Ninh district). The Vũ Ninh district was one of the fifteen districts of the Văn Lang state ruled by the legendary (Vietnamese) Hùng Kings (Đào Duy Anh 1994:20-30). By 300 BCE, the Lạc Việt tribes had merged with several powerful Tây Âu tribes of the Tày ethnic group to the north to form the Âu Lạc state (Tây Âu and Lạc Việt combined), ruled by King An Dương Vương, a Tây Âu (Tày) descendant of Sichuan rulers (China), who migrated southward around 316 BCE when the Chinese Emperor Qin Shi Huang Ti control invaded and took over their territory (ibid.). Since then, the Bắc Ninh area has been the home for this group of mixed Tày-Mường people, who have continued to prosper in the area until today (Lê Hồng Dương 1982:146). An inscription at the Ngọc Sơn Temple (Hà Nội) describes the region of Bắc Ninh as the channel to the water and the mountain; that's the aura of marvelous regions (DuPicq 1935:261). Its aura is represented both in the hill

and river sites, and in the wealth of legends and myths, which bear a strong Taoist overtone. The whole area is permeated by a complex system of rivers, which run across the region from east to west and north to south.

The regional name Bắc Ninh has indicated different land entities through time. Historically, Bắc Ninh included the Bắc Giang mountainous region and the Bắc Ninh delta. It is also the contact area between the Việt people and the highland minorities, such as Tày, Nùng, Yao, Sán Diu, etc. (Lê Hồng Dương 1982:145-46). The term Bắc Ninh had been used to cover both Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang until 10/10/1895, when the French government divided Bắc Ninh into two separate provinces: Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang (ibid.:36).² After Vietnam fully reclaimed independence from France in 1954, the term Hà Bắc was used between 1963 and 1997 to include both provinces (ibid.:135). Now the region is split into Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang again for economic and administrative reasons; the cultural and historical tie between the two provinces remain nevertheless. Most *quan họ* singing activities, which occur these days, are found in what is now the Bắc Ninh Province (Trần Linh Quý 1972).

As in other northern lowland regions, cultural aspects of Bắc Ninh are usually linked with the seasonal calendar of the area's economy. Until recently, Bắc Ninh's economy has fundamentally evolved around agricultural activity, supplemented by a variety of handicraft industries and small businesses. This agricultural mode of production still influences major communal cultural events, such as rituals and festivals. While a small number of festivals take place during the seventh and eighth months of the lunar calendar, called *hội thu* (Autumn Festivals),³ most rituals and festivals take place during the first three months of the lunar calendar, called *hội xuân* (Spring Festivals) celebrating *Tết* (the Vietnamese New Year) and the end of vụ cấy chiêm (the first rice-planting season). In the past, these three months of village festivals were time for *Tết* celebration, leisure, gambling, gathering, and strolling from festival to festival, as described in the following well-known couplet of popular chant (*ca dao*):

Tháng Giêng ăn Tết ở nhà

Tháng Hai cờ bạc, tháng Ba hội hè.

We celebrate *Tết* at home throughout the first month

The second month, we gamble, and the third, we participate in the village festivals.

The Spring festivals, in fact, start as early as the fourth day of first lunar month,⁴ and last through the third month.

Functions of Festivals

The Vietnamese refer to these ritual festivals as *hội hè đình đám* (Toan Ánh 1969, and Toan Ánh 1974), which, as a composite term, contains four linguistic components that demonstrate a Chinese-Vietnamese combination:

hội - from Chinese origin, meaning "club," "affiliated social group," or "to meet"

hè - from vernacular Vietnamese (*chữ Nôm*), meaning "together"

đình - from Chinese origin, meaning "communal-ritual house"

đám - from vernacular Vietnamese, meaning "crowd," or "family or public ritual event."

As an idiom, *hội hè đình đám* refers to the village's gathering events either at the communal-ritual house (*đình*) or Buddhist temple (*chùa*), where villagers carry out

traditional rites and ceremonies as well as celebrate their economic success by sharing feasts, games, and music performances.

Until 1945, these gatherings had many cultural, social, and economic functions as described by Toan Ánh (ibid.):

1) taking advantage of the long leisure periods between harvests to provide pleasure, entertainment, and opportunities, particularly for single men and women, boys and girls, to meet, to become intimate, to flirt with each other, and to express their most intimate sentiment under the social sanction of invented ritual customs, games, and poetic-musical performances;

2) paying gratitude or showing respect toward the guardian spirits of the village, and reinforcing the importance of *lễ nghi* (ritual norms);

3) enhancing village solidarity by promoting understanding between village authorities or notables and villagers; this strengthening of village solidarity was further necessitated by the stratification of land owning that resulted in latent contradictions among the small and middle landowners who made up the majority of the village population;⁵

4) sharing foods, particularly meat which was considered a rarity among poor villagers, whose daily meals consisted primarily of vegetables and very rarely of seafood; in order to give this custom spiritual weight, villagers reminded each other that " *một miếng giữa làng bằng một sàng xó bếp* " (a small bite from the village feast is as significant as a big basket [of food] in the kitchen), for this share had been part of the offering to the spirits;

5) giving the residents of the host village an opportunity to demonstrate their hospitality, and to "show off" their economic affluence and cultural riches; and

6) promoting and consolidating bonds among sister villages (see below) that share certain particularities concerning their history, geography, economy, or culture.

Some functions have remained while others have disappeared, or at least ceased to be as meaningful as they used to be. To a large extent, the fifty years of socialist restructuring as well as the recent opening to a market economy have played a vital role in bringing about those changes of function. As a whole, the festival period has been shortened considerably for a number of reasons. The government has repeatedly cautioned people not to be carried away with pleasure and forget all about work while also calling for them to be economical. The market economy has stimulated among young and middle-aged individuals a stronger interest in improving their family income after a long period of wars and economic collectivization. Thus putting aside months to prepare and celebrate spring festivals has become less appealing to them, especially in villages, such as Thị Cầu Lim, where the economy is no longer confined to farming, but involves lots of buying and selling. Schooling, considered a precious privilege of a few village children before 1945, has become mandatory for all. Not having the same leisure period as some of their peasant parents do, children, teenagers, and college students today are required to be in school as soon as the first week of *Tết* is over, as most city students are. Furthermore, many Bắc Ninh residents are now working in factories and offices, which may require their employees to go back to work as early as the fourth day of first lunar month.

Festivals in Bắc Ninh nowadays include two rather distinct activities: *lễ* (the village ritual) and *hội* (the village fair). The ritual events usually occur at the opening and closing of the festival, whereas the fair goes on from the beginning to the end of the festival. The central authorities always feel uneasy about the ritual part, as they continue to view traditional festivals, weddings, and funerals, as fertile ground for *hủ tục* (backward

customs) to reemerge and proliferate (Văn Kiên 1998:46). Even as reluctant as the government may be, it allows villagers to carry out their ceremony under certain restrictions. For example, a festival committee, which is composed of cultural officials, who are also hardcore members of the communist party, must strictly supervise the whole event. Official codes concerning festival organization and participation are on display practically at every festival to remind villagers and visitors that these ritual festivals are organized for the entertainment of the people and should not be taken advantage of to promote superstition or to be wasteful.

