

The Conceptions of “Yin-Yang” and “Five Basic Elements” in *Đờn ca tài tử* (Amateur’s music)

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Abstract: *Đờn ca tài tử* or Amateur’s music, a kind of traditional chamber music of South Vietnam, is well-known throughout this country and is present in the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Based on the local people’s outlooks on human life, especially the concepts of “Yin-Yang” and “Five Basic Elements”, this kind of music has “a scholarly content in a folk form”, which deserves to be praised as “marvelous mode of musical performance” in the treasure of Vietnamese traditional music.

Key words: *Amateur’s music, outlooks on human life, Yin-Yang conception, Five Basic Elements conception.*

1. Introduction

As a means of entertainment, *Đờn ca tài tử* or Amateur’s music (including both vocalist and instrumentalist music) gradually had developed in the course of the South Vietnamese people’s building and protecting the country to become a leading art form in the indigenous cultural life. As a social phenomenon, this music reflects social reality and is a means of conveying the residents’ way of thinking and living.

It is the interwoven conceptions embedded in all the aspects of *Đờn ca tài tử* (Amateur’s music) that make up its value. Also, thanks to them, the *Đờn ca tài tử* exists in a plain form characterized for a folk art, yet possesses profound content of scholarly beauty; it is praised as “a marvelous mode of musical performance”. Two noteworthy elements herein concern the philosophical conceptions of Yin-Yang and Five Basic Elements. This research is just devoted to the examination of these two conceptions expressed in *Đờn ca tài tử*, in relation to South Vietnamese people’s outlooks on life and approaches toward art.

2. Content

2.1. *Đờn ca tài tử* – an art form born from South Vietnamese society

In order to research into the philosophy of life manifested in *Đờn ca tài tử*, we should underline the philosophical characters in this music's formation. Despite the elements inherited from some other art forms and integrated into it, as social consciousness it was indeed the endogenous product of the past social existence.

Art came into being in rather early days of human history, as testified by the pictures engraved on rocks and stones in many caves. In the same vein were born primitive conceptions of art. Over time, art reached breakthroughs in its development in the time of Renaissance and has developed strongly to the present day. In this course of advancement, art has been not only merely the vehicle to satisfy the needs of humans but also the target to be reached by them in their struggle for survival in the natural world.

As an art form, music is always closely attached to the social life of a given nation and of human society in general. Any nation may feel proud of its national music, from melodies produced by primitive musical instruments like lithophones, leaf flutes, bronze drums, bamboo flutes, up to those gradually enriched to become remembered songs or rhythmic epics. The development of music goes hand in hand with that of society; musical pieces are just reflections of social life. At the same time, as said above, music exerts its influence on social life, contributing to the formation of the consciousness of humans in their efforts of conquering nature and building life. Many nations have historical epics on national construction, land reclamation, and land expansion, or musical pieces capable of encouraging the nation to stand up in resistance to foreign invasions and to build its country more prosperous.

Social consciousness of a historical stage is born of the hitherto society's reality. Thus, Amateur's music born in the mid-19th century reflects the mindset of the South Vietnamese people characterized by simplicity, broadness and dynamism; it also reflects the local terrain conditions, natural setting and even climate. It is actually the blending of the "endogenous" music (South Vietnamese ritual music and folk music) with the "exogenous" music imported into South Vietnam from Huế (Huế chamber music). Its characteristics show that it was "worked out" by folk artists, on the basis of

the reality of the 19th century South Vietnam society to satisfy the cultural needs of the then public.

Obviously, as *Đờn ca tài tử* is a sort of “mirror” for society, social changes have entailed modifications to this kind of music itself, concerning the organization, performance, and musical instruments. Clear examples are the variations such as *vọng cổ* tune, *ca ra bộ* (singing and acting), *cải lương* (renovated theatre), or *tân cổ* (combination of modern and traditional songs), which appeared when Amateur’s music was influenced by the kinds of music imported into South Vietnamese from the outside. Thus let us take “tân cổ” as a typical example because it is one of the major changes ever recorded in Amateur’s music based on the pentatonic scale of the Eastern musical tradition imbued with Western musical conceptions. This fact testifies to the influx of Western music into South Vietnam at the birth of “tân cổ”.

