

The Thang Long Water Puppet Troupe of Hanoi

A glimpse of the cultural life and times of ancient Vietnam

Richard Phillips
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The Thang Long Water Puppet Troupe of Hanoi, which performs the age-old craft of water puppetry or *mua roi nuoc*, has just ended a successful season at the Royal Botanical Gardens, part of the annual Sydney Festival.

Mua roi nuoc was devised more than a thousand years ago by villagers from the Red River delta and other rice-growing regions in northern Vietnam to celebrate the end of rice harvests, mark religious festivals and at later stages entertain the royal court. Unknown outside Vietnam until recently, this unique art form provides a glimpse of the cultural life and times of ancient Vietnam--in particular the stories and legends that provided enjoyment and amusement to peasant farmers and fishermen.

In contrast to other puppetry, Vietnamese water puppetry is a theatrical form in which a rice paddy, river or pond forms the stage. During the height of its popularity in the Ly dynasty (11th to 13th centuries) and succeeding Cham dynasty it was also performed in permanent floating pavilions.

The puppets, some standing two feet high and weighing up to 15 kilograms, are manoeuvred across the water's surface via a system of underwater poles, rods and strings. Many are so heavy and complex that two or three people are required to manipulate them. The puppeteers stand waist deep in the water, their work screened from the audience by a raft, pagoda or some other floating structure. In the past, water puppeteers endured water-borne diseases, rheumatism, leeches and other difficulties in order to practice their craft.

The Thang Long performance in Sydney began with a musical prelude and an introduction by Cheu Teu, a

kind of comic master of ceremonies. Cheu Teu tells the audience that he was exiled to earth from heaven for stealing fruit.

"Seeing that this society is full of complicated problems," he says, "I must wade in to try to sort out these entanglements." And what "entanglements" ensue as the puppets dance, dive, glide and swim across the watery stage, accompanied by a five-member orchestra of traditional Vietnamese instruments during the troupe's vigorous hour and quarter performance.

Poetry, fireworks and the watery reflections of the brilliantly coloured puppets, combine with splashing sounds and the alluring music of bamboo flutes, drums, bells and single-string violins to transport the audience to a world of fishermen and villagers; of knights on horseback and beautiful princesses; of water buffalo, fish, frogs and ducks; of unicorns, lions, magic turtles and fire-breathing sea-dragons.

Some of more charming acts include *Dance of the Dragons*, *Triumphant Return*, *Legend of the Restored Sword* and *Dance of the Fairies*. The more interesting of the many scenes from rural life include *Catching Frogs*, *Fox Stealing Ducks* and *On a Buffalo with a Flute*.

Dance of the Dragons and *Dance of the Fairies* are based on an ancient legend, which claims that the Vietnamese people are the product of a union between a dragon (Lac Long Quan) and a fairy (Au Co).

Triumphant Return, an act dating back to the 11th century, shows young men and women returning to their home villages after graduation. Graduates' names were carved on tablets and carried to Hanoi's Van Mieu or Temple of Learning to be entered in the royal record. Dressed in fine clothing and accompanied by honor

guards, trumpets and flags the graduates return triumphant to their villages.

Legend of the Restored Sword is from the fifteenth century and concerns Le Loi, a Vietnamese king, and his encounter with a magic turtle. The king is boating in a lake following the 1418-1427 Vietnamese uprising against Chinese domination. When the turtle asks the Le Loi to return a sword, which saved his life during the protracted war, the King agrees and renames the lake Hoan Kiem or restored sword.

The rural scene, *On a Buffalo with a Flute*, is accompanied by a haunting musical theme and includes the following poignant verse:

"Let me tell you about the rice field,
the villages enclosed in emerald green bamboo,
the sound of a flute floating above the back of a buffalo.

Those who still miss the homeland, come back."

As is fairly well-known, puppetry is one of the earliest forms of theatre--a craft whose origins can be traced to the first Asian civilisations. The ancient Greeks used puppets, as did the Romans. Puppetry survived the fall of the Roman Empire and since the Renaissance has enjoyed an unbroken tradition in many parts of Europe. Punch the famous English glove puppet, evolved from Pulcinello, the Italian clown of the *commedia dell'arte* tradition. Sicilian puppeteers still enact stories from the Crusades, and for Germans the traditional puppet play is the "History of Doctor Faustus".

But European and American puppetry also incorporated much of the dramatic and technical innovations made by other performing arts over the last three hundred years. Puppet theatre merged comedy, satire, and even political agitation, with complex dramatic, religious and psychological themes.

By contrast, Asian puppetry, particularly from Burma, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, China, Japan and Korea, has changed little over the centuries. Ancient techniques and traditions remain, the art form virtually unaffected by the passage of time and civilisation. No doubt it is the timeless quality of the Vietnamese water puppets that accounts for their allure and increasing popularity with international audiences.

A visit to the Thang Long Water Puppet Theatre provides an occasion to appreciate the complex artistry and beauty of this craft. It also should remind us that

mankind's cultural and artistic traditions are not eternal, they have to be preserved and protected--their aesthetic discoveries handed on to future generations.

The importance of this elementary principle has been confirmed for the Vietnamese water puppeteers by the events of the immediate and recent past.

Capacity crowds flocked to the performances in Sydney but this artistry may not have been witnessed and enjoyed by Australian audiences if the Howard government's Immigration Department had prevailed.

The Thang Long Water Puppet Troupe, which have appeared at festivals in Europe, the US, Japan and South America over the past decade, had never been refused entry visas to any country. Just four days before the puppeteers were to leave for Sydney they were informed by the Australian embassy in Vietnam that they had been denied entry on the spurious grounds that members of the troupe might seek to remain in Australia permanently. It was only after urgent appeals by Sydney Festival organisers and the show's Australian producers that the Immigration Department decided on January 4 to grant visas to the internationally-renowned theatre company.

Nor should it be forgotten that just two and half decades ago, the US, Australia and other imperialist powers were engaged in brutal land and air war against the Vietnamese people. This war not only killed and maimed millions, defoliated vast areas of the landscape and destroyed cities but threatened the destruction forever of *mua roi nuoc* and many other valuable artistic and cultural traditions in Vietnam.

Richard Phillips interviews water puppet director:
"A unique form of art"



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