However, the ritual part continues to be the traditional way for villagers to demonstrate their respectful sentiment towards the village's guardian spirits, which remains strong among elders. For example, keepers, who are in charge of maintaining ritual services at the communal-ritual houses and temples, think it is disrespectful to enquire about the names of the guardian spirits.

As lay people, we shouldn't ask about their names. Just acknowledge that these spirits are here to protect us and it is our duty to worship them. Moreover, asking for their names is the business of those cultural officials, we don't need to do that (personal communication, Keeper of Lim, 02/1999).

Young people, however, thinking of the communal-ritual house as a "serious" place for elders to perform their duty to the spirits, tend to browse in the fairground or gather around the Buddhist temple area. The "dating" or courtship function of old-time festivals has become less necessary as young people can easily make acquaintance and get to know each other better within their school or working environment.

Villagers of the host village consider it to be an honor and good fortune to have visitors who share with them at least a simple meal in their house. A guest invited by the festival committee often eats at the festival site, in the multipurpose room next to the ritual-communal house. The food usually includes bánh chưng (hard-pressed sticky rice cake filled with green bean and pork), pickled leeks and mustard green, boiled chicken sprinkled with lime leaves, and some soup made with bean thread, cauliflower, fungus, mushroom. Fish sauce and rice are basic food items for every meal. Other daily food in the countryside, such as *rau muống* (the closest American vegetable, yet distinctly different from *rau muống*, is spinach), tofu, and small pickled eggplants called *cà pháo* ("firecracker eggplant") are rarely served during these special occasions. Toasts are proposed periodically during the meal. Both men and women drink rice liquor, which can be made easily at home using local or Chinese fermentation powder. Soft drinks such as Cokes and Seven-ups, as well as bottled water, are common these days. Other drinks include local beer and occasionally grape wines or liquors made in other regions. The meal is wrapped up with fruits such as bananas and oranges, and fully completed with a cup of strong tea.

For the majority of general public, village ritual-festivals create a time-space for people to hang out, have some fun, spend a little money on toys and crafts as they enjoy a variety of entertainment events, and above all to feature activities that are uniquely their own. For example, the 1999 *Đọ* Festival featured a rice-cooking contest, which lasted for more than three hours and was extremely well attended. Approximately ten pairs of female participants wearing áo tứ thân (traditional costume for rural women) walked around the courtyard as they cooked the rice. One person was carrying the đòn gánh (bamboo pole) with a rice pot on one end while the other person was keeping the fire going underneath the pot using hay as fuel to burn. Coordination, endurance, and steadiness played an important role in this game. A man was improvising on the barrel drum to keep the excitement going while the people in the audience enthusiastically voiced their support for their favorites as well as personal commentaries about the other contestants. Quan họ singing took place between 7:30 and 12:30 past midnight on the

night before the main day. Vendors lined up outside the communal-ritual house selling all sorts of items from foods, such as dried fish and grilled corn, to necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and toys.

Festivals are also occasions for traveling craftsmen to sell their products. Two craftsmen from Hà Tây (west and southwest of Hà Nội) come to Bắc Ninh every year during the festival season to sell their colorful figures made of bột nếp (smashed sticky rice). The figures are either sacred animals or historical heroes and heroines, which are about three inches long by two inches wide. It takes approximately six months to learn the craft, which is called *tò he* by locals. A dragon costs about 4000 Vietnamese đồng (US\$.33), and a phoenix about 3000 Vietnamese đồng (about \$.25).

Sister Villages

It is also believed that ritual-festivals have always been the occasions for sister villages to further strengthen their traditional bond as they carry out the annual procession to worship their common or related guardian spirit(s), or perform their annual oath-taking ceremony. Villages formed their mutual bonds at various times in history and often worship the same guardian spirit(s). Ném Đông and Ném Đoài villages were ruled in the tenth century by the same warlord, Nguyễn Thủ Tiệp, and their people have since considered each other as members of the same family (Lê Thị Chung 1998: 309-11). Similarly, the villagers of Hòa Đình (central district), Đông Yên (Yên Phong district), and Niềm Xá (central district) established their bond when the king remunerated the court general Lê Phụng Hiểu with land acres for his effort in defeating the Cham to the south in 1044 (ibid.). Bò and Nưa villagers, who worship the five brothers who helped save the country from frequent raids of brigands, have been honoring their mutual bond for more than two thousand years (Lê Anh 1998: 295-6). Traditionally, residents from bonded villages, as a rule, did not marry each other; for they considered themselves to be sisters and brothers from the same village "family." This strict practice of non-marriage is only observed nowadays among very few villages, such as Bò and Nưa (Bắc Ninh central district), or Diềm (Yên Phong district) and Bịu (Tiên Sơn district).

In the past, bonded villages often helped one another to overcome economic hardship, or sent delegates to the village that was "conducting a local affair," such as a wedding, funeral, ritual, and celebration. The bond between Lũng Giang (an upstream village) and Bịu Giữa (a downstream village) helped control the water flow to prevent drought and facilitate water-logging for Bịu Giữa (Tô Lan 1993: 292-314). Once, when Tam Tảo village was about to have a food shortage as a result of crop failure, the people of Xuân Dục village, which is Tam Tảo's sister village, discreetly dumped tons of potatoes and yams in the Tam Tảo fields in the night (ibid.).

Under the socialist administration, most village bonds in Bắc Ninh today are considered to be symbolic and historical. However, village affiliation continues to be observed on ritual festival days, when *quan họ* singers of the historically bonded villages have never failed to get together to exchange a good number of songs. For example, the *quan họ* singing in the 1999 Sẻ Festival was carried out between the Bò women and the Bái Uyên women, while the Sẻ singers were acting primarily as hostesses. In another festival, singers and instrumentalists from Niềm and Yên villages joined the singers of their sister-village, Nhồi, to celebrate their annual ritual-festival day.

Festival Sites

Situated about 30 kilometers northwest of Hà Nội, Bắc Ninh is accessible by trains, buses, as well as two-wheeled vehicles. Out-of-town visitors often arrive on their motor vehicles, or in small buses or vans if they come as a large group. Local people usually walk to

festivals in groups of five or more. Turning away from the noisy National Highway 1, the main artery that runs from the southern tip of Mekong Delta to the northern border between Vietnam and China in *Lạng Sơn* and through the *quan họ* villages of Bắc Ninh for about 20km (See Map), festival goers follow paved paths or dirt trails towards the centers of villages where most festivals take place. The Lim village is an exception: its communal-ritual house is located next to Highway 1.

All festivals take place in the village space of *đình-đền-chùa*, which is a complex of communal-ritual house, (residing) temple of guardian spirits, and Buddhist temple. It is common nowadays to find a concrete administrative house either next to the communal-ritual house or in the middle of the *đình-đền-chùa* complex.

The Communal-Ritual House: *đình*

The communal-ritual house (*đình*) has had its ups and downs throughout the history of North Vietnam, but particularly since the complete establishment of the feudal Vietnam by the Lý dynasty in the eleventh century, it has remained significant as the public symbol of a village.⁶ The communal house was also an indication of a village's economic self-sufficiency.