In the flow of history, *Đờn ca tài tử* was developed in the South of the country which was famous for numerous challenges: “danger-ridden forests and waters”, “crocodiles swam freely in the river and tigers roared in the forest”, or “possible attacks by crocodiles in the swamp or by leeches in the river and even by evil spirits in the forest”. It was just formed and gradually developed as a testimony or confirmation of the dialectical relation between social existence and social consciousness at large, and between itself and South Vietnamese society in particular: *Đờn ca Tài Tử* reflects society and at the same time exerts impact on it.

2.2. Conceptions of Yin-Yang and Five Basic Elements in *Đờn ca tài tử*

Being in the orbit of Eastern culture, Vietnamese culture certainly has differences from Western culture in terms of the world outlooks, way of thinking and behavioral culture. A number of philosophies and doctrines of Eastern culture became attached to the life of the Vietnamese people and have influenced their society’s evolution and all social aspects. As part of Vietnamese culture, Amateur’s music contains in itself principles and conceptions belonging to Eastern culture, especially the theory of “Changes” presented in the “Book of Changes” (I-Ching) of ancient Eastern philosophy.

Thus the conception of Yin-Yang played an important role in the

formation of the melodies or tunes and their “lớp” (sections) of Amateur’s music. “Lớp” is simply explained as a usually structurally completed section consisting of a number of phrases. Its equivalents are “khúc” in Huế chamber music (from Central Vietnam), and “trở” in Chèo singing (from North Vietnam) and it is somewhat similar to the “chapter” in Western music.

Still, the concepts of “male – female” are rather popular in Vietnamese traditional classical theatre “Hát Bội” or in Court music. For Amateur’s music, they are used to designate the principles of Yin (female, negative) and Yang (male, positive) in the same melody if put in comparison with another different melody. Speaking of the section Trống (male or Yang) of Nam Xuân melody and the section Mái (female or Yin) of Nam Ai melody, Prof. Trần Văn Khê noted: “These two sections of Nam Xuân and Nam Ai melodies allude to the Yin-Yang relationship in Amateur’s music”⁽¹⁾. They are based on the Nam (South) musical scale imbued with the feeling of sadness; yet Trống Xuân (“male” section of Nam Xuân melody) is characterized by the Yang timbre (light sadness, nostalgia, sometimes graveness or solemnity), and tempo (andante). Meanwhile, Mái Ai (“female” section of Nam Ai melody) exposes clearly the Yin timbres (melancholy, downheartedness, depression, or poignancy).

Amateur’s music includes 20 core (tổ) melodies arranged into groups based on the I-Ching principle of “changes” as follows:

- a. Six Northern melodies, corresponding to Spring; hence their cheerful or happy timbres;
- b. Seven Hạ melodies corresponding to Summer; hence their high-spirited timbre;
- c. Three Southern melodies corresponding to Autumn; hence their sad timbre; and
- d. Four dolorous melodies corresponding to Winter; hence their sorrowful and melancholic timbre.

Apart from them, there are also other melodies composed by folk artists, following the contrast principle, for example, according to Prof. Trần Văn Khê:

- Lưu Thủy Trường (Long *Lưu Thủy*) and Lưu Thủy Đoản (Short *Lưu Thủy*);

- Ngũ Đối Thượng (Upper Ngũ Đối) and Ngũ Đối Hạ (Lower Ngũ Đối);
or

- Phú Lục nhanh (Fast *Phú Lục*) and Phú Lục chậm (Slow *Phú Lục*)⁽²⁾.

The Yin-Yang conception is also applied to beats in Amateur's music. Here, "beats" have a rather complicated structure; some kinds of beats are attributable to certain melodies, and others to the modes of performance. For the first category of beats, they are divided into two groups:

- a. nhịp nội (within beat): the beat falls on the musical note,
- b. nhịp ngoại (outside beat): the beat falls after the note⁽³⁾.

