# Music and possession in Vietnam

by

Barley Norton

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### ABSTRACT

The thesis is a study of musical and ritual practice in Vietnam. At its heart is an investigation into the relations between music and possession during mediumship rituals, lên đồng.

Inquiry into the interaction between music and ritual context is crucial for understanding possession and the music performed at mediumship rituals, chầu văn. When possessed by spirits, Vietnamese mediums experience 'aware possession' rather than a form of 'trance'. Chầu văn songs invite the spirits to 'descend' to the human world and ensure the maintenance of aware possession. Musicians create song sequences, 'songscapes', for each possession, which musically construct the presence of the spirits.

In addition to music's role in ritual, the thesis explores the creative process involved in the realisation of the vocal melodies of chầu văn songs, and the gradual processes of musical change that have affected the chầu văn repertoire and performance practice.

The traversing of gender during lên đồng rituals, by both female and male mediums, has important ramifications for the gender identities of mediums. Ritual practice enables mediums to behave in ways outside prescribed gendered roles and affords them scope for challenging and destabilising established gender categories.

Lên đồng has been a site of contestation during the second half of this century. Despite being prime targets of an anti-superstition campaign, lên dồng and chầu văn have undergone a strong revival in the last decade. Concurrent with this revival, folk-culture researchers and ritual participants have attempted to rid lên đồng of its association with 'superstition' by developing a legitimating discourse which reframes mediumship in nationalist terms. Chầu văn has also been implicated in debates concerning the ideological reform of traditional musics and national identity.

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The CD-ROM consists of an abridged version of Chapter 4 of the thesis and includes video extracts from two len dong rituals. To access the CD-ROM open the file named: Index\_Intro.htm (which initially comes up on the screen as Index\_Intro). The CD-ROM works on both Macintosh and IBM computers. The required software is Internet Explorer or Netscape with Quicktime or Media Player.

One of the main advantages of the CD-ROM format is that it enables nonlinear comparison of video extracts from two different rituals. The 'Navigation' of the CD-ROM outlines the main sections: Introduction; Notes on layout; Songscapes for the Third Mandarin; Songscapes for the Second Holy Lady; Songscapes for the Tenth Prince; Songscapes for the Third Lady; and Conclusion. Access to each section is gained through clicking on the icons for the main sections. The section of the CD-ROM titled 'Notes on layout' provides further description of the CD-ROM layout and how to activate the video extracts.

### PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

The Vietnamese in this thesis uses the standard quốc ngữ ('national script') writing system. This Romanised script, initially devised by French and Portuguese missionaries in the seventeenth century, became the predominant script from the beginning of the twentieth century, and in 1945 it became the officially recognised writing system.

Prior to the thirteenth century the Vietnamese had no way of transcribing their language onto paper: writing by Vietnamese authors was done using classical Chinese. This script is referred to by Vietnamese as chữ nho ('Confucian script') or chữ Hán ('Hán script'). Essentially, chữ nho consists of classical Chinese characters - the Chinese of the Confucian classics - which were read with Vietnamese pronunciation. From the thirteenth century onwards the Vietnamese devised their own script known as chữ nôm ('southern script'), which was modelled on Chinese characters.<sup>1</sup> As chữ nôm was superseded by quốc ngữ at the beginning of the twentieth century and is now only known to specialists, chữ nôm characters have not been included in the thesis glossary.

### QUỐC NGỮ PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

### Vowels

a = a in father
e = e in empty
ê = a in fate
i = i in it
o = o in boy
ô = o in so
o = e in the
u = u in butcher
u' = oo in good

 $<sup>^{1}</sup>$  For a brief introduction to chữ nôm and its evolution from the thirteenth to the early twentieth century see Nguyễn Ngọc Bích (1984).

### Consonants

d, gi, r = z in zoo c, k, q = c in cookch = ch in chop (but softer) d = d in day g, gh = g in goodh = h in hat kh = ch in lochI = 1 in lamp m = m in mother n = n in new ng, ngh = ng in thingph = ph in photocopy s = sh in shet = t in tea (but harder) th = th in Thailand tr = tr in trackv = v in vanity

### Speech tones

Vietnamese has six speech tones: high-rising (sắc), mid-level (không dấu), high-broken (ngã), low-rising (hỏi), low-broken (huyền), low-falling (nặng). Speech tones are marked with diacritics above or, in the case of the lowfalling, below the main vowel of the syllable, except for the mid-level tone which has no mark. The diacritics are:

- high-rising tone
   (no mark) mid-level tone
   high-broken tone
  - ? low-rising tone
  - low-broken tone
  - low-falling tone

The speech tones may be graphically represented as follows:



# PHOTOGRAPHS



1 A medium, possessed by the Fifth Mandarin, prepares to drink rice wine

2 Temple altar; statues at rear are of the First, Second and Third Mother spirits



3 A medium, possessed by the Third Prince, distributes money to a disciple



4 A medium, possessed by the Little Holy Lady, dances with lit ropes



5 Male medium possessed by the Second Lady Cam Đường



6 Temple band at the Mulberry temple in Hanoi; Phạm Văn Ty is playing the moon lute (dàn nguyệt)



7 Healing session: a male medium consults an ill child



8 Chầu văn lesson at the home of my teacher Đặng Công Hưng; Hưng plays the moon lute (đàn nguyệt) while I play the clappers (phách), small cymbal (cảnh) and drum (trống)



### INTRODUCTION

Chàu văn is a Vietnamese music genre that evokes the spirit world. It provides the sound environment for spirit possession. Chàu văn songs invite the spirits to descend to the human world. They tell of the spirits' great deeds, and vividly describe their beauty and elegance. During the rituals at which chàu văn is performed, known as lên dòng, a medium is possessed by a succession of spirits in front of a temple altar. Once possessed, the medium dresses in the spirit's clothes and carries out the ritual actions of the spirit. The medium's disciples, invited to participate in the ritual, watch on and interact with the possessee. They receive the spirits' gifts and money, and ask for the spirits' advice and protection.

This thesis is an ethnographic study of music and possession in Vietnam. At its heart is an investigation into the phenomenon of spirit possession and the role music plays in the possession experience. In complement with this main theme, the thesis frames musical and ritual practice from a number of different perspectives. It provides a gender analysis of mediumship, it explores the musical processes involved in singing chầu văn, and it situates lên đồng and chầu văn historically and politically.

Above all, chầu văn is music of and for ritual, and as it is shaped by its 'context' an important concern of this thesis is how the performance context of possession rituals affects musical form and expression. Chapter 4, "Songscapes for the spirits", examines how chầu văn bands construct sequences of songs to create an aural environment - a songscape - for each spirit possession. It discusses how the songs that bands perform depend on the interaction between mediums and musicians, and how song choices are made and carried out by bands. Having established how songscapes are created, Chapter 5, "The musical construction of the spirits", goes on to investigate the role of music during lên dồng rituals. It focuses on how music provides a context for possession and ritual action, <sup>1</sup> and argues that chầu văn songs contribute to the presence of the spirits by musically constructing spirits' gender, place and ethnicity.

Inquiry into the importance of chầu văn for possession requires familiarity with the practices of mediums and an understanding of spirit

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> This is informed by Waterman's suggestion that understanding the "influence of music and musicality on human social life" requires a consideration of "music as a context for human perception and action", rather than relegating context to the 'background' (1990:214).

possession. Chapter 2, "Mediumship and possession", examines why, and how, people become mediums and the ritual practices involved in mediumship. It also proposes a way of thinking about possession - based on mediums' descriptions - in terms of bodily lived experience. The notion of 'trance' is not applicable to lên dòng as Vietnamese mediums experience 'aware possession'.

During lên dồng, mediums are possessed by both male and female spirits. How certain chầu văn songs contribute to constructing the gender of spirits is discussed in Chapter 5. The ability of mediums to 'traverse' genders while possessed has important ramifications for their gender identity. Chapter 3, "'Effeminate' men and 'hot-tempered' women: negotiating gender identity", explores how the gender identity of male and female mediums is affected by ritual practices. It argues that mediumship affords mediums scope for challenging the stereotypical gender identities ascribed to men and women.

Chapter 6, "Finding the 'way'", is concerned with the creative processes involved in singing chầu văn. Musicians often refer to chầu văn songs as 'ways', and the vocal contour of each rendition of a 'way' is different. The chapter examines what constitutes a 'way' - i.e. what is consistent in renditions of the same song - by comparing several verses of two songs as performed by two different musicians. It also analyses how the speech tones of song texts affect the vocal contour of songs.

Chapters 7 and 8 examine chầu văn and lên đồng from a diachronic perspective. Chapter 7, "The politics of lên đồng and chầu văn", considers the effects of Vietnamese Communist Party policy regarding lên đồng and chầu văn. It focuses on how mediumship has been affected by an antisuperstition campaign, and the resurgence of lên đồng in the last decade. It includes discussion of a new form of 'revolutionary chầu văn' which stripped chầu văn of its 'superstitious' elements so that it could be performed on the stage. Party policy has, however, had little affect on chầu văn as it is performed during lên đồng. Chapter 8, "Musical change", examines recent changes and innovations to chầu văn as it is performed during lên đồng. It also outlines changes in style and performance practice, and considers the processes of musical change affecting chầu văn.

In the "Conclusion", the themes of the thesis are drawn together and the the relations between music and possession are considered. A documentary made by Vietnamese Television (VTV) about my research is also discussed in order to reflect on the nature of fieldwork and the position of lên đồng and chầu văn in contemporary Vietnam.

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This thesis is the first work written in a European language that examines chầu văn in any detail.<sup>2</sup> Some research has been carried out by Western scholars on Vietnamese mediumship both in Vietnam (Durand 1959) and in the diasporic Vietnamese communities in France (Simon and Simon-Barouh 1973) and America (Fjelstad 1995), but none of these studies makes more than a few passing comments about chầu văn.<sup>3</sup>

Although there are numerous studies by native scholars concerning indigenous religions and the myths of spirits, research on lên dòng and chàu văn has not been permitted due to the Vietnamese Communist Party's condemnation of mediumship as 'superstition'. Since the late 1980s, however, Party policy on mediumship has been less vigorously implemented and some Vietnamese scholars have published work on lên dòng and chàu văn. Researchers at the Folk Culture Institute (Viện Văn Hóa Dân Gian), under the direction of Ngô Đức Thinh, have spearheaded this work. Through a conference held in June 1992<sup>4</sup> and the publication of books on chầu văn and lên đồng (Ngô Đức Thịnh 1992; 1996a; 1996b), researchers at the Folk Culture Institute have argued that lên đồng and chầu văn are 'phenomena of the collective folk culture' and 'religious-cultural activities of the community' which are a legitimate topic for folklore research. The work done at the Folk Culture Institute has been complemented by two other books on chầu văn: one that is concerned solely with analysing chầu văn songs (Thanh Hà 1995), and a second which makes particular reference to lên đồng and chầu văn in Nam Hà province (Bùi Đình Thảo and Nguyễn Quang Hải 1996).

Carrying out fieldwork in Vietnam poses many challenges; this is especially true when researching politically sensitive practices, such as lên dòng and chàu văn. Due to the fact that my initial attempts to obtain a research visa to study chàu văn and lên dòng were met with the suggestion

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Surveys of Vietnamese music briefly mention chầu văn (see Trần Văn Khê 1967:142-44; Nguyễn Thuyết Phong 1998:505-6).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> For instance, Durand's study includes a discussion of song texts, but only briefly mentions music. At the outset he states that "a special music and chant accompanies each possession, and after hearing the melody it is possible to know the personality of the spirit" (1959:7). Later on he mentions that chau văn bands usually include two or three people ("a guitarist, a player of the bamboo clappers and a drummer") and states that "the rhythm of the musical accompaniment varies according to the manifestations of the spirit" (ibid.:34).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The papers given at the conference titled "Bước đầu tìm hiểu thần thoại và truyền thuyết Mẫu Liễu" (Initial research on fairy tales and on the legend of Goddess Liễu) are published in *Tạp Chí Văn Học (The Literature Journal)* 257 (1992):5-67.

that I change my research topic, I decided to take the option of enrolling as a language student at the Centre for Research of International Culture of the Vietnam National University founded by Professor Phan Cự Đệ. During my first period of fieldwork from August 1996 to July 1997, I remained in Vietnam on a study visa from the Vietnam National University. This gave me the opportunity to further my language skills while remaining free to pursue my own research interests. My second period of research in May and June 1998 was carried out under the auspices of the Vietnam Musicology Institute (Viện Nghiên Cứu Âm Nhạc Việt Nam) and the Hanoi Conservatory of Music (Nhạc Viện Hà Nội).

Although I had good contacts with educational institutions, my entry into the world of lên dồng rituals was achieved by becoming involved in local music-making and rituals rather than through official routes. On two previous research trips to Vietnam in 1994 and 1995, when I was studying the chamber music genre ca trù, I established links with musicians, musicologists and other people interested in music. These friends and acquaintances assisted my doctoral research by introducing me to chầu văn musicians, who, in turn, introduced me to mediums and their disciples.

This informal way of getting to know ritual participants seemed the best approach for a number of reasons. First, unlike other types of music, such as the chèo theatre and the water puppetry repertories, chầu văn bands are not supported as part of the government-funded national music troupes, so there was no particular organisation that I could contact in order to meet practising chầu văn musicians. Similarly there are no mediums' organisations through which I could hear about lên đồng rituals or meet mediums. Second, I was concerned that, because of official criticism of lên đồng, it might be difficult to gain permission to attend rituals and carry out interviews with mediums and disciples. Third, I thought that developing acquaintances with people involved in lên đồng, without the mediation of representatives of official organisations, would make ritual participants feel less constrained in how they portrayed their activities.

On the whole mediums were willing to let me attend their lên dòng and were open about discussing mediumship. There were, however, a few occasions when mediums refused to let me go to their lên dòng or did not wish to talk about their ritual practices. The reason for their reticence was not always obvious, but a common concern was that my presence would provoke unwelcome interest from the authorities. This confirmed that I should endeavour to be as unobtrusive and informal as possible, especially when meeting mediums for the first time.

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Mediums who did permit me to attend their rituals were usually agreeable to me videoing, taking photographs and making audio recordings of their rituals. In fact, in some cases my video camera became an incentive for mediums to invite me to their rituals: as a 'camera man' I could make a contribution by providing a 'souvenir' (kỷ niệm) of the event. Providing mediums with video copies of their rituals was also beneficial in that it enabled me to maintain contact with mediums and their disciples, and provided a useful focus for further discussion of rituals.

Interviews with mediums, all of which were conducted in Vietnamese, were usually done without an assistant, although my Vietnamese language teacher Trịnh Thị Nhạn did accompany me for some interviews. As a married woman in her early sixties, Nhạn was an ideal person for assisting interviews, not so much because of the questions she asked, but because of her ability to facilitate frank, relaxed exchanges, especially with female mediums.

Throughout my research I was keen to extend my contact with mediums and disciples beyond the fairly short time-span of rituals themselves, and did so by arranging meetings and interviews. However, living for sustained periods of time to carry out research in the Vietnamese countryside is extremely difficult for foreigners to arrange. So I lived in Hanoi while maximising the time I spent with mediums by regularly visiting a few mediums and making trips to the countryside - for stretches of up to a week - to attend festivals and temple sites in North Vietnam. Regular visits to one female medium, Thanh, who lives in Hà Tây province about 40 kilometres south of Hanoi, became particularly important for understanding how mediumship figures in village life and for gaining insights into the activities of mediums in addition to lên dồng. As well as carrying out semistructured interviews and going to Thanh's lên đồng, I spent much time in her temple and home, getting to know her family and disciples, and other mediums in the village, who came to visit her.

During fieldwork, I studied the chầu văn song repertoire and the moon lute (đàn nguyệt), which is used to accompany the voice. After a brief period of study with Đỗ Đễ, a tutor at the Hanoi Music Conservatory, I studied with Phạm Văn Ty, a well-known chầu văn musician and the leader of a band based at the Mulberry Temple (Đền Dâu) on Fan Street (Hàng Quạt) in Hanoi. For the last six months of my first period of fieldwork and during my second period of fieldwork I also studied chầu văn with Đặng Công Hưng, an instrumentalist of the Vietnam Chèo Theatre (Nhà Hát Chèo Việt Nam). As well as playing chèo, Hưng - whose father, Đặng Công Ứng, is a chầu văn musician - has mastered the

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chầu văn repertoire and regularly performs at lên đồng in Hanoi and the surrounding area. Apart from lessons with Ty and Hưng, I also had some tuition and much discussion with a large number of other chầu văn musicians.

:

### CHAPTER 1

# RITUAL SETTING AND INTRODUCTION TO MUSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

### RITUAL SETTING

On a humid April morning in 1997 I waited outside the Mulberry temple in the old quarter of Hanoi. The street was bustling with life: motorbikes zipped past noisily beeping their horns; street traders - with their wares slung over their backs - shuffled past; shopkeepers were opening their shops for the day's business; occasionally tourists glided past in the back of a cyclo gazing at the scene before them. My chầu văn teacher, Phạm Văn Ty, arrived on the back of a friend's motorbike and ushered me through a narrow alley that led to the temple. Inside, preparations for the ritual had begun. The medium, Nguyễn Thị Lai, and her two assistants knelt either side of her, were arranging votive objects - fruit, betel nut, cigarettes, canned drinks, the spirits' clothes - and placing burning incense on the central altar dedicated to the mother spirits. Lai had invited about 30 disciples to participate in the ritual; most of them had already arrived and were sitting on the floor facing the altar.

After greeting and introducing me to some of the ritual participants, Ty joined the other members of the chầu văn band already gathered to the side of the main altar, and I began to assemble my video and audio recording equipment. Within a few minutes the ritual began: the assistants placed a red scarf over the head of the medium in preparation for possession. The band responded with loud pulsating rhythms played on the clappers, drums and cymbals; the bamboo flute, sixteen-stringed zither and moon lute came in with fast phrases.

Lai sat cross legged with her arms outstretched on her knees; suddenly, her body began circling clockwise. After a few seconds she raised her right arm in a gesture indicating that the First Mother was descending; Ty's voice soared above the instruments inviting the spirit. The assistants then handed the medium some lit sticks of incense, which Lai used to pay homage to the altar. At this point the musicians began to incant prayers to the spirits to a steady pulse played on the 'wooden fish' slit drum. Then Lai, still holding the incense, raised both hands above her head indicating that the First Mother had left her body. The spirit's departure was marked by a phrase sung by the musicians: "The spirit's vehicle returns to the palace."

Possession by the Second and Third Mother followed the same pattern as the First Mother: the red scarf remained draped over Lai's head throughout. When possessed by the next spirit, the First Mandarin, Lai threw off the scarf and the assistants dressed her in the First Mandarin's red tunic. She then stood and paid homage to the altar by walking toward the altar three times and bowing. Next, the assistants handed Lai a large bundle of lit incense and tied a sash around her waist. Holding the incense, Lai gave out a manly shout and began to wave the incense so that clouds of incense smoke drifted in all directions. While Lai waved the incense, a disciple approached her - respectfully saying "kow-tow to the mandarin" - with a large tray piled up with prayers to the spirits written in Chinese characters. After blessing the offering with incense, Lai sat down once more in front of the altar to drink cups of rice wine and smoke a cigarette. The band performed different songs for these ritual acts. Just before the spirit left her body, Lai uttered the following words: "Observe the hearts of the head of the temple, the ritual specialists and the disciples." She then let out an ebullient cry, clapped her hands and the assistants threw the red scarf over her head, signalling the return of the spirit to the spirit world. The musicians once again sang the phrase "The spirit's vehicle returns to the palace" to mark the departure of the spirit.

Possession by other mandarin spirits - the Second, Third and Fifth Mandarins - followed. Each of these mandarin spirits carried out war dances with objects such as swords and spears. During some incarnations, disciples approached Lai to ask for gifts, money and the advice of the spirit.

In the course of the ritual, which lasted over three hours, Lai was possessed in turn by a total of 21 spirits from the main groups of spirits: the mother, mandarin, holy lady, prince, lady and young prince spirits.<sup>1</sup>

Vietnamese possession rituals, lên đồng ('mount the medium'),<sup>2</sup> are held in sacred spaces that are dedicated to the worship of spirits. The main places for spirit worship are public temples (den) and private temples in individuals' homes (diên).<sup>3</sup> Temples throughout Vietnam are dedicated to a wide variety of spirits that are not just confined to the spirits usually included in the four palace pantheon: statues of Boddhissatvas, regional spirits and local heroes worshipped as spirits may also be found in some temples.<sup>4</sup> Many temples are dedicated to a specific spirit or group of spirits. For example, temples that are primarily dedicated to mother and mandarin spirits are known as 'mother temples' (den mau) and 'mandarin temples' (don quan) respectively; a famous example of a temple dedicated to a particular spirit is the Little Holy Lady Temple (Đền Chầu Bé), which is part of the Bác Lệ temple complex in Northeast Vietnam. Public temples are usually presided over by a medium known as a 'temple medium' (dong den); when mediums wish to hold a ritual in a public temple they must arrange to do so with the temple medium.

Mediums themselves choose when to carry out lên dòng. Most mediums hold rituals at least twice a year and often more frequently. Usually it is the medium holding the ritual who invites people to 'participate' (dự) in lên dòng, although at rituals held as part of large festivals anybody at the festival may attend and no invitation is necessary. Usually about 30 or 40

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> See Chapter 4 for detailed discussion of Lai's possession by four of these spirits: the Third Mandarin, the Second Holy Lady, the Tenth Prince and the Third Lady.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Apart from lên đồng, the most common term used to refer to possession rituals is hầu bóng ('serving the shadows [i.e. spirits]'). Another less frequently used term is đồng bóng ('medium and shadows [i.e. spirits]').

 $<sup>^3</sup>$  A minority of public temples are referred to as phủ or miếu rather than đền.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Vietnamese temples (dèn) are usually contrasted with Buddhist pagodas (chùa). However, pagoda complexes usually have spirit altars (thờ thánh) where possession rituals may be held and some temples have statues of Boddhissatvas. See Ngô Đức Thịnh (1996a:99-311) for a survey and description of temples in North, Central and South Vietnam.

people attend rituals, but on important occasions at large temples many more people will (typically) be present. Except for the medium's assistants and the chàu văn band, the people who attend lên đồng are usually referred to as the medium's 'disciples' (con nhang đệ tử). Some mediums, especially those who tell fortunes and heal, build up a following of disciples who consult them when they are sick or in need of advice. Temple mediums also attract disciples who wish to make offerings to the spirits in their temples. However, the people invited to many rituals also include friends and family (who may also be mediums themselves) of the medium holding the ritual who are not strictly speaking disciples, and of course at festivals anyone may attend. Nevertheless, the term disciples is used generally to refer to those invited to rituals.

Mediums themselves meet the expenses of rituals, so the number of rituals mediums hold each year is dependent on their resources. The expenses of holding a lên dòng include: providing a meal for ritual participants; band payment; and, when a ritual is held at a temple presided over by another medium, a fee for the temple medium. Mediums also provide most of the gifts and money which they distribute to disciples during rituals. However, disciples usually contribute by bringing offerings (money, fruit, cigarettes etc.). Disciples place these offerings in front of the altar prior to a ritual or present them to the medium during the ritual. In the latter case, disciples approach the medium with small plates of money or other gifts such as cigarettes, which they supply themselves. Upon receiving the offering, the medium removes part of it and replaces it with a gift of a similar value (e.g. a thousand dòng<sup>5</sup> note may be replaced with a couple of cigarettes), and then the offering is returned to the disciple.

The amount of money spent on rituals varies considerably. This was especially apparent when comparing the extravagant rituals held by wealthy Hanoi-based mediums with the more frugal rituals held by mediums of more limited means, especially those living in rural areas. The cost of rituals therefore varies from as little as US\$30 to several hundred US dollars for the most extravagant rituals. As mediums do not profit monetarily when they hold a lên đồng, most have regular jobs (selling goods at markets, working in shops, working for state companies etc.). However, there are opportunities for a minority of mediums to earn a living from

 $<sup>^{5}</sup>$  The Vietnamese currency dong has the same spelling as the word for medium. During my fieldwork the exchange rate was between 10-12,000 dong to the US dollar.

telling fortunes and healing. In rural areas disciples usually paid mediums about one or two dollars for a fortune telling or healing session. The only other 'professional' mediums are temple mediums. Through donations from disciples and the fees that temple mediums usually charge for allowing other mediums to hold lên dòng in their temples, temple mediums have sufficient resources for the upkeep of their temple and to sustain their own role as temple guardians. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, some male temple-mediums were wealthy though they were not forthcoming about the source of their income.

There are many days and periods of the year which are auspicious for holding lên dòng. These include: the beginning and end of the year in the twelfth and first lunar month respectively; the start and end of summer in the fourth and seventh lunar month respectively; and the 'death anniversaries' (ngày giỗ) of spirits. Some of the best known death anniversaries of spirits are: the tenth day of the tenth lunar month (Tenth Prince), the eleventh day of the eleventh lunar month (Second Mandarin); the twelfth day of the sixth lunar month (Third Lady); the seventeenth day of the seventh lunar month (Seventh Prince); the twentieth of the eighth lunar month (Trần Hưng Đao) and the third day of the third lunar month (First Mother). Although the death anniversaries of spirits fall on specific days, mediums also arrange rituals on other days close to these anniversaries. This 'stretching' of the times that are auspicious for lên dòng is evident in the adage: 'the third lunar month is the death anniversary of mother spirits, the eighth lunar month is the death anniversary of father spirits' (tháng tám giỗ cha, tháng ba giỗ me). Based on the death anniversaries of the 'father' spirit, Trần Hưng Đao, and the First Mother, the entire third and eighth lunar months are popular times for holding lên đồng.

### Mediumship or shamanism?

In accordance with previous scholars writing in French and English, the Vietnamese term for those possessed by spirits, dong, is rendered in this thesis as 'medium'.<sup>6</sup> However, the implications of the term medium require clarification.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> The word dồng is usually preceded by a personal pronoun indicating the sex and age of mediums. Bà dồng and cô đồng are used for old and young female mediums respectively, and ông dồng and cậu đồng are used for old and young male mediums respectively.

Durand traces the roots of dòng to the Chinese *tong*, which was used for boys under 15 years of age who, because of their purity and innocence, were employed as mediums (1959:7). He suggests that, in the past, Vietnamese mediums were young, virginal boys and girls, and then adults, who used to preside over rituals, took their place. In his evaluation of the terminology used in 'Vietnamese spirit mediumship', Nguyễn Khắc Kham concludes that the word dòng is more closely related to a "Mon homophone" meaning "to dance (as if) under daemonic possession" than to the Chinese *tong* (1983:26).<sup>7</sup> Nguyễn Khắc Kham's conclusion that "ecstatic dance, rather than their young age, is the main criterion for Vietnamese mediums" (ibid.:28) resonates with Hamayon's research on Siberian shamanism, which argues that a particular type of physical behaviour is central to shamanism (Hamayon 1995a). Indeed, the Tungus root of shaman - *sam*, *sama* - "primarily means 'moving legs, stirring' and applies to shamanic dancing as well as singing in ritual context" (ibid.:4).<sup>8</sup>

Etymological debates aside, why have dong been considered as mediums rather than shamans? Durand refers to dong as mediums, yet he also maintains that they "represent a watered-down survival of a primitive shamanism" (1959:11). Simon and Simon-Barouh, who consider Durand's references to shamanism to be misplaced, are more emphatic in their assertion that dong are mediums. They state that because dong are always possessed and do not go on a 'voyage' in the spirit world, they should be considered as mediums and not shamans (Simon and Simon-Barouh 1973:32). This argument is based on Eliade's opposition between spirit possession and shamanic 'magical flight' in which the shaman "is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld" (Eliade 1989 [1951]:5).

However, Eliade's distinctions have been challenged, particularly by Lewis (1989 [1971]).<sup>9</sup> Returning to one of the main sources on which Eliade's work is based - the studies of the Tungus made by Shirokogoroff -Lewis concludes that Tungus shamans are possessed by spirits either

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Nguyễn Khắc Kham and Durand also consider the term cốt which is occasionally used as an alternative to đồng. They conclude that it is related to the Chinese ku. Nguyễn Khắc Kham gives several different meanings of ku: "1) bone; 2) frame appearance; 3) strength, energy; 4) said of the dead" (1983:25).

 $<sup>^8</sup>$  Despite the fact that the Mon homophone to which Nguyễn Khắc Kham refers and the Tungus root of shaman both refer to physical movement, I do not mean to imply that there is an etymological link between them.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> New translations into English of older Soviet studies and a number of contemporary ethnographies have also led to a critical reading of Soviet scholars' underlying ideological biases on which Eliade's work is based (e.g. Balzer 1990 and Hoppál 1984).

involuntarily or voluntarily: if the possession is involuntary then it is seen as an illness or a shamanic calling, and when the spirits are 'controlled' the shamanic vocation can be exercised (ibid.:48). Lewis maintains that even during the controlled phase, the shaman is possessed as well as actively possessing the spirits: "according to the social context, the shaman incarnates spirits in both a latent and an active form, but always in a controlled fashion. His body is a vehicle for spirits" (ibid.). For Lewis, then, the issue of control as opposed to 'magical flight' is crucial for defining shamanism. According to Lewis' definition, all shamans are mediums, but not all mediums are shamans: a medium must be a 'master of spirits' in order to be considered a shaman.

The issue of mastery/control is not straightforward in the Vietnamese case (or in other ritual contexts). Apart from rare cases of out-of-control involuntary possession usually prior to initiation (see Chapter 2), dong dictate the onset and resolution of possession and appear to have control over their actions while possessed. This would seem to suggest that they have 'control' over the spirit. Yet, at the same time, Vietnamese mediums said that during the possession they were 'following the orders' and 'obeying' the spirits. In the light of such a description, can dong be considered as 'masters of spirits'? Lewis' definition of a shaman is more problematic than it seems.

Mediumistic possession implies that the primary role of the possessee is as a mediator between the spirits and an 'audience'. Firth, for instance, states that "communication is emphasised" during spirit mediumship, whereas other types of spirit possession do not necessarily involve the transmission of messages from the spirits (Firth 1969:xi, cited in Rouget 1985 [1980]:133). This view of mediumship has led Rouget to state that, in contrast to other types of spirit possession, "the spirit responsible for mediumistic possession has something to say to an audience" (1985 [1980]:133). When possessed, dòng 'transmit the words of the spirits', but this can vary from proclaiming a few stereotypical phrases to much more extensive verbal exchanges with disciples (see Chapter 2). Non-verbal means of feeling a spirit's presence and benevolence - for example, through music, the physicality of ritual action, and the giving of gifts and money - should not be excluded as important factors in the 'communication' between spirits and disciples during lên dòng.<sup>10</sup>

 $<sup>^{10}</sup>$  Hamayon's research into spirit possession and shamanism emphasises the importance of the "physical expression of relations with spirits" (1995b:19). This leads her to dismiss the term mediumship because "it both conceals physical

The use of overarching terms such as medium or shaman has obvious advantages for cross-cultural comparison, but is inevitably a compromise as religious specialists around the world are involved in differing practices.<sup>11</sup> However, as a more accessible alternative to using the Vietnamese term, I can see no compelling reason to deviate from previous scholars' translation of dong as medium. In this study I use the term medium to mean somebody who, when voluntarily possessed by spirits, facilitates a physical and verbal exchange between the spirits and other ritual participants who are not possessed. As the majority of Vietnamese mediums are female, I will use female personal pronouns when referring to mediums in general.

### Religion or 'cult'?

The section addresses the implications of the terms religion and 'cult' in relation to Vietnamese mediumship. There is, of course, a vast literature spanning several disciplines concerning the definition of religion, which I will not attempt to sketch here. Instead, I will briefly outline Vietnamese debates about the religious status of mediumship with reference to some of the uses and connotations of the terms religion and 'cult' in the West. Crucial to the ongoing debates about mediumship among ritual participants, scholars and government authorities is the use of Vietnamese terminology. Malarney has succinctly outlined two of the Vietnamese terms that refer to religion:

... the Vietnamese word normally translated as religion is tôn gíao, a term derived from Chinese that implies an institutionally and doctrinally complex religion, such as Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism. People use tôn gíao in conversations about religion in the abstract, but when speaking of their own religious practices, they employ the term tín ngưỡng. Semantically this word is complex as it involves ideas of faith, belief, or doctrine, combined with the actual practices that invoke those ideas. (Malarney n.d.:245)

expression and stresses language as a mode of communication" (ibid.:20). While I agree with Hamayon's emphasis on physical expression during possession, I would suggest that the term mediumship does not necessarily deny the importance of physical behaviour. For this reason I have expanded the notion of mediumistic 'communication' between spirits and disciples (as outlined by Firth and Rouget) to include physical behaviour as well as language.

<sup>11</sup> Whether or not the notion of 'shamanism' may be considered a unitary category has been a particularly debated issue, not least because it is has been so widely (and variously) employed in different ethnographic contexts (see Howard 1993). Tôn gíao, then, is most often used to refer to institutionalised religions, whereas tín ngưỡng is a broader category. I will usually translate tín ngưỡng as 'religious beliefs', but in some contexts it is also used to refer to 'religion' in general, not just non-institutionalised religious phenomena.<sup>12</sup> We shall see in Chapter 7 that tín ngưỡng is the term used in Party documents to refer to 'legitimate' religious practices as opposed to the those derided as 'superstitious'. It will be argued that the term tín ngưỡng has been adopted by mediums as a strategy for legitimating their activities and aligning themselves with religious practices that are condoned by the Party.

Apart from tin ngưỡng, there are more specific terms for the 'system of religious beliefs' (hê thông tín ngưỡng) of Vietnamese mediumship: Đạo Mẫu and Đao Tứ Phủ. The prefix dao is present in both of these terms. In some contexts dao means 'way' or 'doctrine', but when it is used as a prefix it refers to 'religion'. This is evident in the Vietnamese words for the so-called 'world religions', which use the prefix dao: Đạo Thiên Chúa (Christianity), Đạo Hồi (Islam), Đao Phât (Buddhism) etc.. In recent articles by Vietnamese scholars, which have been translated into English, the term Dao Mau is rendered as "the cult of Holy Mothers".<sup>13</sup> 'Cult' is not an accurate translation of dao: clearly its use in relation to Vietnamese mediumship is governed by other considerations. In an article by Doàn Lâm it is argued that "the cult of the Holy Mothers lacks a complete doctrine or systematized dogmas on nature and man" so it cannot be considered to be a "universal religion" (1999:18). This distinction is in accordance with surveys of Vietnamese religious beliefs which imply that the 'religions' in Vietnam only include the 'three religions' (tam gíao) - Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism - Christianity and 'new religions' such as Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo (e.g. Hue-Tam Ho Tai 1987 and Thanh Huyen 1996). In contrast to these 'religions', other indigenous phenomena - including mediumship, and worshipping ancestors and village guardian spirits - are usually described as 'cults'.<sup>14</sup>

The term 'possession cult' has often been used in anthropological literature to refer to marginalised religious groups that exist on the fringes

 $<sup>^{12}</sup>$  For instance, tin ngưỡng is used in Vietnamese law when referring to the policy of 'the right to freedom of religion' (quyền tự do tin ngưỡng).

<sup>13</sup> Articles by Vietnamese scholars on "the cult of Holy Mothers" appear in a special issue of the journal *Vietnamese studies* 131 (1999):5-96. (Unfortunately, the translations of the original research are poor.)

 $<sup>^{14}</sup>$  See the special issue of the journal *Vietnamese Studies* 121 (1996) for essays on Vietnamese 'cults'.

of society (e.g. Lewis 1989 [1971]). The issue of whether Vietnamese mediumship is 'marginal' will be discussed in the next chapter. However, I will refrain from using the word 'cult', not least because of its negative associations: as Saliba remarks, cults are often thought of as "deviant, dangerous, corrupt and pseudoreligious" (1995:1). Furthermore, none of the 'theological', 'psychological' and 'sociological' definitions of the term cult given by Saliba are applicable to Vietnamese mediumship.<sup>15</sup>

Rather than using the word 'cult', I will translate Đạo Tứ Phủ and Đạo Mẫu as Four Palace Religion and Mother Religion respectively. The term Four Palace Religion refers to the four 'palaces' (phủ) or domains to which the spirits of the pantheon belong in the 'yin' spirit world (cõi âm):<sup>16</sup>



The term Đạo Mẫu (Mother Religion), which has recently been given prominence in recent publications by Vietnamese scholars (e.g. Ngô Đức Thịnh 1996a), refers to the importance of the mother spirits in the pantheon.

While I have argued that the above translations of Đạo Tứ Phủ and Đạo Mẫu are justified from a linguistic standpoint, the use of the term religion in relation to Vietnamese mediumship is hardly value-free. By associating Vietnamese mediumship with 'religion', I am respecting mediums' assertion that they are engaged in 'legitimate' religious practices (see Chapter 7). Definitions of religion which emphasise its institutional dimensions and the importance of moral dogma derived from a corpus of sacred texts, would

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Although the definitions provided by Saliba are diverse, one common thread is that 'cults' are religious groups that converge around a charismatic leader (1995:2-8). Mediums might be described as charismatic, yet Vietnamese mediumship is not centred on a single leader.

 $<sup>^{16}</sup>$  Ngô Đức Thịnh has suggested an evolutionary development in the cosmology of the spirits from a division between the 'yin and yang' (âm và dương) - i.e. the spiritual and human worlds - to the tripartite division into 'three palaces' (tam phủ) - sky, water, earth - and finally, with the inclusion of the Mountains and Forests Palace, to the fourfold division of the 'four palaces' (tứ phủ) (1996a:23-24).

exclude cultural traditions such as Vietnamese mediumship.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, some anthropologists who have written about the practices of mediums and shamans avoid the term religion for these reasons (e.g. Humphrey 1996).<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, there is a long anthropological tradition which defines religion broadly so as to encompass non-institutionalised cultural traditions that are linked to the 'sacred', 'supernatural' etc.. As Atkinson has noted "although they disagree about the usefulness of particular definitions of religion, anthropologists usually favor an inclusive rather than an exclusive use of the term" (1983:692).<sup>19</sup> One such 'inclusive' definition is given by Morris at the beginning of his account of anthropological studies of religion: "the rubric 'religion' ... covers all phenomena that are seen as having a sacred or supraempirical quality" (1987:3-4). According to broad anthropological definitions, then, the term religion may be applied to Vietnamese mediumship.

Classifications of spirit pantheons often give the impression of a fixed, timeless taxonomy to which all ritual participants adhere. However, ritual practice rarely conforms to the classifications of analysts. The spirit pantheon given in Appendix I does not attempt to provide a fixed pantheon reified from the practice of mediums. Rather, it lists the spirits that were incarnated during rituals in North Vietnam that I attended. This is provided as a reference for the spirits mentioned in the course of this thesis: it does not represent a 'definitive' classification of the spirit pantheon of the Four Palace Religion.

The spirits incarnated during rituals varies from one ritual to the next, and there are many regional spirits. Despite this diversity, however, it is possible to identify a 'core' pantheon that consists of a hierarchy of groups of spirits in the following order: mother spirits (mẫu), mandarin spirits (quan), holy lady spirits (chầu), prince spirits (ông hoàng), lady spirits (cô) and young prince spirits (cậu). The pantheons outlined by other scholars -

<sup>17</sup> This definition is, of course, central to Vietnamese scholars' use of the terms religion and 'cult' referred to above.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Humphrey argues that the term religion should not be applied to the practices of Daur shamans because they are characterised by "ideas and beliefs which are never set out as a general theory and make use of relatively few abstract concepts, for which there is no holy founder, no organized institution, no moral dogmas, and no authoritative corpus of books" (1996:49).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Anthropologists have conventionally used the term 'traditional religion' (or 'primitive' religion) to refer to non-institutionalised religions, in contrast to 'historical world religions'. Although this distinction has largely been eclipsed since Geertz's definition of 'religion as a cultural system' (see Atkinson 1983), it still appears in some scholarly literature (e.g. Sutherland and Clarke 1988).

namely, Durand (D) (1959), Simon and Simon-Barouh (SSB) (1973) and Ngô Đức Thịnh (NĐT) (1996a) - differ in the precise number of spirits included in the 'core' groups of spirits and sometimes include other groups. The main discrepancies between the pantheons of previous scholars are: the inclusion (D/NDT)/exclusion (SSB) of the Jade Emperor (Ngoc Hoàng), who is never incarnated, at the top of the pantheon; the inclusion (SSB)/exclusion (D/NDT) of the warrior Trần Hưng Đạo and spirits associated with him, beneath the mother spirits; the inclusion (NDT/SSB)/exclusion (D) of tiger and snake spirits beneath the group of young prince spirits; and the inclusion (SSB)/exclusion (D/NDT) of the medium's ancestors at the bottom of the pantheon. The spirits incarnated at rituals that I attended sometimes included Trần Hưng Đạo and other 'Trần family spirits', but did not include tiger and snake spirits or the medium's ancestors. Mediums also incarnated local spirits - for example The Second Lady Cam Dường, the Holy Lady of the Temple (Chàu Thủ Đền) - which are not included in spirit pantheons of previous scholars.

The terms Mother Religion (Đạo Mẫu) and Four Palace Religion (Đạo Tứ Phủ) are commonly used by Vietnamese mediums and disciples. In this thesis I will use the term Four Palace Religion as it distinguishes the 'system of beliefs' of Vietnamese mediumship from other indigenous phenomena that involve the worship of mother spirits.<sup>20</sup> The term Four Palace Religion also has the advantage that it does not overemphasise the importance of the mother spirits. It should be noted, however, that not all the spirits that possess mediums are classified in terms of the four palaces: the Trần family spirits and some regional spirits are not classified as belonging to any of the four palaces.

 $<sup>^{20}</sup>$  For an overview of female spirits, including mother spirits, that have a place in indigenous religious phenomena, see  $\rm D\bar{o}$  Thị Hảo and Mai Thị Ngọc Chúc (1984).

### INTRODUCTION TO MUSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

### Instruments and bands

The main instruments of chầu văn bands in North Vietnam are the twostringed moon lute (đàn nguyệt) and a set of percussion (bộ nhạc cụ gỗ).

The Vietnamese moon lute, which is related to the Chinese *yueqin*, has a long neck with between 8 and 11 - most commonly 10 - high frets. The frets are positioned to produce an anhemitonic pentatonic scale; other pitches can be obtained by pressing the strings more deeply against the high frets. The two strings of the moon lute - the 'small string' (dây tiểu) and the 'big string' (dây dài) - used to be made of silk but are now nylon. For most chầu văn songs the two strings are tuned to the interval of a fourth (dây lệch) or a fifth (dây bằng); but occasionally the interval is a minor seventh (dây tố lan) or an octave (dây song thanh).

The basic set of percussion used for chầu văn consists of the bamboo clappers (phách), a small two-headed barrel drum (trống) and a small cymbal (cảnh). All the percussion instruments are placed on the floor and are struck with three wooden beaters (dùi). Two beaters are held in one hand one used to strike the small cymbal and the other the clappers - and the third beater held in the other hand to strike the clappers and drum. To this basic set of percussion a knobless small gong (thanh la) and the 'wooden fish' slit drum (mō) is usually added. For the some melodies the gong is laid flat on the face of the drum; for others it is hand-held.

Chầu văn bands, known as cung văn,<sup>21</sup> tend to have only male members; the reasons for this will be discussed in Chapter 3. When necessary I will therefore use male personal pronouns to refer to chầu văn musicians. The minimum number of musicians necessary to form a band is two: a moonlute player and a percussionist, one or both of whom also sing. This 'core' band may be augmented to form a larger band of four or five musicians, especially at rituals where mediums can afford to pay more than two musicians. Additional instruments that are often included in larger bands are the sixteen-stringed zither (đàn tranh), the two-stringed fiddle (dàn nhj) and bamboo flutes (e.g. sáo, tiêu). Further percussion instruments, such as the large double-headed barrel drum found in some temples, may also be added to the band.

 $<sup>^{21}</sup>$  Cung means 'offer to' and văn means 'literature' therefore Durand renders cung văn as "texts offered to the spirits" (1959:29).
There are many different arrangements concerning the way bands are formed and their membership. In some instances two musicians who form a 'core' band will rarely play with other musicians. Usually, however, the membership of bands is more fluid: although certain groups of musicians regularly perform together, the band formed for a ritual often has different members depending on the occasion and the medium holding the ritual. The fact that bands are not given names is perhaps indicative of their unfixed membership.

Many temples have a group of resident musicians from whom a band is formed for most of the rituals held at the temple.<sup>22</sup> However, mediums that have close relationships with a particular musician or group of musicians may invite musicians of their choice in addition to or, more rarely, in place of the resident band. At temples where there are no resident musicians and when rituals are held at private temples in mediums' homes, the medium holding the ritual invites the musicians of her choice. Usually, it is the moon-lute player/singer who leads the band by deciding which songs to play, but sometimes the percussionist/singer also takes a leading role (see Chapter 4). The person who leads a band is not always afforded a high status: there is little differentiation in status between different band members, but as a rule the oldest band members are the most respected.

The amount bands are paid varies a great deal depending on the medium's circumstances. In 1998, Hanoi-based bands would expect to receive an advance (tièn coc) of at least a hundred thousand dòng (approx. US\$10); on some occasions musicians said the advance could be as much as a million dòng (approx. US\$100). In addition to the advance, throughout the ritual the medium gives the band 'reward money' (tiền thưởng) and other gifts - such as fruit, cigarettes, cans of soft drink and beer - in appreciation of their singing and playing. As with the advance, the amount of reward money varies considerably, and may be anything from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese dòng. Although well-known Hanoi-based bands are likely to receive higher fees than musicians in rural areas, payment is usually shared equally between band members. This serves to confirm the largely unhierarchical composition of bands.

 $<sup>^{22}</sup>$  In Vietnamese resident bands are referred to as the 'head band' (cung văn trưởng).

### Chầu văn performance contexts

Chầu văn, literally 'serving literature', is predominantly the music of lên dòng rituals.<sup>23</sup> However, there are several other occasions when chầu văn songs are performed.

A subgenre of chầu văn, which is not performed during possession, is known as hát thờ ('worship singing'). Most of the songs that comprise hát thờ are shared with the chầu văn repertoire performed during possession. However, there are two songs that are unique to hát thờ - Mưỡu (Nhịp Đôi) and Thổng - and different song texts are used. Hát thờ also includes some songs which are rarely performed during rituals (e.g. Phú Chênh, Phú Giầu and Đưa Thư) (see Table 1.1).

Hát thờ songs may be performed either immediately preceding or the day before a lên đồng ritual is held, or independently of possession rituals when disciples worship and make offerings to the spirits (see Thanh Hà 1996:11; Ngô Đức Thịnh 1992:47). The purpose of hát thờ is to 'invite' (thỉnh) the spirits to 'witness' (chứng gíam) the making of offerings, or, when hát thờ is performed prior to possession, to invite the spirits to 'descend' (gíang). Nowadays, chầu văn musicians often perform hát thờ songs immediately proceeding lên đồng rituals and, occasionally, the day before lên đồng rituals, but performances especially for the making of offerings are rare. Musicians maintained that hát thờ sessions independent of lên đồng rituals were more common in the past.

The most widely known texts used for hát thờ are poems dedicated to one or more of the mother spirits (e.g. Tam Tòa Thánh Mẫu Văn and Văn Mẫu Thoải) and a poem dedicated to all the spirits of the four palace pantheon (Văn Công Đồng).<sup>24</sup> A full-length hát thờ session consists of a continuous performance of one of these long poems, some of which have over 200 lines, set to a sequence of songs. Different musicians use different song sequences for each poem, but there are a number of standard song-sequences. The following song sequence is often used for the poem dedicated to the Third Mother Spirit, Văn Mẫu Thoải: 1) Bỉ; 2) Mưỡu; 3) Thổng; 4) Phú Bình; 5) Phú Chênh 6) Phú Giầu; 7) Phú Nói; 8) Đưa Thư; 9) Vãn; 10) Dọc; 11) Cờn Dây Lệch; 12) Hãm;

 $<sup>^{23}</sup>$  Another term for chầu văn is hát văn (lit. 'singing literature'). As well as being a verb meaning 'to sing', hát is also frequently used as a classifier for many different Vietnamese music genres (e.g. hát chèo, hát bội). Hát can also be added as a classifier to chầu văn, hence the title of the book by Bùi Đình Thảo and Nguyễn Quang Hải (1996), *Hát chầu văn*.

 $<sup>^{24}</sup>$  These poems and others used for hát thờ have been compiled in the second volume of the book *Mother religion in Vietnam* (Ngô Đức Thịnh 1996b:5-76).

13) Dồn.<sup>25</sup> Hát thờ performances immediately preceding lên đồng are much abridged: usually only the first few songs of a hát thờ sequence are performed.

It should also be mentioned that in addition to hát thờ, prayers to the spirits (canh) are usually incanted prior to possession rituals. This is very similar to the recitation of Buddhist prayers (kinh): the prayers are intoned to a regular pulse made on a 'wooden fish' slit drum (mỗ). Prayers to the spirits are incanted by a ritual priest (thầy cúng), who is often also a chầu văn musician.<sup>26</sup>

Another performance context for chầu văn is at competitions (thi) which are traditionally held at large festivals. In recent years chầu văn singing competitions have not been common, but in the 1990s there have been attempts to revitalise the tradition, most notably through a competition held at the 1998 Phủ Giầy festival.

During the 1960s, a new subgenre of chầu văn was created. This subgenre, which I will call 'revolutionary chầu văn', will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7. In brief, revolutionary chầu văn was devised during the period when lên đồng was banned as part of the Vietnamese Communist Party's policy to eliminate 'superstition'. In order to make chầu văn conform with Party policy, it was stripped of its 'superstitious' elements so that it could be performed on the 'revolutionary stage' as part of chèo theatre performances.

Revolutionary chầu văn is still occasionally performed, but since the early 1990s chầu văn has been performed on the stage in a quite different form. In 1993, Hoàng Kiều and Trần Minh devised a theatricalized version of lên dồng rituals known as the 'three spirits' (ba gía or ba gía dồng). Hoàng Kiều, who in 1993 was Vice-director of the Film and Theatre School (Trường Sân Khấu Điện Ảnh), was inspired to devise the 'three spirits' because his grandmother and mother-in-law were both mediums; Trần Minh, the head of the Vietnamese Dancers Association (Hội Nghệ Sĩ Múa Việt Nam), choreographed the performance.<sup>27</sup>

 $<sup>^{25}</sup>$  This song sequence was popular with musicians whom I met during fieldwork. For a slightly different sequence of songs used for the text Văn Mẫu Thoải, see Ngô Đức Thịnh (1996b:34-40).

 $<sup>^{26}</sup>$  Other instruments may also be added to provide an accompaniment to the chanted prayers. An examination of this genre would be an interesting topic for future research.

 $<sup>^{27}</sup>$  I am grateful to Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến for information regarding the creation of the 'three spirits'.

The 'three spirits' was first performed by members of the Vietnam Chèo Theatre (Nhà Hát Chèo Việt Nam) - with the artist Vân Quyền performing the role of the medium - during a tour to France in the summer of 1993. Since then, the 'three spirits' has become a popular item of performances by chèo musicians both in Vietnam and abroad, and has been broadcast on Vietnamese television. Although the 'three spirits' is not officially part of chèo, it is often performed in chèo theatres alongside extracts of chèo plays (trích đoạn chèo).

Unlike revolutionary chầu văn which eliminated any reference to lên đồng, the 'three spirits' consists of a re-enactment of possession by three spirits: performers act out the role of a medium and her assistants. Also, the words of chầu văn songs for the 'three spirits' are not changed to suit socialist, revolutionary themes and the arrangement of songs is much closer to the songscapes of lên đồng rituals than is the case for revolutionary chầu văn. However, as the chầu văn songs performed during the 'three spirits' are usually performed by chèo musicians, they are usually influenced by the chèo musical style: they use a more ornate vocal style and use faster tempos than chầu văn songs during lên đồng.<sup>28</sup> There are also differences in the instrumental and vocal forces used: instruments from the chèo ensemble, such as the monochord (đàn bầu) and various percussion, and a chorus of female singers (playing the role of the assistants) are used during performances of the 'three spirits'.

## Repertoire

The chầu văn repertoire is eclectic, drawing on many types of Vietnamese music. The Lưu Thủy melody, for instance, was incorporated into lên đồng from the South Vietnamese chamber genre nhạc tài tử.<sup>29</sup> The process of adopting songs from other genres, making innovations to songs and composing new songs, which will be discussed in Chapter 8, results in the chầu văn repertoire continually changing. There are also differences between the songs used in different areas of Vietnam, the songs different musicians know and the names given to songs. It is therefore impossible to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Chàu văn musicians said that chàu văn songs performed during the 'three spirits' were 'chèo-ized' (chèo hóa), which they said made them lighter and less religious.
<sup>29</sup> As all of the chàu văn melodies are sung, except for Lưu Thủy and Trống Chiến, I will use the terms song and melody interchangeably.

provide a comprehensive list of every melody which might be considered as part of the chầu văn repertoire.<sup>30</sup>

Table 1.1 provides a list of the repertoire of melodies that my teachers, Phạm Văn Ty and Đặng Công Hưng, and other chầu văn musicians in Hanoi and the surrounding area knew and, except for some of the Phú melodies, regularly performed. Some newly composed melodies, which will be discussed in Chapter 8, are not included because they are not widely established as part of the chầu văn repertoire. Four melody 'groups' (nhóm) -Dọc, Cờn, Xá and Phú - have been listed separately from the rest of the melodies.

Table 1.1: Chầu văn repertoire

Four groups of melodies	Other melodies
Dọc* Dọc (Song Thất Lục Bát)* Cờn Nam/Cờn Dây Lệch* Cờn Luyện* Cờn Luyện Tam Tầng Cờn Oán* Cờn Huế Xá Thượng Xá Quảng/Xa Bắc Xá Quảng/Xa Bắc Xá Qiảy Lệch Xá Vào Làng Xá Giấy Tố Lan Xá Kẻ Noi Phú Nói* Phú Ainh* Phú Chuốc Rượu Phú Văn Đần (Nữ Thần)] [Phú Văn Đần (Nữ Thần)]* [Phú Chênh]* [Phú Giầu]* [Phú Giây Lệch] [Phú Bắc Phản] [Phú Tỳ Bà]	Thính Bóng/Kiễu Bóng Lưu Thủy Nhịp Một./Bỏ Bộ (many different types) Bỉ/Bỉ Thơ* (many different types) Sai Kiểu Dương* Hãm* Vãn* Hò Huế Hò (Nhịp Một) Dồn* Chèo Đò Đưa Thư* Thiên Thai Trống Chiến Bắn Chim Thước Các Bạn Tiên Lý Tam Thất Mưỡu (Nhịp Ba) Mưỡu (Nhịp Đôi)**

Table 1.1 key

Alternative names for songs are divided by a diagonal slash. The Phú melodies which are part of the chầu văn repertoire, but which are now

 $<sup>^{30}</sup>$  Recent books on chầu văn in North Vietnam mention songs that are not included in the table below (see Ngô Đức Thịnh 1992; Bùi Đình Thảo and Nguyễn Quang Hải 1996; Thanh Hà 1996).

rarely heard during lên đồng, are placed in square brackets. Songs marked with one asterisk are often included in hát thờ performances; songs with two asterisks are only performed during hát thờ.

## The structure of songs

The rest of this chapter provides an introduction to the basic structure of chầu văn songs. It briefly outlines the unit of the song, the main poetic forms and rhythms employed by songs, and the moon-lute part performed during song verses and instrumental sections.<sup>31</sup> A preliminary sketch of the features of chầu văn songs is necessary at this stage in preparation for discussion of the music—context interaction integral to the construction of songscapes (Chapter 4) and the role of music during rituals (Chapter 5). Detailed analysis of the creative processes involved in the construction of vocal melodies is the topic of Chapter 6, so no analysis of vocal melodies is given here.

Space does not permit detailed description of all the songs of the chau văn repertoire. To outline the most salient aspects of the structure of songs I have chosen to focus on one of the most frequently played melodies: Doc. Specific reference will be made to one performance of the Doc melody by Phạm Văn Ty. Ex. 1 is a transcription of a verse of a Doc melody sung by Ty who also accompanies himself on the moon lute (CD#1); Ex. 2 is a transcription of three instrumental sections taken from the same performance of the Doc melody as Ex. 1 (CD#2) (for transcriptions see Appendix IV; for an explanation of the transcription conventions see Chapter 6). The percussion part on both examples is played by Nguyễn Văn Mùi, who plays the clappers and cymbal, and Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến who plays the drum.

The unit of a song comprises a verse which is normally repeated more than once. With the exception of two melodies, Luu Thủy and Trống Chiến, which are performed instrumentally, there is an instrumental section between each sung verse.<sup>32</sup> Chầu văn songs are therefore strophic. The text

 $<sup>^{31}</sup>$  A discussion of mode (điệu thức) is not included because, unlike many other types of Vietnamese music, it is not a concept that is used by chầu văn musicians.