It was built by villagers once the settlement was approved and given a name by the king, who then "appointed a guardian spirit or spirits to watch over the village and bring it peace and prosperity [...] and in effect, it is a symbolic bond between the village and the emperor" (Hickey 1964:6). In the course of history, these guardian spirits not only included mythical or legendary figures, but also many historical heroes and heroines who were associated with the villages. The king himself could promote these guardian spirits to a higher rank based on the recommendation of the village's officials. Currently, all villages worship male guardian spirits. In the past, some villages worshipped female spirits, who were eventually asked to step down so that male spirits could take over, as in the Sặt village in the Tiên Sơn district and the Diễm village in the Yên Phong district (Ngô Hữu Thi 1997:66). As a rule, this transfer of spiritual authority was prophesied via a medium or through a dream.

The Temple of Spirits: *đền*

If the communal-ritual house is a place for the guardian spirit(s) to preside over village events, the temple of spirits functions as their residence when there are no rituals. In addition, villagers put up one or more temples of spirits to worship spirits other than the main ones. A temple of spirits is considerably smaller than a communal-ritual house, although the general layouts of the two structures are quite similar. The opening procession normally begins at the temple of spirits and proceeds towards the communal-ritual house. At the end of the festival-ritual period, the spirits' figures are carried back to the temple.

In Diễm village, the relationship between *đình* and *đền* is a little more complicated. Currently, the temple houses Vua Bà ("lady king"), considered to be the Supreme Being as well as the creator of *quan họ* singing in the Diễm village. The *đình* keeper said Vua Bà had been permanently removed from the *đình* at the order of the King to leave the shrine for the two legendary brothers Trương Hồng and Trương Hát, who have since become the official guardian spirits of the village (personal communication, the *đình* Keeper in Diễm village, 03/20/1999). As a result, the Vua Bà has no place to "work" whereas the Trương Brothers have no place to "sleep." The Temple of Vua Bà becomes increasingly significant as the annual ritual involving *quan họ* singing continues to take place in front of Vua Bà's altar (see below).

The Buddhist Temple: *chùa*

Festival processions in several villages include visits to the main Buddhist temples, called *chùa*, where the spirits pay tribute to Buddha and listen to Buddhist sutras. Visitors, women and young people in particular, always offer incense and donations at the Buddhist temple during the festival. Each village has only one communal-ritual house, but several Buddhist temples.

In contrast to *đình*, which is visible and easily accessible by villagers from different village sections, *chùa* is secluded and often on higher ground, if not overshadowed by *đình*, as in the *Độ* complex of *đình-đền-chùa*. Women usually gather in Buddhist temples while men frequent the communal-ritual house. Yet, major Buddhist temples continue to serve as landmarks for locals as a result of the long-standing Buddhist tradition in the region.

Many Buddhist temples have altars in the back or side chamber for the worship of the four goddesses: heaven, earth, mountain-forest, and water. Temples in the northern delta also have altars for the worship of *tứ pháp* ("four dharmas") represented by four goddesses. These altars are concrete vestiges of an early form of religious practice embedded in agricultural societies, in which "clouds, rain, thunder, lightning" were thought of as powerful female spirits (Hà Văn Tấn 1993). The *Dâu* complex in Thuận Thành (Bắc Ninh), which was built in the second or third century and comprised perhaps the first major Buddhist establishment in Vietnam, includes four temples, called *Dâu*, *Đậu*, *Tướng*, *Dàn* temples, representing those four forces of nature.

The architectural layout of *Dâu* temple (or The Temple of Cloud, Figure 2.7), which is the main site of the *Dâu* complex, strongly suggests the image of *linga* and *yonis*, with a tall tower at the center squarely surrounded by closed corridors and lined chambers. Owing to its visible advantage, the tower has been a landmark for Buddhist pilgrims from all over the region:

Dù ai buôn dâu, bán dâu

Hễ trông thấy tháp chùa Dâu thì về

(Thanh Hương and Phương Anh 1973: 15)

Wherever you are, selling and buying

Just follow the sight of the *Dâu* tower to return.

Festival Activities

Both *đình* and *chùa* play host to all village events, although major events and activities as a rule take place in the communal-ritual house or open courtyard, as if they had to be witnessed, endorsed, and blessed by the guardian spirits. Until 1945, villagers performed a number of ritual customs, which were even considered 'backward' and 'decadent' by the Court, to please the guardian spirits in return for village harmony and prosperity.

Many of these customs encouraged emotional and sexual freedom during the festival period. The public defiance in the name of village customs against social restrictions demonstrated on the one hand a certain degree of village autonomy from the national court, while framing a context for emotional outbreak within the ritual sanction created by village authorities on the other. The customs ranged from courtship singing, such as *ca quan họ* and *hát ví*, to erotic games and ritual-performances, such as *đánh đu* ("swinging"), *bắt chạch trong chum* ("catching eels in a basin"), *tắt đèn* ("lights off"), *rước sinh thực khí* ("carrying procreative symbols"), and *chen* ("hustling"). Except for *quan họ*

singing and swinging games, other games, deemed to be immoral, have disappeared since 1945, if not earlier.

One of the most popular games among youngsters is đánh đu ("swinging," Fig. 2.8). A set of swings made of thick and tall bamboo is erected in most major festivals, particularly those that include the *quan họ* singing. Hồ Xuân Hương (late 18th century-early 19th century), a prominent poet known for the sexual puns and literary vulgarity which are present in all her works, displays her literary skills by playing with words and double meanings to graphically suggest sexual intercourse in her poetic depiction of the game.

Đánh đu

Bốn cột khen ai khéo khéo trồng,

Người thời lên đánh kẻ ngồi trông.

Trai co gối hạc, khom khom cột,

Gái uốn lưng ong, ngửa ngửa lòng.

Bốn mảnh quần hồng bay phấp phới,

Hai hàng chân ngọc ruỗi song song.

Chơi Xuân đã biết Xuân chẳng tá,

Cọc nhổ đi rồi, lỗ bỏ không!

Swinging

What a clever erection of the four bamboo poles

Some get on to swing while others sit and watch

Boys bend their knees and lower their body

Girls twist their back like a bee, and belly up

Freely flap the four sleeves

As clear as pearl, the two legs straighten next to one another

Who really knows how to play in Spring Festivals?

Poles are dug up leaving empty holes!⁷

Hồ Xuân Hương's satirical and pornographic poem using the elite poetic form of the time (the Đường luật or poetic rules of the Chinese *Tang* dynasty) is an indication of a complex society in which women were second-class citizens, respectable men such as officials and clerics could be perverts as well, and perhaps most important of all, her poems turned up as vestiges of a society in which lingalism had been transformed into widespread literary practice (Phạm Thế Ngũ 1961). Sexual puns also abound in the most common oral tradition of Vietnamese literature called *ca dao* (popular chant). I will

discuss the form and one particular genre of *ca dao* later in the dissertation when I examine the text of *quan họ* songs.

Along with a number of traditional, popular games that continue to be part of a village festival, such as "human" chess, cock fighting, and wrestling among others, new games have been introduced, including badminton, ping-pong (table tennis), and illegal gambling.

The *quan họ* Singing Tradition

For the Bắc Ninh people, festivals not only allow them to highlight their own village's specialties, such as ceramics, folk painting, wrestling, kite parades, or bird contest, among a great many other things, but also their common prized heritage, the *quan họ* singing tradition.