Here, "a" is signaled by the right foot's tapping and "b" is signaled by the left foot's tapping.

For the second category or the beats attached to the modes of performance, they are divided into "doubled" (two-fold), "quadrupled" (four-fold), and "octupled" (eight-fold) patterns. They correspond to the I-Ching philosophy: Two principles (Yin-Yang) which can lead to the formation of four phenomena (Young Yin and old Yin; young Yang and old Yang). The latter, in their turn, can lead to the formation and development of the cosmos. The "quadrupled" and "octupled" patterns of beats are seen in the most of the core melodies mentioned above; the "doubled" pattern is applied to short melodies or *Tẩu Mã* ("galloping horse").

Availing themselves of the above-said patterns of beats apparently based on the principle of duality (Yin-Yang), South Vietnamese folk artists developed the melody "*Dạ cổ hoài lang*" (The wife missing her husband in night time) with the doubled pattern of beats, into the melody "*Vọng cổ*" (nostalgia). "*Vọng cổ*" at first was based on the quadrupled pattern of beats, then over time it was developed into variants with the octupled, 16-fold, 32-fold and finally 64-fold patterns of beats respectively. This testifies to the philosophically-grounded creation of new melodies in Amateur's music, which does not allow any arbitrariness.

The musical instruments used for *Đờn ca tài tử* also manifest the Yin-Yang conception. One typical example is "*song lang*" (or "*song loan*") specifically designed for *Đờn ca tài tử*. This small wooden percussion instrument consists of two parts: the attached mallet with a round head symbolizing the Yang and the hollowed sound-box representing the Yin. During the

performance the player uses his foot to tap on the “mallet” to strike it onto the surface of the sound-box, thus producing a range of sounds regarded as the Yin-Yang harmony.

Another musical instrument – two stringed fiddle – also exposes the Yin-Yang duality represented by its “earth” sound (low pitch; Yin) and “metal” sounds (high pitch; Yang). Their combination is the symbol of the harmony between Heaven and Earth.

Let’s take another musical instrument as example: the moon-shaped lute (“đàn kìm”). According to scholar Nguyễn Văn Ngưu, it is structured on the basis of “Changes” (I-Ching) as follows:

- the sound-box, belonging to the male and day time, has a diameter of 3 *thước 6 tấc 5 phân* (Vietnamese ancient measures); this measurement corresponds with the length of a year (365 days);
- the neck of the “đàn kìm” represents sunlight spreading to humans’ world;
- the two strings: a symbol of Yin-Yang;
- the four tuning shafts: four directions North, South, West and East;
- the round sound-box: the center of Asia; and
- the eight frets: Bagua or Eight Trigrams (càn, khảm, cấn, chấn, tốn, ly, khôn, and đoài).

The sound-box is empty inside like Heaven’s dome drawing into it such elements as water, fire and wind. Moreover, the two strings, when properly tuned, can produce musical sounds. The “sun rising to become round” is a constant phenomenon, so accordingly the light frets must fixed constantly on the “đàn kìm” lute’s neck⁽⁴⁾.

When playing “đàn kìm”, the player uses his left hand (female; Yin) to hold up the neck, while the right hand (male; Yang) strikes the strings. As the musical instrument is a small universe where Heaven harmonizes with Earth, if the player’s performance follows the principle of harmony between Heaven, Earth and Humans (tam tài – three cosmic forces), it is conducive to enchanting melodies.

Another musical instrument is the guitar with concave frets, which may be also taken as an illustration of the Yin-Yang harmony.