 $<sup>^{32}</sup>$  When the Lưu Thủy melody is repeated more than once it is simply repeated without an 'instrumental section' (lưu không) between successive verses. Trống Chiến is a special case: it is based around a particular rhythm and does not have a clearly repeated verse structure.

unit for each song verse consists of two to five - most often two - lines of poetry.

# Poetic forms

The majority of the poems used as chầu văn song texts follow the lục bát ('six, eight') poetic form. The second most common poetic form employed by chầu văn poems is song thất lục bát ('two sevens, six, eight'), and a small number of poems use other poetic forms such as song thất ('two sevens') and bốn chữ ('four syllables'). The names of these forms indicate the number of syllables per line, for example, lục bát consists of a pair of lines with six and eight syllables, and each poetic form has its own speech-tone and rhyming scheme.

For poetic purposes Vietnamese speech tones are divided into 'oblique' (trắc) tones - the low-rising (hỏi), high-broken (ngã), high-rising (sắc), and low-broken (nặng) tones - and 'even' (bằng) tones - the low-falling (huyền) and mid-level (không) tones.<sup>33</sup> The lục bát poetic form conforms to the rules regarding the use of even and oblique speech-tones shown in Table 1.2.<sup>34</sup>

Syll- able	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
First line		even		ob- lique		even		
Second line		even		ob- lique		even		even

Table 1.2: Lục bát poetic form

The sixth syllable of each line, and sometimes also the eighth syllable of the second line, also rhyme.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> The division of Vietnamese speech tones into two categories is akin to the tonal organization of Chinese poetic forms. For comparative purposes, see Pian's discussion of even and oblique tones in relation to the text setting of Peking opera arias (1971:242-43). It should, however, be noted that Vietnamese speech tones are different to those of Mandarin (and other Chinese dialects) and that the contour of speech tones (rising, falling, level etc.) belonging to the Vietnamese even and oblique categories have no obvious similarities with the Mandarin speech tones included in the even and oblique categories respectively.

 $<sup>^{34}</sup>$  The following schema for lục bát is based on Nguyễn Xuân Kính's analysis of poetic forms (1992:115-46).

Each verse of a Doc melody utilises two lines of verse in the luc bát poetic form.<sup>35</sup> Ex. 1 uses the following text:

Trời nam có đức Hoàng Mười Kinh luân thao lược từ trời không hai

The Tenth Prince in the southern sky [Vietnam] In state affairs and the art of war he is unrivalled

When singing a verse of Doc, syllables 3 to 6 of the six-syllable line are usually sung first, followed by the entire six-syllable line (i.e. có đức Hoàng Mười, Trời nam có đức Hoàng Mười). This is followed by the eight-syllable line. On some occasions (see Ex. 1) the first six syllables of the eight-syllable line are followed by the last four syllables (i.e. Kinh luân thao lược từ trời, từ trời không hai).<sup>36</sup>

#### Rhythm

Chầu văn songs employ three main rhythms that follow a regular beat: the one-beat rhythm (nhịp một), the two-beat rhythm (nhịp đôi) and the threebeat rhythm (nhịp ba). Each of these rhythms consists of a repeated basic pattern (notes in brackets are common additions to the basic pattern):

one-beat rhythm



two-beat rhythm



 $<sup>^{35}</sup>$  There is also a variant of the Doc melody in which two pairs of lines in luc bát are sung continuously without an instrumental section between each pair. This is known as Doc Gối Hạc. Apart from the Doc melody which uses text in the luc bát poetic form there is another type of Doc melody, usually referred to as Doc (Song Thất Lục Bát), which uses text in the song thất lục bát poetic form.

 $<sup>^{36}</sup>$  Sometimes singers add two additional syllables in place of the repeat of syllables 5 and 6 of the eight-syllable line.

three-beat rhythm



The placement of barlines and the choice of metre is somewhat arbitrary in oral musical traditions which are not usually notated. Although my chầu văn teachers were familiar with Western staff notation, they did not conceive of the one-, two- and three-beat rhythms in terms of 'bars', so they were unsure as to where the 'downbeat' should be placed. Following the advice of the ethnomusicologist and musician Nguyễn Thuyết Phong, the transcriptions in this thesis are transcribed so that the accented beat of each rhythm falls on the first beat of the bar:<sup>37</sup>

one-beat rhythm



two-beat rhythm



three-beat rhythm



In the case of the two- and three-beat rhythms the basic pattern is played on the small cymbal. The percussion instruments used for the one-beat rhythm are more varied than for the two- and three-beat rhythms: when using the clappers and small cymbal the 'offbeat' and 'onbeat' strikes are usually played on the cymbal and clappers respectively; for the Xá melodies

 $<sup>^{37}</sup>$  Nguyên Thuyết Phong outlined his views on the position of barlines in personal correspondence; his transcriptions of the one-, two- and three-beat rhythms in the *Garland Encyclopedia of Music* omit barlines (1998:465).

the rhythm is usually played by striking the small gong which is placed on the head of the drum (see Chapter 5).

Complex rhythms are normally added to the basic one-. two- and threebeat rhythms. These are usually played on the clappers, but for the onebeat rhythm additional rhythms are sometimes played on the drum or gong. The opening of CD#1 has the following version of the two-beat rhythm on the clappers and cymbal:



Throughout the Doc extracts on CD#1 and #2, the basic two-beat rhythm is sounded on the cymbal. However, when playing the two-beat rhythm percussionists often deviate from the basic rhythm. The following syncopated rhythms are common variations of the basic two-beat rhythm:



During songs that use the two- and three-beat rhythms, the drum is struck to mark the end of phrases. For example, three strikes of the drum can be heard at the end of the instrumental sections of CD#2 as follows:

When a variant of the two-beat rhythm is played on the cymbal at the end of phrases, the rhythm played on the drum is changed to coincide with the cymbal strikes. One common example is:



Most chầu văn songs use the one-, two- and three-beat rhythms, but there are a few exceptions. Some songs, most notably the Bỉ melodies, are in 'free rhythm' (nhịp tự do), i.e. they do not follow a regular beat. For songs in free rhythm there is little percussion accompaniment, except 'rolls' to mark the end of vocal phrases. There are also a few songs that have their own rhythms: the Thỉnh Bóng, Trống Chiến and Sai melodies make use of rhythms which are usually referred to as nhịp phụ đồng, nhịp trống chiến and nhịp sai respectively. Because there is great variation in the way these rhythms are played and because they do not follow a fixed pattern, a detailed examination would require lengthy analysis, which is outside the scope of this brief introduction.

#### The moon-lute accompaniment during song verses

The moon-lute accompaniment during the verses of songs is based on the short, 'linking phrases' performed during breaks in the vocal line. Although musicians did not have a specific term for the linking phrases of chầu văn songs, the same musical device used during the songs of the chèo theatre repertoire is known as xuyên tâm. Hoàng Kiều has defined xuyên tâm as "a short phrase of music two bars [of duple time] long which is inserted into a song verse in order to separate the phrases of a song. There are also xuyên tâm that are four bars long" (1974:32). Chầu văn musicians have their own standard 'licks' that they use for the linking phrases, but the licks are also subject to variation in performance. The length of these linking phrases varies, but they are usually not more than four beats in duration. Some linking phrases are specific to particular songs, whereas others can be played for more than one song.

Ex. 1 shows the linking sections and the accompaniment to the voice for the verse of the Doc melody as played by Pham Văn Ty. Three linking phrases may be isolated from the moon-lute part:



All of these linking phrases begin during the long-held notes at the end of vocal phrases and overlap with the beginning of the next vocal entry. This is the norm for most linking phrases of songs. The last word of the vocal line transcribed in Ex. 1, hai, is sung to a melisma which is a characteristic 'tail'<sup>38</sup> used for all the verses of the Doc melody. A phrase is played on the moon lute which is a variant of the sung tail. Apart from the tail and the linking phrases, the moon-lute part is very sparse and played softly: Ty only plays a few notes - mostly repeated quavers at the same pitch - which simply provide a point of reference for the vocal line. The sparseness of Ty's accompaniment, other than the tail and linking phrases, illustrates that it is not necessary for the moon-lute player to perform an elaborate accompaniment to the entire vocal phrase. Musicians do sometimes play 'busier' accompaniments, especially when accompanying another singer. But when the moon-lute player is also singing (as is the case during Ty's performance transcribed in Ex. 1) there is usually little accompaniment to the voice. This reflects the technical difficulty of singing and playing at the same time, but it also demonstrates that the moon-lute accompaniment to the vocal phrases is of secondary importance.

The accompaniment to the voice played on other pitched instruments (such as bamboo flutes and the sixteen-stringed zither) in larger bands is not a topic that will be examined in this thesis. However, many of the above

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Repeated melismatic phrases, usually sung to the vowels i or  $\sigma$ , which occur at the end of verses of songs are common to many Vietnamese genres and are sometimes referred to as the 'tail' (duôi). The Doc melody has two different 'tails' depending on whether the last syllable of the eight-syllable line of luc bát has a low-falling or a midlevel tone.

remarks concerning the moon-lute accompaniment to the voice also apply to other pitched instruments: there are idiomatic realisations of the linking phrases for each instrument, and additional accompaniment to the voice is usually based on the vocal contour of songs.

### Instrumental sections (luu không)

Instrumental sections, known as luu không ('flowing without words'), are interspersed between each sung verse. Each chầu văn melody has its own characteristic instrumental section, but their length is not fixed and there is considerable variation in their realisation.

The three instrumental sections of the Doc melody given in Ex. 2 are labelled IS1, IS2 and IS3. For comparative purposes each instrumental section may be divided into three phrases labelled X, Y and Z. Each of these phrases employ different pitch registers that correspond to different frets of the moon lute: the X phrases use the pitches c', d', f', g', a', c'' (and in IS1 pitch d''), which are played using frets 6 to 10; the Y phrases use the pitches g, a, c', d', f', g', which are played using frets 5 to 8. The Z phrase of IS2 uses the pitches G, A, c, d, f, g, a, which played using frets 1 to 4; the Z phrase of IS1, which only uses frets 2 to 4, uses the pitches of IS2 except pitches G and A; and the Z phrase of IS3, which uses frets 1 to 3, uses the pitches of IS2 except pitch a. On two occasions open strings are played in order to give more time to move between different fret positions (marked with an 'O' on the score).

The motifs that are shared by more than one version of the X and Z phrases are bracketed and labelled: the shared motives of the X phrases are labelled x1, x2, x3 and x4, and those of the Z phrases are labelled z1, z2 and z3. As the Y phrases of all three instrumental sections are very similar, it is more useful to point out the differences between them rather than their points of convergence. Except for differences in rhythm and in the repetition of pitches, there are only two sections in the Y phrases that deviate significantly from the other versions of the Y phrase. The deviations are marked as y1' and y2' and their corresponding motifs in the other two instrumental sections as y1 and y2. The motif y1' is a related phrase to y1 which is directly substituted in place of y1; motif y2' is a twicerepeated elaboration of y2.

From this brief analysis a few suggestions can be made regarding how different versions of instrumental sections are constructed. The motivic

similarities between the versions illustrate that there are certain 'stock' motives that are frequently used in different renditions of an instrumental section. Nevertheless, there is also scope for the spontaneous creation of new variations. The X phrases, for example, make use of a fixed range of pitches (played on certain frets which fall easily under the hand) which may be combined to make different patterns for each performance. As there is no fixed length to instrumental sections, each phrase may be expanded or shortened. For instance the X and Z phrases of IS2 and IS3 are roughly twice as long as those of IS1. Yet despite the flexibility in length, instrumental sections must resolve on the accented beat of the rhythmic cycle: all three instrumental sections transcribed conclude with the same repeated double stops (z3), the first of which falls on the accented first beat of the bar. Ty's instrumental sections for the Doc melody, then, use many stock phrases which are combined and extended (or omitted) differently during each performance. In addition to the manipulation of stock phrases there is also limited degree of spontaneous alteration of pre-learnt material - what might be called 'improvisation' - during the act of performance. $^{39}$ 

The above analysis demonstrates the degree to which successive realisations of instrumental sections during one performance of the Doc melody differ. However, a far greater number Doc instrumental sections played by more than one musician (and by the same musician on different occasions) would be necessary for a thorough evaluation of the creative processes involved. Based on my experience of learning multiple versions of instrumental sections with different musicians (and through hearing many repeat performances of instrumental sections by a larger number of musicians), it is evident that musicians differ in the degree to which they rely on pre-learnt material. In other words, some musicians 'improvise' more, and others less than Ty. A comprehensive study of instrumental sections would be a worthy enterprise, but has not been included in this thesis as the range of topics covered is already quite broad. I have chosen, instead, to focus on the creative process chầu văn musicians considered to be the most important: the performance of vocal melodies (see Chapter 6).

The aim of this chapter has been to provide an outline sketch of lên dòng rituals and the main characteristics of chầu văn. With this background, we are now in a position to proceed with more detailed discussion of Vietnamese mediumship and the role of music during possession.

 $<sup>^{39}</sup>$  The brevity of the analysis of instrumental sections does not warrant a lengthy discussion of the terms improvisation, variation etc.. See Nettl (1998) for discussion of the practices and processes of improvisation.

# CHAPTER 2

# MEDIUMSHIP AND POSSESSION

Possession and trance have often been coupled together as if one cannot exist without the other. However, it has recently been argued that in many cases the concepts of trance and ecstasy have been inappropriately applied to shamanism and may not be useful concepts at all (Hamayon 1995b). Previous researchers of lên dòng have differed in their appraisal of whether mediums are in a state of trance or not. At one extreme, the term 'possession' has been used without considering the issue of trance (Simon and Simon-Barouh 1973; 1996) and at the other, lên dòng is called a "phénomène de transe mystique" (Nguyen Kim Hien 1996). Durand's position is between these two extremes: he holds the view that lên dòng is a vestige of "the ancient magic of the technique of trance" (1959:47), yet he is cautious about describing possession during lên dòng as a form of 'trance'.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter provides an account of the practices of Vietnamese mediums and their possession experiences. First it will outline the reasons why people become mediums and the process of initiation. It will then discuss mediums' practices as fortune tellers/healers and what mediums say while possessed during lên dòng. This will provide the ethnographic background for a consideration of the issue of possession. It will be argued that when possessed during lên dòng, mediums are not in a 'trance'. Instead, based on mediums' descriptions of possession, an understanding of possession will be sought in terms of mediums' bodily engagement with the spirits.

# 'COMING OUT' AS A MEDIUM

Maurice Durand gives a vivid description of the initiation process, based on the experiences of one male medium, who is referred to as Monsieur Th.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Durand's caution over the issue of trance is based on mediums' comments that they have a certain degree of consciousness during possession with some exceptions such as possession by tiger spirits (1959:15). However, at one point he states that in some cases mediums "attempt to enter trance" (tentatives d'entrer en transes) in order to be possessed by spirits (ibid.).

(1959:23-28). When visiting the Ghènh temple in Hanoi, M. Th. is 'seized' (bắt) by the spirits: he is involuntarily possessed by the Second Lady (Cô Đệ Nhị). Apart from involuntary possession, Durand only briefly mentions one other manifestation of being 'seized' by the spirits: incurable illness (ibid.:26).

This study's description of 'coming out as a medium' (ra dòng) will explore the reasons why people become mediums in more detail than Durand. In order to gain an insight into how mediums conceive of their experiences which lead to initiation, extracts from discussions with seven mediums (the females Thanh, Bính, Hòa, Xuân and Lai, and the males Quyết and Nguyện) are given in Appendix II. Their stories will be referred to in the following discussion.

Followers of the Four Palace Religion say that people have a 'destined aptitude' (căn số) to become mediums: a destined aptitude distinguishes mediums from 'non-mediums'.<sup>2</sup> Căn số is 'destined' because it is a consequence of an unresolved conflict in a previous life<sup>3</sup> (Lai) and an 'aptitude' because it is an ability, analogous to 'talent' (năng khiếu) for music (Bính). Another term with much the same sense as căn số is căn đồng, which I will render as the 'destined aptitude of a medium' (e.g. see Hòa's interview in Appendix II). If a medium has a 'heavy destiny and a high aptitude' (căn cao số nặng), her previous life was especially difficult and the will of the spirits is particularly strong.

The term căn is also used when a medium has an 'aptitude for fortune telling' (căn soi/căn bói) and an aptitude for a particular spirit. For example, Thanh considered herself to have 'the aptitude of the Ninth Lady' (căn cô chín), because she felt a strong affinity with the latter's character and fortune-telling powers.

A person's destined aptitude to be a medium may manifest itself in numerous ways. As Durand has pointed out, the idea of compulsion - that mediums must succumb to the will of the spirits - is a prominent feature of mediums' explanations of their calling. Mediums are the spirits' 'servants'/'soldiers' (lính) (Hòa), they are 'chosen' (chấm đồng) (Bính) and 'seized'/'forced' (bắt) by the spirits, the spirits 'order' (truyền lệnh) them (Thanh), they 'serve' (hầu) the spirits (Nguyện) and must 'pay the debt' (trả nợ)

 $<sup>^2</sup>$  The term căn số (also căn mạng/căn mệnh) is only used in relation to mediums. Số, mạng and mệnh mean fate/destiny. Căn is described by mediums as the particular destiny which gives you the ability or aptitude to be a medium. I have therefore translated căn số as 'destined aptitude'.

 $<sup>^3</sup>$  Occasionally mediums used the Buddhist term qua or qua kiếp in addition to căn số, meaning 'retribution/consequences of one's previous life'.

to the four palaces (Bính). Mediums' servitude to the spirits is also evident in the terms used when addressing the spirits. For instance, when making offerings, mediums and disciples refer to themselves as 'children' (con) and as 'chairs' (ghế), and use honorific classifiers (ngài, vị and đức) for the spirits.

The outward manifestation of being 'seized' by the spirits is that individuals suffer some kind of misfortune or illness. Of course, not all illnesses are a sign of being 'chosen' by the spirits, but in situations where the illness is incurable by other means (e.g. by Western and Chinese medicine) or there is no obvious reason for the misfortune, the affliction may be understood as a consequence of a person's destined aptitude. Such a diagnosis is usually made by other mediums or spirit priests (thầy cúng), especially those who have the ability to tell fortunes and/or cure illnesses. The 'proof' of the diagnosis depends on the efficacy of worshipping the spirits and the resolution of difficulties once the person is possessed by spirits. I did not come across any mediums that thought that their misfortune or illness had not, at least to some extent, been alleviated after initiation.

All mediums are supposed to have a destined aptitude, yet mediums sometimes cast aspersions on the sincerity of others. The term 'racing medium' (dong dua) was used for mediums suspected of not having a destined aptitude.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that the main motivation for initiation is to compete with other mediums and to increase prestige among friends and disciples hence 'racing' - rather than 'authentic' divine calling. Typically, 'racing' between mediums takes the form of ever-increasing displays of wealth through holding large and lavish rituals.

The seven mediums quoted in Appendix II suffered a range of afflictions: Thanh had problems with conceiving children; two of Binh's children died shortly after birth; Hòa was tormented so much that she claims she was given up as dead for three-and-a-half hours; Xuân suffered tiredness, headaches and 'mental illness', which could not be cured by medicine; Nguyện was tired and weak and was then involuntarily possessed by evil spirits; Lai and Quyết were so ill that they could not move and were bed-ridden for months.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> As Lai remarked in the interview given in Appendix II: "racing mediums just like to come out as mediums, they don't have destined aptitude". The use of the verb 'like' in this comment emphasises that for 'racing mediums' initiation is more a matter of personal whim than divine calling.

These afflictions were alleviated through initiation. After becoming mediums, Thanh and Bính gave birth to healthy children; Hòa 'came alive again' and began to be prosperous; Xuân felt 'better' and 'easier'; Nguyện controlled his involuntary possession by evil spirits; Quyết recovered from 'madness' and his 'heart became peaceful'; Lai could walk again and became prosperous, healthy and relaxed.

A state of 'madness', 'mental illness', 'nervous disorder' and being 'hotgutted' was often mentioned by mediums (Quyết, Thanh, Lai and Xuân). They usually described their 'madness' in terms of their abnormal behaviour. Thanh said she wandered around in a dream, that she went begging at the market and failed to look after her children; Xuân said she talked too much and was rarely at home; and Quyết said he was excessively active one minute and bed-ridden the next. <sup>1</sup>Madness' is usually associated with 'crises' that lead to initiation, but in Thanh's case she suffered her bout of madness when she was already a medium. Her 'madness' subsided when, on the advice of other mediums, she established a private temple. She also found that she could tell fortunes after her bout of 'madness'.

Dreams are a feature of Bính and Lai's descriptions of being 'forced' by spirits. In Lai's dream she was bitten by mandarin spirits, in the form of snakes, and she found that she could not walk the next day. In Bính's dream she was visited by the spirits, who 'taught' her to dance.

Explanations for shamanic afflictions have often been sought in terms of psychiatry and the subconscious.<sup>5</sup> I would resist attempting a psychoanalytical analysis of Vietnamese mediumship because even the best examples of this approach (see Oboyesekere 1977) rely on asserting unconscious motivations that are not acknowledged by the 'other' and undermine the 'other's' metaphysics.<sup>6</sup> It might be suggested, for instance, that Xuân and Quyết's 'nervous disorders' (a term which they have probably picked up from consultations with practitioners trained in Western medicine) were due to poverty and stressful working conditions in the factory and army respectively, and that Thanh's 'madness' was a case of postnatal depression. Yet, nothing these mediums said would warrant such a view: Xuân and Quyết did not make a causal connection between their socioeconomic situations and their 'nervous disorders', and Thanh did not say that the birth of her child contributed to her 'madness'. Rather, it was part

 $<sup>^{5}</sup>$  For overviews of psychological approaches to shamanism see Lewis (1989 [1971]:160-84) and Atkinson (1992:309-13).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Oboyesekere's psychological analysis of Sri Lankan possession, for instance, relies on categories such as 'sexual repression', 'aggressive drive' and 'hysteria'.

of these mediums' destined aptitude to be 'subjected to'<sup>7</sup> 'nervous disorders' and 'madness'.

Once it is established that a person has a destined aptitude, the spirits force her to become a medium. In Lai's words: "if you avoid [coming out as a medium] then you will suffer 'madness' and be punished by the spirits". For a person who has a destined aptitude, the formal procedure for being 'presented as a medium' (trình đồng) - which is also referred to as 'coming out to be presented as a medium' (ra trình đồng) or simply 'coming out as a medium' (ra đồng) - consists of an initiation ritual called 'opening the palaces' (mở phủ) followed by a 'thanking ritual'/'thanking the palaces' (hầu tạ/tạ phủ).

To hold an initiation ritual, the initiate must request the assistance of a more experienced medium who incarnates the spirits prior to the initiate. The experienced medium is possessed by a sequence of spirits according to the conventional hierarchy of the pantheon while the initiate watches attentively. During one of the experienced medium's possessions, the initiate is invited to kneel in front of the altar to carry out an 'asking rite' (lễ khất), also known as đội bát hương ('placing bowls of incense on the head'). A red cloth is draped over the initiate's head, and a large tray, containing incense sticks and other votive objects such as prayers written in Chinese (lá sớ), is balanced on top of the red cloth. The experienced medium then consults the spirits as to whether or not they accept the initiate as a medium by throwing two old coins. This procedure is known as 'asking yin and yang' (hỏi âm dương). Two coins are thrown onto a small dish: if both coins land on 'heads' (ngửa) then the spirits response is favourable; if both are 'tails' (sấp) then the spirits' response is unfavourable; and if one coin falls on heads and the other tails, then the spirits' are undecided. If both coins do not land on heads after three throws, then the initiate is not accepted as medium by the spirits.

After the 'asking rite', the experienced medium continues to be possessed by spirits until possessed by the Second Holy Lady. Towards the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> In Vietnamese the passive particle (bj), meaning 'to be subjected to', is usually used for events/effects that have 'negative' consequences. It is most frequently (though not exclusively) used for illness/madness etc.: one 'is subjected to' madness'/'illness' as opposed to 'having' or 'being' ill/mad. Although there are other expressions for 'becoming maddened' (e.g. hóa diên, phát diên), mediums never chose to use them. Instead, they used the passive which emphasises that a person is the recipient of the affliction, rather than an affliction being the result of something a person has done. Of course, 'causes' for afflictions may still be articulated, but I would suggest that the prominent use of the passive article (bj) has implications for understanding Vietnamese conceptions of illness.

end of the possession by the Second Holy Lady, the experienced medium beckons the initiate to come before the altar and be possessed by spirits. The assistants drape the red cloth over the initiates head, and the initiate prepares to be possessed for the first time. Once the Second Holy Lady has returned to the other world, the band sings a song to 'invite the spirits' beginning once again with the mother spirits at the top of the pantheon.

On the two occasions I attended initiation ceremonies, the initiates were 'successfully' possessed by a large number of spirits. Throughout the initiates' spirit possessions the experienced medium and ritual assistants whispered advice and instructions to the initiates and sometimes physically moved their limbs to help them with certain ritual acts. The initiates themselves looked hesitant and unconfident, as if they were overcome by the occasion.<sup>8</sup> They had much to learn before they could 'serve the spirits beautifully' (hau bóng dẹp).

'Thanking rituals' are usually held one hundred days after the initiation ritual, with the purpose of giving thanks to the spirits for a successful initiation. Unfortunately, I did not attend any thanking rituals,<sup>9</sup> yet according to mediums' accounts thanking rituals do not differ significantly from normal lên dòng: they are simply the first time that a newly initiated medium conducts a lên dòng without the assistance of another medium.

Not all mediums undergo the formal initiation procedures. According to Hòa, a person may 'rise up as a medium' (nổi đồng) due to having an ability to tell fortunes and cure illnesses. Also, Nguyện was never presented as a medium: he was involuntarily possessed, tried to control his possession by performing a lên đồng and the spirits then bestowed upon him the power to cure illnesses.

Although Nguyện never had an initiation ritual, the spirits still had to be consulted through the 'asking rite' of đội bát hương before he could be possessed by spirits during a lên đồng. The đội bát hương rite is not restricted to initiation rituals and often occurs outside the context of lên đồng. When I went to the Phủ Giầy festival in 1995 and 1997, mediums and spirit priests held sessions when hundreds of followers of the Four Palace Religion came

 $<sup>^8</sup>$  A more detailed investigation of the initiation of Vietnamese mediums would reveal many similarities with Kendall's description of the initiation of a Korean shaman (1996). However, the case study of Kendall's paper is somewhat unusual in that it is an example of an 'unsuccessful' initiation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> The medium who was overseeing the two initiation rituals I attended would not permit me to return and see the thanking rituals because she was becoming increasingly worried that my presence would cause problems with the local authorities.

forward to have incense sticks placed on their heads. On these occasions initiation did not immediately follow the 'asking rite'.

### FORTUNE TELLING AND HEALING

Some mediums have an 'aptitude for fortune telling' (căn soi) and an 'aptitude to cure illnesses' (căn chữa bệnh), whereas others do not. Mediums who tell fortunes may be referred to as dòng bói ('fortune-telling medium'). No special term was common for 'healing' mediums, but occasionally the term dòng bói chữa ('fortune telling and healing medium') was used.<sup>10</sup> The ability to tell fortunes and cure illnesses is not, therefore, a necessary prerequisite for becoming a medium. In fact, much of the fortune telling and healing done by mediums is not carried out during lên dòng rituals: sessions are held with disciples outside of lên dòng rituals especially on the first and the fifteenth of the lunar month.

Fortune-telling sessions held by mediums that I attended were based on palm and 'face' (tướng mặt) reading, with some use of astrology.<sup>11</sup> Typically, mediums ask the date of birth and home town of their disciple, then examine their palm and appearance, before describing their character and health, and what would transpire in their work and love life. To give one example of a fortune-telling session, a 25-year-old woman, called Phương, was told by a fortune-telling medium that she would have 'obstacles' (căn trở) in her love and work life.<sup>12</sup> Concerning work, the medium said that Phương worked in the fields, but wanted to do something different; concerning marriage, the medium's advice was that she would marry the third or fourth person that she loved, that she should not marry somebody from her same village, and that her husband would be bigger and more handsome than her. The medium said that Phương would only have happiness in marriage if she performed a rite known as cắt tiền duyên ('cutting off from the love fate of a previous life'). This rite is based on the

 $<sup>^{10}</sup>$  As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, many people are initiated as mediums in order to cure persistent illnesses that seem to be incurable by medicine. However, only some mediums take on the role of curing other people's illnesses.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> The fortune-telling and healing practices of mediums, outside of lên đồng, overlap with the practices of diviners (thầy bói). The techniques employed by diviners include: phrenological fortune telling, palmistry, reading horoscopes (tủ vi) and casting divining sticks (xin thẻ). For a detailed account of fortune-telling practices see Toan Ánh (1992b).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Here I will only give a brief summary of the fortune-telling session for Phương.

idea that matters of love are predestined and a consequence of a previous life, so the only way to deal with current problems in life is to distance oneself from the love entanglements of one's former lives.<sup>13</sup>

The cắt tiền duyên rite, which may be carried out during lên đồng, involves the disciple kneeling in front of the altar with a scarf draped over his/her head and a large tray (mâm) placed on the top of the scarf.<sup>14</sup> Votive objects such as petitions (sớ), paper shoes, fans, rice<sup>15</sup> and salt are placed on the tray, and then divided by the medium into two separate 'yin' (âm) and 'yang' (dương) offerings. The piece of paper on which the votive objects are placed is then cut in half and the yin and yang offerings are wrapped up in the sheets of paper. The yin offerings are burnt for the 'yin' spirit world (cõi âm); the yang pile is 'received' (nhận) by the human world (trần gian). One medium described the cắt tiền duyên rite as follows:

The separation of votive objects enables the 'yin' people (người âm) [i.e. the deceased] and the living (người ta) to enjoy gifts (hưởng lộc). The yin will return to the yin and the yang will return to the yang, then the living will be able to love who they wish and get married. After cắt tiền duyên, the yin no longer follows and haunts (ám theo) the living.

It is through the separation of yin and yang, then, that a 'break' is made with the difficulties in love of previous lives.

During healing sessions, the medium first discusses the illness with the disciple, and then diagnoses whether the complaint is due to the 'soul' (tâm linh) of the person or can only be cured by hospital treatment.<sup>16</sup> In either case, the medium usually encourages the disciple to receive hospital treatment, but if an illness is diagnosed as 'belonging to the soul' (thuộc về tâm linh) it may be cured by an invocation. In the words of one 'healing' medium:

<sup>13</sup> In Vietnamese the term duyên refers to a person's fate, usually with the connotation of a person's 'fate in love', and nhân duyên, which might be translated as 'destined love match', refers more specifically to the 'destined' partnership between two people.

 $<sup>^{14}</sup>$  The use of the scarf and large tray, placed on the head, is similar to the initiation rite described at the beginning of this chapter, doi bát hương ('placing bowls of incense on the head').

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> One male medium maintained that organic products such as rice should be cooked before being 'issued' (cấp) to the 'yin' spirit world, whereas rice for the 'yang' human world should be uncooked. However, when he carried out the cắt tiền duyên rite, only uncooked rice was used.

 $<sup>^{16}</sup>$  Some mediums used the term bệnh âm, 'yin illness', to describe illnesses that were designated as being caused by the spirits.

For example, if somebody has a chest pain I will 'look at' (nhìn) their soul (tâm linh) .... If the cause of the illness is due to their fate (số) ... or if the illness is due to evil spirits (ma tà), then it can be cured by an invocation (khấn) to the spirits .... I tell [disciples] to go to the hospital first, but I will also 'call out' (kêu) to help them use the spirits' medicine (thuốc thánh).

Invocations to the spirits usually last a few minutes and are muttered in front of an altar while votive objects - such as those used during cat tien duyên - are 'presented' (dâng) to the spirits. Invocations usually include: the name and address of the disciple; the name of the temple; the date; the illness afflicting the disciple; and a list of spirits that are respectfully implored to show the method for curing the illness. After the invocation some mediums tell disciples to burn a petition (sớ) to the spirits - written in Chinese or Sino-Vietnamese characters - that lists the name of the afflicted disciple, the date, the location and a request for the spirits help.<sup>17</sup> Once burnt, the ashes of the petition are mixed with water and drunk; this is the 'spirits' medicine' referred to in the quote above. 'Incense water' (nước thải), consisting of a little incense ash mixed with water, is also given to disciples to drink in order to help cure illness. Mediums may give incense water to disciples during healing sessions or during lên dong. Disciples usually ask for incense water during lên đồng when the medium is possessed by the Third Lady, because the Third Lady is well known for her ability to cure illnesses.

# 'TRANSMITTING' THE WORDS OF THE SPIRITS

The amount of 'words of the spirits' (lời thánh) that are 'transmitted' (truyền)<sup>18</sup> to mediums during lên đồng varies a great deal. Some mediums say very little other than a few stock phrases and occasional instruction to the assistants. Mediums who tell fortunes and heal, on the other hand, usually speak more when they are possessed and deviate from the stock phrases. Because of their special 'aptitudes', fortune-telling/healing mediums have a greater ability to 'transmit' the advice of spirits, and during lên đồng they may give advice to disciples about their health or future. The comments that mediums make about individual disciples while possessed are not,

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed discussion of invocations (khấn) see Toan Ánh (1992a:30-32).

 $<sup>^{18}</sup>$  The idea of 'transmission' emphasises that when mediums talk while possessed it is the spirit that is talking 'through' the medium.

however, as detailed as those made during sessions that are held specifically for fortune telling or healing.

Literature on Vietnamese mediumship often states that disciples worship the spirits of the Four Palace Religion in order to gain protection and assistance in their everyday lives (e.g. Ngô Đức Thịnh 1996a:21). Yet, there have been no accounts of the comments made by spirits (via the medium) or how the spirits' advice addresses the concerns of disciples. In order to give an impression of the minimum level of linguistic interaction between a possessed medium and disciples, I will briefly outline some of the standard phrases mediums utter during lên dòng. I will then go on to discuss the more extensive comments that a fortune-telling/healing medium made during one ritual. This will provide an insight into the kind of issues that are raised during rituals and the ways in which spirits engage with disciples' everyday lives.

When approaching the possessed medium during a lên đồng, it is usual for a disciple to plead (xin) the spirits to bestow (cho) money and gifts (tài lộc) and for spiritual protection (phù hộ) for his/her lineage (họ).<sup>19</sup> When the medium distributes gifts, she usually utters that the spirit 'praises' (ban khen) or 'pities' (thương) the lineage of the disciple. The medium may also say that the spirit incarnated 'witnesses the hearts' (chứng tâm) of the disciple's lineage. This expression implies that the spirit is aware of all the thoughts and feelings of the disciple and that spiritual protection will be granted. When a disciple receives gifts he/she usually acknowledges the spirit's benevolence by saying lạy - a reverent term of address which literally means 'kow-tow' - followed by the name of the spirit. In addition to responding to disciples' pleas, the possessed medium also distributes gifts and money to other ritual participants. She makes clear who the gifts are for by naming ritual participants such as the band (cung văn), the temple guardian (thủ nhang) and the ritual specialist (pháp sư).

During rituals, mediums may also make general pronouncements about the power of the spirits, or give encouragement to disciples to worship the spirits. These include: 'at the beginning of the year show yourself as a medium, at the end of the year give thanks' (dầu năm có trình, cuối năm có tạ); 'above, organise the work of the spirits, below, endure the earthly work'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Hy Van Luong's detailed analysis of the kinship term ho, which I have translated as 'family name' or 'lineage', states that "the referents of the term ho (i.e. the members of the category ho) include patronymics, locally based patrilineages on the one hand, and bilateral kindreds, outer/distant (kin), and they/them (pronouns) on the other" (1984:297).

(trên thì lo việc thánh, dưới thì gánh việc trần); 'worship the four palaces' (thờ bốn phủ); 'with one heart<sup>20</sup> do Buddha's work, with a true heart do the work of the spirits' (nhất tâm việc phật, thực tâm việc thánh).

### THANH'S END-OF-YEAR RITUAL

In December 1996 a female medium, who will be called Thanh, held a lên dòng for the end of the year (cuối năm) in her own private temple (điện). Thanh is a fortune-telling/healing medium who lives in a village about 50 kilometres south of Hanoi in Hà Tây province.<sup>21</sup> Prior to the ritual, I had not met Thanh – I had been invited indirectly by the musicians at the ritual – but she was very welcoming and invited me to visit her again. So the following week I returned to Thanh's temple. Thanh openly talked about her life, and seemed to appreciate my interest in her.

Over a period of a year and a half (during the first six months of 1997 and during May and June 1998), I made many trips to Thanh's temple in order to attend other lên dòng that she held and to talk to her about mediumship. During these visits I also got to know Thanh's circle of friends and disciples, some of whom were also mediums, who usually participated in her rituals.

At Thanh's end-of-year ritual, there were about twenty people, from Thanh's village and the surrounding area, crammed into her small private temple. I videoed the ritual and later transcribed what Thanh said when possessed. The meaning of her comments was often unclear without further explanation, especially when she referred to the events in disciples' lives. Clarification of Thanh's comments was achieved through watching the video of the ritual with Thanh and asking her about what she had said. I also discussed the ritual with Thanh's disciples.

The end-of-year ritual had an unusual event: when Thanh was possessed by the Third Lady, she started to complain that she was cold. A few minutes

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> The term nhất tâm, translated as 'with one heart', implies the collective and complete devotion of disciples to the spirits. In non-religious contexts nhất tâm means 'unanimous'. Chính tâm, literally 'main heart', is also sometimes used as an alternative to nhất tâm. I have given a literal translation of nhất tâm and chứng tâm ('witness the heart') so that the metaphors embedded in expressions are apparent. The importance of the heart for possession will be discussed in detail in the 'Embodiment' section at the end of this chapter.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> See the section 'coming out as a medium' at the beginning of this chapter for an account of Thanh's initiation and period of 'madness' which led to her becoming a fortune teller.

later, once the Third Lady 'returned' to the Water Palace, Thanh stopped the ritual saying that the Third Lady had made her so cold that she could not continue. She then left the temple leaving everybody wondering what was going to happen next: the premature termination of the ritual was completely unexpected. A few ritual participants went to find Thanh to ask her to continue the ritual. After a break of about ten minutes, Thanh came back into the temple and consulted the spirits as to whether or not she should continue the ritual. She did this by tossing coins, in a procedure known as 'asking yin and yang' (see earlier in this chapter). On the second throw, the coins gave a positive response, so she continued the ritual. Thanh was then possessed by the Seventh Lady, the Ninth Lady, the Little Lady, and finally the Third Young Prince.

During Thanh's possession by the Seventh Lady, the spirit 'transmitted' details about why Thanh's body had been made cold by the Third Lady. According to the words of the Seventh Lady, the Third Lady had punished (phạt) and scolded (quở) Thanh, by making her cold, because her husband had criticised Thanh's belief in the spirits and because Thanh had not 'served' the spirits properly. Below are examples of Thanh's comments when possessed by the Seventh Lady. It should be noted that for all the translations of Thanh's utterances the use of 'I' and 'you' refers to the particular spirit that is incarnated and the person toward whom the comment is directed respectively.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, in the following four quotes 'I' refers to the Seventh Lady and 'you' to Thanh:

The [Third] Lady made you muddle-headed - you didn't remember her!

Today I 'transmit' and then you can tell the future .... Your husband said that "tongues have no bones and there are many twisty roads" so the Third Lady scolded and punished [you].

I pity but [people] still avoid me, they say "don't serve me anymore". People of the mortal world, is that OK?

Why was nothing given to the Third Lady, yet [gifts] are offered to me? For several days I have 'transmitted' for everyone to concentrate fully (lit. 'with one gut')<sup>23</sup> on the spirits. Don't imitate

 $<sup>^{22}</sup>$  The subject and object of sentences uttered during lên dồng are often ambiguous when quoted out of context. For instance, the personal pronoun cô is used to refer to both lady spirits and female ritual participants. On other occasions the subject/object is entirely omitted.

 $<sup>^{23}</sup>$  The importance of the 'gut' as the seat of the emotions will be discussed in the section titled 'Embodiment' towards the end of this chapter.

stupid people of the mortal world, otherwise the Third Lady will scold and punish [you].<sup>24</sup>

Thanh said that a few days before the ritual her husband had criticised her work as a medium because he did not 'believe' (tin) in the spirits. The phrase "the tongue has no bones and there are many twisty roads" is a reference to his criticisms.

When Thanh is possessed by the Ninth Lady, Thanh's mother-in-law, who was present at the ritual, is also encouraged to make her son respect the spirits:

If that husband is still dishonest, why should I forgive [you]?

The relative (lit. 'pink and red blood') who gave birth [to Thanh's husband] must admonish him, only then will I forgive [you].<sup>25</sup>

When Thanh was possessed by the Ninth Lady, the spirit 'transmitted' further comments about why the Third Lady had made her cold.

The [Third] Lady torments [you] with illness, you cannot be 'released' from illness like that. However much medicine there is, it is necessary [for you] to repent at the altar of lady spirit.<sup>26</sup>

According to the words transmitted by the Ninth Lady, then, Thanh's affliction can only be cured by 'repenting', not by medicine.

Mediums and disciples often attribute illness to the punishment of the spirits, and disciples can approach the medium during lên dồng for 'spiritual guidance'. During Thanh's possession by the Ninth Lady, a disciple asked for spiritual help regarding an illness that was afflicting her child. But because the child was not present at the ritual, help was refused: Thanh just said, "Is the woman's child here to plead with me?"<sup>27</sup> Shortly after, a disciple came up to Thanh saying she had a headache. Thanh, still possessed

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Thế mà cô bơ làm cho u mê mà chẳng nhớ gì đến cô nhỉ! Nhưng ngày nay cô truyền cho cô thì cô bói .... Phu quân bảo các cô là 'miệng lưỡi không xương nhiều đường ngoắt nghéo' cho nên chị bơ chị quở chị phạt. Cô thương mà nó còn trốn cô, nó bảo 'không hầu hạ cô nữa'. Trần gian xem có được không? Sao không mang cho chị bơ mà lại dâng cô? Mấy hôm nay cô truyền cho bách gia trăm họ là khăng khăng một lòng đinh đinh một dạ. Chứ đừng bắt chước trần gian mà láo thì cô bơ cô quở cô phạt nhé!

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Thế mà phu quân nó vẫn đong đưa thì làm sao cô tha cho được? Máu đào máu đỏ mới sinh ra mà biết đường bảo ban thì cô tha cho.

 $<sup>^{26}</sup>$  Cô hành cho ốm chứ không phải là ốm như thế mà được cô đã tha đâu. Trăm tay nghìn thang nghìn thuốc mà về sám hối đến cửa cô.

<sup>27</sup> Con cô nó có mặt ở đây mà xin cô?

by the Ninth Lady, replied that the headache was due to worries about money, not the 'punishment' of the spirits:

I haven't tormented [you], [you] only have a headache because of money, here you go! [Thanh gives the disciple money] If you lack money, you will have a headache, that is all. I didn't punish [you]!<sup>28</sup>

Văn Thị Khoát, who was present at the ritual, is a medium who lives in the same village as Thanh. When she was 27 she had repeated bouts of illness, split up with her husband and went back to live at her parents' house. Having left her husband, Khoát tried to make a living from selling goods at markets (previously she had been working in the fields), but she was not successful at trading and did not like the work. A couple of years later, in 1989, Khoát became a medium and built a temple next door to her parents' house. She then began to hold fortune-telling sessions; the money she received from fortune telling enabled her to stop trading at markets.

According to Khoát, the Ninth Lady - who is well known for her fortunetelling powers - gave her the ability to tell fortunes. When Thanh was possessed by the Ninth Lady, Khoát offered gifts as an expression of thanks. Upon receiving the gifts, The Ninth Lady 'transmitted' to Khoát that she was indeed responsible for her ability to tell fortunes and for the money she earned from fortune telling (Khoát is referred to by her family name, Văn):

The Văn lineage! My people, my wealth!

So today I say to the Văn lineage disciples, the Văn lineage enjoys my gift of fortune telling.  $^{2\,9}$ 

When I spoke to Khoát some time after the end-of-year ritual, she also mentioned that she often argued with her mother,  $D\delta$  Thị Chuất. A particular bone of contention was that Khoát's mother would not let her go to lên dồng festivals.<sup>30</sup> The arguments between Khoát and her mother were alluded to by Thanh when she was possessed by the Ninth Lady (Khoát's mother is referred to by her family name,  $D\delta$ ):

The  $D\bar{o}$  lineage are insolent all the time. I 'swallow the bitter medicine' and don't complain, but I will continue to let the Little

 $<sup>^{28}</sup>$  Cô chả hành gì đâu, mà con chỉ có đau đầu vì tiền này này! Thiếu tiền thì đau đầu thôi! Cô không phạt đâu!

 $<sup>^{29}</sup>$  Họ Văn này! Người của cô mà của cô nhỉ! Thế mà ngày nay cô sang tai cho họ Văn cái ghế của cô, họ Văn cũng ăn lộc bói của cô.

 $<sup>^{30}</sup>$  This is also referred to in Chapter 3.

Lady spirit 'seize' the Văn lineage. If the Văn lineage do not behave properly, I will create problems (lit. 'rise up to the bank, go down to the fields'), then you will know my magical powers!<sup>31</sup>

According to Thanh's explanation of the Ninth Lady's words above, it is the Little Lady - who is known for having a tempestuous character - who has made Khoát's mother 'insolent'. The Ninth Lady also threatens that she will make Khoát's life more difficult if Khoát does not behave properly.

Later during the end-of-year ritual, Thanh, still possessed by the Ninth Lady, continued to comment about Khoát's situation:

If the Văn lineage persist in 'swallowing bitter medicine', I will make them ill (lit. 'lie down'). But I will not make these disciples ill, I will let them wander freely. Do not tell fortunes to take money, but help mortal people so that they are not ungrateful.<sup>32</sup>

The message in the above quote is quite clear: Khoát must devote herself to the Ninth Lady, otherwise she will be ill (as she was in the past) and her livelihood as a fortune teller will be adversely affected.

The comments about Khoát and her mother are just one example of many where the personal situations of ritual participants were mentioned by Thanh while possessed. During possession by the mandarin spirits, she also touched on the family situations of Phạm Thị Diễn and Trần Thị Son.

Trần Thị Son, who has been a disciple of Thanh's for several years, does not attend Thanh's rituals very often because she is very busy with her family. In the following 'words of the spirit', Son - referred to by her family name, Trần - is encouraged to attend rituals more frequently:

The Trần lineage still has a debt (lit. 'heavy heel') to the people of the world. If you do not pray to the spirits, you will not have gifts.<sup>33</sup>

The death of Phạm Thị Diễn's husband is acknowledged at several points during the ritual:

The Phạm lineage [i.e. Phạm Thị Diễn] has a difficult love match, there is only one 'chopstick' [i.e. only one of the marital pair is still alive].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Cái họ Đỗ lắm lúc cũng đáo để lắm, mà cô thì cô cứ 'ngậm đắng nuốt cay' mà cô không cho nói. Mà cô cứ cho cô bé về để mà cho bắt trần gian mà cái họ Văn ở chốn tại gia mà không làm cho hẳn hoi mà cô cho 'lên bờ xuống ruộng' rồi mà biết phép của cô chứ!

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Cái họ Văn này khiên trì 'ngậm đắng nuốt cay' thì cô cho nó nằm chứ. Còn cái ghế này thì cô cho nó nằm đâu.Cô cho nó đi tung hoành. Không cần phải xem bói mà lấy tiền trần mà độ cho Trần gian để mà nó bạc mồm bạc miệng đâu nhé.

 $<sup>^{33}</sup>$  Họ Trần ngày nay còn nặng gót trần gian chứ đừng kêu bảo không có lộc.

Today the husband is in the heavens, not at the temple.<sup>34</sup>

Phạm Thị Diễn was, in fact, not invited by Thanh to attend the ritual. This is mentioned by Thanh, when she is possessed by the Third Mandarin:

This is a chance meeting: today the temple guardian [i.e. Thanh] did not invite you to come and ask for gifts.<sup>35</sup>

Another ritual participant, Nghiêm Thị Dậu, is often ill, so she does not always attend Thanh's rituals. Dậu is also a medium, but she did not hold her initiation ceremony at Thanh's temple. When possessed by the Third Mandarin, Thanh makes a number of comments chastising Dậu for not being initiated at her private temple. The words of the Third Mandarin also encourage Dậu to go to rituals at Thanh's 'small temple in a narrow alleyway' even when she is ill:

Even when ill and weak, [you can] with 'one heart' do the work of the four-palace spirits.

Today take a written-prayer petition and confess at the small temple in the narrow alleyway. I will witness [you]!

When your legs cannot walk anymore, do not forget the small temple down the narrow alleyway. I will praise [you]!<sup>36</sup>

Finally, the words 'transmitted' by the Third Young Prince should be mentioned to give an impression of the playfulness of some parts of the ritual. When possessed by Third Young Prince, Thanh made fun of some of the ritual objects. In a 'baby' voice Thanh commented that the Third Young Prince's head scarf was ugly (xấu) and out of shape (méo), which provoked much laughter from the disciples. Thanh then jokingly said that a bent incense-stick had the shape of an old lady:

This incense stick is shrewish and bent like an old lady! Coddling me, hey!  $^{\rm 37}$ 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Họ Phạm vất vả nhân duyên, đũa gắp một chiếc. Phu quân ngày nay hầu tận trên thiên đình không phải ở phủ.

 $<sup>^{35}</sup>$  Duyên kỳ ngộ mà hôm nay chủ nhang không thỉnh cũng về cửa cha cửa mẹ nhà cô xin lộc.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Lúc ốm đau yếu ớt, nhất tâm việc thần bốn phủ. Ngày nay biết đường lấy sớ sám hối chốn đền nhỏ ngõ hẹp quan chứng chol Bao giờ chân không đi được nữa thì hãy quên nơi đền nhỏ ngõ hẹp này nhé. Anh ban khen nhé!

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Cái nén hương nó cứ cong cớn ấyl Ông ẹo với cậu thế này!

The disciples were also greatly amused when Thanh, possessed by the Third Young Prince, challenged me to guess how many 1000 dong bills she was holding. If I guessed correctly, Thanh would give me the money; I said sixteen bills when in fact there were only fourteen, so the money was given to disciples.

While the comments that Thanh made during her end-of-year ritual are specific to a particular occasion and are, to a certain extent, idiosyncratic, they do give an impression of the issues raised during spirit possession. Thanh's comments also illustrate how mediums exert influence over their disciples: Thanh often uses spiritual power as a way of promoting her own position as a medium.

Possessed mediums - if they say more than just a few standard phrases make references to the health and family situation of individual disciples. Whether disciples are facing a death in the family, are suffering illness, are having difficulties with other members of their families or are having money problems, the spirits 'transmit' comments about their plight during lên dòng. These comments sometimes identify spiritual or earth-bound 'causes' for disciples' problems; the 'solution' for afflictions due to the spirits is to avidly worship the spirits and to attend mediumship rituals. The remarks that were 'transmitted' by the spirits about Thanh and her husband during Thanh's ritual are more unusual. However, they are an interesting example of how lên dồng can be a forum for airing tensions between mediums and their husbands.

### AWARE POSSESSION AND OBSESSION

The preceding sections of this chapter have provided an account of aspects of mediumship. Topics discussed have included: the reasons why people become mediums and the process of initiation; the fortune-telling/healing sessions that some mediums hold; the transmission of the words of the spirits by the medium when possessed during lên đồng; how the spirits' words and the giving of gifts are a means of interaction between the possessed medium and disciples.

While possession has not yet been directly addressed, implicit to the discussion of mediumship so far are a number of features concerning possession both during lên đồng and outside of it. Most directly, the accounts of mediums' afflictions prior to initiation made reference to possession by evil spirits (in the cases of Nguyện and Hòa). Thanh also described her period

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of 'madness' after initiation in terms of possession by the Ninth Lady. In this section, possession resulting in 'affliction' will be compared to possession by spirits during lên dòng.<sup>38</sup>

Thanh's period of madness, due to involuntary possession by the Ninth Lady, mentioned above, resulted in an aptitude for fortune telling. Yet most fortune telling/healing is done during sessions outside of the ritual context of lên dòng when mediums are not possessed by spirits. Mediums are able to tell fortunes/heal without being possessed because the spirits have bestowed upon them an 'aptitude' for 'seeing' the 'soul' of clients. Fortunetelling/healing sessions that do not involve possession contrast with the 'transmission' of the words of spirits during lên dòng. So how do the spirits 'transmit' words to mediums during possession? Are mediums aware of what they say during lên dòng?

To answer these questions a thorough analysis of the phenomenon of possession is required. This will be achieved through examining how mediums envisage their possession experiences. The discussion will be based on extracts from interviews of six mediums (Thanh, Bính, Lai, Hòa, Vân and Xuân) given below. The interviews were conducted by myself with assistance during some interviews from my Vietnamese language teacher, Nhạn. Despite the fact that my questions were at times leading, it should be noted that I did endeavour to ask about spirit possession using terms which did not refer to any particular part of the body (i.e. I usually used the reflexive pronoun, mình, which means 'me/myself', 'you/yourself', 'one/oneself' depending on the context).

Văn Thị Thanh (March 1997)

BN: What state (trạng thái) are you in when the spirits enter you (nhập vào mình)? Thanh: When the spirits enter ... my head (đầu) and body (xác thân), and my self in the human world (người trần của mình) is very alert (tỉnh táo) and light (nhẹ nhàng), and my eyes are sharper compared to normal. When the spirit enters, me my heart-soul (tâm hồn) is different from normal, my heart (tâm) is very different and my head and shoulders are heavy.

 $<sup>^{38}</sup>$  As mediums made no distinction between possession during initiation rituals and possession during lên đồng after initiation, the description of possession in this section is also relevant to initiation rituals.

Nhạn: At that point [when the spirits enter] do you say anything? Thanh: ... the 'heart is inscribed' (đề tâm) and [words] come out of the mouth (xuất khẩu) ... speaking does not naturally come from the earthly body (xác thân). The spirits enter the medium's head ... and there is miraculous response (linh ứng) in the heart. For example, when a prince spirit 'transmits words' (truyền lời) or 'sees' (nhìn thấy) for the people, there is a response (ứng) in the heart. A miraculous response (linh ứng) so that my eyes can see. It is no different than when Barley makes a video for me, one must see and then force the pictures into the machine .... The heart comes out as words, words come out of the heart (Tâm xuất thành khẩu, khẩu xuất thành tâm) .... The spirits inspire me to speak.

Nguyễn Thị Bính (May 1997)

BN: How do you feel (cảm thấy) when the spirits enter you (nhập vào mình)?

Bính: A bit buoyant/light (lâng lâng). But [possessed] mediums are alert (tỉnh), not obsessed (mê). I am alert and know everything that is going on around me, the only exception is that I lose balance (thăng bằng) .... The spirits enter your heart (tâm), but you are alert and not obsessed.

Nhạn: The spirit really enters your heart? Bính: Yes, enters my heart, I have premonitions (linh cảm) ....

BN: I would like to understand more about how you feel (cam thay) when the spirits enter you.

Bính: Normal (bình thường). Not special (đặc biệt) at all. Alert (tỉnh táo). You must do the work [of the spirits], that is all. After you have finished serving (hầu) the spirits, you are alert, healthy (khỏe mạnh) and elated (phấn khởi).

BN: So it is not a special state (trạng thái đặc biệt)? Bính: No, normal.

BN: Do you have heavy shoulders or a heavy head? Bính: No, normal. You must have a destined aptitude (căn mạng) to participate ....

BN: But if it is a normal state then how do you know the spirits have entered you?

Bính: You can predict what is going to happen (linh cảm) for normal people. Barley, if you wanted to hold a lên đồng could you do it? BN: Probably not!

Bính: You can only do the right actions if the spirits have entered. It is not like evil spirits (thân thánh ma qủy) have been incarnated (ốp) .... At the moment [of incarnation] you have the aptitude (căn) of the spirits and you must serve them, you don't just participate (dự) [in rituals] like Barley does.

BN: Can you see the spirits?

Bính: Some people can see the spirits. They can see the goddesses change into male spirits, into large green and red snakes. I can see that. If you have a 'high aptitude and a heavy fate' (căn cao số nặng), you can [see the spirits]. Nguyễn Thị Lai (April 1997)

BN: How do you feel (cảm thấy) when the spirits enter you (nhập vào mình)?

Lai: You are suddenly hot (nóng bừng bừng). You are aware (tỉnh), not obsessed (mê), but it is a bit like you are dazed with longing (bâng khuâng). That is all. You are aware of everything.

BN: Can you see (nhìn thấy) the spirits?

Lai: There is imaginary dreaming (mơ mơ aỏ aỏ). You are still alert (tỉnh), but you are dreamy. Sometimes you have dreams (ngủ mê) and can see [the spirits]. When people like me serve (hầu) the spirits, I have a imaginary dreams ... but I am aware and know what is going on, I are not completely obsessed (mê tịt).

BN: Do you get heavy shoulders and a heavy head like other mediums?

Lai: No. I see it like you are dreamy (lơ mơ). It is like you are intoxicated by the spirits (say đồng say bóng). That is the case, but you are sincere (thực lòng, lit. 'true guts'). One is dreamy and dazed with longing (bâng khuâng), so it is not exactly like normal, but one is aware and knows what is going on.