Ca *quan họ*, also called *quan họ Bắc Ninh* singing, is an antiphonal singing tradition in which men and women take turns singing in a challenge-and-response fashion drawing on a known repertoire of melodies. Usually a pair of women starts, presenting in unison a complete song called *câu ra* (challenge phrase) lasting three to eight minutes. A pair of men of the opposing team responds with another song called *câu đối* ("matching phrase"), which must match the melody of the women's song in order to be considered correct. Next it will be the men's turn to challenge the women with a song that can be completely different from the previous pair of songs.

There is in principle a matching song for every challenge song, although traditional singers sometimes presented a kind of single song, called *bài độc* or "killer song," to corner the opposing team. According to the *quan họ* scholar Trần Linh Quý, those songs were usually pre-composed in secret by some skilled singers, and sometimes also involved a poet, for a particular contest (personal communication, 07/01/99 and Đặng Văn Lung et al 1976:371-399). Arguments and disputes concerning the *quan họ* validity of the knockout song often arose, demanding explanation from the singers who presented the song (ibid.).⁸

According to the tradition, only young people used to sing *quan họ* songs, as the major body of song texts centers on the subject of love and sentimental desire among young adults. Nowadays, many elderly singers participate in the singing as well in response to the *quan họ* movement initiated by the provincial government. Trần Linh Quý recalls elderly singers' embarrassment during his fieldwork in the early seventies when he asked them to sing *quan họ* songs, supposed previously to be sung only by young adults to act out love sentiments in songs and singing (personal communication, 07/01/99). By now, elderly singers are quite enthusiastic about singing for guests, as one elderly singer said with tongue-in-cheek that she would not mind singing all night as long as there was some "pickled vegetable and salt to cover her stomach."

Quan họ singing can be carried out both as formal and informal events, called indistinguishably *canh quan họ* ("*quan họ* period") by the locals. Each formal *quan họ* singing event follows a conventional procedure that includes a ritual singing in front of a guardian spirit's altar before proceeding to the extensive courtship singing. This opening of strong ritualistic character usually features two songs in the *la rắng* repertoire, and it must be attended by the two masters of ritual and sometimes also by village officials.

The second part, courtship singing proper, consists of three phases clearly demarcated by tune-types, called *giọng* by *quan họ* singers.⁹ The various *giọng*-s include (1) standard tune-type (*giọng lễ lễ*), (2) variety tune-type (*giọng vặt*), and (3) farewell tune-type (*giọng giã bạn*). The standard tunes are mandatory, difficult, and can be "boring" to sing, according to today's *quan họ* singers. The second phase is the longest,

comprised primarily of love songs in variety tune-types, which make up the largest part of the *quan họ* repertoire and include a wide range of styles.¹⁰ The final segment is clearly distinguished by songs that project a lingering sentiment and a musicality resembling what Vietnamese musicologists call the "South" mode (see below).

Such a complete and demanding session of *quan họ* singing no longer seems to exist, at least as a self-initiated event among the singers and villagers themselves, although it can always be arranged at the request of government officials or special guests. The last complete singing session was done in 1972, when the scholars Trần Linh Quý and Hồng Thao requested well-known elderly singers in the region to record on reel-to-reel tapes a singing session that lasted for three days.¹¹ The lack of resources and changing socioeconomic environments do not allow such a singing event to take place during the festivals nowadays.

Instead, visitors will observe a watered down version of the singing event, which proceeds loosely among local singers, both host and guest. The singing functions primarily as a form of "cultural entertainment" that should provide a sense of tradition and festivity to the village festival as a whole. For example, hosts of the Đọ Festival attempted to reconstruct the ritual aspect of *quan họ* singing by having all female singers kneel and collectively sing one song in front of the altar in the communal-ritual house; differing even further from the tradition, they sang a variety song instead of a standard tune, such as the *la rắng*. The singing then proceeded with singers passing the microphones from one pair to another not worrying about beginning with standard songs or matching tunes. The singing ended with songs in the farewell category, a feature that has never been changed giving the singing session a sense of completion.

Informal singing is more of a norm now, and usually takes place in private homes without recognition or participation of village officials. Singing in the fields or on the road, contexts for informal *quan họ* sessions in the past, no longer occurs as far as I know.

Quan họ singing in festivals

Quan họ singing in festivals traditionally began either at the communal-ritual house or at the Buddhist temple as early as the night before the main festival day. Nowadays, only a few major festivals continue that tradition, while most villages carry out the singing on the main day. Visitors who channel their eye and tune their ear to *quan họ* singing at the festivals these days cannot help but notice several salient features shared by many *quan họ* singing activities throughout the region. Some aspects of traditional *quan họ* singing as it took place before 1945 have disappeared, either partly or wholly.

Use of Sound System

Above all, microphones and loud speakers are used constantly, which often strikes visitors' ears with severe sound distortion and catches their eye with the amusing sight of men and women in traditional costumes holding the microphones very close to their mouths the way "professional" singers do. Sound amplification with some degree of distortion is not only particular to *quan họ* singing, but also noticeable throughout the northern part of Vietnam, even in Hanoi, as a vital means for the official agencies to communicate with people.¹²

Familiar in the region are scenes of loudspeakers (personal address speaker type as shown in Fig. 2.9) attached to the top of an electric post or half-hidden somewhere on a tree. During the festival season, these loudspeakers appear on boats as well. In some way, sound amplification as a modern commodity, reinforced by the popularity of radios, televisions, and karaoke, has a certain attraction for this increasingly urbanized community. It seems the presence of electronic sound, that is the media, matters more

than the format and its content. It is not surprising that *quan họ* singing at the village level is caught up in this field of technology mania as people who are attracted to it make use of the available technology the way they like it according to their best understanding.¹³

Familiar Repertoire

Considering how extensive the *quan họ* repertoire appears to be, it is noticeable that songs heard in festivals are rather limited in number and repetitive in titles. Many singers contend that at festivals they prefer to sing songs that are familiar or easy to listen to. Common titles sung in festivals can be divided into two categories, and reflect a certain familiarity with recordings and productions of the *quan họ* Troupe (see Chapter Four).

The first category includes such songs as "I Am a Girl from Bắc Ninh," which has been considered as the *quan họ* "flag song" or signature song for some time by the younger generations, and "Leaning by the Boat-Side," perhaps the most favored *quan họ* song across different generations, in spite of generational and village variations which exist in singing practice. These two songs speak both to the locals' perception of regional identity and to their musical affinity to the basic features of *quan họ* melody (see below, Chapter 5).

