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# CAI LUONG

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## *Re-reading Vietnamese History Through Popular Culture*

*This paper examines the role of theatrical performances, “cai luong,” in Vietnam’s anti-colonial movement during the first half of the twentieth century. Given increasingly heavy repression of traditional print media by the French colonial regime, cai luong played a unique role in mobilizing the population against colonialism and toward national liberation.*

Loan Dao

University of California, Berkeley

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Hundreds of villagers gathered at the village-center where a makeshift stage had been created out of plywood. In front of the stage, a group of musicians played their instruments, which consisted of everything from a traditional one-string zither to the modern electric guitar. A mobile generator provided electricity for the lights and speakers while the actors waited “backstage” or the open area behind the “curtain,” which consisted of a painted sheet depicting the setting of the scene. The gripping lyrical monologue of the female protagonist pierced the air, as she bewailed having to leave her mother in the countryside to find work in the city. The scene, so familiar to the villagers, moved them to tears. Suddenly, without warning, armed policemen from the French colonial government surrounded the audience and the stage, and ordered the audience to disperse. The troupe was expelled immediately from the village.

While much of the research on Vietnamese performing arts has been depoliticized from its historical context, *cai luong* musical theater serves as an arena for political and social debate for ordinary people and is in need of further academic

exploration. While performing arts have always played a crucial role not only in the “representation of, but also the resistance to imperialism,”<sup>1</sup> little scholarship has been produced that examines the significance of theater as propaganda for swaying public sentiment and mobilizing the masses, especially in societies with large illiterate populations.<sup>2</sup> This paper reconceptualizes the history of *cai luong* of the early twentieth century as central to understanding anti-colonial mobilization. For most of the French colonial period, *cai luong* was the dominant form of popular culture that transcended class and socioeconomic differences. It was also especially influential among the youth. This article examines how *cai luong* supplanted written forms of resistance in challenging French colonialism. With its specific historical role, *cai luong* serves as a valid resource for studying the history of Viet Nam in the early 20th Century.

### *History and Structure*

*Cai luong* is a form of popular musical theater that developed in the early 1900s on the outskirts of Sai Gon, Viet Nam. It synergizes traditional

Vietnamese song, Chinese operatic styles, and French popular music. Musical accompaniments guide the emotional and climatic turns of the plot. Most *cai luong* plays tell of dramatic love triangles with complex subplots and melodramatic conclusions. The stories are often about characters grappling with the difficult task of balancing tradition and modernity. Performances have been held in cities as well as in the countryside, and have won a wide audience throughout the country.

There are three theories on the origins of *cai luong*. The *hat boi* school claims *cai luong* descended directly from *hat boi*, a traditional Vietnamese court theater adopted from Chinese opera. When the Nguyen emperor Minh Mang attempted to “Sinicize” the Vietnamese people and spread Confucianism, he hired actors from the Canton Opera Troupe to teach *hat boi* performers the symbolisms in the make-up, gestures, and costumes of Chinese opera.<sup>3</sup> *Hat boi* thus became a tool for passing on Confucian social and ethical lessons to the Vietnamese people during the Nguyen Dynasty in the early 19th Century in order to buffer the threat of Western Christian influences. If *cai luong* has its roots in Emperor Minh Mang’s national Sinicization project, then *cai luong* can be understood as a form of cultural resistance that opposed French foreign influences.

Another school of thought traces *cai luong* to the chamber music of the Hue court. This school argues that the first large-scale *cai luong* performance took place in 1917 when the play *Bui Kiem Ngayet Nga* was performed to the chamber music of the Hue court rather than to *hat boi accompaniment*. This hybridization of musical genres came to be known as *ca ra bo*, and later, “*cai luong*.”<sup>4</sup>

A third school of musicologists traces *cai luong*’s heritage to *tai tu* music. *Tai tu* music was in the mid-19th Century a form of entertainment for communal ceremonies. It was later performed with lyrics and actors. Many elements of *cai luong*’s music originated from *tai tu* music. *Tai tu* and *cai luong* share the same titles (*long ban*), and song genres (*hoi*). They both abandoned the tradition of using percussion instruments, using only a small knocking instrument for the foot called *song loan* to keep time.<sup>5</sup> The close connection of *cai luong* and *tai tu* traditions suggests that *cai luong* has always been rooted in popular culture.