Nhạn: Is there any time during a lên đồng when you are not aware, when you are obsessed (mê)? Lai: There is dreaminess (mơ mơ).

BN: What is dreaminess (mo mo) like exactly? Lai: ... if the mandarin spirits 'return' [i.e. are incarnated], I am made to do things in a particular way. For example, I am made to move my hand up and down. It is a bit like that.

BN: Can contact (liên lạc) be made with the spirits? Lai: It is not possible to talk (nói chuyện) to the spirits.

Lê Thị Hòa (January 1997)

BN: How do you feel (cảm thấy) when the spirits enter you (nhập vào mình)?

Hòa: When you serve the spirits it is difficult to imagine because it is a moment of true incarnation (ốp). Usually I don't drink alcohol or chew betel because I would be immediately intoxicated (say) .... But however much I smoke or eat when the spirits are incarnated I do not become intoxicated .... Because of that, during a lên đồng we say that the medium is aware (tỉnh) not obsessed (mê). If you become obsessed then the evil spirits (tà) have entered you .... For instance, if an evil spirit is hungry and thirsty, it will punish and tease, and maybe it will enter somebody. The person [possessed by evil spirits] will speak without knowing what they are doing. When a [good] spirit is incarnated, one follows the orders (lệnh) of the spirits, and the person is a 'chair' for the spirits to sit on (bắc ghế cho thánh ngự). Nguyễn Thị Vân (December 1996)

Vân: .... There are two 'roles' (vai) in my head, a second person enters me and orders me to do something.

BN: Can you say that this state is a 'state of trance' (trạng thái ngây ngất)?

Vân: Trance (ngây ngất), but it is like a different person enters me, orders me to do these things. When my heart is true (tâm thật) and the people near me are true, I have premonitions (linh cảm) and know about everything that everybody else does. It's like my brain (óc) is limitless (mênh mang), and somebody has entered you ....

BN: Can you contact (liên lạc) or see (nhìn thấy) the spirits? Vân: It is not possible to contact the spirits. We are people of this earth, spirits are in a place where there is nothingness (hư vô). However, sometimes I imagine that there is a spirit before my eyes .... My heart-soul (tâm hồn) is true, but my brain is as if somebody is ordering (sai khiến) me around.

BN: Mr Cao<sup>39</sup> said when a spirit entered, your stomach (bung) is still on earth but your mind (dầu óc) is in the spirit world ... Vân: That's right! Your body is still that of a real person, but your heart-soul (tâm linh) and mind fly away (phiêu điêu) and float up (lênh dênh) to the top of the sky. I imagine it is like that.

Nguyễn Thị Xuân (May 1998)

BN: When the spirits enter (nhập vào), how do you feel (cảm thấy)? Xuân: ... I feel that there is a premonition (linh cảm), that the spirit enters my head (dầu) .... My shoulders are heavy (nặng). My mind (dầu óc) feels elated (sảng thoái) like the spirit is flying and gliding (bây bây lượn lượn) ....

BN: Can you see (nhìn thấy) the spirits? Xuân: I cannot see but I feel (thấy) the spirits. I imagine that the spirit has 'come back' in the innermost feelings of my heart (tâm tư). My heart 'thinks' (nghĩ) about the spirits.

The above extracts bring out some of the key concepts employed by mediums when explaining their possession experiences. Table 2.1 lists the important Vietnamese words and their English equivalents which appeared in the interviews quoted.

 $<sup>^{39}</sup>$  A chầu văn musician who sometimes plays at Vân's lên đồng.

Vietnamese term	English equivalents			
đầu	head			
óc	brain			
đầu óc	mind (head-brain)			
tâm	heart			
tâm linh/tâm hồn	heart-soul (soul)			
lòng (dạ/ruột)	guts/stomach			
linh cảm	premonition			
linh ứng	miraculous response			
ứng	response			
mê	obsession/obsessed			
say/say mê	intoxicated			
tỉnh/tỉnh táo	aware/alert/awake			
óp <sup>40</sup>	incarnate			
nhập (vào)	enter (in)			
thân/xác thân	body			
mơ/ngủ mê	dream			
lệnh/sai khiến/chỉ huy	order/command/direct			

Table 2.1 Vietnamese possession terms and English equivalents

All the mediums quoted above were adamant that during possession they are 'alert/aware' (tinh) and not 'obsessed' (mê).<sup>41</sup> The term tinh conveys the sense, as suggested by Lai and Binh, that even when possessed, mediums are aware of everything that is going on around them. The possession that mediums experience is therefore best described as 'aware possession'. Despite being 'aware' during possession, mediums still 'follow the orders' of spirits (Hòa) and are compelled to act by spirits in ways that they would not be able to otherwise (Vân, Binh and Lai). When spirits transmit words, mediums do not 'contact' spirits through speaking to them or by 'seeing' them. Rather, it is the spirits who speak through the medium.<sup>42</sup> The theme of servitude, apparent in being 'seized' by the spirit to become a medium, is therefore also present during possession. Although the spirits are

 $<sup>^{40}</sup>$  Durand states that of is derived from a meaning to 'penetrate into' (1959:9).

 $<sup>^{41}</sup>$  Vân also mentioned tỉnh and mê, although those sections have not been quoted.

<sup>42</sup> 'Seeing' spirits does sometimes occur during medium's dreams. For example, mandarin spirits, in their manifestation as snakes, appeared in Lai's dreams before she 'came out' as a medium (see earlier in this chapter).
'transmitting' words, the awareness of mediums' possession enables them to know what they are saying during possession just as mediums have an awareness of their ritual actions.

At the other extreme to aware possession is possession that is mê, which I have glossed as 'obsessed/obsession'. A medium who is obsessed is unaware of what she is doing; she is 'out of control'. Obsession is an undesirable state that usually occurs prior to initiation, not by mediums during lên đồng. As Hòa mentioned, being mê is commonly associated with evil spirits, not spirits of the four palace pantheon.

In some mediums' accounts of why they became mediums, being obsessed was seen as evidence that they had been 'seized' by the spirits. During obsession, Nguyện became violent and lost control, and Hòa collapsed and said she was 'dead' for several hours. In Nguyện and Hòa's cases obsession was controlled by becoming a medium.

Ethnographers of possession have often referred to 'out of control' states prior to initiation, comparable to those experienced by Nguyện and Hòa, as a 'crisis' or 'possession crisis'. However, Rouget's survey of the term 'crisis', and others such as 'trance' and 'fit', illustrates how variously these terms have been used by different authors (1985 [1980]:38-44). Rouget then discusses the term 'obsession'. During the Renaissance, the term obsession was used to describe involuntary tormenting by the devil. It did not denote possession, i.e. entry of the body by the devil, but rather a 'prepossession' state of being besieged by the devil.<sup>43</sup> Rouget adopts the term obsession and extends it to apply to possession: "the difference between obsession and possession lies in the fact that obsession calls for either initiation - thereby becoming possession - or exorcism, whereas possession, which can only occur after initiation ... never in any case leads to exorcism" (ibid.:46). Rouget considers obsession - understood as possession leading to exorcism or initiation - to be less pejorative than previous terms that have attempted to distinguish between 'welcome' and 'rejected' possession e.g. happy/unhappy or authentic/inauthentic possession.

I have chosen to adopt the term obsession for possession that is mê because it suggests the influence of malevolent spirits, and because it has resonances with the Vietnamese meanings of mê. The two principal

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> The Renaissance meaning of obsession persisted into the nineteenth century. The 'obsession' entry in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Third Edition, Vol. 2), for instance, gives the following citation from 1871: "These cases belong rather to obsession than possession, the spirits not actually inhabiting the bodies, but hanging or hovering about them."

meanings of mê are: to be infatuated with love for somebody or very keen about something (e.g. music); to be unconscious or insensible (a meaning which is more explicit in the compound term mê man, 'unconscious'/'in a coma'). During mê possession, mediums are tormented, or 'infatuated', by evil spirits. Regarding the meaning of mê as 'unconscious', most mediums described mê possession as marked by physical activity, so to translate mê as 'unconscious' would be misleading.<sup>44</sup> However, mê possession is similar to being 'unconscious' in that it is characterised by a complete lack of awareness. The term obsession, then, evokes the meaning of mê as infatuated, while avoiding an inappropriate use of 'unconscious'.

Although my use of the term obsession in the Vietnamese context is related to Rouget's definition of the term, there are two important differences. Obsession, for Vietnamese mediums, never leads to exorcism, and while it usually leads to initiation, obsession is possible, though extremely rare, after initiation.

Mê possession might be described as a crisis. However, obsession seems preferable because the term crisis has often been applied to many different states that do not involve possession. In the Vietnamese context, all the examples of the mediums' troubles experienced before initiation - such as problems with fertility, illness and being bed-ridden - could be referred to as crises even if they did not involve possession.

Describing the possession of Vietnamese mediums during lên dòng as 'trance' directly contradicts the idea of aware possession described by mediums. Nevertheless, recent Vietnamese research has attempted to find a Vietnamese term for trance that is applicable to lên dòng. The term that has been used as the equivalent to trance is ngây ngất. In the book *Hát văn* it states: "mediums must hypnotise (tự thôi miên) themselves to create a state of trance (trạng thái ngây ngất)" (Ngô Đức Thịnh 1992:43). Literally ngây ngất means: 1) to be thrilled, enraptured, thrown into ecstasy; 2) intoxicating, heady. However, this term is not relevant for those involved in spirit possession: I never heard a medium use it outside of such occasions as my blatant attempt to lure Vân into considering the term. In the interview, Vân briefly acknowledged my reference to ngây ngất, but did not use it in her description of the experience of possession.

When I discussed ngây ngất with the scholar Ngô Đức Thịnh, he confirmed that the term was a scholarly attempt to find an equivalent for the notion of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Hòa's 'death' experience, mentioned earlier, was obviously some kind of unconscious state. However, such an extreme experience was not common and was not characteristic of the mê possession described by other mediums.

'trance', and he suggested that those mediums who did not enter a state of trance were not 'truly' possessed by spirits, but just wanted to 'perform' (biểu diễn) (p.c. June 1998).<sup>45</sup> Ngô Đức Thịnh was unconcerned that his Vietnamese term for 'trance' was not used by ritual participants and he did not entertain the idea that his own 'scholarly' view - namely, that possession is inconceivable without trance - might be challenged by the ethnographic situation. The aim in the rest of this chapter is to provide an understanding of possession based on mediums' descriptions of their experiences.

#### EMBODIMENT

The way mediums described their possession suggests intriguing relations between the heart, mind, head, soul and so on. In Embodiment and *experience*, Csordas has brought together some of the recent work on embodiment (1994a). This research moves away from viewing the body as either a mere conduit, an object given a thing-like quality which is filled with social reality or the rational mind (Douglas),<sup>46</sup> or as a "creature of representation", i.e. the tendency, since Foucault, to "establish the discursive conditions of possibility for the body as an object of domination" (1994b:12). Drawing on Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, Csordas outlines the 'errors' of 'biologism' and 'sociologism': in the former, "the body is the mute, objective biological substrate upon which meaning is superimposed", and, in the latter, "the body is a blank slate upon which meaning is inscribed, a physical token to be moved about in a pre-structured environment" (1994c:287). For a phenomenologist like Csordas, biologism and sociologism objectify a "preobjective bodily synthesis", by which he means "that our bodies carry the social about inseparably with us before any objectification" (my emphasis, ibid.).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Subsequent to my conversation with Ngô Đức Thịnh, he published an article which argues that lên đồng may be viewed as a "unique theatrical performance" (1999:56). Although performance theory provides scope for interpreting ritual (see, for instance, Freeland-Hughes 1998), Ngô Đức Thịnh's short paper is devoid of any theory: it just briefly mentions that music and dance "stimulate the participants to feel that they are possessed by deities" (ibid.:57).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> See Jackson's critique of Douglas' writing on the body (Jackson 1989:122-3). Jackson argues that Douglas views the human body as "an object of understanding or an instrument of the rational mind, a kind of vehicle for the expression of a reified social rationality" (ibid.:123).

Csordas' analytical theme of "embodiment as the existential ground of culture and self" attempts to open up a space for a phenomenological analysis of embodiment, what he sometimes calls a "cultural phenomenology of embodied experience" (ibid.:288). This approach endeavours to overcome the 'objectifications' of 'biology' and 'culture' in favour of a phenomenological description of bodily engagement with the world. The promise of Csordas' paradigm of embodiment is to show how "culture is grounded in the human body" (1994b:6).

In what follows I will discuss possession in terms of the body and embodiment, where, following Csordas, the body is defined as a "biological, material entity" and embodiment as "an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world" (ibid.:12). In short, I will attempt to give an account of how mediums conceive of their bodiliness.<sup>47</sup>

Mediums mentioned a number of bodily changes during aware possession. These included: 'heavy shoulders and head' (Thanh and Xuân); 'lightness' (Binh); 'hotness' and 'dreaminess' (Lai). While these somatic changes are part of the experience of possession for some mediums, they were not bodily responses that established the conditions of possibility for possession. To examine possession from a phenomenological perspective, requires detailed analysis of how possession is grounded in the body, rather than merely describing bodily changes. In the following discussion I will therefore focus on how mediums described the body as a nexus between the human and spirit worlds.

During aware possession the spirits 'enter' the medium's body (thần/xác thần).<sup>48</sup> Thanh and Xuân added that the spirits entered their heads as well as their bodies, whereas Bính said the spirits entered her heart. The precise details about how the spirits enter mediums' bodies, then, seem to be perceived differently by different mediums.

In the interview extracts above, I have translated the three Vietnamese words, dầu, óc and dầu óc as head, brain and mind respectively. The differences between them should not, however, be overemphasised as mediums used them flexibly. Vân commented that during possession she had 'two roles' in her head, that her brain was limitless and that her mind 'flew

 $<sup>^{47}</sup>$  'Bodiliness' - as well as other terms such as the 'lived body' and the German word *leib* - have been proposed by medical anthropologists as alternatives to 'embodiment'.  $^{48}$  The term xác is used to refer to the dead body/corpse. However, in this context, the compound word xác thần does not have this connotation.

away'. Xuân also said that her mind was 'elated' as if the spirit was 'flying and gliding'.

The heart is involved with possession in a multifaceted way. Binh said that when the spirits entered her heart, 'premonitions' ensued. Other mediums also stressed that the heart is an important point of interaction with the spirits: a 'true heart' is necessary in order for premonitions to occur (Vân); when possessed, the heart feels different than normal (Thanh); the spirits enter the innermost feelings of the heart (Xuân). Thanh discussed the relationship between the heart and the spirit in most detail. She described how: the 'miraculous response' of the spirits is felt in the heart; the spirits 'inscribe' her heart; the 'words of spirits' are 'transmitted' through her heart.

The importance of the heart, then, lies not just in it sometimes being considered as the primary site of possession, but in the fact that the heart feels and responds to the spirits. Devotion to the spirits with 'one heart' (nhất tâm) and the spirits' benevolence through 'witnessing the hearts' (chứng tâm) of disciples - mentioned earlier in this chapter - further confirms the two-way interaction between the heart and the spirits.

The heart is also present as the first part of the compound words for a person's soul (tâm linh/tâm hồn): this connection between the heart and soul is emphasised by rendering tâm linh/tâm hồn as 'heart-soul'.<sup>49</sup> Like the heart, the heart-soul is affected by being possessed by spirits. During possession, Vân's heart-soul 'floats' and Thanh's heart-soul feels different than normal.

Thomas Ots has suggested that in traditional Chinese medicine "the mind is placed in the heart" in what he calls a "heart-mind controls emotion model" (1994). According to this model:

the mind is placed within the heart (xin). The heart is understood as the supreme viscera because it is perceived as the seat of cognition and of virtue (de). The heart-mind is the grounding space for all aspects of bodily as well as social well-being. (ibid.:118-19)

Although I did not explicitly ask mediums whether the mind was 'placed within the heart', the interchangeable use of heart and head/brain/mind in mediums' comments about possession would seem to suggest that there is little differentiation between the heart and mind. Xuân's comment that the heart 'thinks' (nghī) about the spirits indicates that, in a sense, the heart is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> When mediums talked about possession they used the compound words which I have rendered as 'heart-soul'. However, it should be noted that there are also other words meaning 'soul' - hon, linh and linh hon - which do not include the term for 'heart' (tâm).

the mind, or, at the very least, there is an important link between them.<sup>50</sup> Other Vietnamese terms such as tâm trí, literally 'heart and intellect', which is often rendered as 'mind', also suggest a merging of heart and mind.<sup>51</sup>

Such a claim, however, ignores the importance of the guts, long, which are often considered to be the seat of emotions and feelings.<sup>52</sup> In Vietnamese there are many compound words which exhibit the link between the guts and the emotions. Three common examples are: phải lòng 'to fall in love'; méch lòng 'to hurt someone's feelings'; and hài lòng, 'to be content' or 'satisfied'. The term long does not feature in the language of mediums as a part of the body which spirits possess, as the heart and head do, However, Lai used the expression thuc long ('true gutted') - as an alternative to 'true heart' (thực tâm or thật tâm) - to express sincere commitment to the spirits. Being 'true-gutted' has much the same meaning as the expression 'one-gutted' (môt lòng/môt da) which was 'transmitted' by the spirits during Thanh's end-of-year ritual (see earlier in this chapter). The expression 'hot guts' (nóng lòng/nóng ruột) - understood as a feeling of unease/impatience - was also mentioned by mediums as a 'symptom' of being seized by the spirits which was cured through initiation as a medium. So, while the 'guts' are not directly referred to in relation to possession, they do have a place in mediums' bodily relations to the spirits.

In opposition to the widespread use of the term trance by scholars of shamanism, Hamayon has argued that in shamanistic societies the notion of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Roseman has reported that the Temiar 'think' in the heart and she argues that for the Temiar "the heart soul is the locus of thought, feeling and awareness" (1991:30). While there would seem to be many similarities between Temiar concepts and how Vietnamese mediums conceive of the heart, mind and heart-soul etc., Vietnamese mediums do no make the distinction, made by the Temiar, between the 'heart soul' and 'head soul' (ibid.:24-36).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> It is interesting to note that the Western term 'psychosomatic medicine' has been translated in Chinese as 'heart-body medicine' (Ots 1994:119). However, Ots points out that: "the argument that traditional Chinese medicine does not share the Western dichotomy of psyche and soma, and for this reason, that its outlook has always been holistic, is truly a cross-cultural misunderstanding: we simply employ different mind-body models" (ibid.). In Vietnamese 'psychosomatic medicine' does not follow the Chinese, as it is translated as "nervous-system medicine" (thuốc trị bệnh thần kinh). However, like Chinese, Vietnamese does not have an equivalent for 'our concept of psyche': in Vietnamese 'psyche' is usually rendered as 'soul' (linh hồn) or 'spirit' (tinh thần).

 $<sup>5^2</sup>$  According to the second edition of the *Từ Điển Tiếng Việt* (*Vietnamese Dictionary*) published in Hanoi by the Centre of Dictionary Studies (Trung Tâm Từ Điển Học), the guts (lòng) - which refers generally to the contents of the abdominal cavity - "is considered to be the 'symbol' (biểu tượng) of aspects of psychology, sentiment, will and spirit."

trance is "irrelevant" (1995b:20). Similarly, some scholars of lên dòng refer to trance (ngây ngất), yet the notion has no relevance for those who actually experience possession. Mediums incarnate spirits in a state of aware possession; they are not obsessed, nor are they in a trance. Based on mediums' own accounts, I have described aware possession in terms of embodiment: possession as bodily engagement with the spirits. Through aware possession, spirits are sensory presences that are bodily experienced. Spirits enter the head, heart or the whole body of mediums. It has been suggested that there are links in Vietnamese conceptions of heart/mind/soul, and that all are affected during possession. But it is the heart that features most prominently as the nexus between spirits and humans: spirits are felt in the heart; premonitions come from the heart; the spirits 'speak' through and 'witness' the heart.

Aware possession does not constitute a 'sociomythic' domain in which bodies and spirits are unitary or a 'preobjective' form of bodily being-inthe-world,<sup>53</sup> but aware possession does allow for a mode of engagement between the body and spiritual entities which are usually considered as beyond the body. Mediums' comportment toward the spirits during aware possession allows them to follow the orders of spirits, while simultaneously being 'aware' of their immediate environment.

#### CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed Vietnamese mediumship and mediums' possession experiences. People become mediums because it is their destined aptitude to be seized by, and to serve, the spirits. This destined aptitude is made apparent to them through suffering some kind of affliction, particularly illness. In some cases the affliction also takes the form of obsession - an uncontrolled, involuntary possession by evil spirits. The resolution to these afflictions (which might be thought of as 'crises') is sought through becoming a medium.

Some mediums also have an 'aptitude' for fortune telling/healing. Although most fortune telling/healing is carried outside the context of lên dòng when the medium is not possessed by spirits, we have seen how these practices are related to what mediums do during rituals. For instance,

 $<sup>^{53}</sup>$  See Csordas for a discussion of the 'preobjective' and 'objectified body' in relation to the 'sociomythic domain' (1994b:7).

during lên dòng mediums transmit the words of the spirits which sometimes include comments about the future. They also perform rites that concern the past and future such as cắt tiền duyên ('cutting the love fate of a previous life').

Possession during lên dòng rituals is best understood as aware possession, rather than a form of trance. Based on mediums' own accounts, the notion of aware possession has been conceptualised in terms of embodiment, a mode of bodily engagement with the spirits. In particular, it has been argued that the heart and heart-soul, and other parts of the body such as the head and shoulders, are affected during aware possession. Understanding mediums' aware possession as grounded in the body and bodily being-in-the-world marks a shift away from a concern with altered (or alternate) states of consciousness, which has previously dominated much ethnographic writing, in favour of a phenomenological approach.

How possession is conceived is, of course, crucial to understanding the relations between music and possession, which is the topic of Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 3

# 'EFFEMINATE' MEN AND 'HOT-TEMPERED' WOMEN: THE NEGOTIATION OF GENDER IDENTITY

This chapter discusses the gendered implications of Vietnamese mediumship. Through examining the ritual practices of mediums, I aim to demonstrate how the gender identities of mediums are performatively negotiated. Vietnamese mediumship is predominantly the domain of women: the majority of mediums are women - though male mediums are a significant minority - as are those who attend rituals. This raises issues of marginality and has led to the Four Palace Religion being interpreted as a prime example of indigenous folk culture and as part of the 'yin' current in Vietnamese society. In this chapter, I challenge the view that Vietnamese mediumship presents a univocal 'women's' view of the world and critique the conception of yin and yang on which this view is based. I then go on to examine how the shifting gender positionalities of male *and* female mediums are constituted.

Previous work on 'gender' in Vietnam is based on the presupposition that Vietnamese society consists of two contrasting elements: 'foreign' Confucian codes and more flexible 'indigenous' values. Jamieson's yin-yang system (1993), Woodside's comparison of Chinese and Southeast Asian features in Vietnamese society and culture (1988 [1971]) and Ta Van Tai's contrast between the "zealous propagation of Chinese civilisation" and "Vietnamese folk culture" (1981:141) all, in different ways, portray Vietnamese society as a "clash between the rigidities of the moralistic [Confucian] ideology and the flexibilities of the indigenous cultural system" (Whitmore 1984:298).

This construct has led to the claim that the customs and bilateral kinship system of indigenous Vietnamese culture afforded women a high status, whereas 'patriarchal' Confucianism is held accountable for according women a low status (e.g. Barry 1996a, Whitmore 1984, O'Harrow 1995). Literature on Vietnamese women is littered with examples of their oppression. Often cited are Confucian precepts such as the 'four virtues' (tư dức) and the 'three obediences' (tam tông),<sup>1</sup> adages such as 'a hundred

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The 'three obediences' state that a woman should obey her male masters: before marriage, her father: after marriage, her husband; and if her husband dies, her eldest son. The 'four virtues' provide an idealised measure for women to live up to concerning

daughters are not worth a single testicle' and the expression that women are 'generals of the interior' (nội tướng), i.e., that women's influence is confined to the domestic rather than the public (ngoại) domain.<sup>2</sup> Yet, Taylor has argued that the influence of the "ideology of the Chinese classics" and the "patriarchal family system of China" was limited only to "upper-class Vietnamese", and that the Vietnamese retained many of the more flexible elements of "pre-Chinese civilisation" (Taylor 1983:298-300). It has therefore been concluded that, due to the influence of indigenous culture, Vietnamese women have historically been granted a higher status than in other East Asian societies influenced by Confucianism (see Frenier and Mancini 1996).

The impact of Vietnamese Communist Party policy on gender requires a great deal more research.<sup>3</sup> Suffice it to note here that the extent to which equity has been achieved since constitutional equal rights for women and men were established in the 1940s is debatable, and that the yoke of Confucianism is still a prevailing theme.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the reports compiled by Vietnamese women's studies researchers in the 1990s,<sup>5</sup> which point out gender inequalities in the economic, education and domestic spheres, have often been marshalled in support of the assertion that many 'Confucian' attitudes to women and the family still have considerable effects on social relationships (see Barry 1996a; Tran Thi Van Anh and Le Ngoc Hung 1997; Le Thi and Do Thi Binh 1997).

To view Vietnamese gender relations in terms of Confucianism and indigenous culture has serious shortcomings because it essentialises gender identity and has little relevance to the ethnographic situation in

labour (công), physical appearance (dung), appropriate speech (ngôn) and proper behaviour (hạnh). In work, one should be skilful at sewing and cooking, and perhaps also music, painting and poetry. In appearance, one should be graceful, courteous, clean and well groomed. In speech, one should be gentle, soft, and never shout or smile. And in behaviour, one should be submissive and respectful to relatives. For a detailed description of the 'three obediences' and the 'four virtues' see Toan Ánh (1992c:226-27).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Nội tướng is sometimes translated as 'domestic general'. Le Thi Nham Tuyet, for instance, states that: "[women] played an important role in production and were often called 'Domestic Generals' by men, but in reality they were the slaves of men at home" (1998:34).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the rise of women's aspirations for equal rights in the 1920s and '30s and how they were incorporated, and manipulated, by the Indochinese Communist Party to conform to Marxist political objectives see Marr (1981).

 $<sup>^4</sup>$  Pham Van Bich (1999:239-45) has argued that Marxism has compounded Confucian attitudes to the family.

 $<sup>^{5}</sup>$  Gender research in Vietnam has been almost exclusively concerned with the study of women. See Harris (1998) for a recent call to include men.

contemporary Vietnam. The approach employed in this chapter avoids the tendency for Vietnamese to be rendered as passive recipients of a 'naturalised' system (whether it be Confucianism, indigenous folk culture or whatever) in favour of paying attention to what Vietnamese men and women say and do in particular contexts. This is not to deny that Vietnamese may have recourse to overarching models that set out a pattern of normative behaviour. Rather, it is to suggest that the actions of individuals are not determined by abstract codes, and to note, more generally, "the underdetermination of theory by experience" (Hobart 1995:127).

## GENDER AND RITUAL ROLE

In the vast majority of cases, chầu văn musicians are male and mediums are female. When I asked why this was so, ritual participants were unwilling to see the matter in strictly gendered terms: after all, both men and women are able to become musicians or mediums.<sup>6</sup> The importance of including male mediums in studies of Vietnamese mediumship will be emphasised below, yet the tendency for men and women to assume different ritual roles requires examination.

Let us first consider chầu văn musicians. As well as singing chầu văn during lên dồng, musicians sometimes also carry out ritual roles such as reciting prayers before a ritual and writing prayers using Chinese or Sino-Vietnamese characters. Musicians who are also specialists in other aspects of ritual life are referred to as 'ritual masters' (thầy cúng).<sup>7</sup> Women's access to learning to read and write was severely restricted until the second half of the twentieth century. Until recently, then, constraints on women's education prevented them from gaining the skills necessary to become 'ritual masters', thereby making it less likely for women to become musicians.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Atkinson also found that "to examine Wana shamanship with questions of gender in mind conflicts decidedly with a Wana perspective on the matter.... When asked to explain why most shamans were men, people resisted the suggestion that gender was a qualification for shamanship or other ritual activities" (1989:280-81).

 $<sup>^{7}</sup>$  The term 'ritual master' is also used for ritual specialists that are not musicians.

Gender associations with particular instruments have also played a part in preventing women from becoming chầu văn musicians.<sup>8</sup> The main instrument used in chầu văn, the moon lute, was in the past known as the instrument 'held by noblemen' (quân tử cầm). As one musician commented, the moon lute was not considered suitable for women because it was not 'soft' (êm dịu) and its shape was not 'feminine' (nữ tính), unlike instruments frequently played by women such as the monochord (dàn bầu), the pearshaped lute (tỷ bà) and the sixteen-stringed zither (dàn tranh). This attitude seems to have persisted, as it is still rare to find a female moon-lute player.<sup>9</sup> Recently a few women have begun to sing chầu văn, yet many mediums said that they preferred men to sing chầu văn songs. The main reason given was that men could 'flatter' (njnh) the spirits better than women.

Mediums and disciples resisted the idea that mediumship was only relevant to women, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of mediums and disciples are women. For instance, my questions inquiring whether the Four Palace Religion could be considered as a 'women's religion' (dao của phụ nữ) or only of interest to women, were dismissed as irrelevant. When I pressed ritual participants as to the reasons why more women than men became mediums and participated in mediumship rituals, they gave a variety of responses. These may be summarised as follows: 1) the fate of women was such that they are 'seized' by the spirits more than men; 2) women suffer 'madness' more than men; 3) women are interested in 'spiritual' matters (duy tâm), whereas men are interested in 'material' matters (duy vât); 4) women, rather than men, are drawn to the mother spirits, in particular the most famous Mother Spirit, Liễu Hanh; 5) Women 'carry the weight' (gánh vác) of the family, so if anybody in the family needs the protection of spirits they must become a medium; 6) only 'effeminate' men (dồng cô)<sup>10</sup> may become mediums, and because there are more women than effeminate men in society it follows that there would be more female than male mediums.

The first four responses listed above do not so much provide reasons for why women are drawn to mediumship as to make the case that women have a 'natural' propensity to be interested in the Four Palace Religion and thus to become mediums. The fifth and sixth responses edge toward sociological

 $<sup>^8</sup>$  Gender associations of musical instruments have been widely documented. See, for instance, Veronica Doubleday's discussion of the close associations between women and frame drums in the Middle East (1999).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> During fieldwork, I only met one woman who played the moon lute.

<sup>10</sup> The idea of dong co will be discussed in detail below.

explanations, in terms of family responsibilities and the constitution of society at large, but still highlight cultural notions of gender.

Predominantly female possession, as is the case in Vietnam, brings to mind Lewis' theory that oppressed groups in society, most notably women, establish marginal possession 'cults' as a form of protest against established power asymmetries, and that male ecstatics dominate the official institutionalised religions. Lewis interprets 'female possession cults' as merely a strategy, either consciously or unconsciously employed, which gives "women an opportunity to gain ends (material and non-material)" (Lewis 1989 [1971]:77). Criticism of Lewis' interpretation has been directed toward the opposition he sets up between male/female, marginal/institutionalised and centre/periphery. For instance, Kendall (1985) has argued that women's rituals are not peripheral to Korean society, and Fjelstad (1995) argues that Lewis' formulation promotes a malecentred view of female possession that is not shared by women. Recent work on how shamanism, official priesthoods, politics and state power have intertwined in different historical contexts (see Thomas and Humphrey 1994) also makes it difficult to maintain rigid opposition between marginal/institutionalised etc.. A further blurring of Lewis' distinctions occurs when, as is the case in Vietnam, men also participate in mediumship practices that are predominantly carried out by women.

Although Party ideologues and others opposed to possession would most likely brand mediumship as marginal (and in need of eradication), this was not the view of ritual participants nor the Vietnamese that I spoke to who had never been involved in mediumship. To assert that Vietnamese mediumship is marginal would also deny the ways in which mediums can acquire prestige.

During fieldwork it became apparent that male mediums have a disproportionate status and wealth compared with their number. The most renowned and wealthy medium in North Vietnam, who has renovated several important temples in Hanoi and in the countryside, is male. I also met other male mediums in his circle who were wealthy and 'looked after' (trông nom) several public temples. In contrast, most female mediums construct private temples in their homes. Some public temples are looked after by female 'temple mediums' (dòng dèn), yet these temples are less opulent than those presided over by men, and female temple mediums rarely have control over more than one temple. The social differentiation between women's place in the domestic realm and men's authority in the public domain is therefore reflected *within* mediumship.

## CRITIQUE OF EXISTING RESEARCH: RECONSIDERING YIN AND YANG

Fjelstad's PhD thesis is the only attempt to provide a gender analysis of Vietnamese mediums and the Four Palace Religion (1995). Based on fieldwork in the San Francisco Bay area, Fjelstad interprets lên đồng as 'an alternate system of morality' that is based on the 'yin' value of 'compassion' (nhân) as opposed to 'yang' Confucian values (ibid.:178). She repeatedly claims that the Four Palace Religion harks back to 'true' and 'real' Vietnamese 'yin' beliefs, that prevailed before Confucian influence in Vietnam.

Fjelstad's hypothesis is indebted to Jamieson's assertion that "traditional Vietnamese society" is based on a "system of yin and yang" (1993:12). Jamieson interprets Vietnamese history "as a case of patterned oscillation around a point of balance between yin and yang", where yang is defined "by a tendency to male dominance ... rigid hierarchy, competition and strict orthodoxy" and yin "by a tendency toward greater egalitarianism and flexibility, more female participation ... and more emphasis on feeling, empathy and spontaneity" (ibid.:12-13). He lists the concepts of reason (lý), filial piety (hiếu), moral debt (ơn), the correct relations between brothers (dệ) and the righteous path (nghĩa) as Confucian 'yang' elements, and emotion (tình) and compassion (nhân) as constitutive of Buddhist, Taoist and animist yin elements.

A fundamental flaw in Jamieson's argument is that he bases his 'system' on a decontextualised, ahistorical conception of 'traditional Vietnam', with no account of how or when such a situation existed. Fjelstad adopts Jamieson's system which leads her to argue that mediums assert the characteristics that Jamieson designates as 'yin'. She maintains that the Four Palace Religion "represents an alternate female view of the world" (1995:65), a yin-oriented system based on 'compassion' (nhân), which gives "adherents an opportunity to bypass yang-oriented structures" (ibid.:67). Apart from the fact that I have never heard mediums use the word 'compassion' in relation to lên dồng, Fjelstad gives no account of how lên dồng may present conflicting or decentred gender identities, or how 'yinoriented structures' might be thought of as embodying some aspects of 'yang-oriented structures'. Despite Fjelstad posing the question "how far does female power extend and to what extent does it shape the formation of

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yang structures?" (ibid.:66), it is left unexamined. In short, the possibility of interaction between yin and yang is not considered.<sup>11</sup>

Chinese gender theorists have provided a quite different conception of yin and yang to that employed by Jamieson. Based on writings from lateimperial China, Barlow states that:

The forces yin and yang are many things: logical relationships (up/down, in/out, husband/wife), practical forces ... and in a social sense, powers inscribing hierarchy, but yin/yang is neither as totalistic nor as ontologically binaried a construct as the Western stereotype would have it... the dynamic forces of yin/yang do 'produce' - only not women and men but subject positions or hierarchical, relational, subjectivities named mother and father, husband and wife, brother and sister, and so on. (Barlow 1991:135)

Zito extends Barlow's analysis and identifies three different aspects of yin/yang: "their polarity, their relative positionality and their tendency to unequal encompassment" (1993:335). A polarity is different to a dualism in that the yin and yang are 'inter-implicated' and "mutually transform into one another" (ibid.). Relative positionality points out that men can occupy yin as well as yang positions and women may occupy yang positions as well as yin positions. Unequal encompassment is the term Zito gives to her suggestion that "yang always somehow 'encompasses' yin" (ibid.:336).

We shall see that the idea of 'relative positionality' is especially important for understanding gender in Vietnamese mediumship rituals. Instead of interpreting lên dòng as exclusively promoting 'yin-oriented structures' such as compassion, I will argue that, during possession, both male and female mediums occupy multiple gender positionalities which defy simplistic reduction into yin/yang, female/male opposites. We shall also see that in 'polarity' with 'yin' elements, certain features of the Four Palace Religion may be designated as 'yang'.

## 'EFFEMINATE' MEN AND 'HOT-TEMPERED' WOMEN

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. (Butler 1990:140, emphasis in original)

<sup>11</sup> The only aspect of Jamieson's model that Fjelstad criticises is that it "does not fully acknowledge the significance of the [yin] alternate system" (1993:66).

When possessed by spirits, mediums 'traverse'<sup>12</sup> genders; when a medium of one gender is possessed by spirits of the other gender, s/he adopts the spirit's gender. The medium's clothes, mannerisms, way of speaking, ritual acts and way of dancing, differ for each spirit, but are all influenced by the gender of the spirit. Here I will mention some of the most prominent gender-specific traits of spirits which mediums adopt in order to illustrate the ways in which mediums traverse gender during rituals. I will then go on to discuss how ritual acts contribute to the performative construction of mediums' gender identities.

Male spirits wear mandarin tunics (áo bào) and a tiara-like hat (khăn xếp). They smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, and dance with swords, spears and sticks with bells. Male spirits - especially mandarin spirits - are strict (nghiêm túc) and prestigous (uy tín).

Female lowland spirits wear women's tunics (áo dài) and a tiara-like hat often adorned with flowers (khăn hoa). Female mountain spirits wear clothes influenced by the clothes worn by women belonging to ethnic minority groups. Female spirits do not smoke cigarettes and they drink non-alcoholic drinks; female mountain spirits chew betel. The dances of female spirits use fans and lit-ropes, and rowing oars. The mannerisms of female spirits are soft (êm dju) and graceful (duyên dáng). When male mediums are possessed by female spirits, they often use a falsetto voice.

The young prince spirits and 'little spirits' (e.g. the Little Lady Spirit) conform to many of the traits of 'male' and 'female' behaviour while also behaving like children. Young prince spirits, for instance, smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol and dance with bell-sticks, but they are less serious than other male spirits and are often 'naughty' (nghjch). When possessed by children spirits, mediums often speak with the voice of a child and sometimes mispronounce words as a child might (e.g. by not pronouncing consonants).

Mediums possessed by spirits assume different gender positions. Mediums of both sexes 'perform' both yin and yang roles, thereby illustrating what Zito calls the 'relative positionality' of yin and yang. Furthermore, it is crucial that they perform these roles 'beautifully' (dep).<sup>13</sup> Disciples often exclaim how beautiful the medium is when dressed

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> The term 'traverse'/'traversing' has been borrowed from Bolin: "*traverse* implies crossing as well as interpenetrating and shifting aspects of gendered symbols" (1996:23, emphasis in original).

 $<sup>^{13}</sup>$  This applies to male mediums as much as female mediums. The criterion of beauty as a measure of mediums' prowess differs from the ideal of physical appearance (dung)

in the spirits' magnificent clothes or when dancing. 'Doing the work of the spirits beautifully' (làm việc thánh đẹp) is not just an optional extra, it is central to being an effective and respected medium. Mediums are rarely criticised for, say, their devotion to the spirits or the sincerity of possession, but the followers of the Mother Religion often compare mediums in terms of how beautifully they served the spirits. A medium who conducts lên dòng 'beautifully' is respected as a 'good' medium.

The ability of mediums to perform stereotypical gender roles of male and female (and young) spirits 'beautifully' is recognised by followers of the Four Palace Religion to be part of their 'destined aptitude'. This is evident in the phrase dong cô bóng cậu used to describe mediums. The literal meaning of this phrase - 'lady spirit' mediums, young prince spirits<sup>14</sup> emphasises that mediums may be possessed by spirits of the opposite gender, i.e. by both 'lady spirits' and 'young prince spirits'.

The first part of the expression, dồng cô, is also used on its own as a description of male mediums. Because male mediums can be possessed by 'lady spirits', they are perceived as effeminate. Two female mediums described dồng cô in the following way:

Male mediums (đồng cô) have the character and voice of a woman. Some people [men as well as women] have women's 'blood' (máu huyết) ... and a woman's voice. (p.c. Nguyễn Thị Lai, April 1997)

When a man has the 'aptitude of the Ninth Lady Spirit' (căn cô chín), then when that spirit is incarnated, the character of the man is naturally different: he has a sharp tongue (chua ngoa), the voice of a woman, and chews betel like a woman. He is still a man, but because of the aptitude of a lady, the female spirit helps his destiny and he becomes a dòng cô ... who is very graceful .... They [dòng cô] wear women's clothes on the outside and inside.... Many people hug them and call them women. (p.c. Lê Thị Hòa, February 1997)

The book *Hát chầu văn* mentions that as well as male and female mediums there are also transsexual (ái nam ái nữ)<sup>15</sup> mediums (Bùi Đình Thảo and Nguyễn Quang Hải 1996:31). Although I never met a transsexual medium, the

outlined in the 'four virtues' because it refers to the manner in which a medium carries out ritual practices and not her physical appearance *per se*.

14 Đồng means medium and cô refers to the lady spirits of the pantheon. Đồng cô is not to be confused with cô đồng which is a term for female mediums that are not elderly. In the word cô đồng, cô is a personal pronoun: it does not refer to the lady spirits.

<sup>15</sup> Although ái nam ái nữ literally means 'love man love woman' it does not suggest bisexuality. Rather, it refers to the physical condition of being transsexual. The term nửa nam nửa nữ, which means 'half man half woman', is also occasionally used as an alternative to ái nam ái nữ.

possibility opens up a third category and perhaps different gender identities. While the term ái nam ái nữ usually refers to a physical condition, it is also used figuratively with a similar sense to đồng cô. For instance, the chầu văn musician Lê Bá Cao said: "male mediums are ái nam ái nữ: their voice, bearing (dáng điệu) and behaviour (cử chỉ) are like a woman's".

Interestingly, there is no expression (equivalent to dong cô) which describes female mediums as 'masculine'. Bóng cậu (lit. 'young prince spirits') may be used to describe female mediums that have the 'aptitude' (căn) of male spirits, but it does not imply that female mediums have a masculine character.<sup>16</sup> This would seem to suggest that 'traversing genders' is more of an issue for men than it is for women. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that female mediums, while not explicitly being labelled as 'masculine', were often considered to be 'unfeminine'. Many female mediums described themselves as hot-tempered (nóng tính), impatient (nóng ruột, lit. hot-gutted) and difficult (khó chịu).<sup>17</sup>

These characteristics of female mediums were not explicitly linked to the behaviour of male spirits in the way that the behaviour of male mediums is associated with characteristics of female spirits. However, they were considered part of a 'medium's aptitude' (căn đồng), and a female medium with a strong 'aptitude' for a male spirit may have a particularly hot-tempered character. So even though female mediums are not usually thought of as being 'masculine' or behaving like men, they are 'difficult', and spirit possession is the way that they soothe their hot-temperedness. Female mediums said that they felt 'more relaxed' (thoải mái hơn), and were 'easier to bear' (dễ chịu hơn) after being possessed.

The quote from Judith Butler's book, *Gender Trouble*, at the beginning of this section provokes some interesting questions regarding Vietnamese mediumship. To what extent do ritual acts constitute a medium's gender identity? Does the repetition of ritual acts during lên dồng destabilise or subvert established gender categories? It has been argued that during possession men and women transgress dominant gender identities by occupying both 'yin' and 'yang' positions. From such a perspective, lên dồng is a space in which male mediums may assume a 'feminine' gender position

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Having the 'aptitude' of a male or female spirit does not seem to be directly related to gender issues. For instance, male and female fortune-telling mediums often have the 'aptitude' of the Third Lady because of her fortune-telling powers, not for reasons related to the Third Lady's gender identity.

 $<sup>^{17}</sup>$  Fjelstad also describes female mediums as 'hard headed' (cúng đầu) and 'difficult' (khó tính) (1995:184).

and female mediums can come to terms with 'unfeminine' aspects of their personality, such as being hot-tempered.

The ritual acts of mediums are, however, not to be misconstrued as an example of how gender identity may be performatively constructed or deconstructed at will.<sup>18</sup> Being a medium does enable the creation of a divergent gender identity, but only within narrow, culturally prescribed limits established by the gender identity of spirits. The behaviour of possessing spirits in many ways confirms stereotypical gender identities (prestigous mandarins, graceful ladies etc.). Mediums therefore construct their own gender identities with reference to pre-given stereotypes, and assume a gender identity as a medium which is also culturally sanctioned (being dong co etc.).

#### FEMALE MEDIUMS AND 'FAMILY HAPPINESS'

Many female mediums linked 'serving the spirits' with ensuring peace (êm ám), harmony (hòa hảo), safety (vô sự) and prosperity (thịnh vượng) for their family. In contrast, male mediums did not link their activities with their own family situations, although they shared the conviction that 'serving the spirits' (i.e. holding a lên đồng) would ensure prosperity (thịnh vượng), health (khỏe mạnh) and happiness (hạnh phúc). When asked about the 'aim' (mục đích) of holding lên đồng rituals, one female medium said: "The first thing is that when I serve the spirits I am very happy, I like it. The second thing is when I return home after a lên đồng, living will be easier and more prosperous, and the children will study well". Another said that the 'function' (chúc năng) of lên đồng was "to have money and gifts, for my family to be safe and prosperous", and she also commented that the spirits would "fulfil the wishes" (toại nguyện) of her family.

The links female mediums made between lên dòng rituals and the family has interesting parallels with recent discussions by Vietnamese women's studies researchers concerning the family. As Barry has outlined, Vietnamese women's studies researchers contrast 'family feudalism', understood as patriarchal domination of women in the home, with 'family happiness' described as "love and affection, spirit of mutual assistance, faithfulness between husband and wife, filial duty, respect for

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> In her second book, *Bodies that matter*, Butler has in fact argued against the most voluntarist interpretations of the concept of performativity that were prompted by her book *Gender trouble*.

grandparents" (Le Thi 1987:65, cited in Barry 1996b:12). By identifying and promoting the concept of family happiness, Vietnamese researchers have endeavoured to improve gender equality within the family (Le Thi 1996) and "overcome the vestiges of old and backward views and customs" (Le Thi 1987:65, cited in Barry 1996b:12). Yet, Barry has also pointed out that family happiness is a "largely uncritiqued assumption" in which "there is a belief that something within the family must be fixed as if there were some prior, natural state to which it will or can return" (1996b:13).

The discourse of Vietnamese women's studies researchers is quite different to that of female mediums, but both groups are concerned with ensuring a harmonious family life. While female mediums did not refer to the practical measures outlined by Vietnamese women's studies researchers (such as sharing the domestic work load between husband and wife), they did maintain that 'serving the spirits' would help them ensure a happy and prosperous family.

Some of the 'crises' which lead to a woman being initiated as a medium discussed in Chapter 2 may also be understood in relation to 'family happiness'. The death of a new-born baby, an inability to care for children and an affliction with illness are real instances of rupture in family well-being and the prescribed role of women as 'procreators'/'nurturers'. After initiation, female mediums said that the problems they encountered were resolved through the protection (phù hộ), assistance (độ trì) and the pity (thương) of spirits.

Despite concern for 'family happiness', some female mediums concealed (giấu) their ritual practices from their husbands who did not approve. Typically, female mediums said their husbands objected because they thought that mediumship was 'superstitious', that rituals were a waste of money and that female mediums had 'affairs' (ngoại tình) with musicians. So, in contrast to female mediums' desire to ensure a harmonious family life, some women risk marital antagonism when becoming mediums.

Direct challenges to male authority are evident in two proverbs that were often quoted by female mediums:

First is being a medium, second is the husband who is a king (Thứ nhất ngồi đồng, thứ hai chồng vua).

First is marrying a wife who is a medium, second is marrying a husband who is king (Thứ nhất lấy vợ đồng, thứ nhị lấy chồng vua).

The proverbs assert that mediums are more important than husband/king. They therefore challenge the 'patriarchal' authority of the state and overturn one of the 'three obediences', namely a woman's subservience to her husband.

After mentioning the first proverb the medium Vân remarked that after a lên dòng she was so happy (sung sướng qúa) and relaxed (thoải mái) that she did not care about anything else, not even whether her husband became king. Vân and my Vietnamese language teacher Nhạn, who was also present, laughed and agreed about how fun it was that during lên dòng everybody must wait upon (hầu hạ) the medium. Women's traditional role of attending to every need of the family, especially of the male members of the family, is therefore reversed during lên dòng. To extend the two proverbs quoted above, lên dòng rituals provide a space where mediums are treated like husbands and kings.

Such claims do, however, have to be balanced with a consideration of the pantheon of spirits and of mediums' relations with them. Even though over half the spirits are female and the mother spirits are the highest ranking, the pantheon of spirits is hierarchical, which is often designated as a 'yang' characteristic.<sup>19</sup> Mediums are also the 'servants' (lính) of the spirits; they are 'ordered' and 'forced' by the spirits and have to 'obey' them. So could it be that female mediums are simply replacing human 'masters' with spiritual ones? Fjelstad's claim that the ritual practices of mediums exhibit egalitarianism over hierarchy is strongly challenged by the hierarchical nature of the spirit pantheon and mediums 'submission' to spiritual authority.<sup>20</sup> The idea that mediums bear a 'debt to the four palaces' (nợ tứ phủ) also closely resembles the idea of 'moral debt' (ơn) in regard to family relations, which according to Jamieson is a 'yang' value (1993:16-17).

#### MALE MEDIUMS AND SEXUALITY

The term dong co refers to the effeminate gender identity of male mediums rather than their sexuality, but many male mediums also said they were

 $<sup>^{19}</sup>$  Durand even goes as far as to say the pantheon of spirits is influenced by "the organisation of the Chinese empire" (1959:32).

 $<sup>^{20}</sup>$  Fjelstad adopts the terms 'egalitarian' and 'hierarchical' from Jamieson's model in her outline of 'female' and 'male' oriented systems respectfully (1995:211).

homosexual (đồng tình luyên aí).<sup>21</sup> A female medium, Lai, made the following remarks about effeminate male mediums:

... [đồng cô] like relations (quan hệ) with men, including those đồng cô that have wives .... The đồng cô that have wives haven't made it public yet, but generally they have 'feelings' (tình cảm) for men. (p.c. Nguyễn Thị Lai, April 1997)

A recent newspaper article condemning lên dòng mentions that mediums' assistants are "genuine homosexuals" (dân pê-đê chính hiệu),<sup>22</sup> but homosexuality is not recognised by Vietnamese law and is not usually part of public discourse. The awareness of many followers of the Four Palace Religion that male mediums had homosexual relations (even if they were married and had children) suggests that lên đồng, is one site where a different sexual orientation is acknowledged. However, although ritual participants were tacitly aware of the homosexuality of most dong cô, they were unwilling to state that homosexuality was relevant to mediumship. For instance, when I asked a female medium whether lên dồng was a chance for men to 'show' (bộc lộ) their homosexuality, she replied: "you cannot combine lên dòng with homosexuality. Homosexuality is 'outside', you cannot enter it into lên dòng; they are separate." Such statements are in keeping with the lack of public acknowledgement of homosexuality, but they also reflect the view that sexual orientation is unconnected to mediums' destined aptitude and their religious practices. To suggest that the motivation for men to become mediums is dominated by homoerotic drive not only undermines spiritual efficacy (it is the spirits who 'force' a person to become a medium not a person's sexuality), it also ignores the existence of the minority of male mediums who do not engage in homosexual activity.

However, it should be noted that a number of male mediums did argue that their involvement in mediumship precluded marriage. This is illustrated by the following comment by an unmarried male medium:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> This was made abundantly clear when some male mediums made sexual advances towards me. I heard no talk of homosexuality amongst female mediums or musicians. Indeed, the occasional rumour of affairs between female mediums and male musicians suggested the contrary.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> "Lên dòng: một tê nạn mê tín cần lên án" (Lên dòng: a social evil in need of condemnation) by Ngọc Quang, Lao Động newspaper 1997 (date unknown). Curiously, Ngọc Quang's article mentions homosexuality among mediums' assistants (hầu dâng), but not mediums themselves. Such a distinction is, however, unimportant as most assistants (whether male or female) are also mediums.

When I was possessed by the spirits ... [the spirits] said I should not marry and that if I thought about doing different work [other than the 'work of the spirits'] they would take me back to the heavens; [the spirits said] that if I went out on the road I would get run over by a car. My mouth spoke out like that [i.e. the spirits spoke 'through' my mouth]. So I had to become a religious person and do good work. (p.c. Dương Văn Nguyện, April 1998)

For some male mediums, then, initiation results in abstinence from marriage, thereby permitting the forging of a different position in society and the avoidance of heterosexual relations.

## LÊN ĐỒNG: SOCIAL REALITY OR CULTURAL FANTASY?

In her gender analysis of Temiar ritual and music, Roseman has observed a series of 'symbolic inversions' (1987). Temiar "*halaa* [mediums] are predominantly male, their spirit guides are predominantly female. Men ranging extensively through the jungle during subsistence activities, are transformed into the earth-bound students of female spirit guides during ritual singing sessions. Women, restricted daily to swidden and settlement, are the wandering teachers of the spirit realm" (ibid.:144). In rare cases when *halaa* are female they connect with male spirit-guides.<sup>23</sup> Roseman describes such gender inversions in terms of conjuncture: "The male element incorporated by females (and the female element by males) represents a dynamic conjunction of opposites, which overcomes boundaries and generates the 'transformation' ... of Temiar trance" (ibid.:145-46).

The performance of yin and yang roles during lên dòng might usefully be thought of in terms of a dynamic conjunction of opposites. However, for Roseman ritual inversions are primarily symbolic and have little effect on everyday life: "Ritual, with its intricate inversions and transformations, often describes cultural fantasies, rather than social realities" (ibid.:148). In the case of lên dòng I would argue that there are stronger links between social realities and ritual performance than is suggested by Roseman in relation to Temiar rituals. Female mediums' hot-temperedness and male mediums' effeminate behaviour is not just confined to ritual performance. Rather, aspects of mediums' characters, which are present in their

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Roseman has insufficient data to evaluate "whether the spirit guides of female *halaa* are *predominantly* male" (Roseman 1987:144, my emphasis).

everyday lives, find expression, negotiation and (partial) resolution during possession. This is most obvious when considering initiation crises: illness and/or misfortune lessen after initiation. Disciples are also concerned with practical matters during lên dòng: receiving the gifts, advice and protection of the spirits is informed by, and affects, economic and social realities.

Male mediums do not dress in women's clothes outside of lên dòng rituals (nor do female mediums wear men's clothes when not possessed) and they are not noted for carrying out tasks that are normally done by women (e.g. cooking, going to the market). Nevertheless, they are perceived as behaving like women in their everyday lives through their effeminate demeanour, and this is expressed during possession. Also, most men involved in mediumship manage to earn a living either by being temple mediums or through fortune telling/healing.<sup>24</sup> Being dòng cô is therefore not restricted to rituals: it permeates everyday life. Male mediums assume a variant gender positionality and have new possibilities for supporting themselves financially.

The interpenetration of ritual and everyday life is no less apparent for female mediums. After the exuberance of possession - which gives ample opportunity for the expression of hot-temperedness (e.g. through the sometimes truculent behaviour of mandarin spirits) - their difficult temperaments are eased, and they feel happy and relaxed. Some female mediums generate an income through fortune telling or healing, but, unlike male mediums, the majority have regular jobs (e.g. selling goods, working on the land or in government offices).

Apart from the possibility of earning a living through healing and fortune telling, there are other practical ways in which the social realities of female mediums are affected by their religious practices. At temples all over Vietnam there are many lên dồng festivals which give mediums (and disciples) the opportunity to frequently travel to different parts of the country and to enlarge their sphere of social interaction. The comments of a 'husbandless' medium, called Khoát, who did not go to festivals, illustrate some of the constraints that are sometimes placed on women's movement:

I don't go 'willy-nilly' (lung tung) to many different festivals like other mediums. I am on my own, that is I don't have a husband ... so if I went out to different places, went on the back of someone's motorbike or did this or that, people would think this and that about me, and that I wasn't going to places to worship. So my parents don't allow me to go. I just worship at home. (p.c. Văn Thị Khoát, May 1998)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Mediums do not make money from holding lên dòng rituals (see Chapter 1).

Khoát's parents did not consent to her travelling long distances because she was no longer with her husband, and because they were worried about gossip. But, as suggested by Khoát above, most mediums managed to overcome such obstacles and travelled freely. To make a comparison with the Temiar of Malaysia: Temiar (female) spirit-guides wander in the spirit realm; Vietnamese (female) mediums wander in the human world.

Like many female mediums, Khoát worshipped in a private temple adjacent to the house in which she lived. The tendency for female mediums to have their own private temples, either in, or adjacent to their homes, has been noted as a restriction to the domestic rather than the public sphere. However, private temples do afford mediums with a space that is separate from normal domestic activities and which is under their control. During the many visits I made to meet the medium Thanh neither her young children nor husband ever entered her private temple. Whenever Thanh made trips away from the village she always locked her temple, but not the family house; the temple, rather than the house, was a space to which no one else had access without Thanh's permission.<sup>25</sup>

Thanh is known as a fortune-telling medium, so people from the surrounding area often came to her temple for consultations. Thanh's 'private' temple was therefore to a certain extent 'public' as strangers often visited her temple. This, in turn, greatly expanded Thanh's social sphere. So, while it is the case that temples presided over by male and female mediums tend to be in the public and domestic spheres respectively (which seemingly confirms gender-based power asymmetries), private temples (diên) are distinct from, and more 'public' than other domestic space.

