

Abstract

Water puppet (mua roi nuoc) was originally a village performing art among peasant communities on the Red River delta in north Vietnam. In 1956, after independence, the socialist government created the national puppet theatre and supported a group of official artist to learn the art of puppetry from the peasants and staged regular performances. The dissertation accounts for the development of this theatre.

Anthropological fieldwork was conducted in Hanoi from October 2001 to February 2002 to collect data on historical development of the theatre and daily life of official artists affiliated to the national troupe. It is found that contemporary standard repertoire consists of 16 episodes which were selected from the original village repertoire. The standard episodes depict mainly scenes of peasant life showing a variety of agricultural activities, family members, with water featuring as a basic component of village life. Besides, there are historical and mythological scenes alluding to heroism, supernatural strength, fertility and celestial beauties. The dominant message of the entire show is the idyllic image of Vietnam represented by the peasant, nature, history and mythological power. Together they present an alternative to the usual image of war-torn Vietnam.