These three schools of thought demonstrate how *cai luong* surfaced as a distinctive indigenous art. The hybridization of *cai luong* enabled the art form to transcend both class and regional boundaries. With its roots in both popular culture and court chamber music, *cai luong* incorporated musical styles and themes that appealed to both rural and urban people. *Cai luong* offered a “rallying point” that transcended regional and class differences, and the lyrical emphasis provided a site for socio-political dialogue. It rose to the height of popularity in the midst of debates about national liberation during Vietnam’s anti-colonial movement.

### *Political Power*

At the onset, the storylines of many *cai luong* plays had political undertones. In 1917, Thay Than, director of the troupe in Sa Dec province, invited playwright Truong Duy Toan to a private performance of *Luc Van Tien*, which some scholars consider to be the first *cai luong* play.<sup>6</sup> This inspired Truong to create plays for large-scale

performances in Sai Gon, including *Kim Van Kieu*, the iconic national epic poem about a young woman's decision to prostitute herself to save her father from debtor's prison.<sup>7</sup> The content of these classics dealt predominantly with the desecration of moral norms. The political content of these plays became more obvious and contentious with each decade.

Due to waves of insurgency throughout the Southern countryside in the early 1920s, censorship by the colonial government became more strict. Political debates about modernity and the French presence in Viet Nam needed a new forum. This political urgency interestingly paralleled the shift from fantastical tales of traditional narratives in *cai luong* to narratives about the cultural roots of Vietnamese society in plays called *xa hoi*.<sup>8</sup> These later plays became known as *tuong tau*. They often dealt with socially controversial issues such as educational rights for women and uprisings against corrupt governments.<sup>9</sup>

*Cai luong* became a popular art during the 1920s throughout Viet Nam, with itinerant troupes forming in the North and South. By the end of the decade, influenced by amateur student groups touring the north, the first *cai luong* troupe began performing in the port city Hai Phong, headed by Ha Quang Dinh with the legendary Ai Lien in his cast.<sup>10</sup> *Cai luong*'s plays had become a national art that united the Vietnamese people across regional, class, and age differences.

The next decade marked a shift in the content and presentation of the plays as they acquired Western elements. The 1930s introduced *tuong tay*, or Western style *cai luong*, in which the characters dressed in the latest Western fashion

and the sets were elaborately decorated, imitating European design. Conflicts were set in furnished rooms, such as offices, workplaces, or urban homes, rather on rural farms. Stories such as *La Dame Aux Camelias*, *Tristen and Iseurt*, and *Hamlet* were rewritten for the stage in colloquial language.<sup>11</sup> The traditional vocal technique called *vong co* was also often sung to rhumba, tango, and swing music. Mong Van emerged as a prolific producer of Westernized plays, creating in the period between 1930 and 1945 over seventy scripts and thirty songs, including the famous *Suong Chieu*.<sup>12</sup> The numerous troupes performing his plays during this period solidified the dominance of *cai luong* as the national pastime.

*Tuong tay* became an arena for overt anti-colonial mobilization, encouraging unity among the ordinary people against French occupation. Until the early 1940s, such themes were subvert. By the mid-1940s, however, *cai luong* had become a forum where anti-French sentiments were openly expressed. Viet Minh-influenced performers also promoted nationalistic and patriotic propaganda in their renditions of the classics.

The political power of *cai luong* during this period instigated an aggressive response from the colonial government. Governor-General Petain allowed the colonial police force, the Surete, to interrupt musicals and disperse audiences.<sup>13</sup> The Governor-General also co-opted the art to maintain hegemonic influence. For example, the established Quoc Gia Kich Doan, at the time the National Theatre Group, performed only government-selected scenes from *tuong tay* musicals.<sup>14</sup> The French regime's concerted efforts to repress *cai luong* troupes during the height of the anti-colonial

resistance offers some indication of the influence the performances had on popular opinion.