#### CONCLUSION

In the first section of the book *Mother religion in Vietnam* (Ngô Đức Thịnh 1996a) the female spirits incarnated during mediumship rituals are portrayed as a vestige of the 'matriarchal system' (chế độ mẫu quyền) that existed prior to Confucian influence and was never fully eradicated. This argument has much in common with Fjelstad's view that the Four Palace Religion (or Mother Religion) is a 'women's religion' which harks back to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> This is not the place to give a thorough description of Vietnamese homes. However, a feature of Vietnamese homes, which makes private temples particularly unique, is that different areas are not usually designated as, in some sense, 'belonging' to individual family members.

female 'yin' beliefs that prevailed before Confucian influence in Vietnam. In this chapter, I have attempted to shift the debate beyond the assertion that the Four Palace Religion is an indigenous spirit belief-system, designated as 'yin', in opposition to Confucian orthodoxy, designated as 'yang'. Instead, the more flexible notion of yin and yang, outlined by the Chinese theorists Barlow and Zito, has been related to how the gender identities of mediums are performatively constituted. While acknowledging that mediumship does provide female mediums with possibilities of challenging 'patriarchy' and provides a space for women to be treated like 'husbands and kings', I have argued that to present lên dòng as an 'alternate system of morality' based on 'yin' values does not account for many aspects of ritual practice or the motivations of ritual participants. Mediumship is far more complex and contradictory. The 'egalitarianism' of distributing money and gifts has to be measured against subservience to the spirits and the hierarchical nature of the pantheon of spirits. Female mediums' increased access to the public domain should be balanced with the fact that many of them preside over private temples in the domestic realm, and their concern with family happiness needs to be understood in relation to some of them going against their husbands' will by becoming mediums as well as other challenges to male authority.

Gender traversing, by both male and female mediums, during lên đồng has been understood as an aspect of the 'relative positionality' of yin and yang: male and female mediums perform yin and yang roles at different times. Established gender identities are destabilised through such ritual acts: male mediums are designated as 'effeminate' and female mediums deal with 'unfeminine' characteristics such as being 'difficult' and 'hottempered'. Mediumship therefore enables - indeed, requires - men and women to behave in ways which are outside of conventionally prescribed gender roles. However, the gender positionality of mediums is still made in relation to stereotypical gender boundaries: male spirits exhibit idealised masculine traits, such as being 'prestigious' and 'serious', and female spirits present idealised versions of 'soft' and 'graceful' women. Ritual acts do not constitute a voluntaristic construction or destabilising of gender identities. Rather, they afford mediums, within clearly defined limits, a degree of flexibility to negotiate the conventional gender identities ascribed to men and women. Such negotiation is not merely confined to the ritual domain: it also affects mediums' everyday lives.

## CHAPTER 4

## SONGSCAPES FOR THE SPIRITS

A possession ritual is an architecture of time ... composed of various phases connected with different kinds of music. (Rouget 1985 [1980]:32-33)

During lên đồng, musicians construct sequences of songs - songscapes - for each spirit possession. I have coined the term songscape in order to evoke the idea that chầu văn musicians create a continually changing 'environment' in which the presence of spirits is articulated.

Schafer's notion of 'soundscape' is broadly defined as "any acoustical field of study" (1977:7). So, although Schafer's main concern is to investigate "actual environments", "abstract constructions such as musical compositions and tape montages" (ibid.:274-75) are also included as examples of soundscapes. It is quite conceivable, therefore, that the music played during lên dòng may be thought of as a soundscape. However, in the following discussion I do *not* view songscapes as examples of soundscapes. Despite the similarity between the two terms songscape and soundscape, I do not share the premises, aims or methods of Schafer's analyses of soundscapes.<sup>1</sup>

Songscapes constitute the sound environment in which spirits are immersed: they acoustically mark out the space in which rituals are carried out; they create an acoustic environment which enables spirits to return to the human world and carry out ritual acts. By establishing an 'atmosphere' (không khí) within the temple, songscapes also aid the active 'participation' (dự) of all who attend rituals.

Songscapes have a temporal as well as a spatial dimension (songscape:time-space). Through a complex system that links songs to ritual action, different songs are performed at each stage of possession: songscapes structure ritual time. By definition, a songscape lasts as long as a spirit possession. A songscape is therefore best thought of as a single unit consisting of many different parts. As most songs are performed for more

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Although distant from the notion of soundscapes (and songscapes), it is worth noting that Appadurai has also made use of the suffix -scapes to outline "five dimensions of global cultural flow": ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes and ideoscapes (1990:6).

than one spirit, it is necessary to examine songscapes in their entirety in order to distinguish between the songscapes of different spirits.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter is concerned with the processes involved in making songscapes. It examines the songscapes of four different spirits as performed at two different lên đồng rituals. The comparison of songscapes illustrates that the song sequences performed for each spirit are usually different at each ritual. There is a range of song choices available to chầu văn bands. The range depends on which spirit is being incarnated and the stage of the medium's possession: for some spirits there are more song options than for others, and the number of song options varies at different points during the spirit possession.

The interaction between the medium and the band is an important component in the construction of songscapes. The analysis of songscapes therefore focuses on what Qureshi has called 'music-context interaction' (1986:140). Qureshi's ground-breaking study of qawwali in India and Pakistan analyses how musicians change their performances in order to increase the ecstatic arousal of the audience. Qawwali musicians appraise the state of arousal of the audience through observing the audience's gestures. They then intensify the audience's arousal by repeating, recombining and inserting musical phrases. While there are many similarities between the 'context-music interaction' evident during qawwali assemblies and the processes of interaction during lên dòng, there are two important differences. First, chầu văn musicians respond to the ritual actions of the medium, not to audience action. Second, chầu văn musicians do not repeat vocal phrases or change the basic structure of songs in response to particular ritual actions: most of the interaction between mediums and musicians occurs at the 'macro' level of changes between songs and the performance of extra verses, rather than the 'micro' level of individual musical phrases. Mention will be made, however, of the 'micro'-level interaction between musicians and mediums, such as tempo changes and how mediums show their appreciation for songs.

As the main thrust of Qureshi's analysis is to demonstrate "how the context of performance affects the music being performed" (ibid.:231), she offers little discussion of the interaction between the musicians themselves.<sup>3</sup> This chapter will include not only discussion of the

 $<sup>^2</sup>$  Although songs of the same title are shared by different spirits, the song texts are different for each spirit.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Qureshi provides an account of the how the 'lead singer' makes musical decisions, but does not include discussion of the role of other music-group members.

interrelationships between ritual action and songscapes, but also analysis of the different roles that band members perform and how song changes are executed by bands. To this end, I will draw on Brinner's 'theory of musical interaction'. Although Brinner's study focuses primarily on the interaction among musicians, the analytical framework of 'musical interaction' he outlines is sufficiently broad to include performers whose main role is not music-making.<sup>4</sup> The interaction between the medium and the band during lên dòng may therefore be included - along with interaction within the band - under the rubric 'musical interaction'.

Incarnations of the Third Mandarin (Quan Đệ Tam), the Second Holy Lady (Chầu Đệ Nhị), the Tenth Prince (Ông Hoàng Mười) and the Third Lady (Cô Bơ) have been selected for comparison because the songscapes for these spirits encompass the maximum possible diversity. Each of these spirits belongs to a different group and, because the ritual actions and songscapes within each group of spirits are similar, they provide a good insight into lên dòng rituals as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

The two lên dòng rituals compared have been labelled Ritual 1 and Ritual 2. Ritual 1 was held on 24 April 1997 (eighteenth day of the third lunar month) by the medium Nguyễn Thị Lai at the Dâu temple on Hàng Quạt street in Hanoi. The third lunar month is one of the most popular periods for lên dòng because many of the 'death anniversaries' (ngày giỗ) of female spirits occur in this month.<sup>6</sup> At the Dâu temple, for instance, rituals are held continuously throughout this month. The date of Lai's lên dòng was arranged to fit in with the busy schedule at the temple and in order not to coincide with her menstrual cycle. The actual date of the ritual did not coincide with a particular spirit's death anniversary. The band for the ritual was made up of Phạm Văn Ty (moon lute and voice), Phạm Quang Đặt (percussion and voice), Trọng Kha (voice, sixteen-stringed zither, moon lute, and two-stringed fiddle), Đoàn Nhương (bamboo flute) and Trương Mạnh Linh (voice and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> See Brinner's discussion of Javanese 'multimedia productions' (1995:268-84). <sup>5</sup> The groups of spirits not represented in this chapter are the mother spirits, the young prince spirits and the Trần family spirits (i.e. the group of spirits associated with Trần Hưng Đạo). Possession by a mother spirit has not been included because the latter are never fully incarnated: they only 'descend' for a short period, and the scarf draped over the medium's head is not removed. Possession by a young prince spirit or by one of the Trần family spirits is not included because there are many similarities between the music and ritual actions of these groups of spirits and other groups: the incarnations of the young prince spirits are related to those of the prince spirits, while those of the Trần family spirits are related to those of the mandarin and lady spirits (e.g. possession by Trần Hưng Đạo is similar to that by the mandarin spirits). <sup>6</sup> See Chapter 1 for an overview of the times when rituals are held.

percussion). At some points during the ritual, Trong Kha played the moon lute in order to give Pham Văn Ty a break, and at these points Ty played the percussion formerly played by Pham Quang Đặt. All of the band members regularly play together at the Dâu temple with the exception of Trương Mạnh Linh, who was especially invited by the medium, Lai; usually Linh sings at another temple in Hanoi. Lai invited Linh to play at her ritual because she liked to hear his singing during rituals.<sup>7</sup>

Ritual 2 was held by the medium Nguyễn Thị Hằng on 8 July 1997 (fourth day of the sixth lunar month) at An Thọ temple on Yên Phụ street in Hanoi. Hằng's ritual was held in the sixth lunar month in honour of the mandarin spirits for 'the festival of the mandarins of the three palaces' (tiệc quan tam phủ); the climax of the festival is on the twenty-fourth day of the month. The band at Hằng's ritual was made up of Đặng Công Hưng (moon lute and voice), Cao Môn (voice and percussion), Lê Tự Cường (bamboo flutes and voice), Trần Chung Sinh (sixteen-stringed zither) and Nguyễn Ngọc Thú (large drum).

The two rituals to be compared were held by wealthy Hanoi-based mediums, and the musicians are among the best in Hanoi. The opulence of these rituals and the high level of technical proficiency of the musicians are quite different from some lên dòng rituals held by poorer mediums, especially in rural areas. Ideally, a third ritual from a rural area would have been included for comparison. However, an additional ritual for comparison would lengthen the discussion, without providing new information about mediums' ritual actions or songscapes. The two rituals compared have been chosen because I was able to gain detailed information about the songs performed through extensive discussions with my music teachers Phạm Văn Ty and Đặng Công Hưng, and with the band members Cao Môn and Lê Tự Cường.

#### NOTES ON LAYOUT AND THE CD-ROM

For each of the four spirits incarnated, there is a table outlining the songscapes and the ritual action that occurred during Rituals 1 and 2. A brief description of the mediums' movements is given in the left-hand column of the table. The descriptions are based on Vietnamese terms which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Lai said she liked Linh's voice because it was smooth (êm) and interesting (hay) compared to Ty's which she described as 'plodding' (cục mịch) and 'nasal' (dùng mũi nhiều).

are also included. The songs played during Ritual 1 and the video extracts taken from Ritual 1 are listed in the second and third columns respectively. The songscapes and video extracts of Ritual 2 are noted in columns four and five respectively. No video extracts have been taken from Ritual 2 during the possession of the Second Holy Lady, so column five is omitted in Table 4.2. When there is a change of song corresponding to the medium's movement, it is marked with a new row in the table; when song changes are not prompted by the medium's movements, the sequence of songs and movements are listed in the same row. At a glance, therefore, the relationship between songs and ritual action can be ascertained. Most of the video extracts span two or more songs in order to show song transitions, so no rows are marked in the columns where the video extracts are listed. Brackets linking two or more songs to the video extracts show which songs are included in each extract.

On a few occasions there are major differences in the ritual actions of the two mediums, e.g. the inclusion of 'writing' a poem with an incense stick on a fan during the incarnation of the Tenth Prince in Ritual 1. In these cases a dash is marked in the songscape column of the table for the ritual in which the medium does not include the movement. On the whole, however, the ritual actions during the two rituals follow the same overall pattern. This illustrates the general point that, although the precise way in which mediums perform ritual actions differs, mediums carry out similar sequences of ritual actions.

The 'Commentary' section following the tables provides a detailed description of the song changes for each individual video extract. It focuses on: the song choices available to musicians and the factors involved in the choice of songs; the interaction among band members and between the band and medium; and how song changes are executed by bands.

The CD-ROM provides a user-friendly interface which greatly enhances readers' access to the 'total' ritual situation. It also enables comparison, in a non-linear fashion, of the video extracts from the same section of the two different rituals. Video extracts can be seen by clicking on the video extract icons. The 'commentary' text corresponding to each video extract is displayed when the video extract icon is activated. Further details of the CD-ROM layout, which is slightly different from this chapter, are given in the 'Notes on Layout' section of the CD-ROM.

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Table 4.1: Songscapes	for the	e Third Mandari	n
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Description of	Dimeter			
Description of mediums'	Ritual 1	Ritual 1 video	Ritual 2	Ritual 2 video
movements	songscape	extracts	songscape	extracts
	Thinh Dána		The set of the set	
Scarf is placed over medium's	Thỉnh Bóng		Thinh Bóng	
head (phủ				
diện); head				
gyrates (lắc đầu)	Dee			
Scarf is thrown	Dọc		Dọc	
off; changing clothes (thay				
đổi lễ phục)				
Presenting	Lưu Thủy		Lưu Thủy	Video extract 1
incense to the			Luu Illuy	video extract i
altar (lễ dâng				
hưởng)				
Waving Incense	Sai		Sai //	
(khai quang)	Jai			
Dancing with	Lưu Thủy 🔍		Trống Chiến	
swords (múa		-Video extract 9	Trong Onen /	
kiếm)		VILLEO EXILACI 3		
Sitting (ngồi	Phú Văn Đàn		Phú Văn Đàn <sup>/</sup>	
xuống):		Video extract 10		Video extract 2
drinking rice			Cao Môn's	
wine (uống	Phú Nói		Melody	Video extract 3
(rượu); smoking				
(hút thuốc);		Video extract 11	Phú Nói/Phú 🔇	
distributing	Dòn		Gian	Video extract 4
money and gifts				
(phát tài lộc),			Dồn 🧹	
while				Video extract 5
'transmitting			Cao Môn's	
words' (phán			Melody	Video extract 6
truyền) to the				
disciples			Kiểu Dương 🧹	
1				⊳Video extract 7
		Video extract 12	Cao Môn's	
			Melody	
Scarf is thrown	'The spirit's		'The spirit's	Video extract 8
over medium's	carriage returns	[	carriage returns	1
head	to the palace'		to the palace'	
(phủ diện)	(xe gía hồi		(xe gía hồi	
	cung)	<u> </u>	cung)	l

# Table 4.2: Songscapes for the Second Holy Lady

Description of	Ritual 1 Songscape	Ritual 1 Video	Ritual 2
mediums'		extracts	Songscape
movements			
Scarf is placed over	Thính Bóng 🥿		Thinh Bóng
medium's head (phủ	<b>3</b>		Ç
diện); head gyrates		Video extract 13	
(lắc đầu)			
Scarf is thrown off;	Xá Thượng	Video extract 14	Xá Thượng
changing clothes			
(thay đổi lễ phục)		Video extract 15	
	Xá Múa Mồi	Bridde extruct is	Xá Múa Mồi
Dancing with fan			
(múa quạt) and		Video extract 16	
incense sticks (Ritual		Prideo exilaci to	
1 only);			
dancing with lit			
ropes (múa mồi)		4	Vá Clâu Lách
Sitting (ngôj xuống):	Xá Giây Lệch		Xá Giây Lệch
drinking (uống);			
distributing money			
and gifts (phát tài			
lộc); transmitting			
words' (phán truyền)	]	Video extract 17	
to disciples		1	
Scarf is thrown over	'The spirit's carriage'		'The spirit's carriage
medium's head	returns to the palace'		returns to the palace'
(phủ diện)	(xe gía hồi cung)		(xe gía hồi cung)

Table 4.3: Songscapes for the Tenth Prince

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Description of mediums' movements	Ritual 1 songscape	Ritual 1 video extracts	Ritual 2 songscape	Ritual 2 video extracts
Scarf is placed over medium's head (phủ diện); head gyrates (lắc đầu)	Thỉnh Bóng		Thinh Bóng	
Scarf is thrown off; changing clothes (thay đổi lễ phục)	Dọc		Dọc	
Presenting incense to the altar (lễ dâng hương)	Lưu Thủy		Lưu Thủy	
Waving incense (khai quang) Dancing with bell-sticks (múa hèo)	Sai	>Video extract 18	Sai Lưu Thủy	
Imitating writing a poem (viết thơ); dancing with a fan (múa	(Lưu Thủy) Bỉ Thơ Nhịp Một		-	Video extract 24
quạt) Sitting (ngôi), while drinking rice wine (uống rượu)	(Lưu Thủy) Phú Chuốc Rượu	>Video extract 19 >Video extract 20	Bỉ Thơ Chuốc Rượu Nhịp Một Chuốc	
Smoking (hút thuốc); distributing gifts	Cờn Huế	-Video extract 21	Rượu Bỉ Thơ Cờn Huế	
(phát lộc)	Hò Huế	-Video extract 22 Video extract 23	Hò Huế Lý Qua Cầu	
			Lý Mỹ Hưng Nhịp Một	Video extract 25
Scarf is thrown over medium's head (phủ diện)	'The spirit's ′ carriage returns to the palace' (xe gía hồi cung)		'The spirit's ⁄ carriage returns to the palace' (xe gía hồi cung)	

Table 4.4:	Songscapes	for the	Third Lady
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			<b></b>	
Description of	Ritual 1	Ritual 1 video	Ritual 2	Ritual 2 video
mediums'	songscape	extracts	songscape	extracts
movements				
Scarf is placed	Thính Bóng		Thỉnh Bóng	
over medium's	5		······	
head (phủ				
diện); head				
gyrates (lắc đầu)				
Scarf is thrown	Doc		Dee	]
	Dộc		Dọc	
off; changing				
clothes (thay				
đối lê phục)				
Waving sticks of	Sai 🔨		Sai	
incense and fan				
(khai quang)				
Taking the oars	Bỉ Thơ (Chèo 🔪		Bỉ Thơ (Chèo	
(lấy mái chèo)	Đò) `	Video extract 26	Đò) `	
(,			/	
Rowing dance	Chèo Đò 🦯		Chèo Đò	
(múa Chèo Đò)				
Dancing with	<i>//</i>		Nhịp Một	Video extract 29
	//			video extract 29
empty hands			/	
(múa không)				
Sitting (ngôi):	Bỉ Thơ /	1	Cờn Giây Lệch'	
drinking water				
(uống nước);	Vãn <u>/</u>			
distributing gifts		Video extract 27	\	
(phát lộc)	Cờn Oán			
				Video extract 30
	Nhịp Một	Video extract 28		
Scarf is thrown	'The spirit's		'The spirit's	1
over medium's	carriage returns		carriage returns	
head	to the palace'		to the palace'	
(phủ diện)	(xe gía hồi		(xe gía hồi	
	cung)			
L		L	cung)	L

#### COMMENTARY

## Ritual 2: Third Mandarin

Video extract 1 (Thỉnh Bóng - Dọc - Lưu Thủy - Sai - Trống Chiến - Phú Văn Đàn)

The spirit is 'invited' to possess the medium with the Thinh Bóng ('Inviting The Spirits') melody. Once the medium, possessed by the Third Mandarin, throws off the scarf over her head, the assistants dress her as the spirit and the musicians change to the Doc melody. Conventionally, Doc is used when the medium is being dressed in the clothes of a non-mountain spirit. In the case of some mandarin spirits, such as the Third Mandarin, Phú Bình may be performed instead of Doc, but this is the exception rather than the rule.

The Lưu Thủy and Sai melodies are always performed when the medium presents incense to the altar and waves incense respectively. The medium then takes two swords and 'dances' with them. For the sword dance the band plays Trống Chiến ('War Drums'), which does not have a melody; on occasions Lưu Thủy is played (see Ritual 1, video extract 9), but the inclusion of the large drum (trống lớn) in this particular band enables Trống Chiến to be played. When the medium finishes the sword dance and sits down, the band performs Phú Văn Đàn. Other Phú melodies, such as Phú Nói, may be sung at this point, but Phú Văn Đàn is the one most commonly used (see video extract 9).

Video extract 2 (Phú Văn Đàn - Cao Môn's Melody)

The change from Phú Văn Đàn to a new melody written by the band's singer and percussionist Cao Môn involves a rare example of intervention by the medium. Unlike the transition in Ritual 1 from Phú Văn Đàn to Phú Nói, which was initiated by the musician Phạm Văn Ty (see video extract 10), in Ritual 2 the medium requests that the band change the melody. The medium tells her assistants, who pass the message on to the band. One of the assistants can be heard saying "thay dô" - "change". According to the moon-lute player and singer Đặng Công Hưng, the medium asked the band to make the 'singing more happy' (hát vui lên). In response to the medium's request to sing happily, the band perform a song known as Lối Cao Môn, Cao Môn's 'Way' or 'Melody'. The medium shows her appreciation for Cao Môn's Melody by striking a cushion with her hand and giving the band money.
#### Video extract 3 (Cao Môn's Melody - Phú Nói/Phú Gìan)

After singing Cao Môn's Melody for nearly five minutes, the singer and percussionist Cao Môn slows down the tempo, which in effect signals Đặng Công Hưng to begin playing the moon-lute part for Phú Nói. In this case it is the band, rather than the medium, that initiates the change in melody in order to ensure that the songscape is abundant (phong phú) and interesting (hay). In the extract Cao Môn sings Phú Gìan. Phú nói has also been listed with Phú Gìan because, although it is not included in the video extract, Hưng sings Phú Nói in-between Cao Môn's verses of Phú Gìan. As Phú Nói and Phú Gìan are closely related, the alternate verses of the two melodies do not require major adjustments in the moon-lute or percussion accompaniment.

## Video extract 4 (Phú Nói/Phú Gìan - Dồn)

Đặng Công Hưng changes the melody from Phú Nói/Phú Gìan to Dồn. There is no change in the rhythm or tempo when the song transition is made (although the tempo of Dồn gradually increases), so the change in melody does not need to be co-ordinated with the main percussionist, Cao Môn. Dồn is usually performed at the end of a possession in response to an assistant picking up the red scarf to be thrown over the medium's head (see video extract 11). Hưng does not change to the Dồn melody because he notices preparations for the spirit's 'return', but he does anticipate that the incarnation of the Third Mandarin will shortly come to a close. In fact, Hưng turns out to be mistaken because the possession continues for some time (see video extract 5). However, Hưng's change to Dồn is not an 'error' because the use of Dồn is not rigidly restricted to the closing moments of a possession.

## Video extract 5 (Don - Cao Mon's Melody)

Having realised that the possession is not about to finish but is in fact going to continue for some time, the band changes from Dòn back to Cao Môn's Melody. Unlike most transitions between songs, which do not require verbal communication, Đặng Công Hưng tells Cao Môn to make the song change prior to it taking place. Hưng suggests the change because Dòn has continued for nearly five minutes and the spirit has not yet 'returned'. Video extract 6 (Cao Môn's Melody - Kiểu Dương) and video extract 7 (Kiểu Dương - Cao Môn's Melody)

The transitions between Cao Môn's Melody and Kiểu Dương that occur during video extracts 6 and 7 are carried out by Cao Môn. He initiates these changes to provide variety and interest (see video extract 3): the transitions are not made in response to the medium's movements. Although Kiểu Dương may be sung for any mandarin spirit, it is usually only used for the Fifth Mandarin. Cao Môn said he sang Kiểu Dương in-between two renditions of his own melody (which is dedicated to the Third Mandarin) because the two songs have similarities which make them 'well suited' (hợp).

As Cao Môn's Melody is quite closely related to Kiểu Dương, the adjustments to Đăng Công Hưng's moon-lute accompaniment do not require preparation. In fact, Hưng said that before he had learnt the melody properly, he had mistakenly thought Cao Môn had used Kiểu Dương as the basis for the new melody. Cao Môn's Melody and Kiểu Dương both use the three-beat rhythm (nhịp ba) and are in approximately the same tempo, so there are no sudden rhythmic changes.

Video extract 8 (Cao Môn's Melody - xe gía hồi cung)

As in Ritual 1 (video extract 12), there is an increase in tempo shortly before the spirit leaves the medium's body to increase the excitement. The band can tell when the spirit is about to 'return' because one of the assistants picks up the red scarf, which will be thrown over the medium's head when the spirit 'returns' to its 'palace'.

Once the red cloth is thrown over the medium's head marking the spirit's 'return', the musicians sing the phrase xe gía hồi cung ('the spirit's carriage returns to the palace').

## Ritual 1: Third Mandarin

Video extract 9 (Lưu Thủy - Phú Văn Đàn)

The medium's sword dance is accompanied by the Lưu Thủy melody. At some rituals Trống Chiến is played instead of Lưu Thủy (see Ritual 2, video extract 1). Once the medium sits down and starts drinking rice wine, the band changes

to Phú Văn Đàn, which is the usual melody that is performed at this point in the ritual (see also video extract 1).

#### Video extract 10 (Phú Văn Đàn - Phú Nói)

The change from Phú Văn Đàn to the closely related Phú Nói is made by Phạm Văn Ty, the moon-lute player and singer. The decision to change songs was Ty's: the change does not coincide with a particular action of the medium. Phú Văn Đàn and Phú Nói both use the same three-beat rhythm (nhịp ba), so the percussionist does not have to respond to the change in song. The bamboo flute player is immediately aware of the transition between songs, but it sounds like he is initially 'fumbling' to find the right pitches to accompany the vocal line. The other instrument in the ensemble, the sixteen-stringed zither, is only played intermittently and joins in after the Phú Nói melody has already been established.

Video extract 11 (Phú Nói - Dồn)

The change from Phú Nói to Dồn is initiated by Phạm Văn Ty when he is aware that the spirit is about to leave the body of the medium. Dồn, which literally means 'fast', has a faster tempo than Phú Nói and is used to increase the momentum at the close of the possession. The band can tell when the spirit is about to 'return' because one of the assistants picks up the red scarf, which will be thrown over the medium's head when the spirit 'returns' to its 'palace'.

Video extract 12 (Dồn - xe gía hồi cung)

To increase the excitement just before the spirit leaves the body of the medium, the band gradually speed up the tempo of Don. Before the spirit 'returns', the medium 'transmits' (truyen) the following phrases: "I observe the heart of the master of the temple, I observe the heart of the ritual specialist, I observe the hearts of all the disciples in the cosmos, I observe everyone's hearts" (Quan chứng tâm cho thủ nhang, chứng tâm cho pháp sư, chứng tâm cho các ghế vũ trụ, chứng tâm cho bách gia trăm họ). When the scarf is thrown over the medium's head the spirit leaves the her body and the musicians sing the phrase xe gía hồi cung ('the spirit's carriage returns to the palace').

# Ritual 1: Second Holy Lady

Video extract 13 (Thỉnh Bóng - Xá Thượng)

The Second Holy Lady is 'invited' with the Thinh Bóng (Inviting the Spirits) melody. Once the medium, possessed by the Second Holy Lady, throws off the red scarf over her head, the assistants dress her as the spirit. At this point the band performs Xá Thượng, which is always played while the medium is being dressed as the Second Holy Lady. The extract only includes the beginning of the 'instrumental section' (lưu không) of Xá Thượng (see video extract 14).

Video extract 14 (Xá Thượng)

This extract is of a verse of Xá Thượng sung by Phạm Văn Ty while the medium is being dressed by her assistants.

Video extract 15 (Xá Thượng - Xá Múa Mồi)

As soon as the medium stands up after being dressed, the musicians switch from Xá Thượng to Xá Múa Mồi and increase the tempo. Xá Múa Mồi (Lit-Rope Dance Xá), as its name suggests, is always sung when the medium dances while holding lit ropes. In this ritual, the medium unusually dances with a fan and incense before dancing with lit ropes; Xá Múa Mồi is performed throughout.

Video extract 16 (Xá Múa Mồi - Xá Giây Lệch)

The medium completes her dance (she has already put down the lit ropes) and then sits in front of the altar, at which point the musicians slow the tempo and change songs from Xá Múa Mồi to Xá Giây Lệch. On some occasions Xá Quảng is also played after, or instead of, Xá Giây Lệch, but Xá Quảng is usually only sung for the Little Holy Lady and the Tenth Holy Lady. During this extract, Phạm Văn Ty, the singer and moon-lute player, decides which song to play.

#### Video extract 17 (Xá Giây Lệch - xe gia hồi cung)

The musicians increase the excitement just before the spirit is about to leave the body of the medium by speeding up the tempo of Xá Giây Lệch. The band is aware that the spirit is about to return because the medium picks up a fan and the assistants pick up the red scarf. Before the spirit 'returns', the medium says the same phrases as she does at the end of the incarnation of the Third Mandarin (see commentary for video extract 12). When the scarf is thrown over the medium's head the spirit leaves the medium's body and the musicians sing the phrase xe gia hồi cung ('the spirit's carriage returns to the palace').

# Ritual 1: Tenth Prince

#### Video extract 18 (Sai - (Lưu Thủy) - Bỉ Thơ - Nhịp Một)

This extract illustrates how the band responds to the medium when she deviates slightly from the usual sequence of ritual actions.

The Sai melody is always played when the medium is waving incense. Once the medium gives the bundle of incense to the assistants, the musicians begin playing Luu Thủy because they think the medium is about to conduct the bell-sticks dance, as occurs during Ritual 2 (video extract 24). However, after just a few seconds the band realises that the medium is going to perform a stylised imitation of writing a poem: a stick of incense is used as a 'quill' and the outstretched fan as the 'manuscript'. In response to the medium's movements, the musicians begin to sing Bỉ Thơ (Reciting a Poem), which is a prelude to the Nhịp Một (One-Beat Rhythm) melody. The musicians change from Bỉ Thơ to Nhịp Một once Trọng Kha has finished singing Bỉ Thơ: the change is not prompted by any particular movement by the medium.

Video extract 19 (Nhịp Một - Lưu Thủy - Phú Chuốc Rượu)

After 'writing' a poem on a fan with a stick of incense, the medium puts down the stick of incense and dances with the fan. Thinking that the medium now wishes to dance, the band stop performing Nhip Một and begin to play Lưu Thủy, which is the conventional melody used for the dances of the Tenth Prince (see Ritual 2, video extract 24). The dance of the medium

is, however, short-lived, and she summons Luu Thủy to a close by raising her arms before sitting down to drink rice wine. The band play Phú Chuốc Rượu (Wine-Pouring Phú) when the medium drinks rice wine. Each of the three verses of Phú Chuốc Rượu invites the medium to drink a cup of rice wine, so the medium must wait for each verse of the song before drinking each cup. In this instance it is the medium who follows the musicians rather than the reverse. Phạm Văn Ty makes the decision to play Phú Chuốc Rượu, and the percussionist, Phạm Quang Đặt, follows Ty's lead. The other musicians do not play at the beginning of Phú Chuốc Rượu.

## Video extract 20 (Phú Chuốc Rượu - Bỉ Thơ)

The medium waits to drink her third cup of rice wine until she is invited to do so by the third verse of Phú Chuốc Rượu, and then begins smoking. Once the musicians have completed Phú Chuốc Rượu they change to Bỉ Thơ (Reciting a Poem). Bỉ Thơ is the usual melody performed after the medium drinks rice wine, so all the musicians are prepared for this change. Phạm Văn Ty leads the change with a short instrumental section on the moon lute before singing Bỉ Thơ. The only other musician that plays during the transition is the percussionist, Phạm Quang Đặt: the flutist joins in once Ty has begun singing.

#### Video extract 21 (Bỉ Thơ - Cờn Huế)

Once the musicians finish performing Bỉ Thơ, they change to Cờn Huế (Bỉ Thơ is a prelude to Cờn Huế). The change in melody is led by Phạm Văn Ty with a short instrumental section on the moon lute. Trọng Kha and Ty then begin singing in unison and are shortly joined by Trương Mạnh Linh. During some rituals the change from Bỉ Thơ to Cờn Huế coincides with the medium finishing smoking. However, the change in melody is not made in response to the mediums movements: in this ritual the medium has finished smoking and already begun to distribute gifts before the band makes the song change. At the end of Bỉ Thơ the medium lets out a cry and gives the band money as a sign of her appreciation.

Video extract 22 (Cờn Huế - Hò Huế)

As occurs in this ritual, it is usual for Cờn Huế to be followed by Hò Huế. The moon-lute player Phạm Văn Ty initiates the melody change, and the

percussionist responds by changing from the two-beat rhythm (nhịp đôi) of Cờn Huế to the one-beat rhythm (nhịp một) of Hò Huế. No other members of the band are playing at this point. The melody change is made to ensure that the songscape is 'interesting' (hay): it is not made in response to the medium's movements.

Video extract 23 (Hò Huế - Nhịp Một - xe gía hồi cung)

The change from Hò Huế to Nhịp Một is made once the band are aware that the possession is coming to a close. The percussionist Phạm Quang Đặt signals the change in melody by increasing the tempo. Nhịp Một is usually played just before the spirit 'returns' (see Ritual 2, video extract 25) in order to provide a lively conclusion to the possession. When the scarf is thrown over the medium's head the spirit leaves the medium's body and the musicians sing the phrase xe gía hồi cung ('the spirit's carriage returns to the palace').

# Ritual 2: Tenth Prince

Video extract 24 (Sai - Lưu Thủy - Bỉ Thơ Chuốc Rượu - Nhịp Một Chuốc Rượu)

The melodies that are performed to accompany the medium's ritual actions of waving incense and the bell-sticks dance are Sai and Luu Thủy respectively. These two melodies are always played when mediums carry out these ritual actions, regardless of the spirit incarnated. The medium brings Luu Thủy to a close by continuously shaking the bell-sticks.

Once the medium sits and prepares to drink rice wine, the band sing the prelude Bi Thơ Chuốc Rượu (Reciting a Poem for Wine Pouring). When Cao Môn finishes singing Bỉ Thơ Chuốc Rượu, he begins singing Nhịp Một Chuốc Rượu (One-Beat Rhythm Melody for Wine Pouring) at which point the medium begins to drink her first cup of rice wine. Each of the three verses of the song invites the medium to drink a cup of wine, so the medium must wait for each verse before drinking. Cao Môn prefers these two melodies to the song performed in Ritual 1, Phú Chuốc Rượu (see video extract 19), because he considers them to be 'lighter' (nhẹ hơn) and more suitable for the 'romantic' (lãng mạn) character of the Tenth Prince.

Video extract 25 (Hò Huế - Lý Qua Cầu - Lý Mỹ Hưng - Nhịp Một - xe gía hồi cung)

This extract provides another example of intervention by the medium (see also video extract 2). Shortly before the spirit leaves the medium, the medium calls over to the musicians, who are playing Hò Huế, to change the melody so that the end of the possession is more 'happy' (vui). The singer and percussionist, Cao Môn, immediately responds by performing two songs in quick succession: Lý Qua Cầu and Lý Mỹ Hưng. These two melodies are folk songs that are not usually part of the chầu văn repertoire: Cao Môn has written new words for them and incorporated them into lên dong rituals (see Chapter 8). The medium shows her appreciation of the two Lý melodies by letting out a cry and giving the musicians money at the end of each melody. After Lý Mỹ Hưng, Cao Môn changes to Nhịp Một, the song conventionally performed just before the return of the spirit (see Ritual 1, video extract 23). The changes between the two Lý melodies and the Nhip Một melody are all led by the singer and percussionist Cao Môn: the flexibility of the moonlute part makes it easy for Đặng Công Hưng to alter his accompaniment once Cao Môn has begun singing each melody, and the flutist begins to play each Lý melody after Cao Môn has already sung the first phrase. When the spirit leaves the body of the medium the musicians sing xe gía hồi cung ('the spirit's carriage returns to the palace').

## Ritual 1: Third Lady

Video extract 26 (Sai - Bỉ Chèo Đò - Chèo Đò - Bỉ Thơ - Vān)

When the medium waves incense (and a fan) the musicians always play the Sai melody (see also video extracts 9 and 18). The medium is then handed two rowing oars, which is the cue for the band to play Bỉ Chèo Đò, a short prelude in free rhythm to the Chèo Đò (Boat Rowing) melody. This prelude gives the medium enough time to bless the oars and position herself for the rowing dance. Once the musicians switch to Chèo Đò, the medium begins the rowing dance: the medium must follow the musicians. There is a gradual accelerando throughout Chèo Đò and the medium also speeds up her rowing movements. Bỉ Chèo Đò and Chèo Đò are always played when a medium, possessed by the Third Lady, is presented with the rowing oars and performs the rowing dance respectively. After the medium stops rowing in order to sit down and drink cups of water, one of several melodies may be performed. In this ritual, the musician Trong Kha chooses to recite a poem in free rhythm (Bi Thơ) as a prelude to the Vān melody: the change in melody is not prompted by a movement made by the medium. In contrast, the band of Ritual 2 sings Cờn Giây Lệch (see video extract 29). Other songs that may be performed at this point include Cờn Luyện and Cờn Oán.

All the changes of melodies in this video extract (and video extract 27) are led by Trong Kha, who has taken over playing the moon lute in place of Pham Văn Ty. This illustrates that for this band the moon-lute player is responsible for leading changes between songs.

#### Video extract 27 (Vān - Cờn Oán)

Trọng Kha, who at this stage is singing and playing the moon lute, initiates the change from Vān to Cờn Oán. He changes between melodies during the instrumental section (lưu không) and then begins singing the first verse of Cờn Oán on his own. Vān and Cờn Oán both use the two-beat rhythm (nhịp đôi), so Phạm Văn Ty, now playing percussion, does not have to change the rhythmic pattern: he just responds to Trọng Kha when he slows down the tempo during the instrumental section. The flutist closely follows the instrumental section and vocal melody of Cờn Oán. Throughout this video extract the medium is distributing gifts to the disciples: the change in melody is not prompted by a particular movement. Trọng Kha could also have performed other Cờn melodies such as Cờn Luyện and Cờn Giây Lệch, but Cờn Oán was chosen because it goes well with Vān: both Vān and Cờn Oán are 'sad' (buồn) melodies.

#### Video extract 28 (Cờn Oán - Nhịp Một - xe gía hồi cung)

When the medium picks up the fan the band know that the spirit is about to 'leave' her body. In response, the percussionist Phạm Quang Đặt changes the rhythm from the two-beat rhythm (nhịp đôi) of Cờn Oán to the one-beat rhythm (nhịp một). The moon-lute player, Phạm Văn Ty again, follows Đặt's change in rhythm and begins to play the Nhịp Một melody which is often used to ensure an exciting conclusion to a possession (see also video extracts 23 and 25). Before the spirit 'returns', the medium repeats three of the four sentences that she said at the close of the possession by the Third Mandarin: the third phrase, "I observe the hearts of all the disciples in the cosmos", is omitted (see commentary of video extract 12). When the scarf is thrown over the medium's head, the spirit leaves the medium's body and the musicians sing the phrase xe gía hồi cung ('the spirit's carriage returns to the palace').

#### Ritual 2: Third Lady

Video extract 29 (Chèo Đò - Nhịp Một - Cờn Giây Lệch)

After the medium has performed the 'rowing dance' (múa chèo dò) to the Chèo Đò (Boat Rowing) melody, she puts the oars down and begins to dance with empty hands, which is referred to as múa không ('dancing with nothing'). Because the Chèo Đò melody, as its name suggests, is only appropriate for the rowing dance, the musicians sing another melody, Nhịp Một, for the 'empty hands dance'. There is no 'empty hands dance' during Ritual 1 (see video extract 26). Nhịp một is a 'lively' (sôi nổi) melody that is often played for dances of the lady spirits and also at the end of possessions (see video extract 28).

Once the medium stops dancing and sits down, the musicians change from Nhip Một to Cờn Giây Lệch. Other melodies instead of Cờn Giây Lệch may also be played at this stage of the possession. However, 'sad' (buồn) melodies - such as Vān and Cờn Oán played in Ritual 1 (see video extract 27) - are avoided because the band know that this medium prefers 'happier' (vui hơn) melodies such as Cờn Giây Lệch (see also video extracts 2 and 25).

Video extract 30 (Cờn Giây Lệch - xe gía hồi cung)

When the medium picks up the fan, the band know that the spirit will shortly 'leave' her body. In response, the band increase the tempo of Cờn Giây Lệch so that there is a lively conclusion to the possession. The same effect is created in Ritual 1 by changing to the Nhịp Một melody (see video extract 28). When the spirit 'returns', a red scarf is thrown over the medium's head and the musicians sing the phrase xe gía hồi cung ('the spirit's carriage returns to the palace').

#### MUSICAL INTERACTION

Having described in detail the songscapes for four spirits as performed at two rituals, it is now possible to draw some conclusions regarding the interaction between the medium and the band, and within the band itself. Brinner (1995) has outlined a useful theoretical vocabulary for discussing 'musical interaction' which I will use to frame the discussion. The four main 'analytical concepts' Brinner outlines are defined as follows:

Interactive network comprises the roles assumed by performers and the relationships or links between them, *interactive system* refers to the means and meanings of communication and co-ordination, and *interactive sound structure* is a constellation of concepts associated with the constraints and possibilities inherent in the ways sounds are put together .... the 'why' of interaction, the goals, rewards, pitfalls, and sanctions ... may be subsumed under the rubric *interactive motivation*. (ibid.:169, emphases in original)

#### Interactive network

The video-extract commentaries illustrate the importance of the interaction between the medium and the band in the construction of songscapes. However, the medium's 'control' of the band during rituals is limited, for the most part, to dictating the approximate timing of song changes at some stages during possession. Mediums are not usually musically competent, and their knowledge of the chầu văn repertoire varies from scant to considerable. Some are able to name most or all of the songs and have a detailed understanding of the way songscapes are constructed, whereas others have little or no explicit knowledge of chầu văn. Whatever the extent of mediums' musical knowledge, they do not directly select the songs performed. On rare occasions, the possessed medium may express musical preferences, but this is done in general terms: a change in song, rather than a specific song, is sometimes requested (see video extract 2). Mediums may also influence the choice of melodies through expressing their musical tastes prior to rituals. In such cases, bands may include songs which they are aware will be 'appreciated' (thưởng thức).

Within the band itself, the two 'core' members - the moon-lute player/singer and main percussionist/singer - perform the most crucial roles. The core band members usually sit in front of the rest of the band, so that they have a clear view of the ritual action. This spatial arrangement

aids the co-ordination of musical changes made in response to the medium's movements. The addition of two or three musicians to the core band is optional, but has become common since the late 1980s (see Chapter 8). The distinction between the core band and additional band members is not marked by a distinction in status.

The band member who assumes the leadership role is responsible for leading song, tempo and dynamic changes, which may or may not be prompted by the medium's movements, and for making decisions, within the constraints of the chau văn musical system, about which song to perform. The 'leader' of a band does not exercise influence over other aspects of performance.<sup>8</sup> For example, non-core band members may drop in and out of the musical texture more or less at will, so the 'leader' does not dictate whether or not they perform at any given point.

The moon-lute player/singer usually assumes the leadership role. This was made particularly evident in Ritual 1: when Trong Kha played the moon lute instead of Pham Văn Ty, he took over Ty's leadership role (see video extract 26). As the leadership role is dictated by instrument, competence at playing the moon-lute, rather than status, is the most important factor in determining who assumes the leadership role. The band that performed for Ritual 1 is a case in point: Trong Kha and Pham Quang Đặt have a higher social status than Ty because they are older, and have a greater knowledge of chầu văn texts, yet Ty assumes the leadership role when he is playing the moon lute.<sup>9</sup>

While the example of the Ritual 1 band is the norm, in some bands the leadership role is shared between the two core band members. During Ritual 2, for instance, song changes were led by either the percussionist/singer, Cao Môn, or the moon-lute player/singer, Đặng Công Hưng. The reason why Cao Môn assumes the leadership role at some points stems from the innovations which Cao Môn has made to the chầu văn repertoire. Cao Môn leads the transitions involving the Cao Môn Melody and songs such as the Lý melodies - which he has adapted and incorporated into lên đồng - because he knows these songs better than Hưng. This established a

 $<sup>^{8}</sup>$  As a rule, bands do not rehearse, so the leadership role is confined to the actual performances.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Phạm Quang Đặt had a more extensive knowledge of chầu văn song texts and repertoire than Phạm Văn Ty. This was made apparent when I asked Ty to sing an obscure Phú melody, Phú Bắc Phản, during a recording session: Phạm Quang Đặt, who for the recording session was just playing percussion, had to sing this song because it was not part of Ty's repertoire. During the recording session Phạm Quang Đặt also refreshed Ty's memory of some of the less commonly sung texts.

flexibility of role-taking which led to Hưng and Cao Môn sharing the leadership role throughout the ritual. It was mentioned above that age, status and musical experience do not usually determine who assumes the leadership role in most bands, but these factors may have effects *within* the core band. If, for instance, the percussionist/singer is of much lower status than the moon-lute player, sharing the leadership role would not occur: Cao Môn and Hưng's tacit agreement to share the leadership role during Ritual 2 was only possible because Cao Môn and Hưng are on a par in terms of status and experience.<sup>10</sup>

As most song changes are carried out during instrumental sections, rather than in the middle of a song verse, the voice does not usually 'lead' transitions between songs. However, the band member leading song transitions usually sings the first verse of a new song. Also, in keeping with the emphasis musicians placed on the centrality of the voice, singing is linked to the leadership role: if the leadership role is shared between the two members of the core band, they usually take a more equal share of the singing than when the moon-lute player exclusively leads song changes. The core band are usually the main singers, yet other members of the band often sing verses.<sup>11</sup> During Ritual 1, for instance, Linh sings a large number of verses. The band leader usually sings the first verse of songs, but does not dictate when other musicians sing: band members simply begin singing of their own accord.<sup>12</sup>

# Interactive system

Brinner has defined a cue as "a musical, verbal, visual, or kinetic act specifically produced for the purpose of initiating an interaction - that is, bringing about a change in ... performance" (ibid.:183, emphases omitted). During possession, mediums are aware that particular ritual actions

 $<sup>^{10}</sup>$  At another ritual in which Cao Môn was singing and playing percussion, Cao Môn did not share the leadership role because the moon-lute player/singer, Lê Bá Cao, was older and had a higher status.

 $<sup>^{11}</sup>$  Some chầu văn songs also encourage most or all of the members of a band to sing: two songs involve call and response (Chèo Đò and Suối Ơi), and others may be sung in unison either in their entirety or for short sections of verses (e.g. Cao Môn Melody and some of the Xá melodies).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> As a result of the lack of signalling among singers, on some occasions two or more singers begin a verse that would normally be performed solo. When this occurs it is usually the core band member who continues singing and the other singer(s) quickly stop.

provoke a musical response, but ritual actions are not intentionally directed toward the musicians. Rather, the spirits 'force' (bắt) mediums to carry out ritual acts.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, bands respond to some of the ritual actions *as if* they are visual cues. So, even though the issue of intentionality is problematic due to possession, the term 'cue', or, more precisely, kinetic/visual cue, is still useful for discussing the interaction between the medium and musicians. The precise timing of the musical response to the medium's visual cues is quite flexible. For instance, the band may change to the Sai melody when the lit incense is being prepared by the assistants or, as is the case in video extract 1, at the moment the medium starts waving the incense. The 'translation' of the medium's visual cue into an aural response is carried out by the other musicians.<sup>14</sup>

For the most part, the band must respond to the medium's movements. However, at some points the timing of the medium's ritual actions is dictated by the music (see video extracts 24 and 26). At one ritual I attended the medium began the rowing dance of the Third Lady before the musicians had finished Bi Chèo Đò; the musician who was singing was clearly irritated and called out to the medium to listen to the music. This incident vividly illustrates that it is not just mediums who dictate proceedings: bands also have the power to affect ritual action.

Within the band, there are no preparatory cues made by the musician leading the song change: the other members of the band 'follow' the leader with little delay as soon as they hear the song change being made. When song changes are made in response to the medium's movements, there is little or no song choice. This assists the transition between songs because the band members usually know which song will be performed prior to the song change. There is, however, a greater degree of song choice when song changes are *not* made in response to the medium's ritual actions (see the section titled 'Interactive sound structure' below).

There are a number of factors which help to ensure 'trouble-free' transitions between songs when there are several song options. First, due to experience of playing together on many occasions, band members are usually aware of the likely timing of song changes and

<sup>13</sup> This does not diminish the significance of music for carrying out ritual action. If the band does not perform the 'correct' music, the ability of the medium to carry out ritual actions is seriously impaired (see Chapter 5).

 $<sup>^{14}</sup>$  See Brinner (ibid.:188-89) for discussion of the distinction between 'cue reinforcement' and 'cue mediation'.

favoured song sequences. Second, non-core band members are not always playing during song transitions, so only the core band need carry out the song change. Third, as most songs employ either the one-, two-, or three-rhythm, some song changes do not require a change in the basic rhythm. In such cases, the moon-lute player is free to make a song change without necessarily co-ordinating the change with the percussionist (e.g. see video extracts 10 and 27). While these factors apply to many song transitions, there may still be occasions when a song change is not made at precisely the same moment by all the band. However, even on such occasions musicians are quick to respond, and slight differences in synchronisation are tolerated because they do not seriously affect the realisation of songscapes or ritual action.

#### Interactive sound structure

Songscapes are constructed within the 'interactive sound structure' of the chầu văn musical system. At the level of the 'progression' of song sequences, this structure consists of associations between songs and spirits, and between song and ritual action.<sup>15</sup> For each spirit there is a repertoire of songs which may be performed, with many songs being shared between more than one spirit or group of spirits.<sup>16</sup> In addition to the constraints on the use of songs according to which spirit is incarnated, some songs are only performed for particular ritual actions.

The links between songs, spirits and ritual action affect the degree of song choice available for musicians for each spirit possession and at each stage of the ritual. At one extreme, only one song may be performed at any given stage during the possession, while at the other, musicians may perform one of about five songs.

In general, the song choice for mountain spirits is much more restricted than for other spirits, as the identical songscapes of Ritual 1 and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> As this chapter is primarily concerned with the construction of songscapes rather than analysis of the music *per se*, I will not include discussion of the 'musical texture' which Brinner includes under the rubric 'interactive sound structure' (ibid.:191-200). However, in the section on interactive motivation, I will briefly refer to the relationships between musical parts.

 $<sup>^{16}</sup>$  Further details regarding the links between songs and spirits will be discussed in the following chapter.

2 for the Second Holy Lady indicate.<sup>17</sup> Only Xá melodies - with the exception of Thỉnh Bóng - are used for mountain spirits, so the number of songs that can be performed for these spirits is less than for non-mountain spirits. There is, however, a limited number of song choices available to musicians during incarnations of mountain spirits (e.g. the occasional use of Xá Quảng instead of Xá Giây Lệch during the incarnation of the Second Holy Lady).

For non-mountain spirits, the spectrum of song choice is much broader. Musicians have the least song choice when song changes are made as a consequence of the medium's ritual actions and the greatest when songs are not associated with a particular ritual action. Three examples which give an impression of the spectrum of song choice typical for nonmountain spirits are: the 'compulsory' performance of the Sai melody when the medium is waving incense; the performance of either the Lưu Thủy or Trống Chiến melodies for the Third Mandarin's sword dance; and the choice of performing at least five different songs when the Third Lady is drinking and distributing gifts. Up until the medium sits down after dancing, all the song changes for the non-mountain spirits are made in response to the medium's movements: it is only after the medium finishes dancing that musicians may change melodies of their own accord.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the most diversity between the songscapes of the two rituals for the Third Mandarin, the Tenth Prince and the Third Lady occurs when the medium sits down after dancing, and the least diversity occurs during and before her dance.

# Interactive motivation

The primary motivation in the construction of songscapes is to create a musical environment for possession and ritual action. The interaction between the medium and the band, therefore, has the goal of ensuring that the ritual is 'successfully' carried out. Co-ordination between the band and the medium is necessary for 'correct' ritual practice, yet it is loosely synchronised, as demonstrated by the fact that the timing of song changes

<sup>17</sup> See Chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of the distinction between mountain and lowland spirits.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> This is not to say that *all* the songs performed after the medium's dance are unaffected by her movements. Exceptions include: the melodies performed when the Tenth Prince is drinking rice wine; changes in melody prompted by the spirit's imminent 'return'; and cases when the medium actually asks the musicians to change songs. However, most of the songs performed after the medium stops dancing are not prompted by a particular ritual action, unlike the earlier songs.

in response to ritual action is not precisely determined. Close co-ordination between the members of the core band is the ideal, but, when making song changes in the ritual context, a certain degree of looseness is accepted as long as the momentum of the ritual is maintained.<sup>19</sup> The parts of non-core members of the band are generally less tightly co-ordinated than those of the core band.

As the progression of ritual acts is quite fixed, spontaneity is not a crucial part of ritual practice. Mediums rarely deviate from the conventional sequence of ritual actions, but when 'unusual' ritual actions do occur, the band may take a few seconds to adjust. This was the case during Ritual 1 when the medium, possessed by the Tenth Prince, performed the ritual actions of 'imitating writing a poem' and 'dancing with a fan' (see video extract 18). The musician(s) who assume the leadership role may choose songs in the act of performance, but such choices have the aim of creating musical diversity, rather than displaying spontaneity. Songscapes with an 'abundance' (phong phú) of songs are 'interesting' (hay) and help to ensure the attention of disciples.

The voice does not lead song changes, yet the vocal line is the most important part of the musical texture. When referring to the prominence of the vocal line, musicians said that the voice should be 'rounded' (tròn) and stressed that the song text should be clearly heard at all times.<sup>20</sup> The instrumental parts provide a 'base' (nền) and 'support' (phụ họa) to the vocal line and only become more prominent during the instrumental sections (lưu không).<sup>21</sup> The different instrumental parts of large bands should be 'balanced' (cân đối) but also maintain a fairly high degree of independence.

 $<sup>^{19}</sup>$  This point is corroborated by the fact that commercial recordings of chau văn exhibit a closer degree of co-ordination during song changes than is normal during rituals.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> The adage 'rounded [sound], clear words' (tròn vành rõ chữ) was sometimes used by chầu văn musicians to describe the desired vocal quality and enunciation of the song text. It should be noted, however, that this adage is used in relation to many Vietnamese vocal genres, not just chầu văn.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Chapter 1 provided transcriptions and analysis of the moon-lute part during the instrumental section and the verse of the doc melody. When pitched instruments other than the moon lute are included in bands, the accompaniment to the voice is often less 'sparse' than the example analysed in Chapter 1. For instance, it is usual for the person playing the bamboo flute to play a variation of the vocal line throughout song verses, as can be heard during many of Ritual 1 and 2 video extracts. However, instrumental parts performed during song verses are always considered by musicians to be 'secondary' (phu) to the vocal line and should not obscure it.

# CONCLUSION

Chàu văn is an elaborate musical system based on interrelationships between songs, spirits and ritual action. The comparison of the songscapes for four spirits at two different rituals has provided insights into how songscapes are constructed.<sup>22</sup> Songscapes are flexible entities: they are usually realised differently for each ritual, although the degree of difference varies depending on the spirit and the stage of possession. Through examining the links between ritual and musical practice, the nature of the musical interaction - both between the medium and the band, and within the band itself - has been investigated. Mediums dictate the approximate timing of some song changes, but their influence on the choice of songs is limited to, on rare occasions, letting their preferences be known during possession and/or discussing musical options with musicians prior to rituals. The leadership role within the band is usually assumed by the moon-lute player/singer, but is sometimes shared between the two members of the core band (i.e. the moon-lute player/singer and main percussionist/singer). The main responsibility of the leader(s) is to make decisions regarding the choice of songs and to lead song changes. Song changes are made without preparatory cues, and a degree of loose coordination is tolerated.

The discussion of songscapes and musical interaction paves the way for inquiry into the significance of music for possession. The term songscape encourages the music performed for each spirit possession to be viewed as a coherent 'whole' with many parts, rather than as a series of discrete, unrelated songs. This is useful because, as will be discussed in the next chapter, music has different 'effects' at different stages of the ritual, yet the individual songs that constitute a songscape have a 'unity' through being linked to the identity of the incarnated spirit.