The second category includes the majority of songs often performed by the *quan họ* Troupe. Songs in this group, such as "Entering the Buddhist Temple" and "Visitors Are Coming," display a musical contour that bears a strong connection to the official linguistic tonality of North Vietnam, on the one hand, while suggesting some resonance of the Cantonese mode as well as what the Vietnamese music scholars have been calling the "South" mode.¹⁴

Almost totally absent is the singing of songs in standard tune-types, which used to be mandatory at every *quan họ* session. The most important tune-type in the mandatory category is called *la rặng*. Elderly singers speak dearly of this tune, which "makes one feel warmer and warmer the more one listens to it" (personal communication, Cù Thắt, Sẻ Festival, 2/21/1999). Many younger singers would disagree, saying with abandon that "only old singers sing that kind of song, we don't [sing it] because it sounds boring, 'aye ah aye ah' forever without getting anywhere" (personal communication, Nguyễn Văn Tài, Sẻ Festival, 2/21/1999). Singers, young and old, of a village with strong *quan họ* roots such as Diễm, however, maintain respect for the tune because they have been carrying the tradition over many generations, allegedly unchanged. Singing of standard songs in the communal-ritual house as part of the traditional ceremony, which used to be a norm of *quan họ* singing in festivals among villages with a strong *quan họ* tradition, hardly exists.¹⁵

Song Text

Following the textual content of *quan họ* songs within the festival reveals a striking contrast between the open, public setting and the intimate characteristic of the songs. Virtually all songs heard in festivals express personal subjects such as unfulfilled love, expectation, longing, and intimacy. Most researchers and even a good number of *quan họ* singers have steadfastly and rightly denounced any personal attachment between male and female singers, and insisted that mutual attraction is purely "musical" (Nguyễn Văn Phú et al 1962 and Đặng Văn Lung et al 1976). However, unfortunate stories of broken marriages and violent eruption of jealousy are not unreal either. *Quan họ* singers do not always try to hide the fact that they long for living together as husband and wife. Songs such as "Love But Resentfully Without Marriage," "Wish We Lived Together," and

"If We Loved Each Other, We Ought To Marry Each Other" express a sentiment of longing commonly known to many *quan họ* singers.

Verbal and Poetic Introduction

One of the *quan họ* characteristics that have endured through time is the proper verbal and poetic introduction to each and every tune. *Quan họ* singers are not only appreciated for their singing ability, but also for their skill in leaving an impression of their gracefulness and literary adeptness on the audience. Usually one of the singers will say something to praise the opposing pair and express how fortunate her/his pair has been to be allowed to sing with them, before she/he goes on to recite the verses of the song. The poetic introduction also provides listeners with the basic content of the song text, which otherwise can be difficult to follow in singing. Not only that, the rhetoric used in the introduction is so polished that it gives the impression of a theatrical act. As a result, singers often try to imitate the speech tonality and pronunciation of official media announcers, even though *quan họ* researchers have asserted that speeches in the *quan họ* region vary from one village to another (Nguyễn Văn Phú et al 1962:17).¹⁶

Singing Aesthetics

Regardless of how significantly their speech varies, *quan họ* singers always sing in their speaking voice, which sets them apart from the professional *quan họ* singers of the *quan họ* Troupe, as well as from those who have received formal training in schools for traditional performing arts in the region. It is amusing to hear professional singers sing with a greater degree of nasality, partly as a result of uncritically applying the "bel canto" technique to the peculiar Vietnamese pronunciation, which mostly consists of closed syllables. Village singers tend to project a more throaty voice quality and with a greater volume, as if they were to sing without sound amplification. Those who have had experiences with using microphones know how to make the sound system work to their advantage by using a high level of reverb effect as they sing with a soft voice and unsustained vocal quality.

The *quan họ* scholar Trần Linh Quý initiated in the early 1970s a set of criteria for evaluating *quan họ* singing, which he summarized in four terms: *vang, rền, nền, nảy* (personal communication, 06/27/1999). These terms can be literally translated as ringing, resonant, moderate or restrained, and bouncing. Younger singers, who appeared to be oblivious as to how this set of criteria came about, have spoken of it widely as a matter of course. Most of them have heard it, either directly or indirectly, from the professional singers or musicians who in turn have learned it from the scholars. This explains why it can be very difficult for a great number of singers, both professional and nonprofessional, to articulate or demonstrate what these criteria actually mean in singing.

Elderly *quan họ* singers have their own way of talking about the qualities of *quan họ* singing. In the words of Cù Sáu Huyền, who tried to explain to the musicologist Hồng Thao what he thought to be good *quan họ* singing,

[...] first, the voices of the two singers must be clear, even, bonded to one another, as if there was only one person singing; second, the singers must know how to produce the 'bouncing grains' during the long sustained sounds to create the tinkering seeds and grains inside [their throats]; third, they must know how to embellish their singing with *hát luyến* ("slurred singing"); [and] fourth, to [end] a phrase with *hát rớt* [which is a special type of phrase ending, in which a multiple-shake is executed on the last pitch of the phrase, and ends on the upper pitch instead of the main pitch]" (Tô Ngọc Thanh and Hồng Thao 1986:124).

During the 1971 *quan họ* Conference, Cù Phạm Văn Thà, a well-known *quan họ* singer of the old generation, tried to explain these features in his own terms,

[...] *quan họ* singers do not sing with their mouth wide open in order to save their breath. [They] must use their tongue to control the airflow, and shiver their tongue inside the throat to produce a vocal sound that is at the same time ringing, bouncing, and resonant (1972:271).

Bouncing, or "bouncing-grains" as it is called by Trần Linh Quý (personal communication, 06/27/1999), is considered rather special to *quan họ* singing. Other vocal traditions such as *chèo* and *ca trù* also have their own "bouncing-grains" technique, which is different from that of *quan họ*. Curiously, this feature is talked about more than it is vocally carried out in singing. Elderly singers, who have been singing since they were in their teens and twenties, "scatter their grains" naturally as they sing and do not have a precise term for it. The most vivid description of the bouncing characteristic may very well come from Nguyễn Thị Nguyên, a 75-year old female singer, who claimed that "good singing must have the *tinkling inside the throat* (emphasis added)" and "not everyone has it, not even the professional *quan họ* singers" she has taught (personal communication, 06/99). The musicologist Hồng Thao observed that many people cannot learn the technique of "bouncing-grains." Even for those who can, Hồng Thao insists that certain conditions must be satisfied in order to make it happen. Those conditions are:

- a) Singing in real [speaking] voice;
- b) Singing in the middle register of the singer's pitch range;
- c) Singing at a moderate pace to make the grains longer in duration. At a fast pace, the grains are too short to be effective" (1997:89-91).

Considering how special the "bouncing-grains" characteristic is, it is disappointing to realize that such a delicate feature is often lost in festivals as a result of noise and distorted amplification, in addition to the lack of singers who can perform it.¹⁷

Some elderly singers, and rarely a young singer, emphasize the importance of having an "abundance of breath" and "completion of phrase" (personal communication, Nguyễn Thị Nhi and Nguyễn Thị Hải, 07/27/1999). These two ideas imply a basic skill of breath conservation in singing in order to be able to linger over the end of a long phrase with "bouncing grains" (ibid.). In fact, many *quan họ* singers nowadays tend to string together vocal lines of shorter breath instead of long lines as they used to be common in *quan họ* singing.

Costumes

Quan họ singers are easily identified in festivals, as they all wear a particular set of traditional costumes, one for women (Fig. 2.10) and one for men (Fig. 2.11). Except for a very few elderly women or men who perform in ceremonies, hardly anyone wears this sort of traditional outfit today. It somehow appears that this set of traditional costumes has become the performance outfit for *quan họ* singing events. In the early 1970s, members of the newly formed *quan họ* Troupe, who were then in their twenties, felt extremely awkward and embarrassed to put on those costumes in public (personal communication, Trần Linh Quý, 06/1999). The costumes that *quan họ* singers wear today have been modified to become more colorful in order to accommodate stage presence (ibid.).