By the 1950s, most of the political sentiments were channeled into the genre of “*chien tranh*,” or war musicals. These plays had dramatic, poignant settings, with intense battle scenes. The stories were patriotic and encouraged ordinary people to resist the French regime.

Unfortunately, the proliferation of this genre also marked the beginning of the decline of *cai luong*. Due to the arrival of the Vietnamese film industry, funding for the troupes diminished. In the 1960s and 1970s, *cai luong* supported opposition against the traditional social establishment and the French occupation’s political structure. But unlike the plays of the 1950s, *xa hoi* operettas usually offered no solutions and were considered melodramatic. Since the early 1970s, *cai luong* suffered a severe depletion of resources in terms of funding and patronage. Many of its musicians and performers have migrated abroad or into other entertainment industries.<sup>15</sup>

Although *cai luong* ceases to be a testimony of popular opinion, each decade in Vietnamese history in the early 20th Century can be analyzed through *cai luong* narratives. By reading history through this form of cultural production, we have a more thorough and accurate picture of the political shifts experienced by the Vietnamese. Given the important role of the masses during this period, it is important to consider the role of popular culture seriously, and it is perhaps fruitful to reexamine the *cai luong* art form as a political tool in the anti-colonial war to win “hearts and minds.”

### *Rethinking Anti-colonial Struggle*

For much of its history, Viet Nam has fought for her independence from foreign occupation, politically and culturally. One strategy of resistance has been to appropriate various aspects of foreign cultures in the project of creating an organic national identity. During the French colonial period, France assumed the role of a “mother” nurturing her “children,” until her colonies *proved* themselves worthy of independence. Once her colonies and colonial subjects were molded into the mirror images of France, only then were they considered “civilized.”

The process by which the countries would achieve this goal and maintain their national essence was fiercely debated. Constitutionalist asserted that total assimilation of the new generation into French culture was vital to free the country from underdevelopment and economic stagnation. The new generation of Francophile youth would form a mature, refined society that was capable and deserving of full autonomy from its “mother country.”<sup>16</sup> Neo-traditionalists felt it was necessary for future generations to maintain their Confucian virtues such as chastity, filial piety, and loyalty in order to keep an authentic Vietnamese identity.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, the decrepitating condition of the country’s institutions encouraged the increased participation of youths in secret societies and political organizations, such as the well-known Thanh Nien led by Ho Chi Minh in Canton.<sup>18</sup>

The energetic young elites were torn between revering authority in accordance with their Confucian upbringing and fighting against existing political institutions, which they believed their parents had shamefully submitted to. Hungry for new strategies to obtain independence and self-

determination, they sought new ways to express themselves. Regardless of political orientation, national liberation leaders knew that the essence of Viet Nam's anti-colonial struggle for autonomy and independence lay with the vibrant, dynamic, and underestimated youth population. For many across the country, the site of public mobilization efforts occurred on the *cai luong* stage.

Apart from the few journals, magazines, and newspapers written in French that subtly criticized the corruption of French authorities in Indochina by Francophiles, the exploitation of the colonies was virtually undocumented. Since the censorship laws carried out by the Surete forbade any publications in the Vietnamese language to discuss politics, criticisms against the government and political solutions for the nation's problems had to be masked in new discourse—the language of drama.