Vander has coined the term songprint to refer to the song repertoires of five Shoshone women (1996 [1988]). She describes the songprint of each Shoshone woman as being "distinctive to her culture, age, and personality, as unique in its configuration as a fingerprint or footprint" (ibid.:xi). The terms songprint and songscape refer to quite different concepts and have

 $<sup>^{22}</sup>$  By no means have all chầu văn songs been included in the comparison, but it is hoped that sufficient detail has been given to show the complex relationship between chầu văn and ritual practice.

been used for different analytical purposes.<sup>23</sup> However, they might usefully be compared in that both are concerned with identity, albeit in different ways: a songprint reflects the particular personality, culture and life experiences of a singer; a songscape evokes the presence of an incarnated spirit, through musical portrayal of different aspects of the character and identity of spirits. As part of the investigation into the role of music in rituals, the next chapter will develop the theme of how the characters of spirits - especially their gender, ethnicity and 'place' - are musically constructed.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> By tracing and comparing five songprints, Vander attempts to "create an archeological slice of Shoshone music making in this century" and to draw "historic conclusions about song genres and the participation and role of Shoshone women in music" (ibid.:287). Songprints therefore endeavour to map the musical knowledge of particular singers for the purposes of historical analysis. By contrast, the comparison of songscapes in this chapter has enabled inquiry into musical interaction and the construction of songscapes during possession. The lack of documentation of chàu văn at different stages in the twentieth century precludes historical comparison of songscapes, but it is conceivable that, in the future, songscapes from different decades might be compared for the purposes of diachronic analysis. The investigation of musical change in Chapter 8 is based on the analysis of individual songs, rather than songscapes in their entirety.

# **CHAPTER 5**

# THE MUSICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE SPIRITS

Rouget's (1985 [1980]) book on the relations between music and trance and between music and possession is the only extensive survey of data provided by ethnographies of possession rituals. Rouget comes to three conclusions regarding the role of music during possession: first, "it creates a certain emotional climate for adepts"; second, "it leads the adepts toward that great mutation ... that consists in becoming identified with the spirit possessing him"; third, "it provides the adept with the means of manifesting his identification and thus of exteriorizing his trance" (ibid.:325). The third point is emphasised in Rouget's well-known statement that the primary role of music in possession rituals is that it 'socializes' trance (ibid.:323, 326).

In Rouget's study he often uses the words 'trance' (or 'possession trance') and 'possession' interchangeably. It was established in Chapter 2 that Vietnamese mediums are possessed but are not in a 'trance' during lên dòng, so it is necessary to emphasise that the following discussion is concerned with the relations between music and possession, not between music and trance. Although the distinction between possession and trance is important for understanding ritual practice in Vietnam, many of Rouget's conclusions about the role of music in possession rituals are still applicable to possession without trance. This is because Rouget argues against music inducing or affecting trance physiologically in favour of how music contributes to what he calls the 'identificatory aspect', i.e. how the possessee takes on a new identity and its recognition by adepts; the 'identificatory role' of music is just as applicable to possession without trance as it is to possession trance. Similarly, Rouget's main conclusion that music 'socializes trance' could be changed to 'socializes possession' without fundamentally altering Rouget's description of the role of music in possession rituals.

The members of chầu văn bands are musicians, but at the same time they are directors. They tell of the virtues of the spirits and sing for everybody to know which spirit is present .... (p.c. Lê Bá Cao, January 1997) The above statement by the chầu văn musician, Lê Bá Cao, clearly illustrates that the music does enable the spirit to be recognised by those who attend rituals. This confirms the importance of the 'socialising' role of music during possession. However, to understand music as, primarily, an "instrument of communication" (Rouget 1985 [1980]:325) would be to ignore many of the affects of music during Vietnamese spirit possession.

This chapter will first examine the case of rituals that are conducted without a chầu văn band. Although some mediums claimed that possession was possible without music, on closer examination it is revealed that for possession to take place spirits must be aurally invited, and that music is necessary to carry out the ritual actions of the spirits successfully. I then explore in more detail how music enables possession due to its potential to affect the heart-soul of mediums, and music's role in the maintenance of possession. The contribution that chầu văn poems make to evoking the presence of the spirits and confirming the ritual actions of mediums is then outlined. Finally, I examine the ways in which chầu văn songs construct the identity of spirits, specifically how music evokes the gender and ethnicity of spirits and a sense of place.

## **RITUALS WITHOUT BANDS?**

In conversations with mediums about what role chầu văn played during lên đồng rituals, they emphasised the great importance of music. Yet some claimed that they could hold lên đồng without having a chầu văn band present. This obviously has ramifications for understanding the role of music during lên đồng: if it is possible for rituals to occur without music, is music an epiphenomenon?

Until the second half of the 1980s, the Vietnamese Communist Party rigorously opposed lên dòng, and those that were caught participating in lên dòng were often subjected to some form of punishment, including imprisonment (see Chapter 7). Yet, throughout the period when government restrictions were rigorously enforced, some mediums continued to 'serve' the spirits in secret. Mediums who held 'secret rituals' (hàu vụng) said that they usually did not invite bands for fear that the sound of chàu văn would alert the authorities. Lên dòng rituals without bands were commonly known as hàu vo ('serving [the spirits] without [a band]'). Despite the fact that hàu vo do not include a band, mediums' descriptions of hàu vo indicate that sound is not entirely absent because it is still necessary for the assistants to 'call out' (kêu) to the spirits. This is especially important when inviting the spirits: the medium's assistants must call out to the spirits in order to 'satisfy' (thỏa) them and ask their permission for the medium to serve them. Also, mediums said that their assistants and disciples would clap and sing phrases of chầu văn songs during hầu vo.

Since the Party's restrictions were relaxed in the late 1980s, mediums have not held have volves a medium would conduct a ritual without a band out of choice. At best, mediums described have volves 'dull' (té) and 'miserable' (buon), and they said they were much 'shorter' (ngắn hơn) than rituals that had bands. Some mediums even said that have volves 'worthless' (ra gì) and that, in fact, rituals could not be carried out without a band.

Despite the fact that hau vo were no longer occurring by the time of my research in Vietnam, I was intrigued by their existence in the past because they seemed to raise important issues about the role of music during rituals. In May 1998, when I was discussing hau vo with a medium called Thanh, she suggested that she hold a hau vo on condition that I 'sponsor' the ritual. Ever since I had first met Thanh in December 1996 at her end-of-year ritual (see Chapter 2) she had often teasingly said that I should 'sponsor' one of her rituals, but I had always refused due to a concern that paying for a ritual might have consequences of which I would probably be unaware. I was also wary that providing money for a ritual would emphasise the economic disparity between myself and Thanh, and confirm the stereotypical perception that I was a 'rich foreigner' (người nước ngoài giầu). Although Thanh's suggestion that she hold a hau vo was another attempt to persuade me to financially support one of her rituals, she had always said that she could serve the spirits without music because of her particularly 'high aptitude and heavy fate' (căn cao số nặng). For my part I was keen to see what a hầu vo would be like and I was also looking for a way to show Thanh my appreciation for her help and kindness before I left Vietnam. So, despite my reservations, I decided to give a contribution (US\$20) to the cost of the ritual. An auspicious date was then chosen, close to the festival day of the Third Holy Lady, and preparations for the ritual were made.

When the day of the ritual arrived, Thanh had invited a small group of other mediums to participate. Although Thanh maintained that the ritual would be without music until right before the ritual, she had in fact asked one of her disciples to sing chầu văn and play percussion during the ritual. This would seem to illustrate that, despite mediums' claims to the contrary, they find it difficult to 'serve the spirits' without music. It would also seem

to confirm the suggestion that in the past hau vo were not silent because assistants and disciples 'called out' and sang to the spirits.

When Thanh was possessed by Trần Hưng Đạo (also known as Trần Triều), the spirit 'transmitted' words concerning the contradiction between intending to hold a hầu vo while in reality arranging for music to be performed:

Today the wishes in the hearts of the mortals are that ... they address me with their mouths (lấy miệng mà tâu) and bow their heads in worship (lấy đầu mà vái), so why is there still the sound of the drum and singing? How can this be a hầu vo? ... But I forgive the mortals whose words 'cross over' (sang) to the spirits and the four palaces. I, Trần Triều, do not need singing or musical instruments .... The spirits of the four palaces have a child-like deception, because in fact they must be presented with words, playing and song, but remember the spirits of the four palaces are different from Trần Triều.

These comments transmitted by Trần Hưng Đạo state that song is necessary for the spirits of the four palaces, although for Trần Hưng Đạo - who does not belong to the four palaces - it is supposedly sufficient for disciples to address him with the spoken word. They also bring out a tension regarding music and hầu vo: theoretically hầu vo should be without music, yet at the same time, it is vital to 'present' music to the spirits of the four palaces.

The importance of 'sound' during rituals - whether or not it is played by a band or, indeed, whether it is strictly considered to be 'music' - has been highlighted by Yung in his discussion of 'Chinese ritual sound': "The study of ritual music must include all ritual sound. Whether the sonic event is closer to noise, to speech or to music is of less significance than the particular role it plays in the context of ritual" (Yung 1996:17). In the case of lên dòng, there is a similar emphasis on sound and its ritual role. In order for aware possession to take place - even during hầu vo - it is crucial that the spirits are aurally invited, either with speech or song.<sup>1</sup> Following the onset of possession, rhythm and song is necessary for ritual actions to be carried out, as the example of Thanh's hầu vo demonstrates. Chầu văn songs are therefore necessary for the maintenance of possession, even if, in exceptional circumstances, they are not performed by a specialist band.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Aurally inviting the spirits is necessary for aware possession during lên đồng, but spirits are not invited in cases of obsession. This is in accordance with Rouget's observation that music does not play a part in involuntary 'possession crises' (1985 [1980]:66-67).

## INVITING THE SPIRITS

Music makes translucent the boundary between human and spirit. (Friedson 1996:100)

Aural invocation to the spirits is necessary to facilitate contact between the human and spiritual worlds. This does not mean that music 'triggers' possession. It is not that music somehow 'makes' the spirits enter the medium. There is no causal relation between music and possession. Rather, musically inviting the spirits provides the conditions of possibility for the experience of possession. Through music, spirit possession has the potential to become actualised; music enables the bringing-forth of spirits into the human world.

So what is it about music that enables possession? Mediums suggested that the heart-soul (tâm linh/tâm hồn) - discussed in Chapter 2 as a point of interaction between spirits and mediums - was affected by music and that this facilitated possession.<sup>2</sup> This is illustrated by the following comments made by mediums: "when I hear the invitation to the spirits before the spirit enters, my heart-soul flies (bây), I feel elated"; "when I listen to chầu văn I find that I am charmed (quyến rũ), my heart-soul is charmed, then the spirits 'enter' me". The interaction between music, the heart-soul of mediums and the spirits is also alluded to by Vietnamese scholars of chầu văn: "there are people who think that chầu văn ... leads (dẫn) the heart-soul into the supernatural world (cõi siêu nhiên)" (Bùi Đình Thảo and Nguyễn Quang Hải 1996:68); "[Chầu văn] affects the heart-soul of the person serving the spirits and the people participating [in rituals], to create an atmosphere (không khí) for possession" (Ngô Đức Thịnh 1992:82). Music, then, moves the heart-soul of mediums so that bodily possession of the spirits is possible.

The song used to invite the spirits is called Thinh Bóng (Inviting The Spirits). This song is performed for all spirits, although the song text changes depending on the spirit incarnated. Thinh Bóng consists of a percussion tremolo, a fast moon-lute part - which my teacher, Phạm Văn Ty, likened to a speeded-up version of the instrumental section of the Dọc melody - and a sung melody, usually of two or four lines of text. The band begin Thinh Bóng as soon as the scarf is placed over the medium's head which then begins to gyrate or shake. The medium then makes a hand

 $<sup>^2</sup>$  It should be noted that in Vietnamese, music in general - not just chầu văn - may be described as having soul or affecting a person's soul. However, in the case of possession, the effect of chầu văn on the soul seems to take on an added significance.

signal indicating which spirit is being incarnated. The hand signals made by mediums do not 'name' the spirit that is being incarnated, rather they indicate the 'number' and sex of the spirit.<sup>3</sup>

RITUAL TIME: 'ANIMATING' POSSESSION AND 'INCITING' DANCE

If there is no music, you cannot do the work of the spirits. (p.c. Nguyễn Thị Lai, May 1998)

The capacity of music to frame 'experiential time' has been commented upon by a number of authors. Blacking states that the "essential quality of music is its power to create another world of virtual time" (1973:27) and Lysloff argues that the Javanese overture, *talu*, "manipulates subjective time" (Wong and Lysloff 1991:338). From a phenomenological standpoint, Schutz's reflections on how music involves a 'mutual tuning-in process', a sharing of 'inner time', between performer and listener (1977) have also been drawn upon by ethnomusicologists in order to discuss how music affects shared experiences (e.g. Friedson 1996:124-27; Waterman 1990:213-16).

Songscapes performed during lên đồng create a sense of ritual time which enables mediums to carry out ritual action. This was made evident when mediums said they could not do the 'work of the spirits', that is maintain possession and carry out ritual acts, without music. Even those mediums with a particularly 'high aptitude and a heavy fate' who

 $<sup>^{3}</sup>$  If the medium raises her right hand when being possessed by a spirit, the spirit is male, if she raises her left hand the spirit is female. The fingers (and thumb) indicate the 'number' of the spirit. For instance, when the medium raises her right hand with one finger outstretched, the musicians know that a 'first male spirit' is being incarnated. This could either be the First Mandarin, First Prince or First Little Prince, but because the spirits are usually incarnated in sequence following the hierarchy of the pantheon (mother spirits, mandarin spirits, holy lady spirits, prince spirits, lady spirits and little prince spirits), musicians know which male spirit is being incarnated. For spirits whose 'number' is above five, both hands must be raised, otherwise the number of the spirit cannot be indicated. For example, for possessions by the Tenth Prince, the medium raises both hands with all fingers and thumbs outstretched. However, because the sequence of possessions is established by convention, musicians are still able to know which spirit is possessing the medium. Ambiguities do, however, arise when mediums include regional spirits in the pantheon to be incarnated. For example, it is impossible for musicians to know from the hand signal or from the hierarchy of spirits and the sequence of possessions, whether a medium is being possessed by the Second Lady (of the forest) belonging to the four palace pantheon or the regional spirit the Second Lady Cam Dường. If musicians are unsure of the spirit being incarnated, they sometimes use a general invitation for a particular group of spirits.

maintained they could conduct lên dòng rituals without song, admitted that without music possession by the spirits was short-lived. This is not surprising in the light of the correspondence between songs and ritual actions outlined in Chapter 4, especially when music directly dictates the timing of the ritual action (e.g. when drinking cups of rice wine).

When describing the effects of music on possession, mediums said that music made possession 'animated' (bốc) and 'impulsive' (bốc đồng) and that this was one of the main ways in which music shaped ritual time. One medium, for instance, said that music made mediums so 'impulsive' that they could be possessed by spirits 'forever' (māi). The term bốc literally means 'rise up'/'emanate' (e.g. smoke, vapour), but it is also used metaphorically to express 'excess', 'heat' or 'animation' regarding a person's behaviour or character. For example, bốc may be used to describe a person's 'fiery/tumultuous character' (tình hay bốc) or the 'rising up' (bốc lên) of emotion. The compound word bốc đồng - translated as 'impulsive' - is used specifically to refer to the impetuous character of mediums and their behaviour when possessed. Music, then, heightens the 'rising up' of energy when mediums are performing ritual acts and brings out their impulsive character, which is necessary to carry out the work of the spirits.

The 'power' of music to 'animate' possession applies to all ritual acts, but mediums also used a specific term for the effect of music on 'dance' (múa): they said that the rhythm of chầu văn 'incited' (kích động) dance. Conversely, mediums said that possession without music had little or no dance. Although a detailed analysis of the dances of mediums is outside the scope of this thesis, to understand how music 'incites' dance it is necessary to briefly investigate the relationship between the rhythm of chầu văn songs and dance.<sup>4</sup> Discussion of the rhythms used for dance will also illustrate how certain rhythms and dances contribute to the 'traversing' of gender during possession (see Chapter 3).

Mediums usually dance after performing ritual acts of worship or directly after being dressed in the spirit's clothes.<sup>5</sup> In terms of Rouget's classification, the dances that mediums perform during lên dòng are 'figurative' dances "whose function is to manifest the possession state" rather than 'abstract' dances "whose function is to trigger trance" (1985

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Mediums and musicians did not see the vocal and instrumental components of songs as directly relevant to 'inciting' dance, so these elements will not be discussed.

 $<sup>^5</sup>$  A few spirits do not usually dance when incarnated, for example, the First Mandarin and the Lady Thủ Đền.

[1980]:114).<sup>6</sup> These 'figurative' dances are one of the most vivid ways in which the character and gender of spirits is articulated. This was evident from the vibrancy of mediums' dances and the excited reaction they received from ritual participants, especially when the medium was possessed by a spirit of the opposite gender. For instance, during many of the female-spirit dances performed by male mediums that I witnessed, the ritual participants shouted-out compliments (e.g. 'how beautiful' (dep thế)) and terms of reverence (e.g. 'kow-tow' (lay)) to the dancing medium.

The dance performed depends on the spirit incarnated. Most dances are shared between a group of spirits; only a few dances are reserved for individual spirits. Dances are named according to the different ritual objects used for the dance. Table 5.1 lists the most common dances, as well as the song(s) used for each dance and the rhythm used by the song(s).

Dance	Spirit(s)	Song(s)	Rhythm(s)
Lit-rope (múa mồi)	Female spirits belonging to the Mountain and Forest Palace	Xá Múa Mồi	One-beat
Bell-sticks (múa hèo)	Prince spirits and the young prince spirits	Lưu Thủy	Three-beat
Sword (múa kiếm)	Second and Third Mandarin	Lưu Thủy/Trống Chiến	Three-beat/nhịp trống chiến
Sabre (múa đao)	Fifth Mandarin	Lưu Thủy/Trống Chiến	Three-beat/nhịp trống chiến
Fan (múa quạt)	Ninth Lady	Nhịp Một	One-beat
Rowing (múa chè o đò)	Third Lady	Chèo Đò	One-beat

Table 5.1: Spirit dances and percussion rhythms

With the exception of Trống Chiến, which is sometimes played for the sword dances of mandarin spirits and has its own rhythm (nhịp trống chiến), the chầu văn melodies used for dances use two different rhythms. The songs for female-spirit dances use the one-beat rhythm (nhịp một), while those for male-spirit dances use the three-beat rhythm (nhịp ba). Both of these rhythms are used for songs which do not accompany dance, so there are no special 'dance rhythms' which somehow 'trigger' dance when they are

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Rouget also talks of 'mimicry', sometimes as if it is synonymous with figurative dance and at others as a distinct category. The threefold distinction between mimicry, figurative dance and abstract dance is very similar to Royce's distinction between mimetic, abstract and metaphorical dance (1977:204-7).

played.<sup>7</sup> However, both the one-beat rhythm and the three-beat rhythm 'incite' dance when played at the appropriate point in the ritual.

Musicians and mediums consider the one-beat rhythm to be the most 'lively' (linh hoạt) rhythm to dance to and the three-beat rhythm to be 'stately'/'majestic' (oai nghiêm). This is in accordance with the character of the dances for male and female spirits: the dances of female spirits are more 'fun' (vui) than the dances of male spirits. This is especially the case when comparing the dances of female mountain spirits with the 'serious' (nghiêm túc) martial dances (múa võ) of mandarin spirits. However, it should be noted that there is no neat pairing of one-beat rhythm/'female' and three-beat rhythm/'male' when viewing the songscapes of spirits in their entirety: the songscapes for the prince and young prince spirits - who have less high status and are less 'serious' than the mandarin spirits - have songs which use the one-beat rhythm.<sup>8</sup>

No musicians I spoke to specified why the one-beat rhythm was considered to be 'livelier' than the three-beat rhythm, but it is likely that it is due to the one-beat rhythm having a continuously sounded pulse and a strong 'off beat' as opposed to the three-beat rhythm which has one 'empty' beat (see Chapter 1). The fact that the one-beat rhythm consists of a twobeat cycle as opposed to the three-beat rhythm which consists of a fourbeat cycle also contributes to the different 'feel' of the two rhythms. The one-beat rhythm and three-beat rhythm do not have fixed tempi so there is no direct link between 'liveliness' and tempo. However, when the one-beat rhythm is played during mediums' dances it is usually played at a faster tempo than the three-beat rhythm.

When dancing, mediums do not follow a standardised sequence of dance movements, and I will not attempt to describe specific dances in detail. However, there are some basic characteristics of mediums' movements, common to some of the dances of spirits, which can be discussed in relation to the one-beat and three-beat rhythms.<sup>9</sup>

The basic movements of the female-spirit dances and the bell-sticks dances of the prince and young prince spirits all show a direct relationship

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> It is also the case that only some melodies are exclusively performed for dances (e.g. Xá Múa Mồi, Chèo Đò and Trống Chiến), whereas others are not (e.g. Lưu Thủy and Nhịp Một).

 $<sup>^8</sup>$  The use of the one-beat rhythm for the prince and young prince spirits is the only exception: the songscapes of female spirits never use the three-beat rhythm and the songscapes of mandarin spirits never use the one-beat rhythm.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Every medium dances slightly differently, but the relationship between the rhythm of the music and that of the dance was quite similar in the rituals that I attended.

to the rhythm of the percussion, which would seem to be one of the prime ways in which music 'incites' dance.

A core movement of most of the female-spirit dances (except the rowing dance) is a 'jogging step' in which the medium bounces from one foot to the other in time with the pulse of the one-beat rhythm (e.g. see Chapter 4, video extract 15).<sup>10</sup> Arm movements are also usually explicitly linked to the sounded pulse of the one-beat rhythm, for instance, the medium's arms often swing in time with the jogging step. The imitation of boat rowing, which forms the basis of the 'rowing dance', also follows the sounded pulse of the one-beat rhythm. The Chèo Đò melody is performed with a gradual accelerando, and mediums follow the increase in tempo by increasing the speed of their rowing.

The bell-sticks dances of the prince and young prince spirits are linked to the rhythm of the music to the extent that mediums usually contribute to the percussion of the band by beating the two bell-sticks together in time with the sounded beats of the three-beat rhythm. Mediums may also take steps (forward or back) in time with the sounded pulse of the music. It is interesting to note that the three-beat rhythm is sometimes altered for the bell-sticks dances as a result of mediums beating the two bell-sticks together continuously. On such occasions the bell-sticks are struck together on every beat (therefore the crotchet rest of the three-beat rhythm is omitted), and sometimes the musicians follow suit by striking the small cymbal on every beat. This most frequently occurs during possession by the young prince spirits who rank lowest in the hierarchy of spirits. It therefore seems that for the young prince spirits - who have a lower status than male spirits higher in the pantheon - the 'majestic' three-beat rhythm may be abandoned in favour of a more 'lively' continuous sounded pulse, akin to the one-beat rhythm.

The dance movements of the mandarin spirits do not consistently exhibit a direct relationship with the beat of the music. During many of the mandarin dances, mediums usually bob up and down without lifting their feet completely from the ground. This movement is not, however, strictly linked to the pulse of the music: it usually slips in and out of phase with the pulse. Many of the medium's arm movements also do not bear any relationship with the beat of the music. For example, when mediums wield swords there is usually no direct observable reference to the beat given by

 $<sup>^{10}</sup>$  Some mediums do not lift their feet off the ground, but create the same vertical 'bouncing' movement by bending their knees.

the musicians (see Chapter 4, video extract 9). This is also the case when Trống Chiến (War Drums) is played instead of Lưu Thủy for mandarin spirits (see Chapter 4, video extract 1). As the name War Drums suggests, the driving rhythms of Trống Chiến - which consist mainly of a loud, tremololike roles on a large drum and (usually) hand-held gong - evoke the atmosphere of war. Therefore, the music for the military dances of mandarin spirits is not incited by following a specific rhythm. Rather, the rhythms incite dance by creating a majestic or war-like atmosphere that is appropriate for showing military strength.

# CHẦU VĂN POEMS<sup>11</sup>

All the hymns usually begin by stating the spirit (or spirits) implored. They describe their physique, the colour of their clothes; they depict their gestures and stature; they tell of their deeds and movements, their legends .... (Durand 1959:36)

The poems dedicated to each spirit constitute the only 'texts' through which the character and deeds of spirits - which are the basis of the Four Palace Religion - are known.<sup>12</sup> Although some chầu văn poems have been written down and published, many have yet to be compiled and continue to be orally transmitted from generation to generation.<sup>13</sup>

Previous researchers have paid attention to the themes of chầu văn poems, but the poems are discussed in isolation from their use during lên đồng rituals (see Durand 1959:35-44; Simon and Simon-Barouh 1973:58-70; Phan Đăng Nhật 1996:83-110; Bùi Đình Thảo and Nguyễn Quang Hải 1996:44-68). The aim of this section on chầu văn poems is not to provide a survey or analysis of a large corpus of poems. Rather, it examines, as part of discussing the role of music during lên đồng, the importance of words for possession and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> In Vietnamese, the poems dedicated to the spirits are known as văn chầu ('literature for serving'). To avoid confusion with chầu văn, I will refer to văn chầu as 'chầu văn poems' or simply 'poems'.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> See Chapter 1 for a brief introduction to the poetic forms used by chầu văn poems. <sup>13</sup> Maurice Durand's book on Vietnamese mediumship includes a reproduction of 24 poems written by hand in Sino-Vietnamese characters (chữ nôm) and a transcription of the poems in the Romanised script (quốc ngữ) (1959:221-327), but it is unclear when, and by whom, they were first compiled. More recently, other collections have been published (Ngô Đức Thịnh 1996b; Bùi Đình Thảo and Nguyễn Quang Hải 1996:70-142). The authors of a few chầu văn poems written since the 1960s are noted in these published collections, but the vast majority of poems are anonymous. The date when these anonymous poems were written is unknown: chầu văn musicians said that they were devised and amended over many generations.

how poems complement ritual action. Musicians have a great deal of flexibility to choose lines of verse during songscapes, so the arrangement of poems during possession is different at each ritual. The lines of verse outlined below - which were sung for the possession of the Tenth Prince during a ritual held by the medium Nguyễn Thị Lai (labelled as Ritual 1 in Chapter 4) - are one specific example of the arrangement of poems for the Tenth Prince during possession.

The poems of the Tenth Prince (Ritual 1)<sup>14</sup>

When the spirit entered the medium, the band performed Thinh Bóng (Inviting The Spirits). The words used for Thinh Bóng do not explicitly 'invite' the spirit, but they state his name and the places in Vietnam that are associated with him (Nghệ An province is the spirit's home province), thereby 'calling' him back to the human world.

The Tenth Prince defends Nghệ An province, He returns to the district of Thiên Bản to become a mandarin at Phủ Giầy.<sup>15</sup>

The Doc melody performed while the medium gets dressed eulogises about the Tenth Prince's fighting prowess:

Following royal decree, he often visits Nghệ An province. His sacred sword saves the country and protects the people, He fights in the east and north, he commands armies.

When the medium 'waves incense' the band perform the Sai melody. The words of the Sai melody imbue the incense with the military power of the Tenth Prince:

The mark of the incense is like a pen that criticises and orders reluctant generals to protect [the Tenth Prince] and commands armies.

When the medium is imitating writing a poem with an incense stick and a fan, the musicians sing a prelude in free rhythm (Bi Tho) followed by the

 $<sup>^{14}</sup>$  See Chapter 4 for a discussion of the songs performed during Nguyễn Thị Lai's possession by the Tenth Prince.

<sup>15</sup> Phủ Giầy has long been associated with the spirits of the Four Palace Religion and is the site of an annual lên đồng festival.

Nhịp Một melody. The words of these melodies directly relate to the ritual action of the medium:

Bi Thơ His pen orders miracles, The flowers open and bear fruit like spring in heaven, The pen of the Tenth Prince brings peace to the world, Everybody sings the ancient song of peace.

Nhịp Một A fan inscribed with a poem, walking seven steps,<sup>16</sup> No other poems, old or new, compare to those of the Tenth Prince. Recite a sentence from the Lý and Đỗ dynasties, compare old and new poems with his talent, His sacred pen vanquishes evil spirits, The pen of the Tenth Prince 'descends' to write a poem so that everyone is peaceful.

When the medium drinks rice wine, the band perform Phú Chuốc Rượu (Wine-Pouring Phú) which describes the Tenth Prince being offered rice wine. There is a separate verse of the song for each of the three cups of rice wine that the medium drinks. The words of the first two verses are as follows:

The maidens pour the first cup of excellent peach wine, They raise the wine to the Tenth Prince's procession and invite him to drink.

After the first cup, the maidens pour the second and invite him to drink, They raise it to the table for the Tenth Mandarin to drink.

When the medium has finished drinking rice wine, she smokes cigarettes to which the band perform another prelude in free rhythm, Bỉ Thơ. The prelude uses ornate language to describe the heavens:

Peach blossoms are scattered on the path to heavens, where there are celestial streams and where orioles mournfully sing. The beauty of the world is far away, A thousand idle years in the light of the moon.

Bỉ Thơ is followed by two melodies influenced by the musical style of the imperial city of Huế in central Vietnam, Cờn Huế and Hò Huế. These songs are performed while the medium gives out gifts and money to the disciples. The

<sup>16</sup> 'Walking seven steps' refers to a ceremonial way of walking in which kow-tows are made after every seven steps.

following extracts of the song texts poetically describe the Tenth Prince's magical powers and frequently evoke his home province, Nghệ An:

Cờn Huế

People gather at a meeting wearing multicoloured clothes, It is said that the Tenth Prince came and moved people's hearts, The clouds have the red wings of a bird.

The clouds have the red wings of a bird, Can the prince clearly illuminate the human heart? The Ô bridge is built over the Ngân river.

Hò Huế The Tenth Prince in the southern sky [Vietnam], In state affairs and the art of war he is unrivalled.

The light-hearted Tenth Prince casts aside the endless life cycle, Each day his disciples are indebted.

Everybody goes to Nghệ An province, Cross the Bến Thủy bridge and go to the imperial city of the prince.

People flock to the festival at great expense, The Tenth Prince proceeds to the festival accompanied by all the immortal lady spirits.

Just before the spirit leaves the body of the medium, the band sing the Nhip Một melody. The words describe how the First Lady prepares the Tenth Prince's 'return' to the heavens:

Part the golden clouds in the heavens,

The First Lady rides on the back of a bird and parts the golden clouds. The procession of the Tenth Prince crosses the Bến Thủy bridge and returns to Nghệ An province.

At the of the possession the musicians mark the 'return' of the spirit with the following phrase:

The spirit's carriage returns to the palace!

# Poems and possession

The example of the poems sung to the Tenth Prince during Ritual 1 illustrate how, during possession, chầu văn poems evoke the presence of the spirits. This is achieved through 'praising' (ca ngợi) the qualities, miraculous power and deeds of the spirits, and, at some points during the possession, by providing a commentary on the medium's ritual actions. The poems of the spirits also often recall the places in Vietnam where spirits are supposed to have lived and vividly describe the yin spirit world. This serves to remind ritual participants of the spirits' mortal existence, which is briefly re-enacted through possession, and the links between the mortal and spirit worlds.

The poems sung for the Tenth Prince during Ritual 1 provided a commentary on the medium's ritual actions when the spirit was entering and leaving (and preparing to leave) the medium's body, and when the medium was waving incense, imitating writing a poem and drinking rice wine. Such explicit confirmation of some of the medium's ritual actions frequently occurs during possession by other spirits. Other examples include the words to the Chèo Đò (Boat Rowing) melody when the Third Lady is dancing with oars as if rowing a boat, as well as the poems sung to the Nhjp Một melody when lady spirits, such as the Ninth Lady, dance with fans:

Chèo Đò

The lady steps into the boat, (khoan khoan hò khoan), Grab the helm and row, The lady takes the helm, The first strike on the bamboo clappers, On the second strike the lady speeds up, On the third strike she holds the oars, Shout out the rowing call!

Nhịp Một The lady fans to make the mountain flowers bloom, She fans to cool the hearts of mortals, She fans to make the ocean waves calm, She fans to make the moon bright and for it to be shrouded in clouds.

Ritual actions that were not directly referred to by the poems sung during Nguyễn Thị Lai's possession by the Tenth Prince, included when she was being dressed as the spirit and when she was distributing gifts and money. It is during these sections that musicians have the most flexibility in choosing lines of verse from the chầu văn poems. During Lai's possession by the Tenth Prince, the poems praised the spirit's skill at the art of war and his miraculous power to affect people's lives, and portrayed his home province. While these poems do not have any direct bearing on ritual action, they portray the Tenth Prince's character (light-hearted, powerful) and his good deeds (protection, ability to touch people's hearts), which enables ritual participants to relate to the spirit and confirms the spirit's efficacy. The poems sung for the Tenth Prince did not, however, give detailed description of the spirit's physical appearance or of 'legends' associated with the spirit. Descriptions of physical appearance are most common for female spirits<sup>17</sup> and are not always included for male spirits, whereas the 'legends' of spirits do not usually depict specific events in detail. Phan Đăng Nhật's analysis of several poems, which he classifies as 'legendary' (kiểu sự tích), do not mention specific deeds or legends associated with the spirits (1992:84-88). There are, however, some exceptions. The poems for the Fifth Mandarin, for instance, refer to how the Fifth Mandarin defeated the foreign invaders who were in ships on the Tranh river by creating a violent storm:

The Triệu Đà enemy tried to invade, The court ordered soldiers to be deployed. The boats crossing the Tranh river filled the sky, Suddenly a violent storm erupted.

The Tranh river! O, the Tranh river! The reflection of the moon dances on the Tranh river. For thousands of years the sacred spirit has been a glorious hero. Whoever crosses the Tranh river, remember the brilliant warrior.

# THE MUSICAL CONSTRUCTION OF PLACE, GENDER AND ETHNICITY

Martin Stokes has suggested that "music is socially meaningful not entirely but largely because it provides a means by which people recognise identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them" (1994:5). With roots in Barth's analysis of ethnicity, Stokes explores how music both marks out and 'preforms' boundaries - not only geographical boundaries but also the boundaries that define and maintain ethnicity, national identity, and class and gender differences. The idea of boundaries is useful because it denies 'essences' and gives scope for investigating how different social categories overlap. This is particularly important in the chầu văn musical system and the spirit pantheon of the Four Palace Religion, because they involve complex entanglements of place, gender and ethnicity.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> An example of a description of a female spirit's appearance is the following extract from the poems dedicated to the Second Holy Lady:

She has ivory skin and the sparkling eyes of a phoenix,

A fresh face and youthful, silky hair,

She wears rouge and white powder,

Wrists like ivory, a head of platted hair,

The princess of the heavens.

The rest of this chapter examines how, in complement to other ritual activity, chau van articulates the 'boundaries' which establish the place, gender and ethnicity of spirits. How the musical construction of spirits' ethnicity is bound up with national discourse on ethnic minorities in Vietnam is also considered.

Most spirits incarnated during lên đồng rituals have a 'place' in the 'yin' spirit world through belonging to one of the four palaces, as well as associations in the 'yang' human world through having visited, lived in or originated from particular sites in Vietnam. In order to discuss how chàu văn evokes the place, ethnicity and gender of spirits, it is first necessary to give a little background on the links between ethnicity, place and gender in the Vietnamese context.

In the Vietnamese language, there are two opposing expressions of orientation, which when added together account for 'everywhere'. These are miền xuôi meaning 'the lowlands' or 'downstream' and miền núi meaning the 'mountainous regions'. The same polarity is also present in one of the terms for nation, núi sông (lit. 'mountains and rivers'). This has obvious similarities with the opposition of the Mountain and Forest Palace and the Water Palace in the Four Palace Religion.

The prosperous 'downstream' is the heartland of the Việt majority, the Kinh, and the mountains have, at least in the past, been predominantly the domain of so-called 'ethnic minority' groups. In the book *Ethnic minorities in Vietnam*, 54 ethnic minorities are listed (Đặng Nghiêm Vạn et al. 1984). Having set up the diversity of ethnic groups, Đặng Nghiêm Vạn's nationalist discourse combines this diversity again into a "cultural unity" with a "unified core" (ibid:13) with the aim of creating a "higher community", a "community of the Vietnamese nation" (ibid.:9). Ethnic minorities in Vietnam, according to the nationalist project, are incorporated for the good of creating a unified state, with the Việt majority, the Kinh, at the "centre" (ibid.).

Place and ethnicity are therefore explicitly linked through the opposed double pairings of the mountains/ethnic minorities on the one hand, and the lowlands/Kinh on the other. This pairing has a parallel in the chầu văn repertoire through the use of a particular group of melodies, the Xá melodies, for certain spirits that are connected to the mountains and forests. Some of the mountain spirits are also considered to be 'ethnic minority' spirits. For example, the Second Holy Lady is of Dao ethnicity and the Holy Lady Thác Bờ is of Mường ethnicity. For followers of the Four Palace
Religion, the Xá melodies evoke the 'mountains' and the sound of the ethnic minorities that live in the mountainous regions in Vietnam.

However, not all mountain spirits use the Xá melodies: the issue is also complicated by gender. The only two male mountain spirits who are incarnated regularly during lên dòng are the Seventh Prince and the Second Mandarin. Xá melodies are not usually used for these two spirits, except on rare occasions when the songscapes of the Seventh Prince include a Xá melody among many other non-Xá melodies. However, most of the songs performed during possession by the Seventh Prince are non-Xá melodies, unlike the songscapes for female mountain spirits, which are entirely made up of Xá melodies. Therefore, only female spirits are musically constructed as 'mountain' spirits through the use of Xá melodies.<sup>18</sup>

So why are the female mountain spirits, and not male mountain spirits, linked through song to the mountains? In general, female spirits are more explicitly linked to the environment than male spirits. For example, the Third Lady Spirit of the Water Palace is connected to the water, through ritual actions such as rowing down a river, whereas the Third Mandarin of the Water Palace has no such explicit references to the environment.

The close links between female spirits and the environment may stem from the view, outlined by Ngô Đức Thịnh, that "many cosmic and natural phenomena are connected with the female character" (1996a:12), and he gives examples such as 'mother earth', 'mother water' and 'mother rice'. Ngô Đức Thịnh's argument is a version of the classic, male/female culture/nature dichotomies, which seem, to a certain extent, to be embedded in the chầu văn musical system and the behaviour of spirits.

The connections between place, gender and ethnicity outlined so far may be summarised as follows:

Male spirits, female lowland/Kinh spirits = non-Xá melodies Female mountain/ethnic minority spirits = Xá melodies

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> In the case of the Second Lady Cam Đường there is some ambiguity as to whether the spirit is a mountain spirit or not. The Second Lady Cam Đường is a regional spirit, so she is not classified as belonging to one of the four palaces in the 'yin' spiritual world (i.e. she does not belong to the Mountain and Forest Palace or any other palace). The town of Cam Đường, after which the spirit is named, is in Hà Bắc province at the transition between the delta to the South and the mountainous regions to the North. It is therefore open to interpretation whether the Second Lady Cam Đường is a mountain or a lowland spirit: some bands treat her as a mountain spirit and use Xá melodies, whereas others perform non-Xá melodies appropriate for a female lowland spirit.

In addition to the musical construction of female mountain spirits through the use of the Xá melodies, the gender boundary between male spirits and lowland female spirits is musically denoted. Although the songscapes of female lowland spirits have some melodies in common with male spirits (e.g. Doc, Sai, Lưu Thủy), there are certain groups of songs and individual songs which are linked to the gender of spirits. In the broadest terms, female lowland spirits are musically differentiated from male spirits by the use of the Cờn and Phú melodies respectively.<sup>19</sup> Each Cờn and Phú melody has its own different aesthetic, but generalising at the level of the group, the Phú melodies imbue masculinity (nam tính), authority (uy nghi) and seriousness (nghiêm túc) and the Cờn melodies imbue femininity (nữ tính), smoothness (mượt mà) and lyricism (trữ tình). Other melodies which are divided according to the gender of spirits include Vān and Hām, which are sung for lowland female spirits, and Kiểu Dương for male spirits.

Status and age also have a bearing on the division of melodies on gender lines. The Phú melodies and Kiểu Dương are particularly associated with the mandarin spirits, who are the male spirits highest in the hierarchy of the spirit pantheon. The songscapes of prince spirits sometimes include Phú melodies, but many bands favour alternative melodies, such as Nhịp Một, which are less 'serious' than the Phú melodies and therefore more in keeping with the lower status of prince spirits compared to mandarin spirits. Phú melodies are never played for the young prince spirits because they are children (under ten years of age) and therefore cannot assume the same gender position as adult men.

The musical construction of mountain spirits - in contrast to lowland spirits - has already been noted. Apart from this broad division, there are also instances when the 'places' of lowland spirits are more specifically delineated in song. The two main examples of this are the musical construction of the palace, in the 'yin' spirit world, of the Third Lady, and the home province, in the 'yang' human world, of the Tenth Prince. When the Third Lady dances with oars, the musicians sing the Chèo Đò (Boat Rowing) melody, which aurally evokes the Water Palace to which the Third Lady belongs. This is achieved musically through using a rowing call (khoan khoan hò khoan) as a refrain. Songscapes for the Tenth Prince usually

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> There are a few exceptions to this rule. Two Phú melodies Phú Giầu and, extremely rarely, Phú Hạ can be sung for female spirits during lên đồng, but these have been adopted from the repertoire played prior to lên đồng during hát thờ and are not typical Phú melodies (e.g. they both use the two-beat rhythm instead of the three-beat rhythm). Also, Cờn Huế is performed during possession by the Tenth Prince, but this is because of its associations with the musical style of the city of Huế.

include the Hò Huế and Cờn Huế melodies - which draw on the regional musical style of central Vietnam - in order to musically construct the Tenth Prince's home province, Nghệ An.

Song(s)	Spirit(s)	Associations and character of songs
Xá melodies	Female mountain spirits (some of which are 'ethnic minority' spirits)	Mountains/ethnic minorities, lively, happy
Cờn melodies (+ Vãn and Hãm)	Female lowland spirits	Feminine, lyrical, smooth
Phú melodies (+ Kiểu Dương)	Adult male spirits (especially the high- status mandarin spirits)	Masculine, serious, strict
Hò Huế and Cờn Huế	Tenth Prince	Central Vietnam (the city of Hue)
Chèo Đò	Third Lady	Water Palace

Table 5.2: Classification of chầu văn songs according to the gender, place and ethnicity of spirits

Let us now examine the musical features of chầu văn songs that aurally construct the gender, ethnicity and place of spirits.

## 'Mountain' songs

For those participating in lên dòng rituals, the Xá melodies evoke a sense of the mountains and of the ethnic minority groups which are associated with the mountainous regions in Vietnam. According to chàu văn musicians, this was achieved musically through the Xá melodies being influenced by ethnic minority musics.

The main influence of ethnic minority musics on the Xá melodies according to musicians is the use of specific percussion. For the Xá melodies a small gong (thanh la) is placed on the face of a small, two-headed drum. Keys are usually placed on top of the gong so that when the gong is struck there is a metallic rattle. For other melodies a gong is rarely used and is never placed on the drum itself; instead a small cymbal (canh) is placed on the floor. Some musicians said that the use of the small gong was introduced by a chàu văn musician about 60 or 70 years ago after he made visits to the mountainous regions, and that the use of the gong was due to the influence of the gong-chime ensembles played by some ethnic minority groups in Vietnam (e.g. the Mường and Jarai). Whether the use of the gong for the Xá melodies is due to contact with specific ethnic minority groups or not, it is important to note that the gong is used for all Xá melodies, so its use is not restricted to spirits designated as belonging to those ethnic minority groups that play gong-chime ensembles. The use of the gong has therefore been adopted by bands as indicative of a pan-ethnic minority identity.

During some of the lên dòng rituals that I attended, the flautist Lê Tự Cường played a Hmong flute (sáo Hmong) during some of the Xá melodies. The use of the Hmong flute would seem to be an obvious and direct reference to Hmong music. However, Lê Tự Cường learnt to play the Hmong flute through studying neotraditional music at the Hanoi conservatoire.<sup>20</sup> So even though Cường plays the Hmong flute there is no direct use of Hmong melodies or playing techniques. It is also important to note that Cường plays the Hmong flute for ethnic minority spirits that are not of the Hmong ethnicity, for instance the Holy Lady Thác Bờ who is a Mường spirit. This illustrates once more that when musicians play the Xá melodies they are imagining a pan-ethnic minority identity.

The inclusion of the gong and the use, by some flautists, of the Hmong flute are examples of the adoption of certain instruments which are associated with ethnic minorities. However, the Xá melodies do not have any outstanding musical features which might suggest the influence of ethnic minority musical systems.

The only Xá melody which musicians claimed did have links to a specific non-Kinh musical system was Xá Quảng, also known as Xá Bắc (North Xá). It was claimed that Xá Quảng sounded Chinese because it was influenced by Chinese folk songs from the Southern Chinese province of Guangdong, known in Vietnamese as Quảng Đông, yet even in this case musicians were unable to specify musical features as evidence of musical syncretism. The term Quảng entered the Vietnamese musical lexicon in the 1920s when it was used to refer to a body of Cantonese pieces that were incorporated into the cải lương (reformed theatre) repertoire (Phạm Duy 1975:141-43). Any influence of Chinese melodies on Xá Quảng is probably via the Quảng melodies of cải lương. Xá Quảng is usually used for the Little Holy Lady; it is

 $<sup>^{20}</sup>$  Neotraditional music will be discussed briefly in Chapter 7. For detailed studies of neotraditional music see Lê Tuấn Hùng (1998) and Arana (1999).

appropriate because the temple dedicated to her - Bắc Lê temple - is in Northeast Vietnam near the Vietnamese-Chinese border.

With the exception of Xá Quảng, musicians did not claim that individual Xá melodies had been directly influenced by specific non-Kinh musical systems. Indeed, the vocal ornamentation, song structure and pitches of the Xá melodies do not stand out as particularly unique compared to other chầu văn songs. Instead, musicians claimed that the Xá melodies had the 'colour' (bản sắc) and 'atmosphere' (không khí) of the ethnic minority groups in Vietnam and, by extension, the mountainous regions in Vietnam. The lack of specific music influences of particular ethnic minority musics indicates that the musical evocation of the 'ethnic minorities' is largely *imagined*. This imagined relationship takes the form of trying to evoke the atmosphere of the mountains and a pan-ethnic minority identity that is associated with the mountains.

Chầu văn musicians said that the Xá melodies were 'happy' (vui) and 'lively' (sôi nổi) and that this suited the character of the mountain spirits. When I started to learn chầu văn, I began with a Xá melody because it was considered the 'easiest' (dễ nhất) and 'simplest' (đơn giản nhất). It was noted above, in relation to the dances performed during rituals, that the one-beat rhythm is considered to be the most 'lively' rhythm; the use of the gong and keys placed on top of the drum during the Xá melodies emphasises this liveliness even more.<sup>21</sup> Also, as all the Xá melodies use the one-beat rhythm, the songscapes for the female mountain spirits are 'lively' throughout. This is in contrast to the intermittent use of the one-beat rhythm during the songscapes for lowland female spirits, prince spirits and young prince spirits.

The happy, lively and simple character of the Xá melodies fits with the image portrayed by the actions of the mediums when the mountain spirits enter them. When a mountain spirit is incarnated, the medium wears ethnic minority costume, dances energetically and is generally more vivacious than when other spirits are incarnated. Female mountain spirits also distribute natural products to the disciples, such as fruit, rather than

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> The difference in the use of the percussion for the Xá melodies has led some researchers to make a distinction between a 'Mountain Xá rhythm' (nhịp Xá Thượng) and the one-beat rhythm: "this rhythm [nhịp Xá Thượng] is similar to the one-beat rhythm but has a different timbre (âm sắc)" (Ngô Đức Thịnh 1992:60). However, because the basic rhythm of the Xá melodies is identical to the one-beat rhythm - although there are differences in the rhythmic variations of the one-beat rhythm when it is used for Xá melodies and non-Xá melodies - the distinction seems unnecessary. Also, musicians frequently referred to the rhythm played during the Xá melodies as the one-beat rhythm.

packaged food and drink which are distributed by other spirits, thus emphasising the female mountain spirits' connection with nature. The Xá melodies, then, along with the behaviour and dress of the female mountain spirits, promote a feminised pan-ethnic minority stereotype of natural, happy, simple, colourful and lively ethnic minorities.

#### Reflections on the Xá melodies, national discourse and ethnicity

Drawing on Homi Bhabha and others, Peter Wade has recently argued that a "nationalist project does not just try to deny, suppress or even simply channel an unruly diversity; it actively reconstructs it" (1998:3). Wade tries to move beyond the idea of a homogenising elite and an opposing diversifying subaltern, rather he argues that diversity is part and parcel of nation-building and is (re)constituted through it (ibid.:4). It was noted above that Đặng Nghiêm Vạn's nationalist discourse concerning ethnic minorities in Vietnam argues that it is necessary to create a 'higher Vietnamese community', yet it does so by implicitly acknowledging diversity. According to the Vietnamese nationalist agenda, ethnic minorities are not characterised as a troublesome subaltern. Rather, diversity is a necessary prerequisite of, and mediated through, the project of nation-building.

Understanding how diversity is embedded in national discourse opens up the way for examining how "a given style of music can be seen as a national unity and a diversity" (ibid.:16). Wade argues that Costeño music in Columbia can both "constitute the nation" and "constitute the Costeños as a regional group", depending on the "processes of imagining" by those engaged with the music (ibid.). The Columbian material illustrates the general point that music does not simply 'represent' or 'reflect' a particular social group. Instead, music is seen as constitutive of identity and its 'representational role' is flexible and contextual.<sup>22</sup>

Processes of imagining that mediate unity and diversity are also at work in regard to the use of Xá melodies during incarnations of the female mountain spirits. The previous section discussed how musical representations of ethnic minority music in chau văn are largely imagined and based on an idea of a pan-ethnic minority identity that merges

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> The move to viewing music as constitutive of identity, as opposed to representing a pre-existing identity, is evident in much recent writing on music and identity (e.g. Waterman 1990; Frith 1996 and Stokes 1994).

differences between ethnic minority groups. This implies unity with little diversity: chầu văn subsumes the diversity of ethnic minority musics within the frame of a Việt musical system. Such a position suggests that ethnic minority culture is subject to a process of homogenisation by the Việt majority.

A different reading of the representation of ethnic minority groups during lên dồng argues that ethnic diversity is celebrated, not homogenised. In the book *Hát văn* it is argued that lên đồng represents a unified Vietnamese community, which includes a diversity of ethnic minority groups:

There are a number of spirits of the Mường, Tày, Nùng, Dao and Cham ethnicities especially among the holy lady spirits ... the dress and way of dancing of the holy lady spirits as well as the song texts and the hát văn [i.e. chầu văn] melodies sung are characteristic of different ethnicities .... In feudal society the Việt majority, who had a higher social and economic level than the ethnic minorities, had an ideology which discriminated against other ethnic groups in all social relations. However, ... in the religious beliefs of the four palaces we find the spirit of equality; there is no discrimination against any other nationalities. Because of this, the activities of hát văn and lên dòng contribute to cultural exchange and increase understanding between different ethnicities. (Ngô Đức Thịnh 1992:140)

According to this narrative, lên đồng is a vehicle for cultural exchange between different ethnic groups in Vietnam and contributes to national unity *through* diversity. Clearly, such an argument is strikingly similar to that used by nationalist discourse. However, it should be noted that the adoption of nationalist arguments by researchers at the Folk Culture Institute, who contributed to the book *Hát văn*, is primarily motivated by a concerned with providing a positive interpretation to lên đồng in the light of it being condemned as 'superstitious'.<sup>23</sup> Interpreting lên đồng and chầu văn as multiculturalist is therefore one way in which folk culture researchers have attempted to legitimate lên đồng and their research. Publicly stated arguments suggesting that lên đồng contributes to national unity, whether by subsuming or celebrating ethnic differences, would have been inconceivable during the vigorous implementation of the anti-superstition campaign (see Chapter 7). Indeed, contemporary critics of lên dồng still see those Việt people that participate in lên đồng as a troublesome diversity.

Discussion of the representation of ethnic minority music and identity during lên dòng would obviously benefit from an investigation into what

 $<sup>^{23}</sup>$  The anti-superstition campaign and the role of Vietnamese researchers in the production of a discourse that legitimates lên dòng will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

different ethnic minority groups think of the Xá melodies and the ethnic minority spirits incarnated during lên đồng. Unfortunately, however, the voices of the 'represented' will have to remain silent until further research is carried out. Nevertheless, I hope to have demonstrated that there are different possible readings of the representation of ethnic minority groups and their music. Chầu văn and lên đồng may therefore be said to involve differing and contested processes of imagining.

## 'Male' and 'female' songs

It has been noted that chầu văn musicians and other ritual participants consider the Cờn melodies to sound 'feminine' because they are soft, lyrical and smooth, whereas they consider the Phú melodies to sound 'masculine' because they are heavy, authoritative and serious. But how is this musical effect created? Are there specific musical features that are designated as masculine and feminine? Table 5.3 lists a number of musical traits that often differentiate male and female songs.<sup>24</sup>

Songs for female spirits	Songs for male spirits
Two-beat rhythm	Three-beat rhythm
Verses made up of short vocal phrases with no instrumental sections between phrases	Verses made up of long vocal phrases with instrumental sections between phrases
Minimal melisma	Extended melisma
Little syncopation	Highly syncopated
Each verse of a song concludes with the same phrase sung to vocables	Verses do not usually end with a repeated phrase sung to vocables
Full instrumental accompaniment to the vocal line	Sparse instrumental accompaniment to the vocal line
May be sung in unison by more than one person	Solo voice

Table 5.3: Musical traits of 'male' and 'female' songs

Although the musical traits outlined above illustrate how 'feminine' and 'masculine' melodies differ, it is difficult to link these to culturally defined conceptions of masculinity and femininity. For instance, there is nothing inherent in the two-beat or the three-beat rhythm which is 'feminine' or 'masculine' respectively, and the two-beat rhythm is, in any case, used by

 $<sup>^{24}</sup>$  There is no obvious distinction in the scales and ornaments used by the songs for male and female spirits.

other melodies that are performed for both male and female spirits. Chầu văn musicians did, however, consider the three-beat rhythm to be less 'tight' (chặt chē) than the two-beat rhythm, thus enabling greater rhythmic flexibility in the rhythm of the vocal line and more syncopation. As a result of the greater rhythmic flexibility of melodies sung to the three-beat rhythm, two or more singers are unable to sing the songs for male spirits in unison as is possible for the songs for female spirits, and the instrumental accompaniment to the voice is sparser for the songs for male spirits than for those for female spirits. The greater independence of the vocal line of songs for male spirits could be suggestive of male 'authority', which was purportedly a characteristic of male melodies, but my music teachers did not explicitly make such an assertion. The only link that was made by musicians was that the songs for female spirits are more 'lyrical', and hence more feminine, than the songs for male spirits. According to musicians, the songs are more lyrical because most have short phrases sung to vocables at the end of verses, and because they do not include long, drawn-out melismas.

### The Huế melodies: Hò Huế and Cờn Huế

Hò Huế and Cờn Huế are recognised by ritual participants as evoking the musical style of central Vietnam, particularly the imperial city of Huế. They are played in order to musically evoke the home province, the central province of Nghệ An, of the Tenth Prince. Hò is a generic term for a large body of folk songs found throughout Vietnam. They are particularly known for being sung while performing some act of labour, especially rowing, but some Hò songs are also love songs and others are performed at festivals (Phạm Duy 1975:27-47). Hò Huế is not a direct adoption of a Hò folk song from the city of Huế: it was devised in the 1980s by a chầu van musician, Đoàn Đức Dan, who tried to capture some of the characteristics of the Huế musical style.<sup>25</sup> Some musicians said that Cờn Huế was a type of Cờn melody used by chầu văn musicians in central Vietnam, although further research is necessary to substantiate this claim.

The features of Hò Huế and Cờn Huế which my teachers outlined as being characteristic of the Huế musical style were: pronouncing the words with

 $<sup>^{25}</sup>$  Innovations to the chầu văn repertoire made by Đoàn Đức Đan and other musicians will be discussed in Chapter 8.

the dialect characteristic of Huế, and the use of a very wide vibrato. More detailed analysis would require a study of the Con and Ho folk songs from central Vietnam, which is outside the scope of this thesis. However, it is worth pointing out some of the striking similarities between Ho Huế and one of the most famous folk songs from central Vietnam, Hò Mái Nhì, in order to illustrate the influence of the central Vietnamese musical style on Hò Huế. Hò Mái Nhì consists of a long recitation in free rhythm which according to Trần Văn Khê (1996) uses the modal scale: hò [G], xư non (A-), xang gìa [C+], xế non [D-], cong non [E-], liu [G]. The same scale is also used by Ho Hué. Before the percussion begins playing the one-beat rhythm, Hò Huế is usually preceded by an introductory recitation in free rhythm that is highly reminiscent of Hò Mái Nhì. This is particularly evident during sustained phrases sung to a nonsense syllable which make great use of long glissandi between pitches and a wide vibrato. These similarities are illustrated by comparing the initial vocal phrase of Hò Huế (CD#3, Ex. 3) with that of Hò Mái Nhì (CD#4, Ex. 3).