Instrumental Accompaniment

Instrumental accompaniment is slowly creeping in and welcomed by *quan họ* singers in some villages. The *đàn bầu* ("gourd instrument," a monochord zither producing overtones as pitches) is the most common instrument, followed by the *sáo trúc* (bamboo flute). Other traditional instruments may include the two-stringed bowed lute, 36-stringed hammered dulcimer, and 3-stringed plucked lute. Occasionally the acoustic guitar and even the electronic keyboard are used.

The use of instruments in *quan họ* singing officially began when the *quan họ* Troupe was formed in 1969, and since has caused debate among scholars, and local *quan họ* singers as well (Hồng Thao 1998). Some village singers are enthusiastic about singing with accompaniment because of the support it provides. The official media always present folk singing with accompaniment. Professional and semi-professional troupes always perform *quan họ* songs accompanied either by a set of modified traditional instruments that also includes a drum set (Fig. 2.14), or sequenced arrangements on electronic keyboard. However, not all songs are accompanied by instruments. For example, the tune *la rắng* has never appeared in accompanied form, either on professional stage or in village activity. Some singers prefer to maintain the tradition of *quan họ* singing without accompaniment, even on stage.

Quan họ Stages

A *quan họ* "stage" in festivals is simply designated by a few straw mats on the ground; therefore it is also called *chiếu quan họ* ("*quan họ* mats"). The male singers sit on one side and the female on the other side. The listeners either sit or stand around the mats. At the center, there usually is a round aluminum tray for donations and rewards. These days, some festivals, such as the well-known Lim and Diễm Festivals, present *quan họ* performances and musicals on elevated stages in addition to the *quan họ* mats.

For musicals (theatrical productions in the Troupe's fashion involving more or less limited acting), village officials usually contract either a member of the professional *quan họ* Troupe or the Center for *quan họ* Culture to coach and direct. To some extent, this professionally modeled activity has opened up a performance venue that gives *quan họ* singing the focused attention similar to that of pop singing on the one hand, while it undermines the *quan họ* tradition as a non-professional popular cultural practice, on the other hand. In spite of active participation by the local people, the *quan họ* scholar Hồng Thao continued to view such activity as being culturally impoverished,

As much as professional musicians have consciously absorbed and made use of folksong, and the people have incorporated folksong in their musical events, the folksong activity, with its true meaning of a folk culture, has increasingly become limited (1997: 353).

Quan họ Singing as a Cultural Practice and Local Pride: The Lim and Diễm Festivals

Trying to make cultural sense of the *quan họ* tradition as it is practiced today is not an easy task. *Quan họ* singing has undergone several changes with regard both to its context and content as its practitioners continue to search for ways to put the puzzle together, while realizing that missing pieces may never be found. Yet, the Bắc Ninh locals believe that *quan họ* singing has always been the window through which outside people can see who they really are, as the director of the *quan họ* troupe maintains,

It is possible to say that for hundreds of years until today, Bắc Ninh is known to the people from all over the country above all because of *quan họ* singing (Thúy Cải 1998: 37).

This sense of local distinctiveness and regional pride has become especially significant since 1997, when Bắc Ninh was separated from Bắc Giang, the administrative center of the former Hà Bắc province (Bắc Giang and Bắc Ninh included). Cao Khải, a retired army general, bluntly expressed his view within the context of *đặc sản* ("special products" or local specialties, a widespread notion of regional products applied to all things in Vietnam, from food to ideas) that "*quan họ* singing is all that the Bắc Ninh people have to show to the world," and "furthermore, it is so deeply rooted in the *region* that practically every Bắc Ninh native was born with a flair for *quan họ* singing in his/her blood" (personal communication, 07/09/1999). His opinion can be validated in the sense that everyone, children and elderly people included, can sing a certain version (old or new, unadulterated or modified) of a *quan họ* song, and that outside perception is also shaped by such an expectation—Anyone from Bắc Ninh sings *quan họ* songs.

Their assertion of local distinctiveness does not rest at the regional level, but rings true all the way down to the village level. The ethnologist Bùi Xuân Đính argues that being a self-reliant social unit until the emergence of communism by the mid 1900s, the traditional village in the northern delta had developed a conservative and resistant attitude towards non-local factors (1998: 103). Besides, villages in the past had to constantly deal with their own internal conflict among various factions, as well as develop their distinct customs. Therefore it was rare that one village was willing to share administration with another (ibid.: 103-4).

The three most popular *quan họ* festivals today are the Lim Festival (pronounced "leem" in the non-glottal middle tone), which takes place on the 13th day of the first lunar month, Diềm Festival (pronounced "ziem" in the non-glottal low tone) on the 6th day of the second lunar month, and Thổ Hà Festival on the 22nd day of the first lunar month. Both Lim and Diềm have always been known as villages of strong *quan họ* roots within the region, while Thổ Hà has become more popular as a *quan họ* site some time since the sixties, as a result of its hospitality and therefore its ability to attract top singers in the region to come for *quan họ* singing.

The Diềm and Lim Festivals are arguably the two most important *quan họ* festivals in the region.¹⁸ These two sites are distinguished by their geographical and historical conditions on the one hand, while their people starkly distinguish themselves from those living in the downtown Bắc Ninh area by their peculiar speech dialects and the significance of their *quan họ* history and activity.¹⁹

The Diềm Festival

Recognized by locals and non-locals as the place where *quan họ* singing is said to have originated, Diềm village has always attracted visitors and *quan họ* scholars as well. In 1994, to highlight its *quan họ* significance, the Diềm people changed their annual festival from the 6th day of the 8th lunar month to the 6th day of the 2nd lunar month, which was the day when *Vua Bà* was sent down to earth from heaven to help establish the village and taught village people the *quan họ* singing. Many Diềm residents continue to recite a poem, written in the vernacular *nôm* script, which praises *Vua Bà* and glorifies *quan họ* singing (Nguyễn Văn Phú et al 1962: 36-37 and Đặng Văn Lung et al 1978: 169).

The change of annual festival date was primarily triggered by the central authority's formal recognition of the *Vua Bà* temple as an historical heritage. *Vua Bà* is significant to Diềm villagers not only as the creator of their *quan họ* singing, but also as their Supreme Being. She taught the Diềm people how to cultivate the land, form plantations, grow crops, plant rice, raise silkworms for textiles, plant sugar cane for honey, and perform ritual practices. In the past, when the drought occurred every year, people gathered to sing *quan họ* songs for days in front of her altar to pray for rain. Significantly, during the

rain ritual, only *la rắng*, the fundamental tune of *quan họ* repertoire, was sung (see Chapter Six).

The 1999 festival was marked by the presence of officials from the Center for *quan họ* Culture, a television crew from Hà Nội, and several official guests from the provincial government. The evening event appeared to proceed in a manner that served the purpose of making a documentary film, directed by a Hà Nội official/scholar. Several interruptions occurred as the director had a plan for how to shape the event on the television screen. The Diêm people did not seem to mind as long as things got done and their village got a chance to become better known through the media as the village of *quan họ* origin. As a result of such a highly fragmented proceeding, singers appeared to enjoy chatting with the audience when another pair sang (Fig. 2.15).