The main dilemma had been the individual conundrum of whether to abandon Confucian family morals in favor of urban, cosmopolitan lifestyles. Stories often solidified into stock characters and narratives that audiences came to expect. The common motif underlying them dealt with the struggle between “good” and “evil”. Characters embodied this Manichean perspective. Vietnamese young adults assumed protagonist roles as either a rural farmer or a poor urban laborer, who become enticed by the materialism of “modern” city life. The antagonist, usually another Vietnamese young adult, would succumb to a Westernized, materialistic lifestyle as a middle-class cosmopolitan. He was “chic” in dress and appearance while aggressive in language and mannerisms. He presented the tension in the story as he tempted

the protagonist to disavow traditional Vietnamese values for unethical acts. During the anti-colonial period, the climax was often the moment of internal conflict for the protagonist. Nevertheless, the resolution often involved an apology from the antagonist and eventual reconciliation through forgiveness. These characteristics of the *cai luong* play attracted a young audience because of the metaphoric analogies through which internal conflicts and moral values resulting from French colonial rule were discussed. Not only did these plays critique French “modernity,” they advocated national unity through the reconciliation of vying political factions.

The musicals offered a “hidden transcript” in public arenas, safely protesting colonialism beneath the eyes of their French colonial oppressors. The “hidden transcript” takes effect in the “offstage” space “where subordinates may gather outside the intimidating gaze of power [and where] a sharply dissonant political culture is possible,”<sup>19</sup> and where power and oppression can be critiqued without fear of retribution. *Cai luong's* undeniable effect during the French colonial period eventually manifested in the Surete's disruption of performances and co-optation of troupes. *Cai luong* thus compels scholars to look beyond the obvious and public demonstrations of rebellion and the rare periods of open confrontation in revolution.

### Conclusion

While print media undoubtedly helped the anti-colonial movement in Viet Nam, a historical analysis of *cai luong* reveals the significant role it played in mobilizing the population. Its emergence in rural regions of southern Viet Nam demonstrated

its power as a medium for political debate for populations that had no access to media during a period when the French colonial government censored Vietnamese political written materials. The itinerant nature of the traveling troupes served as a thread weaving together a national identity and socio-political trajectory, thus realizing an “imagined community” in the spaces of these public events. Although this paper only offers preliminary conclusions, it validates the need for more research on the role of cultural productions such as *cai luong* during the anti-colonial struggle.

*Cai luong* has not been adequately studied for its impact on the changes in public opinion on

questions of French colonialism, modernity, and nationalism. Moreover, popular culture in general has often been cited only to buttress the master narratives of history. This particular genre of theater addresses the significance of mass movement in the process of resistance and anti-colonial struggle in Viet Nam that analytically complicates dominant historiographies. Reading Vietnamese history through *cai luong* suggests that the politics during this period were publicly driven by the ordinary people of Vietnam, rather than the educated elite class. It is in these creases of cultural production that we might excavate a history “against the grain” of a meta-narrative.



## ENDNOTES

- 1 Ellen J. Gainor, “Introduction,” in Ellen J. Gainor, ed., *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre, Drama, and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1995) xiii.
- 2 Nora M. Alter “Vietnamese Theatre of Resistance: Thich Nhat Hanh’s Metaphysical Sortie on the Margins,” in Ellen J. Gainor, ed., *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre, Drama, and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1995) 1-18.
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- 4 Stephen Addiss, “Theatre Music of Viet Nam,” *Southeast Asia*, vol. 3, (1970), 129-152.
- 5 Bui Trong Hien, interview, Viet Nam, May 15, 1999.
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- 7 Edward Hauch, “The Cai Luong Theatre of Viet Nam, 1915-1970” (Southern Illinois University: Ph.D. Dissertation, 1972), p. 28
- 8 Ha Quang Van, interview. April 21, 1999. Le Xuan Hieu, 1999.
- 9 Ibid, 47.
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- 14 Vien Chau, 1999. Minh Chau, interview. February 3, 1999. Le Xuan Hieu, 1999.
- 15 Hauch, 52.
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- 17 Ibid, 39-44.
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- 19 Scott, James C., *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 18.

## LOAN DAO

Loan Dao is a PhD candidate in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. She spent six months researching *cai luong* in Vietnam during the spring of 1999. Her primary areas of interest are Southeast Asian diasporic studies, Asian American studies, and social movement history.

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