### CONCLUSION

Music has multiple roles during lên đồng. Music enables possession through inviting the spirits; it structures ritual time and action; it constructs the ethnicity, gender and place of the spirits. The words of chầu văn songs also make a significant contribution to possession and ritual action through praising and describing the spirits, depicting their 'places' and providing a commentary for ritual action.

The place, gender and ethnicity of the spirits is musically constructed through the use of different songs for female mountain spirits, female lowland spirits and male spirits. The Xá melodies that are used for female mountain spirits (some of which are ethnic minority spirits) convey the atmosphere of the mountains through evoking the music of the ethnic minority groups in Vietnam. However, the relationship between the Xá melodies and ethnic minority musics is largely imagined.

For spirits to descend and possess the medium, they must be aurally invited. Music makes possession possible because it affects the 'heart-soul' of the possessee which is central to possession: both spirits and music affect the heart-soul of mediums. Once the spirit has possessed the medium, music makes ritual action more 'animated' and 'incites' dance; without "sweet playing and interesting singing" (dan ngọt hát hay), possession is short-lived.

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The power of music to 'socialise' possession has been acknowledged as an important aspect of why music is necessary for a 'happy' and 'successful' ritual, but we have seen how music is not just a means by which the possessee and other ritual participants identify with the spirits. Instead, music, in complement with other aspects of ritual practice, actively 'makes' the spirits' presence. Just as possessed mediums must wear the spirits' clothes and carry out their 'work', so must the spirits be 'immersed' in their music. By constructing the contrasting histories, personalities and 'places' of spirits, music enforces the subject positions mediums assume during possession. Music during lên dòng may therefore be understood as being transformative: chàu văn songs enable mediums to 'cross' between the human and spiritual worlds, and to 'traverse' gender and ethnicity boundaries.

## CHAPTER 6

# FINDING THE 'WAY'

Chầu văn songs are often referred to by musicians as 'ways' (lối), instead of as 'melodies' (giai điệu) or 'songs' (bài hát).<sup>1</sup> The Vietnamese term lối has much the same meanings as 'way' does in English. It can refer to: a path or track; a course of movement or travel; or, a manner or style of doing something. Each chầu văn 'way' has an unlimited number of possible realisations.<sup>2</sup> The fluidity of each 'way' is evident at a number of different levels. First, there are differences between successive renditions of a 'way' (with the same words) by a single musician. Second, renditions of the same 'way' (with the same words) by different musicians differ. Third, the vocal line changes when the verse of a 'way' is sung with different texts.

Despite the differences in the vocal contour each time a song is performed, every realisation has the same direction or movement - a 'way' in common. Musicians consider every realisation of a song to be the 'same' because, if sung correctly, each performance conforms to the same 'way' (i.e. the identity of the song is preserved).

The creation of numerous realisations of the same piece is common to both Thai and Vietnamese music traditions: just as every realisation of a chầu văn 'way' has a different melodic contour, so does every realisation of a Thai 'composition' (*phleen*). After stating that "the distinction between a particular 'composition' (*phleen*) and each of the many possible 'ways' (*thaan*) of playing that composition is perhaps the most fundamental concept in Thai music", Silkstone describes Thai musicians' use of *thaan*: "It can refer to many specific 'ways', such as the 'way' of playing (i.e. 'style') appropriate to each instrument ... or the 'way' of playing (i.e. 'style') that characterises one musician's performances on one instrument" (1993:16).

The literal meanings of lối are the same as the Thai word *thaan*, but they have different musical meanings. Lối is used to refer to chầu văn songs themselves - e.g. the Phú Nói way (lối Phú Nói) - rather than the different 'way of playing' or method of realising a composition. Also, unlike the use

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> In addition to lối, the compound word lè lối was also occasionally used. To avoid confusion I will continue to use the terms 'song' and 'melody' and will only use the term 'way' when making a specific point about the fluidity of chầu văn songs.
<sup>2</sup> During the process of learning chầu văn songs, I found that thinking of them as 'ways' had resonance because it neatly captures their fluid nature.

of the term *thaan* by Thai musicians, Vietnamese musicians did not use lối to refer to the musical 'style' of particular musicians; the expression 'each person has their own style' (mỗi người một kiểu) - where kiểu is rendered as 'style' - was often used by chầu văn musicians in order to point out the uniqueness of each musician's performance style.

When musicians talk about 'grasping a way' (nắm vững lối) they are referring to the internalisation of the underlying melodic shape of a song. But what constitutes a 'way'? What do musician's 'grasp' and conform to when singing different texts to the same song? Is it something that musicians are aware of and can articulate?

My teachers Ty and Hung had different responses to these questions. Ty said that there was a 'basic melody' (giai điệu dơn giản) or 'general melody' (giai điệu chung) common to the verses of a song. To explain this he pointed out 'axis notes' (nốt trúc) or 'main notes' (nốt chính) around which the melody was based, but he could not sing a version of a general melody for particular songs. Hưng said that each song had a 'backbone' (xương sống) which every verse of a song conformed to, despite differences in the melodic contour of the vocal line.<sup>3</sup> The backbone to a song is not realised in any actual performance, rather, a backbone, for Hưng, is 'a model in his mind' (khuôn mẫu trong dầu mình) which guides all his performances. Furthermore, Hưng could sing the backbones to songs.

The terms 'basic' and 'general' melody were 'made up' by Ty in response to my questions. Admittedly, I subjected Hung to the same questioning, but when I discussed the term 'backbone' with other chầu văn musicians some were familiar with it, although they could not sing the backbones as Hung was able to. Another term that was also mentioned by some musicians (though not chầu văn musicians) to refer to the 'core' melodic shape of a piece was lòng bản (lit. 'guts of a piece'). I will adopt the term backbone in the following analysis.<sup>4</sup> However, it should be emphasised that the term backbone is not used by all chầu văn musicians (nor Vietnamese musicians in general).

The idea of a backbone to songs which exists in the mind of the performer has striking parallels with Sumarsam's suggestion of an 'inner melody' in Javanese gamelan (1975). Prior to Sumarsam's paper, Javanese

 $<sup>^3</sup>$  Xương sống was sometimes shortened to xương, which means 'bones'.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The term backbone has been used by some contemporary composers in the West. The composer and performer Peter Wiegold has called a type of prescriptive score a 'backbone' and other composers, such as Tim Steiner, have also employed the method (Steiner 1992). In this context, backbones are written by a composer and used as the focus of collaboration between the 'composer' and one or more 'performers'.

music researchers (such as Hood and Kunst) had thought that the 'skeleton', 'nuclear theme' or 'fixed melody' (*balungan*) of a Javanese *gendhing* (composition) was simply played on one of the instruments of the gamelan, the *saron*. However, Sumarsam asserted that the *balungan* "was not necessarily played" by the *saron* because of its limited range of only six or seven pitches (1975:5). He suggested, instead, that "it is the individual musicians' conception of the melody, sung audibly or in their minds, that directs the melodic motion" and he called this "melodic conception 'inner melody'" (ibid.:7). Sumarsam also claims that the inner melody results from the sum of different conceptions of the piece by different musicians:

Each musician has to coordinate his conception of the inner melody with the range of his instrument and its performing technique when creating melodic patterns for a *gendhing*. The inner melody is not played by any particular instrument, but all instruments in the ensemble are inspired by it. Inner melody is the spirit of the ensemble. (ibid.:12)

Like the inner melody of a *gendhing*, a backbone is a model in the musician's mind that guides performances. Whether or not, for large chầu văn bands, there is a synthesis of individuals' backbones to form a 'collective backbone' - just as the inner melody is the sum of different musicians conceptions - is not investigated here. The optional status of pitched instruments (in addition to the moon lute) in the chầu văn band and the predominance of the vocal line suggest, in any case, that the idea of a collective backbone is not central to chầu văn. Nevertheless, further research and analysis of chầu văn song performances, which include additional pitched instruments, could be carried out to test such a hypothesis.

This chapter aims to investigate the process by which chầu văn musicians create new vocal lines while still maintaining the basic identities of songs. This is achieved through analysis of the differences and similarities between several verses of two songs as performed by Ty and Hung.

The first part of the chapter is concerned with what gives a song its identity. The melodic contour which remains constant throughout every performance of a song by an individual musician is abstracted from multiple performances of the song with different texts. I have called the sequence of pitches which are invariant in the different verses of a chàu văn song by a single musician an 'abstracted backbone'. Ty and Hung's abstracted backbones for a song are then considered in relation to the backbone that Hung sang (Hung's backbone). The second part of the chapter gives an account of the differences in the melodic contour of the vocal line when different texts are sung. The variation in melodic contour of different verses of a song were explained by chầu van musicians as being due to the effect of the speech tones of the text: in order for the song texts to be intelligible, the melodies had to reflect the speech tones. How speech tones affect the melodic contour is therefore examined.

It is important to emphasise that abstracted backbones are derived from analysis and are not an emically enunciated blue-print that exists in the mind of a performer (in the manner of Hung's backbone). We shall see, however, that the abstracted backbones are, in fact, quite similar to Hung's backbone. As abstracted backbones are an implicit sequence of pitches which are always observed by individual chầu văn musicians, they might also have been called 'abstracted melodies', a term which has been used by Giuriati in his analysis of Khmer music (1988; 1995). Giuriati identifies an abstracted melody which "even though implicit and not performed as a melody by an instrument is always respected by the performers and which constitutes the foundation for group improvisation". The term abstracted backbone has been used in this analysis because it is an extension of a Vietnamese term and because there are differences between abstracted backbones and Giuriati's abstracted melodies (i.e. abstracted backbones are a synthesis of different verses of the same piece sung by the same musician, whereas Giuriati's abstract melodies are abstracted from the different parts of the Khmer ensemble and are the basis of 'group improvisation').

## TRANSCRIPTIONS, BACKBONES AND ABSTRACTED BACKBONES

Two of the best-known songs from the Phú group, Phú Bình and Phú Nói, have been chosen for transcription: the Phú group of songs are among the most fluid of the chầu văn repertoire, so they provide the most interesting examples for analysis. All of the recordings transcribed were conducted outside the ritual context.<sup>5</sup> In the first recording session at a small studio in

 $<sup>^{5}</sup>$  Such controlled settings for recording had the advantage of enabling me to ask both Ty and Hung to sing the same words. It also ensured that the recordings did not have too much background noise for ease of transcription. I requested Hung to sing at the same pitch level as Ty so that the transcriptions of recordings did not need to be transposed.

Hanoi on 22 June 1997, Ty sang while accompanying himself on the moon lute and percussion was played by Pham Quang Đạt. In the second recording session at Hưng's home on the outskirts of Hanoi on 20 July 1998, Hưng sang while accompanying himself on the moon lute and the percussion was played by a musician known as Chén. Pitched instruments in addition to the moon lute, which are sometimes included in rituals are not present on the recordings.

Six verses of Phú Bình and Phú Nói have been transcribed: for Phú Bình three verses by Ty (CD#5) and Hưng (CD#7), and for Phú Nói four verses by Ty (CD#9) and two verses by Hưng (CD#11). For Phú Bình, the texts used by Ty and Hưng are the same (with just a few word changes). The texts are dedicated to the Third Mandarin and are often used when the Third Mandarin is incarnated during lên đồng. The use of the same texts by different musicians enables a direct comparison between renditions by Ty and Hưng. For Phú Nói, the first two verses by both performers use the same texts as the first two verses of Phú Bình. The third and fourth verses (verses will be referred to as v.1, v.2 etc.) of Phú Nói performed by Ty use texts dedicated to the Third Mother.<sup>6</sup>

The multiple performances of the phrases of each song (and the intermediary step to the abstracted melodies to be discussed below) have been arranged vertically, as a synoptic score, to enable direct visual comparison. The synoptic score for Phú Bình and Phú Nói have been labelled Ex. 4 and Ex. 5 respectively (see Appendix IV).

In addition to the six verses of Phú Bình and Phú Nói, one repeat performance of v.1 of Phú Bình by Hưng (CD#8) has been transcribed on the bottom staff of the synoptic score. The recording was made during a lesson with Hưng on 20 January 1997: Hưng sings and accompanies himself on the moon lute while I keep the basic rhythm on the small cymbal (thanh Ia). The transcription has been raised approximately a semitone so that the pitch level is the same as the other transcriptions.

A glance at the two renditions of v.1 of Phú Bình by Hưng shows that the differences are relatively small compared with the differences between verses of songs: the rhythmic detail often varies but the melodic contour is much the same. A detailed comparison of the repeat performance is not included here, because this chapter is concerned with the more dramatic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> During lên đồng, Phú Bình and Phú Nói are never sung during possession by female spirits. Phú melodies that are reserved for male spirits during lên đồng are, however, sung to praise female spirits during 'singing at the altar' (hát thờ) sessions, which are sung prior to lên đồng rituals.

variation between different verses of songs and the effect of speech tones on the melodic contour.

The transcriptions use (slightly modified) Western staff notation. Horizontal arrows above notes indicates that the note is slightly delayed or anticipated. Smooth glissandi between pitches are notated by a straight line between note heads; glissandi between pitches which include a tense vibrato are notated with a zigzag between note heads. Ty and Hung used the term luyến láy<sup>7</sup> to refer to vocal ornamentation in general and the term rung for vibrato;<sup>8</sup> they made no further distinctions between different types of vocal ornaments.<sup>9</sup>

In the book *Hát văn* a number of terms to describe vocal quality are listed: hơi óc (head nuance), hơi mũi (nose nuance), hơi đan điền (stomach nuance), hơi trong (cheek nuance) (Ngô Đức Thịnh 1992:64). These terms are, however, of little importance for chầu văn musicians, and are difficult to link to specific vocal timbres used when singing chầu văn. The only difference in vocal timbre notated in the transcriptions is the use of a cross as a note head for syllables that are half spoken, half sung (somewhat like sprechstimme).

Non-semantic vowels, which will be referred to as 'vocables', are often used between different words of the text. In the transcription these have been written as the Vietnamese vowels i and  $\sigma$  and have been placed in brackets so that they are not mistaken as part of a word. These two vowels are rough approximations of what the singers actually sing, but the inclusion of finer detail is not necessary for the analysis.<sup>10</sup>

The Phú songs transcribed all use the three-beat rhythm (nhịp ba). The basic three-beat rhythm, which consists of three beats on the small cymbal (cảnh) followed by one beat rest, has been outlined in Chapter 1. Specific bars of the transcriptions will be referred to as b.1, b.2 etc.. The transcriptions divide the verses of the songs into separate phrases (which

 $<sup>^7</sup>$  Nguyên Thuyết Phong translates luyến láy as 'combined ornaments' and graphically represents it as an irregular zigzag (1998:464).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Vibrato is occasionally used during songs but has not been notated in the score.
<sup>9</sup> There are, however, a number of different terms for ornaments on the moon lute.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> The use of vocables in chèo is discussed by Hoàng Kiều (1974). He states that a, i-a and oi-a are used for "happy" pieces or in "high passages", whereas i is used for more "relaxed", "lyrical" pieces that are "light" or "sad" in character (ibid.:21-22). The vocable  $\sigma$  is described as having a "long and big resonance" (ibid.:22). Chầu văn musicians did not make explicit connections between vocables and emotions. For chầu văn songs the choice of vowel - as Ty and Hưng's renditions of Phú Nói and Phú Bình illustrate - seems to depend more on the preference of the musician rather than the aesthetic of the song.

will be referred to as p.1, p.2 etc.). Usually phrases are separated in performances by an instrumental section (luu không) or a few beats rest in the vocal line.

As mentioned above, a sequence of pitches have been abstracted from the transcriptions of Ty and Hung's performances which will be referred to as Ty's abstracted backbone (TAB) and Hung's abstracted backbone (HAB). The abstracted backbones consist of those pitches that occur in every verse of the song as performed by each musician, i.e. that which is consistent through the diversity of the different verses. In a few cases, pitches that occur in more than one verse, but not every verse, are included in the abstracted backbones and are placed in brackets. Rhythm has not been incorporated into the abstracted backbones because the rhythmic complexity is such that recurring patterns cannot be clearly ascertained. The only rhythmic distinction that has been made is the difference in relative duration between long and short pitches, which is indicated by empty note-heads and filled in note-heads respectively. As only relative duration is notated and because the abstracted backbones are a synthesis of several verses, no barlines are used for the abstracted backbones. The pitches of the backbones are spatially arranged so that the relationship between the backbones and the different renditions is as clear as possible. At the end of phrases, there are sometimes two alternative melodic contours. The backbone scores include these alternative 'end-patterns' and they are labelled as '1' and '2' on the score. The backbone that Hung sang for Phú Bình (CD#6) and Phú Nói (CD#10) is notated above Hung's abstracted melodies and is labelled as 'Hung's backbone'. As Hung only sang the backbone for each song once, there is only one end-pattern to each phrase (labelled as '1').

As it is difficult to immediately see the similarities between different verses of the songs, an 'intermediary step' has been notated so that the relationship between the melodic contours of different versions is more apparent. Above each transcription of the vocal phrases as sung by Ty and Hung, the pitches in the vocal line are written without the notation of rhythm, i.e. no note stems are used. As with the abstracted backbones only relative, short and long duration is indicated. The absence of rhythmic detail in the intermediary step makes it easier to see the relationship between the abstracted backbones and transcriptions of the verses of the songs. Dotted barlines are used simply to maintain the coherence of the synoptic transcription: they do not indicate metrical divisions. The intermediary step also includes information about the speech tones of syllables. When a pitch is sung to a syllable, the speech tone mark of the syllable is indicated above the note head. No tone marks are given for pitches sung to vocables because they do not have speech tones. In cases when a syllable is sung with a melisma the note heads are linked with a phrase mark and the symbol for the speech tone is placed above it.<sup>11</sup> The symbols used to indicate speech tones are the same as the diacritics used in written Vietnamese (see 'Pronunciation guide') with the addition of an L for the level tone (which has no diacritic in the written script).

# COMPARISON OF THE BACKBONE AND ABSTRACTED BACKBONE OF $PH\dot{U}$ Bình<sup>12</sup>

For ease of comparison and analysis, each phrase of Hung's backbone (HB) and abstracted backbone (HAB), and Ty's abstracted backbone (TAB) has been taken from the original synoptic score (Ex. 4) and written so that all the backbone/abstracted backbone phrases can be seen on one sheet (Ex. 6). Each phrase of Hung's backbone and the abstracted backbones have the same rising motif (labelled motif x) of a glissando from a short c' to a long d'. Motif x is therefore a point at which every phrase converges. The only minor variation to motif x appears in TAB3 (i.e. Ty's abstracted backbone, phrase 3) where there is no glissando between the two pitches.

Motif x is sometimes preceded by other pitches (see TAB2, HAB2, HB3, HAB3, HB4, TAB6, HB6 and HAB6). Comparing Ty and Hung's abstracted backbones, the pitches prior to motif x are the same for phrase 6 and only slightly different for phrases 2 and 3. There are greater differences between the pitches prior to motif x between Hung's backbone and abstracted backbone. For instance, HB2 and HAB4 have no pitches prior to motif x, whereas HAB2 has a glissando from pitch c' to pitch f' and HB4 includes the pitches a and d.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> When there is an extended melisma, there is usually a change from the syllable to a vocable so it is clear when the pronunciation of the syllable finishes. There are some cases, however, where there is ambiguity as to where the melisma of a syllable terminates. This is particularly the case with words that end with vowel sounds, most notably i, which is frequently used as a vocable. For example, during Hung's performance of Phú Bình (p.1, v.1, b.3) it is difficult to assess whether the vowel i, indicated in brackets after the syllable nổi, is an extension of the syllable or a vocable. Having discussed the issue with Hung in June 1998, I will assume that the syllable is pronounced over the duration of the initial melodic direction and that the melisma continues with a vocable (see the 'Tonal inflection' section below).

 $<sup>^{12}</sup>$  A comparison of the Phú Nói backbones has been omitted to avoid unnecessary length and repetition.

As Hung's backbone is a transcription of one rendition there is only one end-pattern to each phrase. For the abstracted backbone phrases that have two alternative end-patterns, end-pattern 2 is a truncated form of endpattern 1 (see backbones for phrases 1, 3, 4 and 5). Therefore, although the phrases of HB only have one end-pattern, the alternative end-patterns of TAB and HAB are usually both encompassed by the HB end-pattern. The choice of end-pattern is clearly determined by the speech tone of the final word of the phrase (see below).

There are differences for most phrases in the melodic contour of endpatterns of Ty and Hung's abstracted backbones (compare for instance, endpattern '1' of TAB1 with that of HAB1). There are also slight differences in the end-patterns of HAB and HB. The rise to c' in HAB2, for example, replaces the stepwise descent down the pentatonic scale in the end-pattern of HB2. Note, however, that the end-pattern of Hung's repeat performance of Phú Bình v.1, performed over a year earlier, concurs with his backbone.

The end-patterns for phrases 4 and 6 (and for HB2) come immediately after motif x. But for the other phrases (1, 2, 3 and 5) there are 'linking pitches' (or sometimes just one pitch) between motif x and the end-pattern.<sup>13</sup> These linking pitches have been square-bracketed and labelled with a 'y'. The linking pitches of the backbone and abstracted backbones of phrase 1 are very similar, as are those of phrase 3. The linking pitches of the backbone and abstracted backbones of phrases 2 and 5 differ to a greater extent. HB2 includes no linking pitches, but the phrase 2 abstracted backbones do include at least one linking pitches than HAB5 and TAB5, which have just one linking pitch.

Through the analysis of abstracted backbones it has been shown that there is a melodic contour which is adhered to for every verse of a chầu văn song. There is also a high degree of convergence both between Ty and Hưng's abstracted backbones and the abstracted backbones and Hưng's backbone. However, there are slight differences between Ty and Hưng's abstracted backbones which demonstrates how individual musicians' conception (and realisation) of songs differs to a certain extent.<sup>14</sup> The

<sup>13</sup> The notion of 'linking pitches' is not derived from a Vietnamese term. It should not to be confused with the instrumental 'linking phrases' (xuyên tâm), discussed in Chapter 1, which are used to link vocal phrases of songs.

 $<sup>^{14}</sup>$  Although Ty and Hung did not learn chầu văn from the same group of musicians and do not perform together in the same chầu văn bands, they are both Hanoi-based musicians of the same generation. Performances of songs by chầu văn musicians from

comparison of Hung's backbone - as a 'model in his mind' - and his abstracted backbone illustrates that Hung does not always strictly adhere to his backbone.<sup>15</sup>

Before discussing how speech tones affect the melodic contour of different verses, it is important to note that some of the differences between the HAB and TAB, and between HAB and HB (for instance, the differences in the melodic contour of end-patterns cited above) are not the result of different speech tones because they occur when vocables are sung.

### SPEECH TONES AND MELODIC CONTOUR

Two effects of linguistic tones on melodic contour, both of which were mentioned by chau van musicians, will be examined: tonal inflection and the relative pitch level for successive words of the text.

A brief examination of the transcriptions reveals that there is a wide diversity of pitches used for each speech tone. Therefore, an analysis of the occurrence of certain pitches for certain speech tones, what Yung calls 'pitch matching' (1989:86-89), has not been undertaken. I would contend that even if such an analysis were carried out for chầu văn, any weak correlation that might be found would simply be a product of the relative pitch level for successive words of the text (i.e. a range of the lowest pitches in the vocal register would be used for the low tones etc.), rather than specific matching between speech tones and pitches. No relationship between speech tones, 'primary pitches' and melodic formulas, as is evident in Thai court song, is present in chầu văn songs.<sup>16</sup>

different generations and from different geographical regions would probably differ to a greater extent than Ty and Hung's renditions.

 $<sup>^{15}</sup>$  Further research is necessary to investigate whether or not Hung always realises backbones identically.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Yoko Tanese-Ito's analysis of the relationship between speech tones and vocal melody in Thai court song demonstrates that "speech-tones are represented by a system of melodic formulas superimposed on the primary pitches of the melody (which do not themselves reflect speech tones)" (1988:109).

### Tonal inflection

The melodic direction of semantic syllables (excluding vocables which do not have speech tones) in the six verses of Phú Bình and Ty's rendition of Phú Nói, verses 3 and 4, have been examined.<sup>17</sup> Following standard convention (see Yung (1989:82) and Schimmelpenninck (1997:404-10)), only the initial pitch contour for each syllable - not extended melisma - is taken as relevant to establishing the melodic contour.<sup>18</sup> The length of the melisma taken as relevant for the melodic direction of a syllable can be seen in the 'intermediary step' of the transcriptions.

Following Schimmelpenninck's classification, the melodic contours for each speech tone have been divided into four categories: falling (F), rising (R), level (L) or falling rising (FR).<sup>19</sup> Table 6.1 plots the pitch contour for the 271 syllables used during Ty and Hung's renditions of Phú Bình and Ty's rendition of Phú Nói, verses 3 and 4.

Tone	F	R	L	FR
high-rising		55		
mid-level	15	10	74	
high-broken		3	2	
low-rising		1	1	20
low-broken	4		21	
low-falling	57	2	5	

Table 6.1: Pitch contour of syllables

The high-rising tone has a consistent match with melodic contour in all 55 cases. Syllables with the mid-level, low-falling and low-rising tones also

 $<sup>^{17}</sup>$  The Phú Nói verses which use the same text as the Phú Bình verses and Hưng's repeat performance of verse 1 of Phú Bình have been omitted in order to avoid unnecessary duplication of results.

<sup>18</sup> The assumption that the speech tones should become apparent in the initial direction of the music is in accordance with chầu văn musicians' comments on the influence of speech tones (see footnote 11).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Schimmelpenninck's classification into four melodic contours is a simplification of the speech tones of Wu dialects (the entering tones are categorised as level tones) in order to "reduce the risk of unwieldy results" (1997:405). Schimmelpenninck's classification works well for Vietnamese speech tones as all follow one of the four melodic contours (see 'Pronunciation guide'). Due to the clear relationship between the melodic contour and Vietnamese speech tones it is unnecessary to classify the speech tones into the same four categories as the melodic contours (see Schimmelpenninck (ibid.)).

exhibit a high correlation with melodic contour (i.e. level, falling and falling-rising respectively). The low-broken tone is graphically represented as falling (see Pronunciation guide), but it is the shortness of the tone which differentiates it from the low-falling tone. It is this durational aspect rather than the melodic contour which is reflected when syllables with the low-broken tone are sung. Either the sung syllables with the low-broken tone are short (and sometimes followed by a rest) or, when slightly longer in duration, there is a strong accent when the syllable is pronounced. It is therefore accent and duration - rather than the melodic contour, which is usually level - that indicates the low-broken tone.

The small number of examples of the high-broken tone are split between a high-rising and a mid-level melodic contour. As with the lowbroken tone, it is not just the melodic contour which enables the highbroken tone to be identified. The high-broken tone involves a glottal stop, which results in a short break followed by a resumption in sound. The glottal stop can clearly be heard when singing such syllables. This enables the tone to be recognised whether the melodic contour is rising or level.

There are a number of exceptions to the matching between tonal inflection and melodic contour involving syllables with low-rising, lowfalling and especially mid-level speech tones. There are two cases (out of 22) when a sung syllable with the low-rising speech tone does not have a falling-rising melodic contour. In the first case the low-rising tone has a rising melodic contour with no clearly audible fall before the rise (Hung, Phú Bình, p.4, v.3, b.1) and in the second case a level melodic contour (Hung, Phú Bình, p.4, v.2, b.2). One possible reason why the low-rising tone is not confused with high-rising tone in the first case is that the low-rising tone has a lower pitch-level than the preceding syllable, whereas a high-rising tone would have a higher relative pitch (see below). For the second case, the pitch has been notated with a cross because the quality of the voice is half spoken, half sung. This may enable the listener to recognise the tone, because the initial sung pitch of many of the syllables with low-rising tone also has the same spoken quality.

The two cases when there is a high-rising melodic contour for the lowfalling tone both occur at the end of the last phrase of the song (Ty, Phú Nói p.4, v.3, b.7 and p.4, v.4, b.7; see also the other verses of Phú Nói). The rising resolution from pitch f to pitch g at the end of the song is part of the backbone of the piece and may therefore be considered as an essential musical characteristic which overrides the contour of the speech tone. There are also five cases when the low-falling tone has a level melodic

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contour. In three of these cases (Hung, Phú Bình: p.3, v.2, b.3 and v.3, b.4, and p.4, v.2, b.1) the preceding syllable also has a low-falling tone. It is likely that the melodic contour on the second syllable with a low-falling tone is changed to avoid repetition of the melodic contour of the previous syllable (see the discussion of 'monotony' below). In the other two cases (Ty, Phú Bình: p.5, v.2, b.6 and p.1, v.3, b.7), there is no obvious reason why there is not a falling melodic contour, say, from pitch f to pitch d (see for example Ty, Phú Bình p.5, v.3, b.4).

The mismatches between speech tone and melodic contour are most numerous for the syllables with a mid-level tone (25 out of a total of 99). Ty's renditions have the greatest number of instances when the mid-level tone has a rising or falling melodic contour. When I asked Ty about why he sang a rising or falling melodic contour for the mid-level tone, he said that he varied the melodic contour of some mid-level tones to avoid the melody becoming 'monotonous' (đơn điệu). Comparing Ty's Phú Bình, p.2, v.1, b.4-5 and p.2, v.2, b.3 with the equivalent sections in Hung's renditions (Phú Bình  $p_{2}$ ,  $v_{1}$ ,  $b_{3}$  and  $p_{2}$ ,  $v_{2}$ ,  $b_{3}$ ), we can see that Ty's versions use more pitches than Hung's. When there are two consecutive syllables with mid-level tones (i.e. in v.1 'dua quân' and v.2 'khi lên'), Hưng simply repeats the same pitch for both with no melisma whereas Ty sings a falling melodic contour for the syllables 'dua' and 'khi', thus avoiding repetition of the same pitch. The last two syllables (sông Thương) of phrase 3 of Phú Bình are an instance when both Ty and Hung use a falling melodic contour for syllables with a midlevel speech tone. In this case, both musicians avoid singing the same pitch for the two syllables to avoid a 'monotonous' vocal line (Ty sings a falling melodic contour for the Thương syllable and Hưng sings a falling melodic contour for the sông syllable).

## Relative pitch level

The relations between speech tone and relative pitch level succession for all the verses of Phú Nói and Phú Bình transcribed (with the exception of Hưng's repeat performance of verse 1 of Phú Bình) have been plotted in a matrix (see Table 6.2; method borrowed from Hughes 1989; 1991). The speech tones are listed on both the horizontal and vertical axes so that the melodic movement corresponding to every possible sequence of speech tones can be plotted. The speech tones on the vertical axis are taken as prior to those on the horizontal axis. For instance, the second and third syllables of Ty's rendition of Phú Bình p.1, v.2 have a mid-level and low-broken tone respectively and the melodic contour moves down from pitch a to pitch g; therefore, one point after the minus sign (-), indicating the fall in the contour of the melody, is recorded in the third row, sixth column of the matrix. An equals sign (=) is used when the pitch remains the same and a plus sign (+) when the melodic contour rises. A total of 324 relative pitch levels between successive pairs (dyads) of pitches are marked in the matrix. The pitch succession of syllables between phrases of the songs is not included because the last syllable of a phrase and the first syllable of the following phrase are usually separated by an instrumental section.

There are two factors which complicate the assessment of the relative pitch level of successive syllables: melisma and the use of vocables. In cases when a syllable is sung with melisma it is the pitch adjacent to the next syllable, i.e. the final pitch of the melisma, which is counted in the assessment of pitch succession. The use of vocables threatens to obscure the relative pitch level between syllables. However, for the most part, pitch succession is unaffected by vocables, which suggests that relative pitch level is still of some importance even when vocables are used. In cases when the final pitch of a vocable does affect pitch succession it is noted with a 'v' in the matrix. An example is the use of the vocable  $\sigma$ , on pitch d, between the first and second syllables (tråi and giang) of Ty's Phú Bình p.1, v.3. The first syllable trải is sung with a melisma from pitch g to pitch c' and the second syllable, giang, starts on pitch d'. Without the vocable, then, the pitch level between tråi and giang moves up, but if the vocable (which is sung to pitch d') is taken into account the pitch level between the two syllables is the same. In the matrix the pitch succession of trai and giang is indicated with a +1v in the fourth row, third column. Thus, the relative pitch level between the syllables is plotted in the matrix while noting the possible effect of the vocable. When vocables do not affect pitch succession, a 'v' is not marked in the matrix.

	high- rising	mid- level	high- broken	low- rising	low- broken	low- falling
high- rising	+2 =8 -5 -1v	=7 -19 -9v		-2	-5 -2v	-17 -2v
mid- level	+7 +1v =4 -2v -3	+4 +2v =22 -18	-1	-8	-13 -1v	=2 -21 -8v
high- broken		=1 =1v			-2v	-1
low- rising	+4 -1	+2 +1v =1 -3		-1	+1 -2	+2 +1v =1 -8 -2v
low- broken	+5 =1 =1v -1	+12 +1v =1	+1	-1		+2 +2v =3 =1v -1
low- falling	+7	+25 +2v	+2	+2 =4 -5	+1v =1	+7 =4

Table 6.2: Relative pitch level of successive syllables

The comprehensiveness of the sample is unfortunately limited by the unequal use of the speech tones in the texts. This is a fact of the Vietnamese language itself: even if many more songs with different texts were analysed, there would still only be a small number of high-broken tones and a low instance of some other tone combinations such as consecutive low-rising tones and consecutive low-broken tones.<sup>20</sup> However, there is a good enough sample to posit the following rules concerning the high-rising, level, low-broken and low-falling tones:

1. High-rising tone: higher relative pitch level than the low-broken (12/15), low-falling (26/26) and low-rising (6/7) tones; relative pitch level is higher than (36/52) or equal to (11/52) the mid-level tone.

 $<sup>^{20}</sup>$  This is illustrated by taking as an example the 78-line text for the Third Mandarin given in the second volume of the book *Mother Religion in Vietnam* (Ngô Đức Thịnh 1996b:141-43). In this text there are only 12 instances of the high-broken tone (with no instances of successive high-broken tones), two instances of low-broken tones and two instances of successive low-rising tones.

2. Mid-level tone: higher relative pitch level than the low-broken (27/28) and low-falling (56/58) tones; relative pitch level is equal to (11/52) or lower than (36/52) the high-rising tone.

3. Low-broken tone: lower relative pitch level than the high-rising (12/15) and mid-level (27/28) tones.

4. Low-falling tone: lower relative pitch level than the high-rising (26/26) and mid-level (56/58) tones.

There are a number of exceptions to these rules. There are five cases (out of 52) when the syllables with the mid-level tone have a higher pitch level than the following syllable with a high-rising tone. On two occasions (Hưng, Phú Nói, p.3, v.2, b.3-4 and Ty, Phú Nói, p.4, v.3, b.1-2) there is a vocable which affects the relative pitch level. In the other three cases (Ty, Phú Bình, p.3, v.3, b.4-5; Hưng, Phú Bình, p.3, v.3, b.4-5 and p.3, v.1, b.2-3) there is no obvious reason for the mismatch, yet as syllables with a high-rising tone always have a rising contour, the high-rising speech tone can still be recognised.

There is one case when the low-broken tone has a higher pitch level than a syllable with a high-rising tone and two cases where the pitch level between the two tones is the same. The case where the low-broken tone is higher than the high-rising tone (Ty, Phú Nói, p.2, v.1, b.8-9) occurs at the end of the phrase, so the high-rising tone must conform to the invariant pitches at the end of the phrase (the two syllables are also separated by a vocable, although the vocable does not actually change the relative pitch level between the syllables). The same two syllables in Hưng's version have the same pitch level (Phú Nói, p.2, v.1, b.7-8). The other instance where the low-broken tone has the same pitch as the high-rising tone (Ty, Phú Nói, p.1, v.4, b.2-3) is affected by a vocable and there is also a short rest between the two syllables which might serve to make the relative pitch level irrelevant.

There is one instance when a syllable with the low-broken tone has the same pitch level as a syllable with a mid-level tone (Ty, Phú Nói, p.3, v.4, b.5), which is explainable due to the constraints of the invariant melody at the end of a phrase.

Finally, on two occasions (out of a sample of 58) a syllable with a midlevel tone has the same pitch level as the following syllable with a lowfalling tone (Ty, Phú Nói, p.2, v.2, b.5 and Hưng, Phú Nói, p.2, v.1, b.5-6), for which there is no obvious explanation.

The rules above do not account for a number of other speech tone sequences. From the sample it is clear that the relative pitch-level for successive syllables with the *same* speech tone (and for combinations of syllables with the low-falling and low-broken tones, see discussion of low tones below) cannot be determined.

The small number of instances of the high-broken tone makes it impossible to formulate a comprehensive rule. However, there does seem to be a regular correlation when the high-broken tone is adjacent to the lowbroken and low-falling tones:

5. High-broken: higher relative pitch level than the low-broken (3/3) and low-falling (3/3) tones.

Although rule 5 is based on very few examples it is suggestive because a perfect 6/6 score could seldom occur by chance.

The relative pitch level of the low-rising tones is the most inconsistent of all the tones. This is probably due to the falling-rising melodic contour and the frequent use of a spoken quality for syllables with the low-rising tone, which enable the speech tone to be recognised irrespective of relative pitch. However, there is some consistency of successive pitch when the low-rising tone is adjacent to the high-rising and mid-level tone, which permits a sixth rule to be formulated:

6. Low-rising: lower relative pitch level than the high-rising (6/7) and mid-level (11/15) tones.

The three low tones show no clear tendencies regarding pitch succession among themselves. But as a group they are clearly lower than the other three tones (i.e. high-rising, mid-level and high-broken tones).

The high-rising tone is higher than all the low tones in 44 out of 48 cases, equal in 2 others, and lower in only 2 of 48 cases. Three of the exceptions to the rule (involving the low-broken tone) are explained above. The remaining exception, in which a syllable with a low-rising tone is higher than the following syllable with a high-rising tone (Ty, Phú Nói, p.1, v.3, b.3-5), is explainable because the low-rising syllable (thể) must rise to the basic melodic pitch (d') at this point of the phrase. The mid-level tone is higher than the low tones in 94 out of 101 cases, equal in four, and lower in only 3 of 101 cases. A syllable with a low-rising tone precedes the syllable with a mid-level tone in all three cases when a mid-level tone has a lower relative pitch level. The syllables with a low-rising tone all have a falling-rising melisma which affects the pitch succession (Ty, Phú Nói, p.2,

v.4, b.8-9 and p.3, v.3, b.1; and Ty, Phú Bình, p.5, v.2, b.1-3); in the Phú Bình case the pitch succession is also affected by the adherence to the basic melodic pitch (d'). The high-broken tone is higher than all the low tones in all six cases. In total, then, the three high and mid tones are lower than any of the low tones in only 5 out of 155 cases, and all five are explainable due to contextual constraints.

#### Speech tones and end-patterns

For phrases that have two alternative end-patterns, the choice of endpattern is affected by the speech tones of the final syllable of the phrase. Descending end-patterns are only used when the final word of the phrase has a low-falling tone (i.e. the end-pattern 1 of Phú Bình, p.1, 3 and 5; endpattern 2 of Phú Bình, p.4; and end-pattern 1 of Phú Nói, p.1). When the last syllable of the phrase has a level tone, an alternative end-pattern is sung which has a final pitch higher than the other end-pattern and which has a level or rising melodic contour (i.e. end-pattern 2 of Phú Bình, p.1, 3 and 5; end-pattern 1 of Phú Bình, p.4; and end-pattern 2 of Phú Nói, p.1).

#### CONCLUSION

Chầu văn 'ways' ('melodies' or 'songs') have an unlimited number of possible realisations. Through analysis of several verses of two songs (Phú Bình and Phú Nói) by two musicians (Ty and Hưng), this chapter has sought to examine the 'creative process' (Yung 1989) involved in singing chầu văn. Hưng's conception of 'backbones' suggests that songs have a melodic identity which acts like a 'model in the mind' of the performer. Unlike Hưng who sang a version of the backbones of songs without using a text, most chầu văn musicians could not articulate the melodic identity of a song.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the idea that there is an invariant identity to each song was confirmed by a number of chầu văn musicians and is probably applicable to other types of Vietnamese music.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> The fact that most musicians could not sing the 'backbone' of songs is hardly surprising considering that songs are learnt through a process of repeating the same song with different song texts, rather than by learning 'abstracted' versions of songs.
<sup>22</sup> The few songs of the chèo repertoire that I studied share many similar characteristics to chàu văn songs.

The analysis of abstracted backbones confirmed that songs have a melodic shape which is maintained throughout different verses, although the abstracted backbones are not necessarily identical with the musician's conception of the song's backbone (as demonstrated by Hung's backbones and his abstracted backbones). The comparison of Hung and Ty's abstracted backbones showed that their renditions of Phú Bình conformed to a similar underlying melodic shape. It would be expected, however, that a comparison of abstracted backbones based on performances by musicians from different geographical regions and different generations would show greater variation.

Musicians often refer to chầu văn melodies as 'ways' (lối). While I have chosen to adopt Hưng's term 'backbone' for the purposes of analysis, referring to a song as a 'way' also evokes the notion that a song has an underlying melodic shape or backbone. Once musicians 'grasp a way' which may be understood as internalising the backbone of a song - they can sing any text, with the correct poetic metre, without preparation. The interdependence of texts and ways was neatly summed up by Hưng during one of my lessons:

It is impossible to remember exactly how to sing one sentence of the text because there are too many texts. The texts, for example, of the Mother Spirit of the Water Palace are many pages long ... so how can you remember exactly which notes you should sing? You can't remember exactly, there is a 'way', that is all .... Each time you sing is different, but the 'way' must be correct. (p.c. Đặng Công Hưng, May 1998)

Hung's comments indicate that the song text affects the vocal line although the 'way' must be maintained. On other occasions, Hung, Ty and other musicians explicitly stated that the realisation of the vocal line changes to suit the speech tones of the text. This chapter has demonstrated the influence on the speech tones of the text on the melodic contour. It has shown that tonal inflection and the relative pitch level of syllables affect the vocal line. The speech tones of the text do not rigidly determine the vocal line, but they do affect melodic direction. The creative process involved in singing chau văn, then, involves varying the vocal line to suit the speech tones of the text while still adhering to the underlying melodic shape, the backbone, of the song. A similar process also occurs in Cantonese opera: "the singer uses, within the constraints of the skeletal structure ... the relatively less-defined pitches of the texts' linguistic tones as a guide in creating a series of well-defined musical pitches to form the melodic line" (Yung 1989:90).

Having demonstrated that the speech tones of the song text affect the vocal line, it should be noted that the analysis revealed a number of exceptions. In some cases the reasons for the deviation from the expected relative pitch level and melodic contour for a particular syllable of the text is not obvious.<sup>23</sup> In others, however, melodic considerations, such as avoiding several repetitions of the same pitch, affect the vocal line. The assertion that chầu văn melodies are affected by the speech tones of the song text should therefore be qualified with the caveat that melodic factors may, sometimes, override the influence of speech tones on the vocal line.<sup>24</sup>

 $<sup>^{23}</sup>$  Further discussion with chầu văn musicians may be helpful in seeking explanations for the exceptions to the rules relating speech tone to melodic contour.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Stock has argued that musical considerations are not *always* subordinate to speech tone structure in Beijing opera arias (1999). He particularly emphasises that "*music-structural* considerations may, sometimes, challenge the dictates of speech tone and lyric structure" (ibid.:183, my emphasis). While the analysis of chau van songs in this chapter has provided a few instances of the melodic identity of songs - i.e. the song *structure* - overriding the dictates of speech tone, the musical consideration of avoiding 'monotony' is also an important factor.

## CHAPTER 7

# THE POLITICS OF LÊN ĐỒNG AND CHẦU VĂN

This chapter examines how the Vietnamese Communist Party's policy toward 'superstition', culture and the arts has affected lên đồng and chầu văn.<sup>1</sup>

The Vietnamese Communist Party condemned and prohibited lên dòng and chàu văn through a propaganda campaign to eliminate superstition. In the wider context of the Party's policy of The New Ways, this chapter will first trace the official enunciation of the campaign against superstition and its effects at the local level. Changes in the implementation of the campaign to eliminate superstition since the Renovation (dổi mới) policy in 1986 will then be scrutinised. It will be observed that a 'national turn' is evident in the development of a discourse of legitimation for lên dòng and chàu văn which draws on, and is given strength by, a nationalist Party agenda. The last section of this chapter will focus on the creation of a new 'revolutionary' form of chàu văn stripped of its 'superstitious' elements.

#### THE CAMPAIGN TO ELIMINATE SUPERSTITION

Within a year of the Vietnamese Communist Party (at that time called the Labour (Lao Động) Party) gaining power in 1945, a committee for the propagation of The New Ways (đời sống mới/nếp sống mới) was established with the aim of eradicating outmoded attitudes and propagating a new way of life suitable for a socialist society.<sup>2</sup> The New Ways doctrine aimed at implementing the maxim, 'industriousness, thrift, honesty and righteousness' (cần, kiệm, liêm, chính) in all aspects of individual, family and village life (see Tân Sinh 1977 [1947] and Ninh Bình Cultural Service 1970). It called for comprehensive reform ranging from maintaining better hygiene standards and studying more studiously, to working with greater

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> This chapter is only concerned with Party policy in northern Vietnam from 1954 to the late 1990s. Many Party policies outlined have been applied to central and southern Vietnam since 1975, but differences in the implementation of these policies in the former Republic of Vietnam is outside the scope of this thesis. As I have not been able to uncover documentation that refers to mediumship during French colonial rule, this chapter does not consider the history of lên dồng prior to the Communist era. <sup>2</sup> For a detailed history of revolutionary ritual reform and The New Ways with particular reference to changes in 'sacred space', see Malarney (1993:280-307).

honesty and achieving greater discipline in the army. The New Ways were also directed toward cultural activities. Tân Sinh's early formulation of The New Ways mentions the need to conduct cultural activities, such as weddings and New Year's celebrations, in an economical and thrifty way (1977 [1947]:26).

The New Ways were part of a range of closely related campaigns which specifically sought to reform 'backward customs and habits' (phong tục tập quan lạc hậu) in order to achieve a thorough 'cultural and ideological revolution' (cách mạng về tư tưởng và văn hóa) (see Vietnam Government 1962 and Second Conference of the Musicians' Association 1964). Such a revolution, it was argued, was necessary for progress and the creation of the 'new society' (xã hội mới) based on socialist principles.

Hồ Chí Minh himself pin-pointed lên đồng and the procession of spirits as 'bad traditions' that needed to be eradicated:

If old traditions are to be restored, then only restore good things; bad things must be gradually eliminated .... Last year, dong bong [i.e. lên dong] and the procession of spirits (rước xách thần thánh) were revived. If that kind of restoration is carried out in the countryside, many places will forget production and continue to drum and sing willynilly. Some communes spend millions of dong buying clothes, hats and shoes. Is this kind of restoration of old traditions right? Good traditions we must restore and develop, bad ones must be got rid of. (Hò Chí Minh 1976 [1958]:83)

Foremost among the campaigns to reform 'backward and outmoded customs' was the campaign to 'eliminate superstition' (bài trừ mê tín dị đoan).<sup>3</sup> The Party made a distinction between 'superstition' (mê tín dị đoan) which was in need of elimination on the one hand, and legitimate 'religious beliefs' (tín ngưỡng) on the other:

It is necessary to distinguish between religious beliefs and superstition. Going to the pagoda and the ancestor altar belong to the freedom of beliefs (tự do tín ngưỡng); fortune telling, fate prediction, phrenological fortune telling, calling up the souls of dead ancestors, lên đồng, divination with sticks, casting spells, worshipping ghosts, exorcising and chasing away evil spirits, 'carrying incense on the head', burning paper effigies, miraculous healing etc. are

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Comparison of the cultural and religious policies of the Chinese and Vietnamese communist parties and their implementation, is outside the scope of this chapter. It is worth noting, however, that there are many similarities between policy on religion and 'superstition' in both countries. (See, for example, Pas (1989) for discussion of the Chinese Communist Party's religious policies.)

superstitions. Freedom of beliefs is guaranteed in law, whereas the State strictly bans superstition.  $\!\!\!^4$ 

Although examples of 'superstitious' practices as opposed to 'religious beliefs' are given in the above extract, the basis for this distinction is hard to clarify as both imply religious practices that involve supernatural entities. The term tin ngưỡng refers to "people's belief (niềm tin) in and veneration (ngưỡng mộ) of forces (lực lượng) beyond the human world" (Nguyễn Đức Lữ 1992:9)<sup>5</sup> and brings with it a "a strong sense of prestige and legitimacy" (Malarney n.d.:246).

Superstition was discredited by the Party as a product of former historical situations. Many of the arguments made in the propaganda of the anti-superstition campaign from the 1950s to the early 1980s are similar. However, in early formulations the negative effects of 'feudalism' and the 'French colonialists' were often emphasised, whereas in later documents 'American imperialists' are also mentioned as being responsible for spreading superstitious practices. According to the communist propaganda of the early 1980s, superstition arose and developed for several reasons. First, because of a lack awareness and education in primitive society; second, as a means of exploitation in class-ridden feudal society; and third, as a tactic of 'foreign aggressors' (xâm lược nước ngoài) to corrupt and confuse the Vietnamese masses in order to weaken their resolve to protect the Vietnamese nation against 'French colonialists and American imperialists' (see Truth Publishing House 1982:18-28).

The practitioners of 'superstitious' rituals were portrayed in the antisuperstition campaign as liars and swindlers who did not even themselves believe in the supernatural. Those 'exploited' by such practitioners were portrayed as infantile and uneducated: ignorant people who cowered in a world full of miracles and mystery. The slogan 'selling the spirits' (buôn thần bán thánh) was employed to brand these practitioners, including mediums and spirit priests (thầy cúng), as manipulating others for financial gain. In accordance with the virtues of thriftiness and industriousness outlined in The New Ways, the campaign argued that the money and time spent on superstition was extravagant, wasteful and decreased production.

Belief in spirits' capacity to cure illness and to alleviate misfortune was ridiculed in the propaganda because it was seen to have "no basis in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> From Section 5 of Directive 56-CP of the Party Committee on the elimination of superstition, 13.3.1975.

 $<sup>^5</sup>$  See also Toan Ánh (1992a, 1992b) for a similar definition of tín ngưỡng.

reality" and was "completely unscientific" (Truth Publishing House 1985:19). As Malarney has pointed out: "One of the prime strategies used in the propaganda campaign against superstitions was the undermining of popular beliefs in spirits by demonstrating their non-empirical nature. Foremost here was a campaign to invalidate all claims of spiritual causality in corporeal life" (1993:301). The following anecdote taken from an antisuperstition document is typical of the campaign's attempts to illustrate the ineffectiveness and non-existence of spirits:

Mrs T. had a child ... [who] was more than two years old but could not yet stand and walk. Many people encouraged her to take the child to the hospital for a doctor to cure the problem. But Mrs T. refused everybody's sincere advice and instead listened to her mother whose head was full of superstition. She went ... to find a 'good fortune teller' and beg the 'spirits' to show how to cure the illness (!). The old fortune teller said that she could not live on the land that her house was build on and that if she wanted the child to be cured then she must pray for several months and move house. After several months of rituals, Mrs T. spent and wasted more than 8,000 dong. She had lost her house but not the illness because the child still had to be carried! (Truth Publishing House 1982:36)

The campaign against superstition had the effect of greatly diminishing the number of lên dồng that took place, but it did not totally eliminate them. Many mediums still continued to practise small-scale lên đồng in secret (referred to as hầu vụng, 'secretly serving [the spirits]'). So that rituals would be less noticeable to the authorities, lên đồng were arranged in remote places or late at night. In order for rituals to remain secret, the length of rituals was reduced and less people were invited to attend. Chầu văn was still sometimes played at clandestine lên đồng rituals, but sometimes a full chầu văn band was not present because of fears that the music would be heard by the authorities (see Chapter 5).

One exception where there appears to have been a complete elimination of lên dòng activities concerns a group of male mediums who primarily worshipped the spirit of the general Trần Hưng Đạo. Prior to 1954, it is claimed that this group of male mediums when possessed by Trần Hưng Đạo carried out ritual acts such as self-strangulation with a sash, flame eating, and tongue and cheek piercing (Durand 1959:59). When I went to the 1996 festival at Kiếp Bạc temple, which is dedicated to Trần Hưng Đạo, no lên dòng was permitted in the Kiếp Bạc temple itself, nor was there any evidence of the existence of a special group of male mediums who specifically worshipped Trần Hưng Đạo. The group of male mediums dedicated to Trần Hưng Đạo therefore seems to be have been effectively outlawed and eliminated as have many of the practices associated with these male mediums. Today, mediums of both sexes incarnate Trần Hưng Đạo and, with the exception of flame eating, none of the other ritual acts mentioned by Durand are carried out.

In general, however, lên đồng was never completely eliminated. The following comment about lên đồng activity before the late 1980s by one medium was typical:

In reality lên dòng was banned, but if you went to mountainous regions far away then you could still hold lên dòng. If you gave the police money it was easy. It was only in Hanoi that it was strictly prohibited.

Mediums and musicians caught practising lên dòng were often punished. This usually involved confiscation of votive objects and ritual clothes and, in the most severe cases, detention. One musician from Hanoi said that he was twice held at the police station in the early 1980s, the first time for five days and the second for twenty days, for playing chàu văn at lên dòng rituals. Despite these periods of detention, he continued to play chàu văn, which demonstrates how even the most stringent measures failed to prevent the occurrence of chàu văn.

Although the anti-superstition campaign did not completely eradicate lên dòng rituals, it has had lasting effects on mediums' activities and how they think about what they do. Many mediums that I spoke to during the period 1996-98 discussed 'superstition' in such a way that it did not include lên dồng. This was achieved through two strategies. First, many of the criticisms of superstition found in the anti-superstition campaign have been adopted by mediums. For instance, many mediums distanced themselves from the most 'negative' (tiêu cực) aspects of 'superstition' mentioned in Party propaganda such as using 'selling the spirits' and some, or all, types of ritual healing and fortune telling. Second, mediums tried to reclassify certain activities designated as 'superstitious' in the antisuperstition campaign as belonging to 'religious beliefs' (tín ngưỡng). As noted earlier, Vietnamese law ostensibly states the right to freedom of religious beliefs (quyền tự do tín ngưỡng), so mediums' use of the Partycondoned term tin ngưỡng may be seen as an attempt to legitimate their activities. In order for mediumship to be reframed in terms of the boundaries of legitimacy delineated by the Party, mediums compared the spirits of the Four Palace Religion to other 'legitimate' spiritual entities connected to Buddhism and ancestor worship.

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The following remarks made by a medium, called Thanh, in May 1998 illustrate aspects of these two strategies:

Thanh: The government should ban social evils (tệ nạn xã hội). It has banned superstitions such as phrenological fortune telling (đóan tướng) and horoscopes, and it has banned people whose fortune telling creates disruption in society.

BN: But you also tell fortunes, don't you?

Thanh: But I don't tell fortunes through horoscopes or phrenology. I only bow in front of Buddha and the spirits in order for people to pray and make offerings. For example, if somebody is in impoverished circumstances or has problems about something, then the spirits advise them so that their heart's wishes are fulfilled, so they have belief and confidence .... I just follow and respect my [deceased] parents, Buddha and the spirits (Phật thánh) .... If somebody's child is ill they come and pray to the spirits, and ask me to implore the spirits to see if the child has a problem in the 'blood' (máu huyệt sở sinh) or an illness of the other world (bệnh âm) .... [If it is an illness of the other world], I advise and help them, but if it is in the blood then they should go to the hospital .... People just follow their heart. If superstition was my profession, I would prophesy for whoever came and they would have to give me several million dong, or I would force them to carry out some rituals; that is a social evil. People who sincerely pray to the spirits and light incense might donate 500 or 1000 dong, it is up to them, but I don't force them to do anything.

In the above extract, Thanh takes on board many of the policies of the antisuperstition policy, such as being thrifty, using modern medicine and not swindling or taking advantage of people. She even accepts that superstition can have negative effects on society and agrees with Party criticisms of some forms of fortune telling. The only points at which Thanh deviates from the Party line are when she refers to the spirits' power to cure illnesses and to her ability, as a medium, to channel the advice of the spirits for others. Rather than seeing lên dòng as superstitious, Thanh's comments illustrate that she considers worshipping the spirits of the Four Palace Religion to be closely related to paying respects to her ancestors and Buddha, and later in the discussion she stated that "lên dòng is part of religious beliefs" (lên dòng thuộc về tín ngưỡng).

Some mediums went even further in their acceptance of the arguments of the anti-superstition campaign. One male medium, Thắng, who was himself a Party member, maintained that the spirits had no effect on everyday life and that people who believed in the spirits' power to cure illness were 'uncultured'/'uneducated' (vô văn hóa). This view is hard to reconcile with his activities as a medium, especially as I witnessed him giving 'incense water' (nước thải) blessed by the Third Lady to a disciple during a lên dòng, which many ritual participants claim can help cure illnesses. When I questioned him about the incense water, he replied that it made some disciples feel more 'relaxed' (thoải mái lên), but denied that it could cure illness. Thắng did not, I think, make such remarks because he felt that was what he ought to say to a 'foreigner', but because he really had no belief in, as Malarney has put it, 'spiritual causality in corporeal life'. Thắng's views represent the most extreme example of how many of the tenets of the anti-superstition policy have been adopted by mediums.