In the past, the evening before the main day of festival was primarily significant as a singing ritual in which the bonded *quan họ* groups (and not the village officials as it was this year), got together and sang the mandatory tunes to praise and to show gratitude to *Vua Bà* before proceeding on to several private homes for the rest of the singing event. Nguyễn Văn Trung, the leader of the Diêm *quan họ* troupe, recalled the old days, when "only *quan họ* groups between the two villages were bonded as opposed to nowadays, even the villages' administrative organizations have joined the bonding relationship" (personal communication, 06/13/1999).

The Lim Festival

The Diêm festival is not the only popular event that has all along attracted government officials. The Lim festival has also received considerable attention from the government, although with less direct involvement: the once-popular Lim *quan họ* singing contest organized by Lim village has gradually and unofficially been replaced by the regional *quan họ* singing contest now administered by the Center for *quan họ* Culture (see Chapter Four). As if it were a continuation of the Lim tradition, the government-sponsored tournament takes place every year right before the Lim festival which always lasts from the 12th day through the 14th day of the first lunar month. The 13th day is the main festival day.

Compared to the Diêm festival, the Lim festival was a lot more diverse, spread out, less tradition bound, better known to outsiders, and therefore always attracting many more visitors. Both accessibility and economic position have made Lim known to a great many visitors as the festival place for *quan họ* singing. The traditional Lim market area (called *thị trấn* Lim) occupied a strip on what is now Highway 1. This area continues to be populous and is now full of small stores, services shops, and restaurants, especially near the village *đình*. Trains from Hà Nội to Bắc Ninh stop at the Lim station before going into downtown Bắc Ninh. The festival site is only a ten or fifteen-minute walk from the train station. Lim's economic affluence has allowed its local people to host many singing sessions during the festival and year round.

Not any different from any other year, the traffic around Lim during the 1999 festival was unbearable. A mile long traffic jam and shoulder-to-shoulder crowds crammed on Highway 1, with the procession right in the middle of it. *Quan họ* singing had started early in the morning on a boat and continued for a few hours. By 11:00A.M., the site began to clear out and a new *quan họ* singing site (Fig. 2.18) replaced the singing on boat. Amidst such a chaotic scene, blasted with honking and whistling, the intimate *quan họ* corner put up its own sound walls with the help of microphones and loudspeakers. It is not clear whether the loud and intimate singing was contesting the street noise or was simply adding to the soundscape of the festival.

As with major *quan họ* festivals, singers from other villages were invited to the host village the evening before the festival day to sing in the communal temple. From about an hour past midnight the guest singers would sleep at the host village until the next morning, when they would come out to sing again in the temple yard or on a boat.

The Lim Festival occupies a large area from the communal temple on Highway 1 up to Buddhist temple, called chùa bà mụ ả (Temple of the Lady), on the Lim Hill. A wide range of activities went on within that festival space of a little less than one square mile. Procession, wrestling, a human chess contest, cock fighting, merry-go-round, games, and a lottery among others, were all part of the festival. This year, the Coke advertisement sign got bigger and there was more than one transvestite stage (Fig. 2.20 and Fig. 2.21).²⁰ Near the top of the hill is the open center stage, where several local performances have been presented along with those of professional troupes, such as the official *quan họ* Troupe of Bắc Ninh and the recently formed *quan họ* Tiên Sơn Troupe privately owned and managed by a local of the Tiên Sơn district.

The *quan họ* Tournament

In the past, *quan họ* singing in festivals sometimes occurred in the form of a tournament. The traditional tournament outdoor involved a new prize, a *quan họ* team representing and sponsored by the host village currently holding the prize,²¹ a panel of judges, and a number of challenging teams to compete for the prize and even more for the pride. A prize often included some tea, special fabric, firecrackers, and occasionally money (Nguyễn Văn Phú et al 1962:27-9). To win, a group had to come up with one or more unusual songs to which the opposing group could not respond, either poetically or musically (Trần Linh Quý 1972).

Things have changed since the tournament was revived in 1992. Nowadays, the organization, rules, procedures, and methods and criteria of evaluation show several departures from earlier practices. The sponsoring village has been replaced by the Center for *quan họ* Culture representing the central authority. The formal procedure based on the performance of the three phases of a *quan họ* singing session has been entirely eliminated. Now the Center for *quan họ* Culture selects a list of songs, which increases from year to year, and sends out to villages for preparation. In the preliminary round at the tournament, singers draw titles from the pool of selected songs (the titles have been written on folded pieces of paper by the tournament officials and placed in a tray). As a result, the required repertoire has noticeably been scaled down, and only within the last year was the most important standard song, *la rắng*, reinstated in the tournament. The prizes now consist exclusively of money: the 1999 tournament awarded 600,000 VND (Vietnamese *đồng*, roughly US\$45, which is about the amount a worker of a local sewing factory makes in 2 or 3 months) for the first prize, and 400,000 VND for the second prize.

One of the most critical severances from tradition involves the judging panel. Instead of having village elders who have been known throughout the region for their singing serve as judges, the judges now are composed primarily of government agents who have more or less been trained as professional musicians or singers, even though their music training may be unrelated to *quan họ* singing. Virtually all the judges have, or have had at some point in their career, a close tie either with the professional *quan họ* Troupe, the Center, or the Bắc Ninh Department of Culture and Information.²²

Every year since 1997, the Center for *quan họ* Culture has organized three special indoor contest-festivals in addition to the outdoor tournament: a *quan họ sân khấu* ("*quan họ* on stage") contest for young and middle-aged singers (17-50s) which takes place at the same time as the outdoor tournament, a festival for elderly singers (61 years old or older) in September or October, and a festival-contest for children (6-15 years old) in

May or June. The outdoor tournament has become, as Vũ Tự Lãm, a knowledgeable ex-member of the professional *quan họ* Troupe and adjudicating member for many years, said with tongue-in-cheek, a *lệ* (mandatory custom) as [the way] the Lim Festival [was] in the past (personal communication, 02/1998).

Closing

The *quan họ* activities as they are carried out today reflect to a great extent the efforts of the Vietnamese socialist government to preserve and make use of what it perceives to be part of the people's national cultural heritage. Dialectically and ironically, the global Marxism introduced to Vietnam has since heightened the Vietnamese leadership's awareness of a Vietnamese distinctiveness, which privileges all the more a political assertion over cultural manifestation. In the next two chapters I will discuss the perception of Vietnamese identity and the institutional mechanism employed to implement and reinforce such a perception with regard to the *quan họ* tradition.