#### THE NATIONALIST TURN

Since the Renovation policy of 1986, there has been a relaxation in the enforcement of the anti-superstition policy. As a result, there has been an explosion of lên dòng activity which has largely been ignored by the \_\_\_\_\_\_ authorities.<sup>6</sup> This is despite the fact that the Party's anti-superstition policy has still been in force post-1986. Documents from the Sixth Party Conference in 1986 mention the "elimination of superstition and outmoded customs" (Truth Publishing House 1993:6), and the policy was most recently reaffirmed through an instruction on religious beliefs from the politburo of the Vietnamese Communist Party's Central Committee, dated July 2, 1998.<sup>7</sup> This has been echoed in recent newspaper articles in the government-controlled Lao dộng newspaper, which state that the anti-superstition policy should be applied to lên dòng and that it is a superstitious social evil in need of elimination.<sup>8</sup>

There are a two possible explanations for the seeming contradiction between the Party officially condemning 'superstitious' activity while tacitly accepting the occurrence of lên đồng. In light of the 'open door' (mở

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Reliable statistics on the number of mediums is Vietnam are currently unavailable. If one village I visited in 1998 is indicative, then as many as 1 in 200 of the Vietnamese rural population may be mediums, although the figure is probably less in urban areas. The Institute for Religious Studies estimated the number of mediums in Hanoi in 1986 as one for every 4000 inhabitants (Đặng Nghiêm Vạn 1998:252). How this figure was arrived at is not available for scrutiny in the publication, and its accuracy is dubious; it does, however, indicate the existence of mediums even before the resurgence of lên đồng activity in the 1990s.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> The Instruction which states that superstition must be criticised and eliminated was reported in the English-language newspaper, Vietnam News 9.7.1998.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> "Lên đồng" by Phạm Tường Vân was published on the 25.1.1997; "The memoirs of spirits" by Nguyễn Hà was published on the 7.6.1997; and "Lên đồng: a superstitious evil (tệ nạn mê tín) worthy of condemnation" by Ngọc Quang was published at the end of 1997(precise date unknown).

cửa) policy and greater economic freedoms, it may be the Party's thinking that it is no longer feasible to vigorously suppress cultural activities such as lên dồng and chầu văn. Prohibiting lên đồng in the 1990s would not only have the potential to create unrest among the Vietnamese people, but might also draw increased criticism of Vietnam's record on religious rights in the international community.<sup>9</sup>

These suggestions assume that the Party still considers lên đồng as 'superstitious'. However, some Vietnamese scholars are reframing lên dòng as contributing to nationalism and as part of 'folk religious-beliefs' (tín ngưỡng dân gian) rather than as 'superstition'.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, Party policy toward the development of a 'national culture' and the Party's recent position on the preservation of 'traditional' Vietnamese culture has provided the framework for a discourse legitimating lên đồng. During the 1990s, research has been conducted into lên đồng and chầu văn, primarily by a body of researchers at the Folk Culture Institute (Viện Văn Hóa Dân Gian). Their research - in a series of publications (e.g. Ngô Đức Thịnh 1992, 1996a, 1996b) - has presented lên dồng and chầu văn as "phenomena of the collective folk-culture" (hiện tượng văn hóa dân gian tổng thể) and "religious-cultural activities of the community" (sinh hoạt tín ngưỡng-văn hóa cộng đồng). The research has stressed the historical importance and the role of certain spirits, such as the Second Prince and Trần Hưng Đạo, in "building and defending the nation" when they lived as mortals on the earth (Ngô Đức Thinh 1996a:12). Scholars at the Folk Culture Institute have thus attempted to show how lên đồng and chầu văn have contributed to the cultural life and 'soul' of the Vietnamese people, and have downplayed 'superstitious' elements such as fortune telling and curing illness (ibid.:317).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Possibly in an attempt to appease international criticism of its record on religious freedom, the Vietnamese government recently gave in to pressure to allow the United Nations Human Rights Commission's special rapporteur on religious freedom. Abdelfattah Amor, to visit Vietnam in October 1998. However, during his visit, Amor was refused access to Buddhist leaders of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, and his report is extremely critical of the Vietnam government's policies concerning religious freedom (Amnesty International Vietnam Report, 11 January 1999). <sup>10</sup> Research concerning the resurgence of shamanism among Siberian nationalities has noted close links between cultural revivals and the development of ethnic consciousness/nationalism. While the ways in which ritual practices are tied to nationalist agendas are quite different in Siberia and Vietnam, it is interesting to note that, in both parts of the world, scholars and intellectuals are a significant force in the reframing of cultural practices. For instance, Balzer (1993) links the re-evaluation and revival of Sakha shamanism with the development of an urban educated elite, and Humphrey discusses how 'the Buryat intelligentsia' is involved in the development of 'national consciousness' and "the recovery of the cultured past for the Buryat people as a whole" (1990:302, emphasis omitted).

It is not just folk culture researchers who have interpreted lên dòng and chầu văn in nationalist and culturalist terms: some mediums also justify their activities by saying that they are respectfully remembering historical figures who have done 'good work' (công đức) for the Vietnamese nation. When I asked Xuân, a medium who had done some fortune telling in the past, whether she carried out fortune telling during lên dòng she replied:

No, [lên dồng is] solemn and serious, and based on the traditions of the dynasties of the past when the spirits did battle with the enemies. Today we review history to make people aware of, how the spirits fought the enemies with swords and spears, how the Ninth Lady Spirit danced with a fan as if cooling humanity, how the Third Holy Lady Spirit rowed a boat for Lê Lợi<sup>11</sup> in order for him to cross the river and fight the enemies. Through the 'work of the honourable spirits' (làm việc ngài) these stories are relived. (p.c. Nguyễn Thị Xuân, May 1998)

Xuân's comments illustrate how mediums themselves interpret lên đồng as a nationalist activity drawing on the Vietnamese nation's heritage, rather than a 'superstitious' activity involving fortune telling.

Promoting the national merit of folk beliefs on which lên dồng is based chimes with a long-held policy of the Party. The development of a national Vietnamese culture imbued with the character of the Vietnamese people, including the ethnic minority groups, has long been part of the Party's project of nation building. The creation of a Vietnamese culture with a 'national character' (tính chất dân tộc) is one the main tenets of the Cultural Thesis of 1943 (see Truth Publishing House 1985:14-16 and Ministry of Culture 1985:5), and the policy has resurfaced time and again ever since. For instance, the Third Party Conference in 1960 asserted the need to "develop new art with socialist contents and a *national character* that has the character of the Party and the profound *character of the people*" (cited in Academy of the Arts 1972:6, my emphasis), and documents from the Sixth Party Conference in 1986 call for "socialist art *rich in national colour* (dậm dà bản sắc dân tộc) (cited in Truth Publishing House 1993:6, my emphasis).<sup>12</sup>

 $<sup>^{11}</sup>$  Lê Lợi expelled the Ming dynasty Chinese administrators who had control over Vietnam from 1407 and established the Lê dynasty in 1428.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> The term dân tộc, rendered as 'national' in the above quotes, has been favoured by socialist revolutionaries in preference to other terms such as quốc. Semantically, the Vietnamese term dân tộc is complex as it also refers to ethnicity. For example, the Vietnamese people can be collectively referred to as dân tộc Việt and the ethnic minorities in Vietnam are referred to as dân tộc/dân tộc thiểu số. In musical contexts dân tộc may also be used to mean 'folk'/'traditional' as opposed to 'new'/'modern' (see Arana 1999:74-75).

In the 1990s the promotion of 'traditional' (truyền thống) Vietnamese culture 'rich in national colour' has become an even more pressing concern of the Party in the face of increasing international influences and the knock-on effects of economic liberalisation. At the Fourth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Party in 1993 the preservation, rather than the reform and improvement, of traditional arts was recognised for the first time. It may also be the case that traditional arts are being promoted because of benefits to the tourist industry. At the Fifth Plenum on Culture in July 1998 Hữu Thọ, the director of Party Central Committee's Ideology and Culture Commission, and Lê Khả Phiêu, the Party General Secretary, expressed the need to ensure the development of an "advanced Vietnamese culture rich in national colour" (nền văn hóa Việt Nam tiên tiến, đậm đà bản sắc dân tộc) while still absorbing international influences.<sup>13</sup>

Official policy toward the Phủ Giày festival - an annually held event to commemorate the death day of the First Mother spirit, Liễu Hạnh, at the beginning of the third lunar month - provides a concrete example of the Party's prioritisation of national culture and a distancing from the antisuperstition campaign. The Phủ Giày festival is the most renowned festival for one of the most revered spirits of the Four Palace Religion and is famous for lên dòng. During the anti-superstition campaign the Phủ Giày festival was specifically referred to as 'superstitious' and in need of eradication (Truth Publishing House 1982:6), but it has recently been described by one of the researchers at the Folk Culture Institute as "a rich, profound and unique folk culture activity ... [that] contributes to the abundance of national culture (văn hóa dân tộc)" (Thang Ngọc Pho 1992:62).

In 1998 the Phủ Giầy festival was for the first time officially acknowledged and given permission to go ahead by the Department of Culture and Information. The acknowledgement of the festival is a significant step that indicates an increasing tolerance of lên đồng on behalf of the authorities because, although lên đồng itself has not received official permission, lên đồng rituals are rife at Phủ Giầy. In the previous three years, from 1995 to 1997, the festival was given the status of an 'experiment' (thể nghiệm) - a trial period before official endorsement was given. Prior to the experimental period, official recognition was not granted to the Phủ Giầy festival, and, according to mediums and musicians, only clandestine, smallscale lên đồng rituals were held.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Reported in the newspapers: Vietnam News 18.7.98 and 20.7.98; Người Cao Tuổi 15.7.98; and Nhân Dân 18.7.98.

When I attended the Phủ Giầy festival in 1995 and 1997, there were prominent banners proclaiming the Party's anti-superstition policy, despite the fact that lên đồng were being held in virtually every temple. In 1998 these banners had been replaced by the slogan 'promote the culture colour of the nation' (phát huy bản sắc văn hóa của dân tộc). This change marks a clear shift in policy away from condemning superstition in favour of an emphasis on adopting cultural activities as part of building a national identity.

The same tactic is evident in the documentary made by Vietnamese Television about the 1998 Phủ Giày festival. The documentary made no reference to lên dong because of restrictions of the censors, nor did it mention superstition.<sup>14</sup> Instead, it focused on other aspects of the festival which were presented as 'old heritage' (vốn cũ) and 'traditional culture' (văn hóa truyền thống). These included: lion dancing; 'arranging words' (xếp chữ), involving the formation of Chinese characters through the arrangement of a large group of people; and a chầu văn competition, which was the first to be held for many years. Taken away from the context of lên dòng and conducted in the controlled, formal setting of a competition, chau van was praised by the film narrator for its 'artistic value' (gía tri nghê thuật) as a 'collective cultural activity' (sinh hoat văn hóa tổng thể) rich in 'folk colour' (bản sắc dân gian). Throughout the documentary, interviewees and the narrator of the film depicted the festival in terms of the preservation, restoration and development of traditional culture and its contribution to building the Vietnamese nation.

## **REVOLUTIONARY CHẦU VĂN**

Chầu văn as it is performed during lên đồng has been subject to strict prohibition because of its association with, and contribution to, 'superstition'. However, there were still a few occasions when it was performed at secret lên đồng rituals, and the music played at rituals has not been affected by communist ideology.<sup>15</sup> In order for chầu văn to be ideologically acceptable to the Party, members of the Nam Định Chèo Troupe devised a new form of chầu văn, which I have glossed as 'revolutionary chầu

 $<sup>^{14}</sup>$  The restrictions of the censors were conveyed to me by one of the documentary makers.

 $<sup>^{15}</sup>$  See Chapter 8 for discussion of musical changes to chầu văn as it is performed during lên đồng.

văn' because of its revolutionary socialist content. Revolutionary chầu văn has been performed on the stage and broadcast on the radio since its conception in the early 1960s.

The Party's vision of the role of arts in society was that the arts should serve the ideological interests of the Party, the nation and the socialist revolution.<sup>16</sup> In the words of Hồ Chí Minh: "The task of all cultural cadres is to use culture to transmit the industrious and thrifty work of building the country, building socialism in the north and fighting for the unification of our country" (Hồ Chí Minh 1976 [1960]:102). Other Party ideologues such as Lê Duẩn, Trường Chinh and Phạm Văn Đồng have expanded at length on the important role of culture and the arts in building a socialist state (see Hồ Chí Minh et al. 1976).

Applying the socialist agenda to the arts was vigorously carried out by many state-run musical organisations such as the Musicians' Association (Hội Nhạc Sĩ) and national music troupes, and has had profound affects on the teaching method at the music conservatoires (see Second Conference of the Musicians' Association 1964 and Academy of the Arts 1972). Trường Chinh, the General Secretary to the Party, advised musicians to exploit and modify 'the nations heritage' according to the following principles: "1. Use old forms to propagate new content. 2. Transform and improve old forms. 3. Create new forms drawing upon fundamental features of traditional music" (Hà Huy Giáp 1972:17, cited in Lê Tuấn Hùng 1998:98). The idea of transforming and improving the national heritage of musical forms, of putting 'new wine' into an 'old bottle' (bình cũ rượu mới) is the musical equivalent of the reforms of 'backward' customs and habits.

Such ideological reforms of music gave rise to a new genre of music usually referred to as 'modern national music' (nhạc dân tộc hiện đại)<sup>17</sup> and also to modifications of 'traditional' music genres. Recent studies have provided detailed analysis of modern national music (Lê Tuấn Hùng 1998 and Arana 1999) and the conservatoire system (Arana 1999), yet there has been

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> The use of music as a means for propagating revolutionary propaganda is common to many communist countries - e.g. Bulgaria (Rice 1994), China (Perris 1983; Jones 1995; Stock 1996; Schimmelpenninck 1997) and Uzbekistan (Levin 1979) - though the implementation and the degree to which socialist ideology has affected musical practice varies in each case. It should be noted, however, that the use of music as propaganda is not restricted to communist states. Perris (1985), for example, discusses music as propaganda in a wide range of contexts including Nazi Germany and the Broadway musical.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Many different Vietnamese terms have been used to refer to 'modern national music'. For a discussion of the 'semiotics of nhạc dân tộc hiên đại' see Arana (1999:47-49).

little ethnomusicological research to date concerning how traditional Vietnamese music genres have been affected by Party ideology. Some music genres - such as nhạc cung đình Huế, nhạc đám ma, nhạc lễ, chầu văn and ca trù were officially or unofficially banned until recently, but different provinces emphasised different cultural policies and varied in the severity of policy enforcement.<sup>18</sup> Research at the local level is required to ascertain to what extent prohibited or discouraged music genres continued to be performed secretly or were ignored by the authorities.<sup>19</sup> Extensive historical research is also required to examine how traditional music genres that were performed by state-funded troupes - such as chèo, tuồng and folk song - were altered to suit socialist ideology.

In the case of chầu văn, the state-funded troupe that devised revolutionary chầu văn was the Nam Định Chèo Troupe (Đòan Chèo Nam Định), now called the Nam Hà Chèo Troupe (Đoàn Chèo Nam Hà). Nam Hà province is thought of by some as the "cradle" of chầu văn (Bùi Đình Thảo and Nguyễn Quang Hải 1996:8) and is home to the Phủ Giầy festival. Instrumental in the creation of revolutionary chầu văn at the Nam Định Chèo Troupe were the moon-lute player Nguyễn Thế Tuyền and an official at the Nam Định Cultural Service, Chu Văn. Nguyễn Thế Tuyền learnt chầu văn by assisting older musicians at lên đồng from 1950 to 1954 (p.c. Nguyễn Thế Tuyền, May 1998). Once lên đồng was prohibited he decided to integrate chầu văn into a new socialist context. This was encouraged by Chu Văn who wrote the first revolutionary chầu văn texts. At a national performance festival held in Hanoi in 1962, members of the Nam Định Chèo Troupe won a gold medal for their revolutionary chầu văn item, which used a text by Chu Văn, called Nam Định, My Home Town (Nam Định Quê Tôi). Since then, members of the troupe have continued to devise and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> It has sometimes been assumed that official or unofficial banning of music genres resulted in the total cessation of musical activity. Lê Tuấn Hùng, for instance, states that chầu văn, along with many other types of folk song, were "gradually silenced after 1954" and that "authentic [sic] performances of chầu văn (mediumship music) were banned until the late 1980s because of its association with 'backward' and 'superstitious' spiritual activities" (1998:96). Chầu văn as it was sung during lên dòng was indeed banned, but to assume that chầu văn was completely eradicated because it was prohibited by the authorities is found to be erroneous when a study is made of what chầu văn musicians actually did at the local level. Lê Tuấn Hùng's discussion of the impact of the 'socialist revolution' on music gives a monolithic account of official Party policy as if the Party's pronouncements were directly translated into practice. He gives no detailed account of how musicians at the local level conformed to, interpreted, ignored or subverted such policies.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Malarney's study of funeral reform, for instance, suggests that funeral music was not universally banned and that the implementation of policies varied from province to province. Some funeral music, therefore, was still played during the implementation of the ritual reforms (Malarney 1993:355).

perform revolutionary chầu văn pieces, and when I visited the Nam Hà Chèo Troupe in 1998 revolutionary chầu văn was still part of their concert programme. Although I have found no evidence that revolutionary chầu văn was adopted by other state-funded troupes, other musicians recorded revolutionary chầu văn for the radio. For example, performances of revolutionary chầu văn by Đoàn Đức Đan, who was a member of the Vietnam Chèo Theatre (Nhà Hát Chèo Việt Nam) in Hanoi, were broadcast on the Voice of Vietnam (Tiếng Nói Việt Nam) radio station in the 1970s.

Revolutionary chầu văn was devised in order to transform chầu văn from a "superstitious product" to a "cultural product" so that it could take its place on the "revolutionary stage" and help promote "socialism" (Lương Đức Vinh, n.d.:91-92). To create revolutionary chầu văn that was acceptable for performances on the stage and on Vietnamese radio, chau van was stripped of any references to lên dòng. This was achieved through the use of song texts with revolutionary and patriotic themes and some reforms to the music itself.<sup>20</sup> The most ideologically unacceptable element of chau van was the 'superstitious' content of the song texts. Chầu văn song texts about spirits were therefore replaced with song texts that honoured Hồ Chí Minh and had revolutionary, socialist and patriotic themes. These include: Nam Đinh, My Home Town (Nam Đinh Quê Tôi) and The Moon Remembers Uncle Hồ (Vàng Trăng Nhớ Bác) by Chu Văn; Welcoming Vietnam's Great Victory (Mừng Việt Nam Đại Thắng) and Presenting Lotus Flowers To Uncle Hồ (Mùa Sen Dâng Bác) by Kim Mã; Crossing The River While Remembering The Ferry Girl On The Wharf (Qua Sông Nhớ Bến Nhớ Người) by Đỗ Nhuân; and Deep Feelings For The Homeland (Thắm Tình Quê Hương) by Đào Nguyên.

An extract from the song text of Welcoming Vietnam's Great Victory (CD#12), which was broadcast by the Voice of Vietnam radio station just after the fall/liberation of Saigon in June 1975, gives an impression of the revolutionary spirit of revolutionary chầu văn song texts:

The magnificent ancient capital, Saigon, resounds with the sound of the city's glorious new name, Hồ Chí Minh. Suddenly in an historical night, a 55-day campaign brings back the bright light to the capital. After 30 years the whale has now displaced the wolf and cleared the borders of barbed wire. The rising tide of hundreds of thousands of brave troops have made the tower fall under the light of the stars.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> The creation of 'revolutionary chầu văn' has many similarities with the 'revision' of folk songs for propaganda purposes in China and the former Soviet Union. See Yang Mu (1994) for discussion of 'Chinese revolutionary folk song' (*geming minge*) and Slobin (1996) for analysis of the effects of communism on musical practice in the former 'East bloc'.

An extract from Chu Văn's poem The Moon Remembers Uncle Hồ illustrates the reverence to Hồ Chí Minh and the patriotism evident in many revolutionary chầu văn song texts:

Looking at the moon I remember the smiling face of uncle Hò, Seeing the clouds reminds me of his grey hair, The wind is like his young hands stroking the beard of the revered and loved uncle Hò. The young moon comes out early, in the afternoon. The moon has waited for the night so many times. Do not be sad moon! Moon, people are busy on the military training ground, Visit the compassionate soldiers, Visit the villages of the homeland, Where the people are, the moon will follow. Follow the footsteps of uncle Hò and write a people's poem; A happy poem full of the sentiments of uncle Hò.

Like chầu văn bands at lên đồng, the instrumental ensembles used for revolutionary chầu văn usually include the moon lute and a set of chầu văn percussion (phách, thanh la, cảnh, trống). Occasionally, other pitched instruments - such as the two-stringed fiddle (đàn nhị) and monochord (đàn bầu) - and additional percussion instruments are also used. The only significant difference in instrumentation compared with chầu văn bands that perform at lên đồng rituals is the use, in some revolutionary chầu văn ensembles, of a group of female singers who sing in unison.

The main musical differences between chầu văn performed at lên đồng rituals and revolutionary chầu văn are in the following three areas:

#### 1) Repertoire

Only a limited number of the main chầu văn songs are included as part of revolutionary chầu văn songscapes. The songs used most frequently are Bỉ, Dọc, Cờn (Dây Lệch), Chèo Đò, Nhịp Một, Xá (Thượng) and Phú (Bình). Differences between songs of the same melody group (e.g. Cờn Dây Lệch and Cờn Luyện Tam Tầng) are ignored by revolutionary chầu văn, which usually uses a single invariant melody for each group. The revolutionary chầu văn piece Nam Định, My Home Town (CD#13), for instance, consists of a suite of songs, Bỉ, Dọc, Cờn, and Xá. The *impoverishment* of the chầu văn repertoire is in part due to the limited knowledge of some revolutionary chầu văn musicians. But it is also part of the ethos of reformed traditional musics, like revolutionary chầu văn, to concentrate on a few outstanding features that identify the genre, rather than its subtleties. In such a way 'precious heritage' (vốn qúy) is redefined to suit the revolutionary socialist agenda. Advocates of revolutionary chầu văn point out the "lyrical" and "gracious" nature of Cờn, the "confidence" of the Phú melodies, the "happiness" and "liveliness" of Nhịp Một and Xá Thượng and the "danceable rhythms" of Chèo Đò (Bùi Đình Thảo and Nguyễn Quang Hải 1996:198). This is not so much at odds with meanings that may be assigned to the chầu văn repertoire, rather it is limited and selective. In keeping with the revolutionary spirit, the palette of chầu văn songs is constrained and interpreted in a one-sided manner so as to bring out positive and happy elements. In contrast, more ambiguous or negative aspects of chầu văn are re-interpreted or excluded. For instance, 'sad' songs such as Phú Giầu and Cờn Oán are never included in the revolutionary chầu văn repertoire, and the only Phú melody that is normally included as part of revolutionary chầu văn, Phú Bình, no longer conveys the strictness and severity of feudal authority.

#### 2) Structure of revolutionary chầu văn suites

The songs used in revolutionary chầu văn suites are not ordered according to the identity of spirits and the actions of mediums. Revolutionary chầu văn suites therefore ignore the ways of constructing chầu văn songscapes as they occur in lên đồng. For instance, Cờn and Xá melodies, which would never be heard in the same songscape during a lên đồng, are often performed in the same suite.

The construction of revolutionary chầu văn suites is driven by purely musical factors, rather than ritual practice (p.c. Nguyễn Thế Tuyền, May 1998). This is evident in two ways. First, the suites attempt to encapsulate the 'essence' and 'diversity' of chầu văn by incorporating a contrasting range of chầu văn songs (bearing in mind the impoverishment of the repertoire discussed above). Therefore, many of the pieces of the revolutionary chầu văn repertoire are played in every suite. Second, structural patterns which build to a 'climax' are favoured.<sup>21</sup> Nam Định, My Home Town (CD#13), for instance, begins with the unmetred Bỉ melody and gradually increases in tempo during the Dọc, Cờn and Xá melodies. As the Xá melodies are among the most 'lively' chầu văn melodies, they are often used as a 'rousing' finale to suites. During the final phrase of Nam Định, My Home Town, there is a dramatic ritardando which marks the end of the suite. This

 $<sup>^{21}</sup>$  In some revolutionary chầu văn suites the structural pattern of building to a climax is repeated more than once.

musical convention is common to many renditions of revolutionary chầu văn suites.<sup>22</sup>

## 3) Tempo

The tempo of revolutionary chầu văn songs is faster than chầu văn songs during lên đồng. According to Nguyễn Thế Tuyền and current members of the Nam Hà Chèo Troupe, the tempo of chầu văn pieces was increased in order that the melodies portrayed the 'bustling happiness' (vui nhộn) of the socialist revolution. Also, the differential between the tempi of songs is decreased, which has the effect of diminishing the expressive range of chầu văn songs, thus making them more uniform.

The three areas of musical change outlined above are significant, yet in general, revolutionary chầu văn suites do not exhibit changes such as the harmonisation of melodies or the transformation of melodic lines to fit the tempered scale. One exception is the revolutionary chầu văn suite arranged to Kim Mã's poem, Presenting Lotus Flowers To Uncle Hồ. Much of the musical arrangement of Presenting Lotus Flowers To Uncle Hồ consists of chầu văn songs that exhibit only the three main musical changes listed above. However, some of the chầu văn songs used in the suite have instrumental accompaniments that are clearly influenced by tonal harmony. For example, at the end of the piece there is a modified version of a Xá melody (CD#14), which has a quasi-tonal instrumental accompaniment unrelated to that usually used for chầu văn songs. The piece also includes sections that are not chầu văn. For instance, in the middle of the piece the Dọc melody is interrupted by a male narration with the following message (CD#15):

When uncle Hò says go, then go. When he says victory, there is victory. The nation's people united, the whole country with one heart. Independence, reunification and success is certain.

The narration is musically unrelated to the chầu văn songs preceding and following it (the Dọc and Cờn melodies respectively), which makes it sound like a 'propaganda advert' inserted into a sequence of chầu văn songs.

Revolutionary chầu văn was devised on a small scale and has not had a significant long-term impact. Although revolutionary chầu văn is still occasionally performed on the stage and broadcast on the radio, the vast

 $<sup>^{22}</sup>$  While chầu văn songs performed during rituals involve tempo changes, ritardando are not used as a sign of 'musical closure' as in revolutionary chầu văn suites.

majority of chầu văn musicians in the late 1990s do not play it. The chầu văn competition at the 1998 Phủ Giầy festival did not include revolutionary chầu văn and neither do recent commercial recordings.<sup>23</sup>

### SUMMARY

From 1954 until the late 1980s the Party severely restricted lên dòng, yet it never succeeded in wiping it out entirely; absolute cultural and ideological revolution was never achieved. At the local level lên dòng and chàu văn continued to exist in a clandestine manner. If caught by the authorities, lên dòng participants were subject to punishment, ranging from confiscation of ritual objects to short periods of imprisonment.

While Party policy continues to officially condemn 'superstition', since the Renovation (dổi mới) policy was initiated in 1986 the anti-superstition campaign has been implemented less rigorously. As a result of the weakening of the Party's ideological control over cultural activities, lên dòng has been practised with increasing openness since the late 1980s.

It has been argued that since the early 1990s a legitimating discourse has been developed by folk-culture researchers and those engaged in lên dòng which reframes it in nationalist terms. This national turn has been made possible by the long-held Party policy on the promotion of a national Vietnamese culture and been bolstered by the Party's tentative acceptance of 'traditional' Vietnamese culture since 1993. Also, scholars and many contemporary mediums argue that lên dòng is not 'superstitious', but rather belongs to the Party-condoned category of 'religious beliefs'. This is achieved by downplaying elements of ritual practice, such as fortune telling and healing, that were most criticised by the anti-superstition campaign.

Party policy toward the arts and 'superstition' gave rise, in the early 1960s, to revolutionary chầu văn, which erased any reference to the spirits or lên đồng. New texts with revolutionary and patriotic themes were written for revolutionary chầu văn, and revolutionary chầu văn suites were constructed which ignored the conventions of the songscapes performed during lên đồng. The revolutionary spirit was evoked musically through selecting a limited number of the 'happier' chầu văn songs that were played

 $<sup>^{23}</sup>$  The recently recorded Hồ Gươm Audio and Dihavina tape series' by Phạm Văn Ty and Xuân Hinh do not include revolutionary chầu văn pieces.

at a faster tempo. A few pieces of revolutionary chầu văn do include sections in which melodies are harmonised, but on the whole such changes do not figure in the majority of the revolutionary chầu văn repertoire. The lasting impact of revolutionary chầu văn has not been large, and today it is not a significant cultural force.

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# CHAPTER 8

# MUSICAL CHANGE

This chapter examines the processes of change in the repertoire and performance practice of chầu văn as it is played during lên đồng. The effects of Party policy discussed in the previous chapter resulted in chầu văn being performed much less, even at covert lên đồng rituals, until the late 1980s. It also resulted in the creation of revolutionary chầu văn to be performed on the stage. Despite the activities of chầu văn musicians being severely restricted during the period when the anti-superstition campaign was rigorously implemented, Party ideology has had no effect on the music that is played during lên đồng: revolutionary chầu văn could not be incorporated into rituals precisely because it erased any reference to spirit possession.

Chầu văn performed during rituals, then, has not changed in accordance with the political and ideological climate: it has existed in spite of Party policy and independent of any government-funded organisations. It has long been claimed that religious music is less susceptible to change than other types of music because it "is so much a part of general religious practice that it cannot be altered without altering other aspects of ritual" (Merriam 1964:308). Indeed, in the Vietnamese case, music and the ritual actions of mediums are so intertwined that it would be difficult to imagine radical musical change without fundamental changes to other aspects of lên dồng rituals, and vice versa. The anti-superstition campaign did not effect lasting changes in lên đồng, despite some effects on how mediums conceive of their ritual practices (see Chapter 7). Concomitantly, chầu văn as performed during lên đồng (in marked contrast to revolutionary chầu văn) has remained impervious to communist ideology.

The fact that chầu văn as it is performed during lên đồng has not been affected by Party ideology raises a number of issues regarding musical change. For instance, how have the period of prohibition and the recent resurgence in lên đồng rituals affected chầu văn? It might be expected that restrictions on the performance of chầu văn would have led to an impoverishment of the repertoire. However, elderly musicians who played chầu văn in the 1940s gave quite the opposite impression: they maintained that chầu văn had become 'more abundant' (phong phú hơn) - i.e. the number of songs had increased - during their lifetimes and that the increase in the song repertoire had not just occurred since the relaxation of Party condemnation of lên dòng in the late 1980s. In the following discussion of changes to the chầu văn repertoire a number of changes which took place during the period when lên dòng was vigorously prohibited will be discussed. That chầu văn was still subject to change during the implementation of the anti-superstition campaign supports the argument made in the Chapter 7 that some chầu văn performances continued at 'secret' lên dòng rituals. Also, although there were fewer opportunities for chầu văn musicians to perform during the period of rigorous prohibition compared to the 1990s, the tradition was still maintained by older musicians, and some musicians did learn chầu văn (including my teachers Phạm Văn Ty and Đặng Công Hưng).

This chapter will outline a number of musical changes to chầu văn that occurred during the second half of the twentieth century. These include: the composition of new songs; innovations in the rendition of songs by individual musicians; the incorporation of songs from other genres of 'traditional Vietnamese music' (âm nhạc truyền thống Việt Nam)<sup>1</sup> into the repertoire; and songs falling into disuse. Changes in performance practice such as the use of amplification and increases in the size of bands will also be addressed. Following the description of specific examples of change, the processes of musical change affecting chầu văn will be discussed with reference to the relevant ethnomusicological literature.

Due to a lack of historical records, my discussion of musical change relies on comments by contemporary musicians about the past. These oral histories provide a diachronic perspective on perceived changes during the second half of this century. Musical examples and comparative analysis are provided to substantiate musicians' comments. A number of recent developments, which are still emergent, also give clues pertaining to the current conditions and limits of change.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> References to traditional music in this chapter reflect the designation in Vietnamese of certain types of music (e.g. ca trù, chèo and tuồng) as 'traditional' (truyền thống/cổ truyền). Debates concerning the definition of 'traditional music', and the use of the term dân tộc (national/ethnic) to mean 'traditional' (see Arana 1999:75), will not be considered here.

#### COMPOSITION

Notions of composition, creativity and so on, are subject to change, and a thorough genealogy of the concept of composition in Vietnam would make an interesting study. A short paper on the subject by Gisa Jähnichen (1991) argues that the figure of the Western-style composer and the separation of 'composition' from 'improvisation' arose in Vietnam with the creation of the main song form of cải lương theatre, vọng cổ ('longing for the past'), by Sáu Lầu around 1917 and became firmly established during the 1930s with the development of 'composed songs' (ca khúc). Although there has been little research in this area to date, Jähnichen's conclusions suggest that the notion of composition in pre-twentieth century Vietnam was quite different than it is today.

In current usage, the Vietnamese word sáng tác, which means 'compose'/'write', is used for both music and literature with similar connotations to the West: an individual is assigned full creative responsibility for composing/writing a pre-structured 'work' (tác phẩm).<sup>2</sup> There were three songs which contemporary musicians identified as being composed by individuals. Two of the new songs, Suối Oi (Mountain Stream) (CD#16, Ex. 7) and Các Bạn Tiên (The Fairies) (CD#18, Ex. 9), have become standard pieces in the repertoire whereas the other, Múa Đăng (Lit-Rope Dance) (CD#17, Ex. 8), is sung in more restricted circles. All of these songs are usually sung for the Little Holy Lady. Suối Oi and Múa Đăng were composed by Phạm Văn Kiêm (b.1922) and Các Bạn Tiên was composed by Đoàn Đức Đan (1921-c.1994).<sup>3</sup>

Although I managed to establish who had composed Các Bạn Tiên, Suối Ơi and Múa Đăng, some musicians did not know who had composed these melodies. It is also likely that the composers of these melodies will, in time, be forgotten as authorship was not an important issue for chầu văn musicians.<sup>4</sup> Several other songs - such as two Nhịp Một melodies - may also

 $<sup>^2</sup>$  Usually sáng tác is used in connection with musical compositions that are written down, but this does not preclude its use for musical compositions that are not usually notated, such as chầu văn songs.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> None of the musicians that I spoke to were definite about Đoàn Đức Đan's year of death. Dan died before my period of fieldwork, but the changes that he initiated were reported to me by musicians who knew him, especially my teacher Đặng Công Hưng and Đan's son-in-law, Hồ Viết Chí. Information from Hưng and Chí was corroborated through recordings of Đan's performances.

 $<sup>^4</sup>$  Authorship may become an important issue for chầu văn musicians in the future. This might occur if, for example, there is a copyright incentive, more documentation of chầu văn, or if there are changes in the governmental/institutional support of chầu văn

have been recently composed, but musicians were not certain of their origin.

The fact that only a small number of songs have recently been composed, even bearing in mind the possibility that the composers of some songs have been forgotten, is consistent with the attitude of chầu văn musicians toward composition. When I questioned my music teachers about writing new songs they said that they did not 'dare' (dám) write new melodies for fear of being ridiculed by other musicians. Hưng made the following comment when I asked him why he had not composed any songs:

I am frightened that people will laugh! One has to be very careful; I dare not compose. I only inherit what the elders (các cụ) did. I think that I am not yet good enough to compose anything. The elders were formidable and I have not yet reached their level. Only when I reach a comparable level to the elders will I dare to think about composing ..... What the elders have done is so interesting that I am hesitant and frightened (sq) to bring something of my own into chầu văn. (p.c. Đặng Công Hưng, May 1998)

It is evident from Hung's remarks that previous generations, the 'elders', are seen as powerful custodians of the 'tradition'. Even though some musicians were less deferential to the past than Hung, there was a distinct reluctance among most chầu văn musicians to compose new songs: only the most highly esteemed musicians, such as Phạm Văn Kiêm and Đoàn Đức Đan, were thought capable of composing. The same principle also applies to writing new song texts. The rest of this section will discuss the songs composed by Phạm Văn Kiêm and Đoàn Đức Đan so that the stylistic differences between recently composed and older songs may be evaluated.

Phạm Văn Kiêm, who is best known for writing many chầu văn poems, composed the songs Suối Oi and Múa Đăng in the late 1960s, apparently due to encouragement from his wife.<sup>5</sup> When composing Suối Oi, Kiêm said he was imagining the forests in the mountains, yet he did not point out any musical traits that 'evoked' the mountains. Suối Oi is unusual because it employs call and response (đối đáp) between a soloist and the rest of the band: the only other chầu văn song in call-and-response form is Chèo Đò (Boat Rowing). In the case of Chèo Đò, the response used is khoan khoan hò khoan, a meaningless phrase which is traditionally sung to synchronise the oars when rowing. Suối Oi has no such functional connotations, and the

<sup>(</sup>through a system of 'preservation' or the incorporation of the genre into the conservatoire system).

 $<sup>^{5}</sup>$  I discussed these two songs with Phạm Văn Kiêm in June 1998. Some of the poems written by Kiêm are given in Ngô Đức Thịnh (1996b).

responses are based on repetitions of the soloist's preceding phrase. Each verse of Suối Oi (see Ex. 7) consists of two vocal sections (b.1-10 and 12-27) separated by a short instrumental linking phrase. The vocal sections consist of smaller call-and-response units with a 'tail' (duôi) sung in unison at the end of each verse (b.24-27).

Múa Đăng is usually played when the medium is dancing with short litropes as a replacement for Xá Múa Mồi. The structure of Múa Đăng may be described as follows (see Ex. 8): an A section (b.1-14); a closely related A1 (b.15-24); a repeat of A1 with minor changes (b.25-34); and a four-bar end phrase (b.35-38). As its structure implies, Múa Đăng uses a great deal of repetition.

The title of Đoàn Đức Đan's song Các Bạn Tiên is taken from the first line of the song text. Although I was unable to ascertain a precise date of its composition, musicians said that it was not performed prior to the 1970s. Like Suối Oi, each verse of Các Bạn Tiên has a short instrumental linking phrase that separates two vocal sections (see Ex. 9). At the end of each verse there is a 'tail' sung to the vowel i (b.16-18).

Compared with other chầu văn songs, the three songs Suối Oi, Múa Đăng and Các Bạn Tiên use less melisma and syncopation. The song texts are also sung faster: on almost every beat and half-beat a new word of the text is sung. The vocal lines therefore emphasise the regular sounded beat of the onebeat rhythm which all three melodies use. An additional characteristic of Các Bạn Tiên is the frequent use of octave leaps, especially during the first vocal section. Musicians said that these features made the songs more 'lively' (sôi nổi), 'happy' (vui) and less 'drawling' (ề à).

### INNOVATIONS

Some chàu văn musicians have made innovations to established songs in the repertoire that exceed the 'allowable variation' (Nettl 1983:177) between successive performances by the same musician and between renditions of a song by different musicians.<sup>6</sup> Not all innovations made by individuals are widely adopted by the chàu văn community, nor are new song titles always given to innovative variants. However, taking note of innovations does provide insights into the processes of change at the micro level. To

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Variation in the vocal melody of songs between performances by different musicians and between successive performances by the same musician was discussed in Chapter 6.

illustrate the innovation process, this section will discuss the following examples: innovations to the Dồn melody by Đoàn Đức Đan; innovations by Cao Môn to Đoàn Đức Đan's Xá Lửng; innovations by Phạm Văn Ty to Xá Tạy Nguyên. These examples do not constitute a comprehensive list of innovations. Rather, they are indicative of the prevalent phenomenon of making innovations to songs.

Dòn, which literally means 'fast', has a quick tempo and is usually played as an exciting conclusion to the incarnation of mandarin spirits. Ex. 10 is a comparative score of a rendition of the original Dòn melody (CD#19) and Doàn Đức Đan's modified version of Dòn (CD#20), labelled on the transcription as Đoàn Đức Đan's Dòn. Compared with the original, Đan's Dòn exhibits many of the features already discussed in relation to the composed songs: it uses less melisma and delivers the words of the text faster. For instance, the first two words of Đan's Dòn are sung on the first two beats of the bar whereas the same two words occupy nearly two bars in the original version. The faster delivery of words also serves to emphasise the pulse as a new word is sung 'on the beat' for most of the song. Đan's version of the Dòn melody is a good example of innovations made in order to suit the contemporary musical tastes of ritual participants: according to Hưng, Đan created his own version of Dòn so that ritual participants would find it 'easier' (dễ hơn) to listen to.

A Xá melody, which Đặng Công Hưng referred to as Xá Lửng (CD#21), is also the result of innovations made by Đoàn Đức Đan. Xá Lửng literally means 'incomplete Xá' : it is 'incomplete' because each verse only uses two lines of poetry, whereas the verses for most other Xá melodies have three lines. Contemporary musicians did not know which Xá melody Đan had used as the basis for Xá Lửng, and tracing its genesis need not concern us here. However, I would like to compare Đan's Xá Lửng with an innovation of Xá Lửng made by the musician Cao Môn (b.1959) in the early 1990s. Cao Môn described his innovations to Xá Lửng in the following terms:

The words [of the song] were already in existence, but I took the melody and made it a bit different to suit 'modern rhythms' (tiết tấu hiện đại), to make it happier (vui hơn) and more animated (bốc hơn) .... Đoàn Đức Đan used to sing a similar melody [Xá Lửng]; I just reformed it some more (cải biên lên). (p.c. Cao Môn, June 1998)

Cao Môn's innovation of Xá Lửng has no formal name, but some musicians referred to it as Xá Cao Môn (CD#22).<sup>7</sup> Comparison of transcriptions of Xá

 $<sup>^7</sup>$  The song referred to as 'Cao Môn's Melody' in the songscapes of the Third Mandarin (Ritual 2) outlined in Chapter 4 will not be discussed. When I discussed this melody

Lửng and Xá Cao Môn (Ex. 11) shows the close relationship between the vocal contour of the two songs. A major difference between the two melodies lies in the pentatonic scale used: Xá Lửng uses the pitches C, D, F, G and A, whereas Xá Cao Môn uses the pitches C, D, E, G and A. Changing the pitches of the melody is presumably one of the 'reforms' which Cao Môn says makes the melody 'happier' and more 'animated'. Although the rhythms used for the vocal melodies are different, there are no striking characteristics that clearly differentiate the vocal melodies themselves; this is despite Cao Môn's reference to the use of 'modern rhythms' for Xá Cao Môn.<sup>8</sup> The examples of Xá Lửng and Xá Cao Môn illustrate the process by which successive generations of musicians make innovations to existing melodies: Xá Cao Môn might be called a 'second-order innovation', i.e. an innovation of another musician's innovation.

Phạm Văn Ty's version of a Xá melody, which he called Xá Tây Nguyên (CD#23, Ex. 12), is another example of a second-order innovation. The term tây nguyên refers to the Vietnamese central highlands, and Ty maintained that the song evokes the music of the minority groups that live there. Xá Tây Nguyên was devised by chầu văn musicians in South Vietnam; Ty learnt it during a trip to Ho Chi Minh City. Although I have been unable to obtain a rendition of Xá Tây Nguyên from south Vietnam for comparison, according to Ty he has made a number of innovations to the original. These include the phrases sung to the vowel  $\sigma$  (b.19-22, b.33-54) and the use of vocables for the rest of the song, which are meant to sound like the ethnic minority languages in the central highlands. It would seem, therefore, that through his use of vocables, Ty makes a more 'overt' connection to the ethnic minority groups in the central highlands.<sup>9</sup> Also, Ty's innovations emphasise the difference between other chầu văn songs and Xá Tây Nguyên by including the phrases sung to the vowel o which are uncharacteristic of the chầu văn style. This is specially true of the two repeated descending phrases (b.37-50) which Ty sings using long glissandos and an 'uneven' vibrato.

with Cao Môn he said that, like Xá Cao Môn, he had reformed a melody that Đoàn Đức Đan used to sing. However, he was not specific about the original melody, nor did he have a recording of it.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, the percussion accompaniment cannot be compared because no percussion instruments were used during Đặng Công Hưng's rendition of Xá Lửng.

 $<sup>^9</sup>$  On a number of occasions when Phạm Văn Ty performed Xá Tây Nguyên, the Vietnamese audience who had never heard the song before were immediately aware of the evocation of the ethnic minority groups in the central highlands.

As well as being an example of a second-order innovation, Xá Tây Nguyên is interesting because of its association with ethnic minority cultures. The potential for musical changes due to the processes of intercultural contact between the Việt majority and ethnic minority groups will be discussed below.

#### SONG BORROWING

Chầu văn has long adopted songs from, and been influenced by, other genres of traditional Vietnamese music. Cross-genre influence is by no means a feature that is unique to chầu văn, as there are links between many types of Vietnamese traditional music. However, chầu văn scholars and musicians often claimed that chầu văn is particularly eclectic.<sup>10</sup>

The influence of the musical style of central Vietnam on Hò Huế and Cờn Huế and the largely 'imagined' influence of ethnic minority musics on the Xá melodies has already been discussed in Chapter 5. Examining other examples of alleged connections between chầu văn and other music genres is, however, hampered by a lack of historical and musical detail. To cite one example, musicians claimed that the chầu văn melody Bắn Chim Thước was related to the chèo melody Đương Trường Chim Thước. Yet because little is known about when and how Bắn Chim Thước became part of the chầu văn repertoire, an investigation of the relations between these two melodies would add little to the present discussion of musical change. In many cases it is also difficult to substantiate alleged musical connections between chầu van melodies and songs from other Vietnamese music genres. However, there are some clear-cut examples of chầu văn songs that have been borrowed from other genres. Through examining historically situated examples of the incorporation of songs from other traditional Vietnamese music genres, I hope to illustrate how song borrowing contributes to musical change.

The chầu văn musician Lê Bá Cao said that Phú Tỳ Bà and Phú Bắc Phản were 'chầu văn-ized' (chầu văn hóa) versions of the ca trù pieces Tỳ Bà Hành and Bắc

<sup>10</sup> In the book *Hát văn* it states that compared with chầu văn "it is hard to find a type of 'folk music' (âm nhạc dân gian) that draws in so many influences from many different types of folk song" (Ngô Đức Thịnh 1992:57). It then lists types of music that have influenced chầu văn including North and Central Vietnamese 'folk songs' (dân ca), ca trù, chèo, cải lương and tuồng. Even if transcription and analysis was attempted for all the examples mentioned in *Hát văn*, cross-genre influences would be difficult to substantiate. However, such claims do reflect the views of many chầu văn musicians.

Phản respectively.<sup>11</sup> Here, I shall compare Phú Tỳ Bà and Tỳ Bà Hành, which are clearly different versions of the same piece; further analysis is necessary to ascertain the connections between Phú Bắc Phản and Bắc Phản.

Ex. 13 is a comparative score of the vocal melody of Tỳ Bà Hành performed by the Ca Trù Thái Hà Ensemble (CD#24) with the same section of the Phú Tỳ Bà vocal melody sung by Lê Bá Cao (CD#25).<sup>12</sup> Both Tỳ Bà Hành and Phú Tỳ Bà use the same text (with only slight differences) and, although exact pitches of the two vocal melodies are different, they have a similar melodic contour. The most striking difference between Tỳ Bà Hành and Phú Tỳ Bà is that the latter uses the three-beat rhythm, whereas the former does not follow a regular pulse (except for a short section when singing the words chiều trúc ti). Despite Phú Tỳ Bà having a metrical framework, Lê Bá Cao compared the 'flexibility' (mềm dẻo) and 'syncopation' (sanh cốp) of Phú Tỳ Bà with the 'free rhythm' (nhịp tự do) of Tỳ Bà Hành which does not follow a regular beat. Another stylistic similarity between the two vocal melodies, noted by Lê Bá Cao, is the use of extensive ornamentation (luyến láy) between each word of the song text.

Lê Bá Cao's claim that Tỳ Bà Hành has been incorporated into chầu văn, rather than Phú Tỳ Bà being the original song, is confirmed by the fact that the song text of Tỳ Bà Hành is a ninth-century Chinese poem (written by Bai Ju Yi)<sup>13</sup> which is thought to have been translated by Phan Huy Vịnh in the nineteenth century so that it could be sung as part of ca trù (Đỗ Bằng Đoàn and Đỗ Trọng Huệ 1962:37). Historical records concerning the Phú melodies are lacking, but Lê Bá Cao said that Phú Tỳ Bà existed before he started playing chầu văn in the 1940s. It therefore seems that at least since the first half of this century, the chầu văn-ization of pieces from other traditional Vietnamese music genres has been a permitted aspect of musical change.

Recently, Cao Môn has continued the tradition of adopting songs from other genres into the chầu văn repertoire through his use of two folk songs, Lý Qua Cầu and Lý Mỹ Hưng (CD#26, Ex. 14), during incarnations of the

 $<sup>^{11}</sup>$  Lê Bá Cao also said that Phú Chênh and Phú Nói were 'influenced' (ảnh hưởng) by the ca trù pieces Gửi Thư and Hát Nói respectively.

<sup>12</sup> The ca trù ensemble consists of a female voice, the three-stringed plucked lute (dàn dáy), the clappers (phách) and the praise drum (trống chầu). Only the vocal line of Tỳ Bà Hành has been transcribed. Apart from a short section at the end of the extract, Tỳ Bà Hành does not follow a regular pulse so the transcription does not indicate exact duration. Instead, extended note stems are used to give an approximate indication of relative duration. Vocal glissandi and the 'broken' vibrato are indicated with lines and zigzags between note heads. For a more detailed description of ca trù ornamentation and rhythmic structure see Norton (1996).

<sup>13</sup> In Vietnamese, Bai Ju Yi is usually referred to as Bạch Cư Dị.

Seventh Prince.<sup>14</sup> Lý is a generic name for a type of folk song which is widespread throughout Vietnam.<sup>15</sup> When I discussed Lý Qua Cầu and Lý Mỹ Hưng with Cao Môn, he said that he had written new words to suit the context of lên dòng and set them to the original Lý melodies. Unfortunately, he did not have recordings of the original Lý melodies for comparison.

As Cao Môn only started using Lý Qua Cầu and Lý Mỹ Hưng in the early 1990s, they have not yet been widely adopted by other chầu văn musicians, and, as with Cao Môn's innovations, some musicians would not accept the two Lý melodies as part of chầu văn. Nevertheless, Cao Môn's use of two Lý melodies illustrates the process by which melodies are incorporated into lên đồng rituals through the initiative of particular individuals. It also suggests that song borrowing continues to, at least potentially, effect changes to the chầu văn repertoire.

### UNSUNG SONGS

Changes in the musical tastes of ritual participants have resulted in some melodies falling into disuse. Foremost among the songs that are no longer heard during lên dồng are a number of Phú melodies such as Phú Tỳ Bà, Phú Bắc Phản and Phú Hạ.<sup>16</sup> Now these melodies are no longer performed during lên dồng because, according to musicians, mediums find them 'sad' (buồn), 'not elegant' (không dịu) and 'not fashionable' (không xôm). Apart from these songs becoming unpopular, musical competence was also mentioned as a factor in some Phú songs becoming 'unsung' songs: the Phú melodies were considered the 'most difficult' (khó nhất) melodies to grasp and therefore beyond the training and skill of some musicians.

Some Phú melodies are still regularly sung during lên đồng rituals (e.g. Phú Nói, Phú Bình, Phú Văn Đàn, Phú Chuốc Rượu), but comments from some mediums indicated that even these melodies are becoming unpopular. In Chapter 4, for instance, it was observed that the medium of Ritual 2 asked the musicians to change from Phú Văn Đàn to something 'happier', so the band switched to performing a more 'lively' melody, Cao Môn's melody (see video extract 2).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> See also Chapter 4, Songscape for the Seventh Prince (Ritual 2).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> For a discussion of Lý folk songs see Phạm Duy (1975:49-59).

 $<sup>^{16}</sup>$  According to Lê Bá Cao, Phú Tỳ Bà and Phú Hạ used to be sung for the Third and Tenth Prince, Phú Bắc Phản for the Third and Seventh Prince, and Phú Hạ for the Third and Ninth Lady.

Another example of a song that has fallen into obscurity for much the same reasons as some of the Phú melodies is Thiên Thai, which is usually played for the Tenth Prince. This melody has been replaced by newer melodies such as Hò Huế and Cờn Huế. Lê Bá Cao said that he only played the Thiên Thai melody for a few mediums who could appreciate it, otherwise he would play Cờn Huế or a Bỉ melody. (Cao never performed Hò Huế because he did not accept it as a legitimate part of chầu văn.)

#### NOISY RITUALS

During the 1990s many bands in both rural and urban areas have started to use amplification during lên dòng. The amplification for bands usually consists of two or three microphones plugged into a small mixer/amplifier which is connected to a speaker or megaphone horn. The microphones are used for the voice and for instruments such as the moon lute and bamboo flutes. In recent years there has also been a tendency to increase the size of bands with the addition of instruments such as the sixteen-stringed zither, bamboo flutes, and the two-stringed fiddle (see Chapter 1). This has been made possible due to some mediums in the 1990s having sufficient economic resources to pay for larger bands.

In the last decade, there has been a great increase in the mechanised reproduction of music in Vietnam. Although no statistics are available, increased prosperity has enabled many people to buy stereos, and karaoke, both at bars and in private homes, has also become widespread. At some lên dòng I attended, the amplifier and microphones used were, in fact, karaoke equipment that had been borrowed from a local bar or an individual's home.

The most striking aural effect that has occurred due to the use of amplification (barring the increase in loudness) is the application of very long reverberation. In the light of the ubiquitous use of reverberation for karaoke and recordings made in Vietnam, it is not surprising that it is also used when chau văn bands are amplified.<sup>17</sup> In addition to reverberation,

<sup>17</sup> My inquiries into why reverberation is used during lên dồng (and so indiscriminately used for all types of music) were met with the suggestion that people had become 'used to' (quen) it and that it made the voice sound 'better' (tốt hơn). In fact, it often seemed to be assumed that reverberation was a necessary part of amplification.

Of the two rituals discussed in Chapter 4, only Ritual 2 used amplification. Less reverberation was used during Ritual 2 than is typical, primarily because, unusually,

sporadic feedback, crackle and distortion were not uncommon features of amplification systems. Musicians and ritual participants were not forthcoming about the quality of the amplification equipment; from observation, the participants seemed to find crackle, distortion and feedback tolerable, although certainly not desirable because attempts would be made to stop these effects when they occurred.

The reasons musicians gave for the use of amplification were that it 'decreased the tiredness' (do most) of the singers and ensured that everybody present could hear the music and words. Some musicians also argued that ritual participants were more 'noisy' (on ao) and less reverent than in the past, so amplification was necessary. But, of course, it is equally possible that the reverse is true: that ritual participants make more noise during rituals because of the increased loudness of amplified bands. Amplification was also said to be necessary in order for the voice to be heard above large bands.

## REFLECTIONS ON MUSICAL CHANGE

So far, this chapter has provided specific musical examples that illustrate several areas of musical change. Five areas of change have been identified. First, there is (limited) scope for musicians' compositions to be incorporated into the repertoire. Second, some individual musicians make innovations to already existing songs; while these innovations are examples of change at the micro-level, their cumulative effect over time should not be underestimated. Third, songs from other traditional Vietnamese music genres are continually being chầu văn-ized and incorporated into the repertoire. The chau van-ization of songs has been an established practice for some time. Indeed, many Vietnamese scholars and musicians argue that eclecticism is at the heart of chầu văn. Fourth, as new songs are introduced into chầu văn some unpopular songs which are 'difficult' to perform have fallen into disuse. Fifth, since the resurgence of lên dòng rituals in the last decade, there have been changes in performance practice. Most notably, there has been a tendency for the size of bands to increase and for amplification to be used, especially for the voice(s) and moon lute.

Đặng Công Hưng does not like to use a lot of reverberation. Hưng's taste may stem from his experiences of playing at concerts in the West.

Having outlined specific examples of the products of change, I will reflect on the "musical *processes* that generate ... musical products" (Blacking 1995 [1977]:167, emphasis in original). Particular emphasis will be placed on the role of individual musicians as agents of change and the influence of the changing musical 'tastes' of ritual participants.

Before discussing musical processes, it is necessary to critically evaluate the notion of musical change. This is particularly important in the case of chàu văn because according to Blacking's definition of musical change the 'changes' outlined in this chapter would probably be classified as 'innovations' or 'variations' that are permitted within a musical system, rather than as examples of musical change per se. Blacking has argued that "to qualify as musical change, the phenomena described must constitute a change in the structure of the musical system, and not simply a change within the system" (1995 [1977]:167). He continues to suggest that such distinctions can only be made "by relating variations in musical processes and products to the perceptions and patterns of interaction of those who use the music" (ibid.:169, emphases omitted). However, one of the problems with Blacking's distinction between musical change and innovations is that he does not take into account the way the musical system itself may be contested. As Béhague's critique of Blacking notes, "what may constitute the boundaries of a musical system within any culture is not easily apprehended given the potential multiplicity of levels of perception" (1986:16). In the case of chầu văn, song borrowing has been part of the musical system since before the Second World War, but this does not necessarily mean that songs recently borrowed from other genres will be accepted as part of chầu văn. As mentioned above, some musicians did not accept the two Lý melodies, which have been performed at lên đồng by Cao Môn, as part of the chầu văn musical system. Also, from a diachronic perspective, there is bound to be slippage between what is considered 'inside' and 'outside' the musical system: what once may have been thought of as a 'change' in the system may in time be understood as an 'innovation' and vice versa. In order to maintain Blacking's distinction between musical change and innovation, it is necessary to set up an ahistorical "traditional structure of the musical system" (1995 [1977]:164), however flexible, which seems at odds with the investigation of musical change. Blacking's views concerning musical change are based on his conviction that musical change should be treated as a unique field of inquiry, a "special category of action" (ibid.:130). This has the advantage of avoiding the tendency to interpret musical changes as simply the consequence of other changes,

such as social, political and economic changes. Unfortunately, however, problems in distinguishing between "change within a style and a change of style" (ibid.:165) make Blacking's theory difficult to apply in particular contexts.

Nettl has proposed a much broader view of musical change than Blacking. This is exemplified by Nettl's classification of musical change into four degrees: complete, radical, gradual, and allowable variation (see Nettl 1983:176-78).<sup>18</sup> The changes outlined in this chapter would probably be described as gradual. This is the norm for music cultures. Indeed, musical cultures which have undergone complete change, or, at the other extreme, show no evidence of change, are extremely rare. The case of chau van is, however, notable in that the rate of change has not been dramatically disrupted by the vigorous prohibition of chau van from the 1960s to the late '80s. For instance, some songs, such as those composed by Pham Van Kiêm and Đoàn Đức Đan, were composed prior to the 1980s, and there has not been a marked increase in the composition of songs during the 1990s. A possible explanation for the continued process of gradual change is that contemporary musicians still have a reverent attitude toward the maintenance of the chầu văn 'tradition'. Musical changes are usually the result of decisions made by individuals, yet only a minority of chầu văn musicians 'dare' to initiate musical changes.<sup>19</sup> The members of a particular band obviously have to accept a musical change before it is incorporated into performances, and if a change is to be adopted more widely then it must be accepted by the wider community of musicians. The fact that some of the innovations to the repertoire outlined in this chapter have not been widely adopted is indicative of different musicians' views regarding the 'acceptable' limits of musical change. But even musicians, like Lê Bá Cao, who reject some new developments accept that there is scope for individuals to effect change. Differences of opinion lie not in whether or not musical changes should occur, but in evaluating the musical merit and

<sup>18</sup> The broadness of Nettl's view of musical change is evident from the inclusion of allowable variation which he admits "may not even be perceived as change" (1983:177). In this chapter, allowable variation has not been viewed as musical change (see footnote 6).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Despite the criticisms of Blacking's theories of musical change outlined above, a notable aspect of his theorising, which has influenced the description in this chapter, is the emphasis placed on the individual. For instance, he argues that: "musical and cultural changes are not *caused* by culture contact, population movements, or changes in technology and in means and modes of production: they are the results of decisions made by individuals about music-making and music or about social and cultural practice" (Blacking 1986:3, emphasis in original).

appropriateness of specific changes. The limits of change are therefore negotiated by musicians. However, decisions regarding musical change are not just determined by musicians: ritual participants also have an influence. If mediums and their disciples like, say, a particular innovation to a song, then musicians are more likely to incorporate the innovation into their performances on a regular basis. Mediums show their musical 'appreciation' (thưởng thức) during rituals through giving gifts and money to the band, so musicians benefit from performing songs which are enjoyed by the medium. More generally, musicians have an economic imperative to perform music which is liked by ritual participants because their livelihood is reliant on being invited by mediums to perform at rituals.

Discussion of the processes of musical change in ethnomusicological literature have often revolved around the notions of Westernization and modernization. Nettl defines Westernization as the incorporation of central but non-compatible Western traits by a non-Western music with the intention of creating a new type of Western music (1983:353). In contrast to Westernization, Nettl defines modernization as the incorporation of noncentral but compatible Western traits with the aim of making a "new, adapted, modernized version of the original" in which the fundamental characteristics of the original are preserved (ibid.:354).

In general, musicians stressed that chầu văn is a 'traditional' Vietnamese music genre, thereby emphasising continuity with 'tradition' and chầu văn's 'Vietnameseness'. Musicians who initiate changes to chầu văn do not intend to create a 'Western' music genre, so the process of Westernization, in Nettl's sense, is not relevant. There were, however, occasions when musicians referred to the influence of Western music on chầu văn. For instance, one elderly musician, called Chén, made the following remarks:

In the past chầu văn was leisurely (đủng đỉnh), smooth (êm) and graceful (dịu); sung sentence by sentence (từng câu), word by word (từng chữ). Now, because Western [popular] music has come to Vietnam, chầu văn has become more noisy (ồn ào). Now that people are familiar with Western music, they find leisurely music sad (buồn). If people sing sentence by sentence and word by word with ornamentation between each sentence, it drags (lầng nhằng), and people who are accustomed to lively (sôi nổi) music find it dull (tẻ). (p.c. Chén, June 1998)

Chén neatly sums up some of the changes in musical style outlined in the course of this chapter, particularly the tendency to make songs more 'lively' by using a faster delivery of the text and less ornamentation between words. But what are the processes at work here? Should the increasing liveliness of songs be understood as a result of modernization? Nettl's definition of modernization and Westernization rest on the problematic distinction between central and non-central musical traits. It could be argued that the use of a more emphasised beat, faster delivery of the words and less ornamentation are non-central traits of Western popular music that have been incorporated into chau van. Yet it is debatable whether these musical traits are 'non-central' or whether they are compatible with the 'fundamental characteristics' of chầu văn. A similar problem arises in relation to Nettl's statement that the "prominence of the large ensemble" is a central characteristic of Western music (1983:353). Even if it is agreed that large ensembles are a central characteristic of Western music, increases in the size of non-Western ensembles are not necessarily due to the influence of Western music. Rather than citing the influence of Western music, musicians said that the size of chầu văn bands had increased because many mediums have been able to afford to pay for more musicians during the 1990s due to increased prosperity. Also, larger bands were preferred because they made rituals more 'boisterous' (náo nhiệt). According to musicians, then, there are economic and aesthetic reasons for increases in the size of bands which are unrelated to the influence of Western music.

Vietnamese people are being exposed to an increasing range of Western and, especially, Western-derived pop music. This is most evident through the widespread proliferation of karaoke during the 1990s. Chén suggests that the musical preferences of ritual participants have been affected by the increased exposure to 'Western [popular] music' and that musicians are responding to changing musical tastes. It might therefore be useful to think of many of the changes to chàu văn not as the adoption of Western musical traits (central or non-central, compatible or incompatible), but as a response to changing musical tastes. In other words, chàu văn musicians are not 'copying' or 'incorporating', say, aspects of 'Western' vocal style. Rather, they are responding to the changing tastes of musical participants, which have been influenced by Western-derived music, by changing aspects of the chàu văn vocal style and so on, in ways that are distinctive to their musical heritage.

To think of modernization as involving the influence of Western music, as Nettl maintains, has the disadvantage of implying that being 'modern' is an exclusively Western prerogative. Hughes has pointed out that it is more useful to view modernization as a process that it is independent of the influence of Western music (1985:4). In his study of developments in the

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world of Japanese folk song, Hughes makes a distinction between two types of modernization: "modernization type 1 (M1) will refer to those developments which follow ... without necessary consciousness, from the spread of mechanization and the harnessing of inanimate energy sources"; "modernization type 2 (M2) will designate the relatively conscious pursuit of modernity" (ibid.:269).<sup>20</sup>

One of the main changes in chầu văn performance practice which might be attributed to the process of modernization is the use of amplification. However, musicians did not describe the use of amplification in terms of being 'modern'. When pressed, they accepted that the technology of amplification was 'new' or 'modern', but the intention of being modern was not a conscious motivating factor for its use. Hughes' distinctions between different types of modernization are useful in that they emphasise the intention of musicians themselves. As the process Hughes refers to as 'modernization type 1' (M1) does not necessarily involve the conscious pursuit of modernity, the use of amplification by chầu văn bands - and also the increases in the size of bands - might be interpreted as following from M1.

While 'Western' scholars may define the process of modernization for their own analytical purposes, these definitions are likely to bear little resemblance to 'native' uses and understandings of the term. In Vietnam, as in many other developing countries, the notion of 'modernization' (hiện đại hóa) is a highly politicised and contentious term. Articles by Vietnamese music scholars which discuss 'modernization' are primarily concerned with finding ways to 'develop' (phát triển) 'traditional' music genres - through eliminating 'backward' (lạc hậu) characteristics - while maintaining their 'essence' (tinh hoa) and 'national identity' (bản sắc dân tộc).<sup>21</sup> A similar modernizing agenda is evident in the book *Hát chầu văn*, which calls for the 'development' of chầu văn in order to rid it of 'superstitious' elements and to make it suitable for 'the new life' (cuộc sống mới) (Bùi Đình Thảo and Nguyễn

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Hughes also makes a distinction between two processes of Westernization (1985:270): Westernization type 1 "covers only those cases where elements of Western culture are borrowed or imitated primarily because of the prestige accorded to Western culture as a whole"; the second type of Westernization corresponds to Nettl's definition given above. Hughes has recently renamed M1 and M2 as pragmatic and ideological modernization respectively, and W1 and W2 as ideological and assimilative Westernization respectively (Hughes n.d.).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> For recent debates among Vietnamese music scholars concerning the 'modernization' of 'traditional' Vietnamese music genres, see the collection of articles in the book *Tim về bản sắc dân tộc của văn hóa* (*Investigations into the national identity of culture*) (Culture and Art Studies 1993).

Quang Hải 1996:197-200). However, this book does not address how chầu văn performed during rituals might be 'developed': only revolutionary chầu văn suites are mentioned. This reflects the fact that chầu văn performed during rituals has been untouched by the proposed modernizing agenda. It is also important to note that the issues discussed by Vietnamese scholars have little bearing on the concerns of musicians: the issue of 'modernization' was rarely mentioned by chầu văn musicians and was not a primary motivation for instigating change.<sup>22</sup>

The influence of the music of the ethnic minority groups in Vietnam on the Xá group of melodies was discussed in some detail in Chapter 5. It was argued that the Xá melodies evoke a pan-ethnic minority identity and that this evocation is to a large extent 'imagined'. Pham Văn Ty's version of Xá Tây Nguyên, discussed earlier in this chapter, shares many of the general characteristics of the Xá melodies outlined in Chapter 5, and its creation should be understood as one of a number of changes to the Xá melodies. It is unnecessary to reiterate the material discussed in Chapter 5. However, in the context of the present discussion of musical change I would like to briefly consider the effects of intercultural contact on chầu văn.<sup>23</sup> Should, for instance, Xá Tây Nguyên and other Xá melodies be considered as a product of the process of syncretism? The term 'syncretism' has often been used by ethnomusicologists to refer to "the development of mixed or hybrid styles ... when the sources are similar, compatible, and ... share central traits" (Nettl 1983:252; see also Merriam 1964 and Nettl 1978). According to this definition, syncretism is not applicable to chầu văn because the Xá melodies do not 'blend' musical elements of Viet and ethnic minority musics. Xá Tây Nguyên shows no evidence of the adoption of discrete musical traits from a specific ethnic minority music, and chầu văn musicians did not describe it in those terms. Rather, Xá Tây Nguyên evokes the 'sound' of ethnic minorities primarily through imitating the ethnic minority languages heard in the central highlands.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Cao Môn's reference to 'modern rhythms' (tiết tấu hiện đại), mentioned earlier in the chapter, should not be interpreted as a general statement concerning the 'modernization' of chầu văn. That reference was made in the context of discussing his musical innovations to Xá Lửng and his attempts to make chầu văn more 'lively'.
<sup>23</sup> As the ethnic minorities in Vietnam and the Việt majority are culturally distinct, I will refer to contact between them as 'intercultural'. However, it should be noted that nationalist discourse often describes ethnic minority cultures as contributing to Vietnamese national identity (see Chapter 5). This enables chầu văn to be influenced by ethnic minority music cultures without threatening its 'Vietnamese character' (tính Việt Nam).

Kartomi has critiqued definitions of syncretism that involve identifying compatible musical traits and suggests, instead, that the term syncretism (as well as transculturation and synthesis) should be "applied ... only to the process of intercultural contact, not to the varying types of results" (1981:234). Xá Tây Nguyên and other Xá melodies might be considered as the 'results' of the process of intercultural contact. However, an objection might still be made to the application of the term syncretism to chầu văn in that it is usually used to refer to processes of intercultural contact that have more radical and large-scale 'results'. As the motivation for evoking ethnic minority music cultures is extramusical - Xá melodies are performed during rituals in order to construct the identity of the mountain spirits (see Chapter 5) - it seems unlikely that the musical 'results' of intercultural contact will become more radical in the future unless there is substantial change to ritual practice.

# CONCLUSION

Rice's analysis of changes to Bulgarian music under communist rule leads him to conclude that "music, and therefore musical change, is embedded in economic and ideological systems" (1994:232). In Vietnam, communist ideology has had a profound impact on the lives of musicians and on many types of music. However, despite the activities of chàu văn musicians being severely restricted from the 1960s until the implementation of the Renovation (dổi mới) policy in 1986, communist ideology has not affected the music performed for spirit possession. Chàu văn performed during rituals has not been susceptible to political manipulation due to its intimate connection to mediumship, which is antithetical to the Vietnamese Communist Party's religious policies. Chàu văn is embedded in the 'ideological system' of mediumship rather than that of communism. Economically, chàu văn is also independent to the Vietnamese state: the economic livelihood of chàu văn musicians is dependent on the 'private' financial resources of mediums.

Chầu văn has undergone a gradual process of change during the second half of the twentieth century. The chầu văn repertoire is continually evolving: 'new' songs are composed and incorporated from other 'traditional' music genres; innovations are made to songs; and songs have fallen into disuse. These changes are made by individual musicians, and decisions regarding musical change often take into account the musical preferences of ritual participants, especially mediums. There have also been changes to the chau văn musical style which are due to musicians' attempts to make songs more 'lively'. The increased liveliness of some songs is a response to the changing musical tastes of ritual participants, which are being influenced by exposure to Western and Western-derived pop music. During the 1990s, amplification and larger bands have been employed at some lên dòng rituals. Larger bands and the use of amplification are beneficial because they increase the 'boisterousness' of rituals; changes in performance practice were not interpreted by musicians as being due to the processes of Westernization and modernization.

The changes to the chàu văn musical style and performance practice outlined in this chapter do not constitute radical change. This is perhaps surprising given the prohibition of lên dòng and chàu văn from the 1960s to the late '80s and the explosion of ritual activity in the '90s. The lack of radical change is explainable because: 1) the surreptitious maintenance of the 'tradition' during the period of prohibition prevented musical impoverishment; 2) the reverent attitude of musicians toward the 'tradition' and the interrelationship between chàu văn and ritual practice have resulted in the continuation of gradual change during the recent lên dòng 'boom'.

# CONCLUSION

### MUSIC AND POSSESSION

This thesis has endeavoured to evoke, in detail, mediums' possession experiences. Even though I have not adopted a kind of 'radical empiricism'<sup>1</sup> in order to gain insight into the nature of possession, I would suggest that inquiry into the nature of possession is crucial for investigating the effects of music during possession, and has been paid too little attention by previous studies.<sup>2</sup> During lên dòng, mediums experience aware possession; spirit possession has bodily effects, but does not result in a loss of awareness. Spirits are sensory presences which affect the heart-soul of mediums. Sound is crucial for the onset of possession because it too has the power to affect the heart-soul and is necessary for inviting the spirits to descend from the 'yin' spiritual world.

In the Vietnamese case, then, it makes no sense to describe possession or the effects of music in terms of trance or altered/alternate states of consciousness. Research into consciousness has increased in the last decade, but it is still little understood.<sup>3</sup> Until more is known about consciousness, it is difficult to imagine how the possibility of music affecting states of consciousness might be investigated. The generally accepted ethnomusicological position on the relations between music and trance is that "trance is not generated physiologically by music" (Erlmann 1982:56).<sup>4</sup> Leaving aside the problems of defining trance, this would seem obvious simply because people respond in different ways when listening to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Ethnographies informed by 'radical empiricism', a term coined by William James, emphasise lived experience and "the *interaction* between the observer and observed" (Jackson 1989:3, emphasis in original; see also Stoller 1989). One of the most thorough applications of radical empiricism in the field of ethnomusicology is Friedson's Heideggerian-influenced phenomenological inquiry into Tumbuka healing and musical experience (1996).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> This is confirmed by Rouget, who, after a survey of the literature on spirit possession, states that: "we do not know a great deal about the actual state experienced by those who have become possessed" (1985 [1980]:33).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> A wide range of recent philosophical and scientific theories were presented at the conference titled "Towards a science of consciousness" held in Tuscon in 1996. For a brief synopsis of these theories see *New Scientist*, 4 May 1996, Issue no. 2028.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> This is not to suggest that music does not have any physiological effects whatsoever during possession rituals. Rouget and Erlmann have both noted, for instance, that the accelerando of tempo may be a possible factor in the generation of 'trance'. However, an accelerando is not capable of generating 'trance' physiologically regardless of the situation; clearly, cultural and contextual factors are vitally important.

the same sounds. As Blacking has pointed out, "things do not happen to people automatically because musical sounds reach their ears: if organised sounds are to affect people's feelings and actions, people must not only be predisposed to listen to them, they must also have acquired certain habits of assimilating sensory experience" (1995:174).

Chầu văn bands create a sound environment in which spirits 'figure' through the performance of a songscape for each possession. Rouget's suggestion that music socializes possession has been acknowledged as a factor in the role of chầu văn during rituals. However, music cannot be reduced to a tool of communication, a signifier. Through examining how songs construct the ethnicity, gender and place of spirits I hope to have shown how songs are *constitutive* of the presence of spirits. Spirits are musically constructed. Music also enables mediums 'to do the work of the spirits', that is to carry out the ritual actions of the spirits. It animates possession and incites dance. Without music to maintain possession, the presence of spirits is severely weakened.

Lên dòng is a ritual of the Kinh (or Việt) majority which associates the (female) mountain spirits with a pan-ethnic minority identity, and presents a stereotypical image of the ethnic minorities in Vietnam as natural, happy, simple, colourful and lively. Such representations of ethnic minorities have parallels with the nationalist project which endeavours to integrate ethnic minority groups into a unified community with the Kinh at its centre. However, Vietnamese scholars at the Folk Culture Institute have recently offered quite a different interpretation of the representation of ethnic minority groups during possession. They have argued that lên dòng contributes to cultural exchange and understanding between the Kinh and Vietnam's ethnic minorities.

The 'context' of lên dòng rituals is vitally important for understanding chàu văn performance. Bands create songscapes consisting of songs that are appropriate to the spirit incarnated and the medium's ritual actions. The 'musical interaction' (Brinner 1995) during rituals therefore involves the medium as well as band members. For certain ritual actions the band must perform a particular song, but at other stages of possession the song choice available to musicians is much broader. The degree of song choice is also dependent on the spirit incarnated. When there are a number of song options, it is usually the moon-lute player/singer, and occasionally the main percussionist/singer, who decides which song to perform. The choice of song is affected by musical considerations such as ensuring that the songscapes have an 'abundance' (phong phú) of songs and are musically

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'interesting' (hay). The member of the band who assumes the leadership role is also responsible for leading song changes; the band carries out song transitions without the use of preparatory cues (musical, verbal or visual).

Berliner states that Shona mediums "impose their musical tastes upon the mbira players, and the musicians follow the directions of the possessed medium, switching pieces whenever the medium expresses interest in another composition" (1978:202). Vietnamese mediums only occasionally express their musical preferences while possessed. For the most part, chầu văn musicians have prior knowledge of the musical tastes of mediums and include songs that they prefer.

The ability to traverse gender during rituals is seen by disciples as a necessary requirement, an indicator of the destined aptitude (căn số) of mediums. Songs performed for spirits express their stereotypical gender identities. For example, the 'feminine' Cờn melodies are soft, lyrical and smooth, and the 'masculine' Phú melodies are heavy, authoritative and serious. By confirming the gender identity of spirits, songs help mediums adopt different gender identities while possessed.

The traversing of gender during rituals, understood in terms of the relative positionality of yin and yang, affords mediums a degree of flexibility to negotiate stereotypical gender identities. Such a negotiation of gender identity is not just confined to ritual. Mediums, more so than other Vietnamese, have scope for assuming unconventional subject positions in their everyday lives. Social realities - such as being effeminate, hottempered, ill and 'mad' - are expressed and partially resolved through ritual practice. When possessed by female spirits, male mediums, who have an 'effeminate' gender identity in everyday life, behave like women. Dressing, speaking and behaving as female spirits affords male mediums a site in which to assume female gender roles. The 'hot-tempered' character of some female mediums, which in everyday social relations is seen as unfeminine, is expressed, and to a certain extent eased, through possession.

In Judith Butler's terminology, the stylized repetition of ritual acts provides mediums with *limited* scope for destablising established gender categories. Ritual acts enable women to challenge gender-based asymmetries, yet, at the same time, aspects of the Four Palace Religion, ritual practice and the motivation of mediums are complicit with established gender values (e.g. female mediums' concern with 'family happiness').

Transcription and analysis in this thesis has concentrated on what chầu văn musicians considered to be the most important aspect of songs: the vocal

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melody. Although brief descriptions of the moon-lute part and the main percussion rhythms are included, space has not permitted detailed analysis of instrumental performance. Investigation of the role and performance of instruments such as the sixteen-stringed zither and various bamboo flutes in large bands would be interesting topics for future research.

One of the striking characteristics of chầu văn songs, or 'ways' (lối), is the flexibility of the vocal melody. The vocal contour of a song changes most dramatically when different song texts are used, but there are also differences between each realisation of a song with the same text by different musicians and between successive performances by the same musician. Despite this flexibility the identity of each 'way' is maintained.

Chapter 6 investigated what constitutes a way and the factors that influence the realisation of a way. It was proposed that there is an underlying melodic shape, a 'backbone' (xương sống), that acts as a reference for all renditions of a way. Through comparison of different versions of the same song by two different musicians, the invariant pitches common to all renditions of the same song were ascertained. The resultant melodic shape was called an 'abstracted backbone'.

One of my teachers, Đặng Công Hưng, was unusual in that he could realise the backbones of songs: he was conscious of the musical 'models in his mind' and could sing them. Most musicians, however, although they acknowledged that there was a 'basic melody' to which each realisation of a song adhered, were unable to articulate it. This is hardly surprising as 'grasping a way' is achieved through performing the same song many times with different song texts rather than by learning an abstraction (i.e. the backbone or basic melody) of a song.

Each time a 'way' is sung with a different text, the melodic contour changes in order to suit the speech tones of the text. The precise pitches of the melody are not determined by the speech tones, rather the tonal inflection and relative pitch-level of syllables affect the melodic direction of the vocal line. The creative process involved in realising chau văn 'ways' is probably an inherent part of many traditional Vietnamese musics.

Chầu văn and lên đồng have proved remarkably resilient. Despite being prohibited from the start of the anti-superstition campaign until the introduction of the Renovation policy (đổi mới) in 1986, possession rituals were still held secretly, and in the 1990s chầu văn and lên đồng have undergone a strong revival.

Communist ideology has had no lasting effects on chầu văn as it is played during lên đồng rituals. However, a new form of 'revolutionary chầu văn',

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influenced by revolutionary socialist principles, was created by the Nam Định Chèo Troupe in order to be performed on the stage and broadcast on the radio. In the early 1990s, a theatricalized version of chầu văn and lên đồng for the stage, called the 'three spirits' (ba gía đồng), was devised by Hoàng Kiều and Trần Minh. The 'three spirits' is essentially a re-enactment of a lên đồng ritual. The creation of the 'three spirits' indicates the extent to which Party policy is changing: prior to the Renovation policy, performances that made direct references to spirit possession would not have been permitted.

Rather than being affected by Party policies, chầu văn as it is performed during lên đồng has undergone its own gradual process of change in ways that are compatible with ritual practice. These include the composition of new songs and song texts, borrowing songs from other traditional music genres, innovations to already existing songs, a number of songs falling into disuse, and the use of amplification and larger chầu văn bands. In terms of musical style, changes include a faster delivery of the text, increased emphasis of the beat and less vocal ornamentation. Musicians have made these stylistic changes in response to the changing musical 'tastes' of ritual participants, which have been influenced by increasing exposure to Western pop music.

#### 'A WESTERNER LOVES OUR MUSIC'

During my last period of fieldwork, Vietnamese Television (VTV) filmed a 35-minute documentary about my research that was broadcast in Vietnam during the 1999 lunar new year festivities. At the risk of being solipsistic, I would like to discuss sections of the documentary, called 'A Westerner loves our music' (Người tây mê nhạc ta),<sup>5</sup> in order to reflect on my research and the position of lên dòng and chầu văn in contemporary Vietnam.

The use of recordings, audio and audiovisual, as a reflexive tool has become a standard part of fieldwork methodology. I often employed this technique in order to discuss music and possession with mediums and musicians. For instance, explanations of Thanh's comments during her endof-year ritual (Chapter 2) were elicited through playing back the video recording of the ritual to Thanh and discussing it with her. The making of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> I have translated the Vietnamese word mê, which appears the documentary title, as 'love' because its literal meaning of 'infatuated by' or 'crazy about' would be cumbersome in this context. The use and meaning of mê by mediums was discussed at length in Chapter 2. In the context of possession mê was rendered as 'obsession'.

the VTV documentary turned the camera around 180 degrees: the documenter was documented. Although the documentary was not made by people who attended lên dòng rituals, the process of filming was also a salutary reminder that mediums, musicians and disciples had been listening to and watching me throughout 'my' fieldwork.

The documentary makers were keen to give me the opportunity to give my own explanations of my doctoral research into chầu văn and my masters degree research into ca trù. In order to do this they conducted a long interview at the VTV studios and then used extracts from it (with the questions edited out) throughout the programme. I was therefore given a direct 'voice' to express my opinions. Yet just as the quotes of mediums and musicians in this study are edited, interpreted, reflected upon and added to, so are my own comments in the documentary.<sup>6</sup> For instance, at the beginning of the documentary I am heard saying that my research is not just about 'music', but also concerns 'society' at large: "one cannot separate music and society; in order to understand music you must understand society and vice versa". Later in the documentary, my original assertion is paraphrased in the voice-over with an added nationalist sentiment: "Some people say that the traditional music of a nation is the soul of the nation. Maybe that is so. To understand people and society you must know about music and vice versa."

The voice-over of the documentary portrays my research as a 'fated' (dinh mệnh) quest for the 'soul' (hồn) of Vietnamese music. The justification of my (unusual) interest in Vietnamese music in terms of fate, a comment that was made repeatedly during my fieldwork, illustrates the importance of this concept for many Vietnamese. Clearly, the special fate of mediums, their destined aptitude, taps into a similar notion of the inevitability of an individual's life path, but whereas fate applies to everyone, only a few have a destined aptitude for mediumship. On the occasions when mediums raised the issue of whether I had a destined aptitude, there was usually much hilarity: the thought of a Westerner serving the spirits seemed so incongruous as to be laughable.<sup>7</sup>

A point which the documentary makers were keen to get across was how I carried out research, particularly the importance I placed on practice and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Now, of course, I am interpreting the documentary-makers' work.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Despite most mediums not being able to take seriously the idea that I had a destined aptitude, they did not think that initiation was totally inconceivable. I did not attempt initiation, even though I was intrigued, because I thought that I should only do so if I was convinced that I had been 'seized' by the spirits; I did not want to undertake initiation as a fieldwork 'experiment'.

participation. This is done through scenes which show me playing ca trù and singing chầu van, while accompanying myself on the moon lute. Just before a scene in which I play the three-stringed lute (đàn đáy) in a ca trù ensemble, the voice-over explains why I wish to learn Vietnamese instruments:

He thinks that to understand what is interesting, beautiful and soulful about ca trù you must directly participate, not just study through books and records, or talking to artists.

The second half of the documentary focuses exclusively on chầu văn and lên đồng. Its omissions are as informing as its content. When filming, the director, Kim Hương, was aware that the VTV censors would not permit her to include scenes of a medium being possessed by spirits. Given this restriction, she decided to use scenes of a theatricalized performance of lên dồng - in which the chèo artist, Vân Quyền, played the role of a medium - in order to give an impression of chầu văn's ritual context.<sup>8</sup> Chầu văn was not subjected to the same censorship as possession: all the chầu văn heard in the documentary, even that performed during the theatricalized performances of lên đồng, is as would be heard during a ritual: revolutionary chầu văn does not feature.

In keeping with the omission of scenes of possession, the term 'medium' (dòng) is not mentioned. However, there is a scene in which I meet a medium, called Doan, and drink tea in her house. The voice-over describes the meeting and Doan's involvement in religious practices:

He has met Doan, who lives in Thường Thín, many times. Like many other people when not working the fields, she often goes to worship at temples and pagodas. She follows the religious beliefs of the four palaces, a belief system of the Vietnamese people that has existed for a long time. Some of the spirits that are revered as part of this belief system are normal people who have done good work for the people and the nation and after they died they were venerated as spirits. They are worshipped at temples like the general Trần Hưng Đạo.

The above description of the Four Palace Religion makes no mention of superstition, mediums or possession. Instead, it is said to be an age-old belief system and spirits are depicted as national heroes; condemned 'superstitious' aspects of lên dòng are entirely omitted. This is reminiscent of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> The re-enactment of lên dồng on the stage shown in the documentary was filmed during a tour of England, which I helped organise, funded by Asian Music Circuit in April 1998.

the legitimating discourse of Vietnamese folklore scholars, outlined in Chapter 7, which argues that lên dòng is part of 'folk religious-beliefs' and contributes to the creation of a 'national identity rich in folk colour'. Despite Kim Huong having to depict the Four Palace Religion in nationalist terms for the censors, the making of a documentary which repeatedly refers to lên dòng (though not possession as such) without also condemning it as 'superstitious' would have been inconceivable until a few years ago. The documentary therefore illustrates the extent to which the rigorous prohibition and condemnation of lên dòng has relaxed over the last decade.

Toward the end of the documentary there is an interview with the Vice Minister of Culture and Information, Nguyễn Trung Kiên, who was present at a concert of ca trù and chầu văn in London in April 1998. He was supportive of the concert, and remarked that many people had told him they had increased their understanding of the Vietnamese nation and people through attending the concert. Nguyễn Trung Kiên therefore linked traditional music to the promotion of the Vietnamese national identity.

The final words of the voice-over make a call for drawing on traditional culture and music in order to develop a Vietnamese national identity:

Is there anything strange about this story about a Westerner? Yes. The strange thing is that unintentionally or not, through his research of Vietnamese national/traditional music (âm nhạc dân tộc Việt Nam), Barley Norton has helped us with something we ought to do, that is to 'see Vietnamese culture' (nhìn văn hóa Việt Nam) and develop our 'national identity' (bản sắc dân tộc).

Nation states have often utilised music in the job of nation building and constructing a national identity. In communist countries this has often taken the form of creating some form of neotraditional music that is embedded in an "aesthetic of nationalism" (Arana 1999:137). In Vietnam, modern national music (nhạc dân tộc hiện đại) has been the main musical form through which national identity has been asserted, whereas many traditional music is still widely propagated by music institutions, particularly the music conservatoires, but recently there has been increasing criticism of it, and champions of 'pre-revolutionary traditional genres' are becoming more vocal (ibid.:109-31). In 1993, there was also a slight shift in Party policy in favour of preservation, rather than the reform, modernization and improvement, of traditional music. This has resulted in the possibility that traditional music, such as chầu văn, may be celebrated rather than

modernized. But, ironically, traditional music genres may serve a nationalist agenda much like modern national music. The voice-over at the end of 'A Westerner loves our music' and Nguyễn Trung Kiên's statement are examples of discourse that implicates traditional music genres in the project of developing a national identity.

The Intangible Culture Asset system of Korea is a well-known example of the promotion of traditional music and musicians (rather than neotraditional music) in order to forge a national identity. However, Howard has noted that the Korean system is not without effects on the very music that it seeks to preserve, most notably increased professionalism and standardization and a loss of "communal ownership" of musical genres (1990:260). Vietnam has an embryonic award system through conferring titles of 'people's artist' (nghệ sĩ nhân dân) and 'artist of merit' (nghê sĩ ưu tú) on renowned musicians, but it has not yet been explicitly employed as a method for the preservation of traditional music.<sup>9</sup>

Whether or not the Party develops a preservationist policy toward the arts in the future, there have been many political and economic changes in Vietnam since the Renovation policy was introduced. State control over cultural activities has weakened and Vietnam's fledgling market economy has increased levels of prosperity. State incomes are not keeping pace with the commercial sector, so musicians who are members of national music troupes and state-run music institutions have for some time had to look for other opportunities to supplement their income. As the audiences and performance contexts of many traditional musics have diminished, many musicians have been forced to find alternative venues and audiences, typically hotel performances for tourists.

In contrast, chầu văn musicians have been in demand in the last decade due to the massive increase in the number of lên đồng. Increased prosperity has also led to rituals becoming increasingly lavish, especially in urban areas. (Indeed, some criticise lên đồng for losing its sacredness and sincerity, and accuse mediums of turning it into a superficial show of wealth.) The higher fees paid for chầu văn bands has enabled musicians to earn a living by performing at rituals either as 'freelance' musicians or as members of temple bands. Chầu văn musicians have therefore benefited from the opportunities that have arisen since the late 1980s. Chầu văn and lên đồng, then, exhibit the contradictions that arise from the uneasy marriage

 $<sup>^9</sup>$  Many musicians were of the opinion that political factors often affected who received awards. As far as I am aware, no chầu văn musician has ever been given a title.

between communist ideology and free market economics. The Party still criticises lên dòng and chàu văn, yet 'entrepreneurial' chàu văn musicians are making the most of new economic opportunities. 'Superstition' is still derided by officials, yet some mediums still earn a living through telling fortunes, and temple mediums also have opportunities to generate income.

The persistence of chầu văn and lên đồng is testament to their cultural and religious significance. Music and ritual practice, and the advice and protection of the spirits, is highly valued by ritual participants, and informs events in their everyday lives. After being condemned and prohibited as superstitious for so many years, lên đồng continues to be a site of contestation: a site entangled with debates concerning traditional culture, national identity, religious freedom and gender values. As long as chầu văn songs retain their power to invite the spirits, music will continue to collapse the boundary between the human and spirit worlds, and thus to ensure mediums' bodily engagement with the spirits.

#### APPENDIX I

## THE PANTHEON OF SPIRITS

The pantheon of spirits listed below includes the spirits incarnated during lên dòng rituals that I attended in North Vietnam. Although some regional spirits (e.g. the Second Lady Cam Đường) are included, the pantheon does not attempt to provide a comprehensive list of all the regional spirits in different parts of Vietnam.

The main differences between the spirit pantheons outlined by different scholars are noted in Chapter 1. Spirits who never possess mediums (e.g. the Jade Emperor (Ngoc Hoàng) and the Fourth Mother (Mẫu Đệ Tứ/Mẫu Địa), and spirits who have been known to possess mediums but who were not incarnated at lên đồng that I attended (e.g. tiger spirits), are not included in the pantheon below.

Spirits are listed in the sequential order in which they possess mediums during lên đồng (although, of course, all the spirits are not incarnated during rituals).<sup>1</sup> Many spirits are referred to by more than one name; two Vietnamese alternatives are given for some spirits. Asterisks indicate those spirits who only possess mediums in an 'unrevealed' way, i.e. the scarf draped over the medium's head is not removed. For spirits who belong to one of the four palaces, the palace of the spirit is noted (Sky Palace (SP), Water Palace (WP), Mountains and Forests Palace (M&FP), Earth Palace (EP)). In some cases, opinion differs about which palace a spirit belongs to. For example, some mediums consider all the little lady spirits from different parts of Vietnam to belong to the Mountains and Forests Palace, whereas others did not. A spirit's palace is not noted in ambiguous cases.

<sup>1</sup> Although most rituals follow the same possession sequence, there are occasionally variations to the order in which spirits' possess mediums.

#### The mother spirits (mau)

The First Mother (Mẫu Đệ Nhất/Mẫu Liễu Hạnh)\* - SP The Second Mother (Mẫu Đệ Nhị/Mẫu Thoải)\* -WP The Third Mother (Mẫu Đệ Tam/Mẫu Thượng)\* - M&FP

#### The 'Trần family' spirits

Trần Hưng Đạo

The Second Lady (of the Trần dynasty) (Cô Đôi (nhà Trần)) The Little Lady (of the Trần Dynasty) (Cô Bé (nhà Trần))\* The Little Young Prince (of the Trần dynasty) (Cậu Bé (nhà Trần))\*

#### The mandarin spirits (quan)

The First Mandarin (Quan Đệ Nhất) - SP The Second Mandarin (Quan Đệ Nhị) - M&FP The Third Mandarin (Quan Đệ Tam) - WP The Fourth Mandarin (Quan Đệ Tứ) The Fifth Mandarin (Quan Đệ Ngũ/Quan Tuần Tranh) - WP The Mandarin Điều Thất (Quan Điều Thất)\* The Second Mandarin Hoàng Triệu (Quan Đôi Hoàng Triệu)

#### The holy lady spirits (chầu)

The First Holy Lady (Chầu Đệ Nhất) - SP The Second Holy Lady (Chầu Đệ Nhị) - M&FP The Third Holy Lady (Chầu Đệ Tam) - WP The Holy Lady of the Temple (Chầu Thủ Đền) The Holy Lady Thác Bờ (Chầu Thác Bờ) The Fourth Holy Lady (Chầu Đệ Tứ)\* The Fifth Holy Lady (Chầu Đệ Ngũ)\* The Sixth Holy Lady (Chầu Đệ Ngũ)\* The Seventh Holy Lady (Chầu Lục) The Seventh Holy Lady (Chầu Bảy)\* The Eighth Holy Lady (Chầu Tám)\* The Ninth Holy Lady (Chầu Cửu)\* The Tenth Holy Lady (Chầu Mười) Little Holy Lady (Chầu Bé) - M&FP

#### The prince spirits (ông hoàng)

The First Prince (Ông Hoàng Đệ Nhất)\* - SP The Second Prince (Ông Hoàng Đôi)\* - M&FP The Third Prince (Ông Hoàng Bơ) - WP The Seventh Prince (Ông Hoàng Bảy) - M&FP The Tenth Prince (Ông Hoàng Mười) - EP

#### The lady spirits (cô)

The First Lady (Cô Đệ Nhất) - SP The Second Lady of the Mountains (Cô Đôi Thượng) - M&FP The Second Lady Cam Đường (Cô Đôi Cam Đường) The Third Lady (Cô Bơ) - WP The Fourth Lady (Cô Đệ Tứ) - EP The Fifth Lady (Cô Đệ Ngũ)\* The Sixth Lady (Cô Sáu) The Seventh Lady (Cô Bảy)\* The Seventh Lady (Cô Bảy)\* The Eighth Lady (Cô Tám)\* The Ninth Lady (Cô Chín) - EP The Tenth Lady (Cô Mười)\* The Little Lady of the Mountains (Cô Bé Thượng) - M&FP The Little Lady Đông Cuông (Cô Bé Đông Cuông) The Little Lady Bắc Lệ (Cô Bé Bắc Lệ)

#### The young prince spirits (cậu)

The First Young Prince (Cậu Đệ Nhất) - SP The Second Young Prince (Cậu Đệ Nhị) - M&FP The Third Young Prince (Cậu Bơ) - WP The Little Young Prince (Cậu Bé)

### APPENDIX II

## 'COMING OUT' AS A MEDIUM

The comments of seven mediums concerning the reasons why they took up their calling are given below. On some occasions they were not responding to direct questions. When direct questions were asked (usually by myself and occasionally by my Vietnamese language teacher, Nhạn) the questions are included.

#### Nguyễn Thị Xuân (May 1998)

I suffered a 'nervous disorder' (thần kinh), mental illness (tâm thần, lit. [illness of] heart and spirit) .... I was ill, I had headaches, I was tired (mệt mỏi), scrawny and thin (gầy còm). I was out all the time and spoke so much, I was seldom at home. After that, I went to the hospital and when I had the medicine I was a bit better, I felt soft (êm dịu) as if I was sleeping. My nervous system was soft and I slept. But once I stopped taking the medicine I was as ill as before.

I went to worship (di lė) at the Trưng Sisters Temple [Hanoi].<sup>1</sup> That was 41 years ago. I am from Thánh Hóa province, I had been in Hanoi three years when I got work at the rice mill. I got ill there, so I went to work at a factory for a long time; but it wasn't really a weaving factory, it was a building site! Well, I went to the Trưng Sisters Temple to pray and when I returned I found that I was at ease, I was naturally high-spirited (khoan khoái tinh thần). I went to worship every week and took the medicine. I was better and continued to work for a while. But then I lost all my strength, I was ill and people said I shouldn't work any more, that I should rest and get stronger ....

When I lost strength, I went to see a spirit priest (sư phụ). I asked the spirit priest to carry out a ritual and afterwards I was better. A few months after, the spirit priest said I should establish a private temple (điện). Other people who were ill came to me, the spirits had given me gifts (lộc), so other people came to me for advice about their spirit (tinh thần). For example, I

 $<sup>^1</sup>$  The Trung sisters are celebrated as Vietnamese heroes for revolting against the Chinese in the first century A.D.

would say 'you have this illness, you must do this, go to this hospital [or] to this ritual' .... Gradually people followed me and they were well again and believed in me .... I established a temple 28 years ago and was initiated as a medium (mở phủ lit. opened the palaces) 31 years ago ....

'Buddha saves and the spirits pity' (phật độ thánh thương). When I worship I feel easier (dễ chịu hơn) .... Even now, I have a little mental illness. When I do a lot of rituals, do the work of the spirits (làm việc thánh), I forget my illness.

#### Lê Thị Hòa (February 1997)

#### BN: When did you become a medium?

Hòa: There are two types of medium: we say that mediums who predict the future and cure illnesses (dòng bói chữa) 'rise up as mediums' (nổi dòng); mediums who are 'presented as a medium' (trình dòng) go through an 'initiation ritual' (mở phủ, lit. 'open the palaces') and after three years they hold a 'thanking ritual' (tạ phủ, lit. 'thank the palaces'). They are then formally recognised as mediums.

I have told fortunes for a long time, but it was only in 1991 that I was presented as a medium and began to offer paper effigies ( $n\phi p m\bar{a}$ ). I prayed to my parents (k $\hat{e}u$  cha m $\phi$ ), my parents pitied (thương) me and then I was forced (bat) to be presented as a medium and have an initiation ritual. I was forced to be a medium and was pitied, [I was] forced to be a 'soldier' (lnh)<sup>2</sup> and was pitied.

#### BN: Why did you become a medium?

Hòa: That is hard to answer, but I know I have the 'destined aptitude of a medium' (căn đồng). Since I began worshipping I have lived prosperously, and I knew that I naturally said things (phát ngôn) that turned out to be right. If you know you have the aptitude of a medium you must 'come out' (phải ra) .... If you don't come out, then you will get ill. In May 1977 I died for three and a half hours! I had to come out so that I could live ....

 $<sup>^2</sup>$  Lính means both 'soldier' and more generally 'somebody subservient' who takes orders and is lower in rank.

BN: Why did you decide to have an initiation ceremony (mở phủ)? Hòa: Because I was tormented (hành) by illness so much, and after that I went to the temples and met a spirit priest (thầy cúng) and other mediums. They analysed the situation for me - at that time I didn't know anything and they said I must be presented as a medium. Only then was I easy (yên), and had money and gifts (tài lộc).

Văn Thị Thanh (March 1997)

#### BN: When did you become a medium?

Thanh: ... I was married when I was 17 ... but until I was 24 I didn't have any children .... People said that I should establish a temple because then I would have children and wealth. So I was presented as a medium (trình dồng) and then I became pregnant with my first child. When my second child was eight months old, I went mad (điện). The Ninth Lady descended (gíang) and made me obsessed (mê). I left my husband and didn't look after my children. I still incarnated the spirits, but during the time when I was mad I 'threw away' (vứt) my child. I was mad from March to July. I still wasn't better by September when I went to Bắc Lệ temple.<sup>3</sup> I didn't know anything about the history of Bắc Lệ temple or where it was. I wandered around all the streets and alleys ... I was mad. When I went to Bắc Lệ temple ... there were a lot of fortune-telling mediums (đồng bói). They ordered (truyền lệnh) me to go home and to build a private temple (điện) ... so that November I established a private temple.

Nhạn: How come you were 'mad' but didn't realise it?

Thanh: Different people told me and wrote it down! After I had returned home, my husband's father, who was a master (thầy), prayed (kêu cầu) for me .... We prayed that if I did the work of the spirits (làm việc thánh) correctly, my body (xác thân) would return to the 'human world' (trần gian) .... Once my private temple was finished, people in the village came to me, and if they had 'heart' (tâm) and virtue (đức), then I would tell their fortunes (xem bói).

 $<sup>^3</sup>$  Bắc Lệ temple, which is dedicated to the Third Mother, is in Tân Thanh commune, Hữu Lũng province, about 150 km east of Hanoi.

#### BN: What was the 'madness' like?

Thanh: I wandered around in a dream (thơ thần). I went everywhere, I went begging at the market .... After my madness I enjoyed the spirits' gifts (lộc) and my body was calm (yên thân) .... Now that I am calm I help other people by fortune telling .... When I went mad, people in the village thought that mediumship ... had made me 'mad' (rồ). But after my madness I could predict the future .... Now I can make a living from the gift of fortune telling that the Ninth Lady provided (Cô Chín cho) .... Whoever has the Ninth Lady's aptitude (căn Cô Chín) can tell fortunes.

#### Nguyễn Thị Lai (April 1997)

Lai: I didn't believe in mediumship (dồng bóng) ... but then my body was naturally (tự nhiên) forced (bắt xác) .... In 1993, just before I went to sleep one night, I saw two mandarins: the Third and Fifth Mandarin in the form of snakes. The snakes chased me and bit me on the knee. It was a dream (ngủ mê), but in the morning I couldn't get up. I had to lie down for more than two months ....

When I asked people about it, they said my body had been forced (bắt xác) by the mandarins, that I had a 'high aptitude and a heavy fate' (căn cao số nặng) and that the only way I could be cured was by becoming a medium. I bought some clothes and prepared for the initiation ritual (mở phủ). Then quite naturally a few days later I found my leg was better; I could walk again .... I thought my husband would prohibit me from 'coming out' (ra) as a medium, but I had to try it ....

#### Nhạn: When did you get ill?

Lai: During the 1993 lunar new year festivities and after new year, I was ill. I am hot-gutted (nóng ruột). I went shopping for 15 days and bought all the necessary clothes. Then I asked a male medium, Thinh, to carry out my initiation ceremony on the eighteenth of the third lunar month ....

In the past I didn't believe in the spirits, but many people are forced to become mediums. Some are forced through their hair curling; hair mites (chấy) jump round (lổm ngổm) and they can't comb their hair. After an initiation ceremony, they are able to comb their hair. Other people are forced to become mediums by 'madness' (diên), and they go and pick food out of the sewers. Getting bitten by a snake is the lightest form of being forced by the spirits ....

#### BN: What happened after your initiation ritual?

Lai: I was prosperous (thịnh vượng), healthy (khỏe mạnh) and relaxed (thoải mái). It was like having a bowed back that became less tense. There was nothing pressing (bức xúc) or stressful (căng thẳng), nothing to get angry about ....

#### BN: What does 'destined aptitude' (can) mean?

Lai: It means that your previous life (kiếp trước) was cut short (đại khái). Things that you did in your previous life make you come out as a medium, you are forced. If you avoid it (trốn), you will suffer madness (điên cuồng) and be punished (đày) by the spirits.

BN: How can you distinguish between people that have 'destined aptitude' (căn) and people who do not?

Lai: 'Racing mediums' (dòng dua) just like (thích) to come out as mediums, they don't have aptitude. Other people are naturally obsessed (mê) and have to come out as a medium.

Nguyen Thị Bính (May 1997)

BN: Why did you became a medium?

Lan<sup>4</sup>: She became a medium because of her 'destined aptitude' (căn mạng). The spirits forced her to become a medium (bắt đồng). The spirits forced her to such an extent that her son was born dead .... She has a terrible fate (căn mạng khổ).

Nhạn: When you gave birth the baby was dead?

Bính: The doctor delivered the baby as normal like any other, but when it came for the breast feeding 24 hours after the birth, someone entered and said, "get Bính so that the child can feed", but when I came they said, "the child is dead, we don't know when it died". If the baby had died during birth it would be understandable, but it died afterwards. It happened twice like that, two sons died .... The doctor said the babies didn't have any illness.

After I 'came out' (ra) as a medium, I had a child, a son, there was nothing wrong and I made a good living. Now my son is nine years old. I

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Lê Kim Lan, a close friend of Bính and also a medium, was present at this meeting. She became a medium after her twelve-year-old daughter drowned.

became a medium ten years ago. Now I have three children: two girls and one boy ....

BN: Why do you think you lost your children?

Bính: ... I went to have my fortune told, and it was said that the spirits had forced me, and that if didn't come out as a medium then I would not have a baby. I was very frightened (sq) .... It was only when I became a medium that I had a child.

BN: Why do you think the spirits 'forced' you to become a medium? Binh: I used to go to rituals with an old medium called Xuân. She said I should become a medium and everything would be better. I said that if I am forced to become a medium, I should have a dream (chiêm bao) .... Then one night I was taught the dance of the medium in a dream. I was so frightened ....

BN: What is destined aptitude (căn mệnh)?

Bính: It means that the spirits have 'chosen you as a medium' (chấm đồng) from the time you were young. When you grow up you must 'pay the debt to the four palaces' (gỉa nợ tứ phủ) .... It is like talent (năng khiếu) for music, which you need to sing well.

Vũ Đức Quyết (May 1997)

BN: Why did you want to have an initiation ritual (mở phủ)? Quyết: If you have destined aptitude (căn số), you have to do the work of the spirits and then your heart will be peaceful (tâm sẽ thanh thản). The spirits will make everything good. You must do everything the right way (đúng mức); if you are too idealistic (duy tâm) or too obsessed (mê), then you will die ....

When I worked and went to the army, I was weak and ill all day long. When I got married my 'nervous system' (thần kinh) wasn't stable, I was hotgutted (nóng ruột) and mad (điện). One moment I would be climbing up the trees, then I would be bed-ridden like an invalid. In bed I didn't eat, I just drank water, I lived for three months like that. When I went to the hospital I was better, but as soon as I returned home I was ill. At that time I began to see the future and became a fortune teller. Then it was said that I had the 'aptitude of the medium' (căn đồng) and that I must be initiated as a medium (mở phủ).

#### Dương Văn Nguyện (June 1998)

In 1990, from the lunar new year to the third lunar month, I suffered from tiredness (mật) and had a pain in my back (lưng bị đau). I could only eat half a bowl of rice a day. My mother went to rituals secretly (vung) so my father didn't know. When I was weak, I said to my mother that I needed to go to the festival. So I went with an old medium to the Phủ Giày festival, and while I was there the spirits possessed me. I didn't know about anything, only knew my head was rolling around ... I wasn't in control (không lập chủ của mình). Whenever I went into a temple it was like that, but when I left the temple I was normal again ....

When the old medium was possessed by spirits during a lên đồng, she said that I had 'destined aptitude' (căn) and that I must 'serve the spirits' (hầu bóng) immediately. But I didn't know how to serve the spirits! When I began the ritual I cried ... I was aggressive (hung hăng), my legs and arms were thrashing about (khóat chân khóat tay). The old medium said that I had a 'very high aptitude' (căn cao lắm), that I had been possessed by evil spirits (ma tà), and that I must organise a lên đồng for the spirits ....

When I came home, I ate seven bowls of rice; before, I could only eat half a bowl. I was worried I would die and that an evil spirit had taken me over .... My brother had died in Russia ... my family was worried there would be two deaths to mourn (trùng tang) .... I was very poor at that time, I was only paid 12,000 dòng [approx. US\$1) a month, but I borrowed money and organised a ritual .... So in the fourth lunar month I organised a lên dòng ....

When I was possessed by the spirits, the spirits 'transmitted' (truyền) that I had been chosen to save people and the world (cứu dân độ thế), and they gave me the power to cure illnesses and to become a master (thầy).

# APPENDIX III

# GLOSSARY

ba gía đồng	'three spirits', re-enactment of lên đồng and chầu văn on the stage
bản sắc dân tộc	national 'colour'/national identity
ca Huế	Central Vietnamese chamber music genre
ca trù	North Vietnamese chamber music genre
cải lương	reformed opera
cảnh	small cymbal
canh	prayers incanted to the spirits prior to lên đồng rituals
căn/căn số	destined aptitude (to be a medium)
căn đồng	the aptitude of a medium
cắt tiền duyên	'cutting off from the love fate of a previous life' rite
chầu văn	music performed during possession rituals
chèo	North Vietnamese folk music-theatre
con nhang đệ tử	disciples
dân tộc	national/ethnicity/traditional
đàn bầu	monochord
đàn nguyệt	moon lute
đàn nhị	two-stringed fiddle
đàn tranh	sixteen-stringed zither
Đạo Tứ Phủ	Four Palace Religion
Đạo Mẫu	Mother Religion
đền	spirit temple
điện	'private' spirit temples built in mediums' homes
đời sống mới	The New Ways, Vietnamese Communist Party policy
	aimed at propagating a 'new way of life'.
đội bát hương	'placing on the head bowls of incense' rite
đổi mới	Renovation policy, introduced by the Vietnamese
	Communist Party in 1986
đồng	medium (also the name of the Vietnamese currency)
đồng bói	fortune-telling medium
đồng cô	effeminate (male) medium
đồng đền	temple medium
hầu/hầu bóng	possession/mediumship ritual

hầu tạ	'thanking ritual', possession ritual held to thank the							
	spirits after a medium's successful initiation							
hát thờ	literally 'worship singing', a subgenre of chầu văn							
	which is performed prior to lên đồng rituals in order to							
	'invite' the spirits							
hát văn	alternative term for chầu văn							
hầu vo	possession ritual without a chầu văn band							
Hò	type of folk song							
lên đồng	possession/mediumship ritual							
lưu không	instrumental section of a piece							
lối	'way', i.e. song							
lục bát	poetic form consisting of a pair of lines with six and							
	then eight syllables							
Lý	type of folk song							
mê tín dị đoan	'superstition'							
mê	obsession/obsessed, i.e. uncontrolled spirit possession							
mở phủ	'opening the palaces', initiation ritual to become a							
	medium							
nhạc cung đình Huế	court music of the imperial palace of the city of Huế							
nhạc dân tộc hiện đại	modern national music (or neotraditional music)							
nhạc đám ma	funeral music							
nhạc lễ	ceremonial music							
nhập	enter (used to refer to spirit possession)							
nhịp ba	three-beat rhythm							
nhịp đôi	two-beat rhythm							
nhịp một	one-beat rhythm (also the name of a chầu văn song)							
nóng ruột	'hot-gutted', i.e. illness suffered by some mediums prior							
	to their 'coming out'							
phách	bamboo clappers							
pháp sư	ritual specialist							
Phủ Giầy	temple complex in Nam Hà province, south of Hanoi,							
	home to an annual Four Palace Religion festival							
quốc ngữ	a form of writing Vietnamese using the Latin alphabet,							
	replaced the Sino-Vietnamese character script (chữ							
	nôm) early this century							
ra đồng/ra trình đồng	'coming out' as a medium, i.e. process of becoming a							
	medium							
sáo	horizontal bamboo flute							
sáo Hmong	horizontal bamboo flute of the Hmong ethnic group							

song thất lục bát	poetic form consisting of four lines (two lines with seven syllables, then a verse of luc bát)									
tài tử (ar phao tài tử)										
	South Vietnamese chamber music genre									
tâm hồn	heart-soul									
thánh	spirit									
thanh la	small gong									
thầy cúng	spirit priest									
tiêu	vertical bamboo flute									
tín ngưỡng	religious beliefs									
tỉnh	aware, used to refer to an 'aware' possession state in									
	contrast to uncontrolled spirit possession (mê)									
Trần Hưng Đạo	Vietnamese general who prevented a Mongol invasion									
	of Vietnam in 1288, now venerated as a spirit									
trống	drum									
truyền thống	traditional									
tuồng	classical opera									
xương sống	backbone, used to refer to the underlying melodic									
	shape of a song									

## APPENDIX IV

# TRANSCRIPTIONS

The transcriptions use (slightly modified) Western staff notation (see Chapter 6 for explanation of the transcription conventions). Only the vocal line of songs is transcribed with the exception of Exx. 1 and 2: Ex. 1 includes a transcription of both the moon-lute accompaniment and the voice; Ex. 2 is a transcription of the moon-lute part performed during three instrumental sections of the Doc melody. Percussion is omitted from all the transcriptions.



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