Lê Ngọc Chân

Notes:

1. The Lạc Việt tribes constituted one of what the ancient Chinese historians called the Bách Việt ("Hundred-Việt") groups inhabiting the Hoa Nam ("South of China") territories, which are now North Vietnam, Yunnan, Fukien, Guangdong, and Guangxi. Except for North Vietnam, all the other regions are now part of China (Đào Duy Anh 1994:21).
2. It has been said that the French merely adopted the division initiated by the previous Vietnamese Emperor Minh Mạng (personal communication, Tô Ngọc Thanh, Hà Nội, February 1998).
3. Traditionally, the two ritual festival periods were marked by an overall sentiment of gratitude toward supernatural powers that protected the community (Toan 1969 and Toan 1974). They also functioned as a communal temporal space for behavior which was otherwise restricted by national laws and decrees as well as social conventions (ibid.). The ritual aspect of these festivals was discouraged by the government following the 1945 revolution. The 1987 economic reform has triggered a revival of traditional (pre-revolutionary) customs of the village, including ritual and ceremonial practices.
4. The *hội đình* and *hội chùa* either took place one after another to prolong the pleasure, or *hội đình* during the Autumn season (the 8th month) and *hội chùa* during New Year (Nguyễn Văn Phú et al 1962:14-15).
5. Nguyễn Từ Chi has learned from his fieldwork that "on the surface they [landowners] seemed to be friendly, but all the while they were watching each other's moves until that moment when all the little contradictions burst out into larger conflict, resulting in legal cases, which often lasted for years" (1993:59-60).
6. The worship of guardian spirits, however, had been introduced to Vietnam from China during the Chinese occupation of North Vietnam between 111BCE and 939CE by the Chinese rulers to protect their citadels in the occupied territory. The practice was adopted by the Vietnamese Kings after they had chased the Chinese rulers away. Eventually the villagers also adopted the worship for their own villages. In 1572, King Lê Thánh Tông assigned the mandarin Nguyễn Bính to systematize the guardian spirits reported to the Court by the villagers in an attempt to conform with Confucian beliefs (Trần Quốc Vượng 1998:93-4).

7. My translation. The poet also played with sounds, such as *cật* and *lòng*, which both sound very close to the slang words for the man's penis and the women's vagina. This poem is but one of Hồ Xuân Hương's many poems that aimed at one of society's taboos: sexual expression. In other poems, she took advantage of literary sanction to laugh at hypocritical individuals, or to express a talented woman's aspiration to become a man.

8. The notion of "killer song" rarely exists among more remote villages, such as Diễm or Châm Khê villages. Singers from the Thị Cầu village, which was becoming less of a traditional village of rice fields and more of a little merchant district by the beginning of the twentieth century, created many songs in this category.

9. The concept of *giọng* will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

10. The prominent *quan họ* scholar Hồng Thao suggests that these variety songs display many musical and textual features acculturated from other northern lowland genres (1993). The variety songs are categorized according to two chronological styles (based on the elderly *quan họ* singers' articulation): old and new (Nguyễn Văn Phú et al 1962).

11. Nobody has claimed to have the tapes now. Similar requests have been carried out now and then for audiovisual documentary productions within the past 5 years, although none is as extensive as the 1972 project.

12. Following the fall of Saigon in 1975, I was introduced for the first time to the kind of collective broadcast employed by the communist government to propagate, exhort, criticize, "entertain," and occasionally inform its local citizens. This was done both by erecting several loudspeakers posts and mounting loudspeakers to moving vans or tricycles.

13. A full examination into the nature of this phenomenon of sound amplification and distortion is definitely beyond the scope of my present study, although I believe it is an area of merited attention, if not indispensable. To keep the issue alive in the background of my mind, I would like to point out aspects which converge with some of Sutton's perceptive observations and explanations on the Indonesian's flair for sound technology (1996). One plausible assertion is the intentionality on the part of users, which is encouraged by the crowd-attracting aura and sense of self-empowerment generated by sound amplification and effects without users' exertion. I will refrain myself from making deep cultural associations here acknowledging that Sutton has achieved such a feat with a sleight-of-hand regarding the Indonesian situation. I find it suggestive that the ambiance and soundscape created via the technological tools of microphones and sound amplification during years of war and collectivization may have instigated among the rural people a certain sense of social security. The Indonesian aesthetic of *ramé* ("busyness") can also serve as a point of departure for further investigation, not only to explore similarities between the two cultures in the same region, but also to understand their dissimilarities due to Vietnam's geographical and cultural proximity to China.

14. I will discuss further in depth the musical interchange between *quan họ* and other genres in later chapters devoted to musical analysis of the songs.

15. When it did take place, as in the 1999 Diễm Festival, a great deal of interference occurred as a Hà Nội television crew had previously arranged to "direct" and record the event.

16. During my fieldwork in 1999, I was surprised to find that the linguistic pronunciation and tonality of people living in rural villages, where *quan họ* singing has taken place for a long time, are distinct from the typical Hà Nội speech, which is considered as 'standard' nowadays in the northern delta. In fact, their more limited tonality sometimes

suggests that of people from central Vietnam. For example, they pronounce *dấu hỏi* (low melodic tone) and *dấu ngã* (high glottal tone) more or less with the same tonal inflection (see also Chapter Five).

17. According to Thúy Cải, a *quan họ* singer of distinction and director of the *quan họ* Troupe, the bouncing feature is very difficult to teach, and she is perhaps among the rare number of singers, if not the only one, from her troupe who can do it naturally (03/1999). My observation away from festivals reveals different bouncing techniques and productions depending on individuals and villages.

18. According to Trần Linh Quý (1974), *quan họ* singing was a major event in the festivals of Lim, Đặng, Yên, Đồng Cao, Thị Cầu, Diêm, Chắp, Nhồi, Ó, Bịu, and Sẻ, by the turn of the twentieth century.

19. The downtown people consider the speech of the Lim and Diêm people to be "heavy, bland," and to bear a strong resemblance to the speech of northern Central Vietnam.

20. In strong contrast to the prevalent northern dialect heard in the festival, all the hosts for these gay shows spoke with the southern dialect (I suspect there is a desire to create a "modern" image to attract the rural crowd).

21. This *quan họ* team could be locals or guests, which was up to the festival committee to decide. As a rule, if the female team held the prize, then the challenging teams were male; and vice versa.

22. During both the 1998 and 1999 tournaments, the director of the Bắc Ninh Department of Culture and Information occasionally offered his ideas and evaluation of singers to the appointed judges. In the 1999 tournament, the leader of the Diêm contestants even challenged the judges' decision at one point, which, of course, was overruled by the judges themselves.

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A graduate from Indiana University, Dr. Le has taught piano at the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music, Michigan State University, and Wesleyan University, where he also taught the Vietnamese *dan bau* monochord zither. His original works have been performed by L'Atelier des musiques contemporaines (Paris), Gina Buntz Dance Company (New York), Michigan State University Symphony Orchestra, and Minneapolis Civic Orchestra among others. He has performed in Europe and North America as a pianist before devoting his full effort to research on Vietnamese music in 1992. His research has been supported and funded by numerous agencies and foundations including the Social Science Research Council, Fulbright Foundation, Asian Cultural Council, and Center for Southeast Asian Studies at UC Berkeley. He has given lectures/demonstrations at The Michigan Academy of Letters and Sciences, U.C. Berkeley, Trinity College, San Francisco Museum of Asian Art, and several other museums and institutions around the country. As a music teacher, Dr. Le is exploring the possibility of incorporating various musical systems of the world in a comprehensive curriculum for musicianship. He is also on the faculty of Los Medanos College, Pittsburg.