One of the typical features of *Đờn ca tài tử* and Vietnamese traditional

music in general is the modified pentatonic scale of Oriental tradition. The notation for this scale includes five notes: Cung, Thương, Giốc, Chủy, and Vũ. It has become the “công - xích - phổ” notation in Vietnamese traditional music with five corresponding notes: Hò, Xự, Xang, Xê, and Cống. Even this pentatonic scale is viewed as manifestation of the Five Basic Elements principle, as clearly presented in the book “Inherited Essentials of Traditional Music”, where the five notes are categorized as follows:

- Hò is attributed to Metal, white color, West and human lungs;
- Xự: Wood, green, East, liver;
- Xang: Water, black, North, kidney;
- Xê: Fire, red, South, heart; and
- Cống: Earth, yellow, (the globe's) center, stomach⁽⁵⁾.

The relationship between the five notes of the Việt (Vietnamese) traditional music scale is different from its Chinese counterpart. The Việt scale starts with the note “Hò” correlating to Metal in the Five Basic Elements conception, while the Chinese scale begins with the note “Cung” correlating to Earth (Cf. Hoàng đế nội cung). However, other scholars may have other views on the difference between the two scales. Thus, Trần Thanh Hà noted:

“Like in the Western heptatonic scale, each of the five notes of the Chinese scale may be taken for forming a new mode named after the starting note itself; and the mode has fixed pitches and timbres. As for the Vietnamese scale, the only “Hò” serves as the starting note for all derived modes”⁽⁶⁾.

Thus, in *Đờn ca tài tử* the linking of the established modes makes up a circle, like the Five Basic Elements' cycle in the cosmos.

The notes of the pentatonic scale may express different moods of humans:

- Hò is imbued with slight sadness;
- Xự expresses anger;
- Xang: fear, scare;
- Xê: joy, passion, dynamism; and
- Cống: worry, concern.

In general, Vietnamese traditional music and especially *Đờn ca tài tử* produces melodies which at time may have a quick tempo and eventually lead to the peak of the performance. It creates sympathy in the audience, enables them to get an insight into the Vietnamese person's inner world and

motivates them to strive for the Good or the Truth of life. Ancient sages said, “When music and humans are in concord, the cosmos and humans begin to reach unison”. Obviously, as Vietnamese traditional music has philosophical significances, some religions, particularly Buddhism in South Vietnam, give attention to the using of the genres of local folk music for purifying people’s soul to orientate them to Benevolence.

The performance of *Đờn ca tài tử* also represents the change from the principles of I-Ching as the core traditional philosophy of the Orient. According to Prof. Trần Văn Khê, each time performing Amateur’s music, the artist “never sticks tightly to the melody he has learnt from his teacher”⁽⁷⁾. Rather, he would add to it his new small creations. The established melody is taken as the core (unchanged); yet it can be rendered slightly different each time thanks to the innovative elements brought forth by the performer on the basis of set modes and scales. This is the principle of primary importance in Amateur’s music performance. The core melody serves as the basis for the artist to offer to the audience creative renderings.

The combination of musical instruments for a performance is also based on the mutually-supportive principle, i.e. the accord of timbres rather than the chord. In other words, artists would combine two or more musical instruments, which produce different timbres, following the principle of Five Basic Elements, that exist in mutually- generating or mutually-preventing relations.

Thus, for example, the use of the moon-shaped lute (*đàn kìm*) together with the 16-stringed zither for a duo musical piece: the former produces “earth” sounds (low pitches) whereas the latter has “metal” sounds (high pitches). The contrast of these two kinds of sounds does not cause any unpleasant combination to hearing. Instead, they offer accords of timbres pleasing the ears of even demanding listeners. In the same vein, artists may combine moon-shaped lute (“earth”) with the two-stringed fiddle (“metal”); and the combination may be enlarged with the 16-stringed zither (“metal”), or further with the three-stringed lute.

3. Conclusion

We can reaffirm that *Don ca tai tu* is a kind of folk music, which is, however, imbued with a number of conceptions of Eastern philosophy

(Yin-Yang, Five Basic Elements, and numerology in the doctrine of “Changes” (I-Ching)). It is these conceptions that have elevated this kind of music to a form of scholarly art in the treasure of Vietnamese traditional art.

The research into the South Vietnamese people’s outlooks on human life expressed in *Đờn ca tài tử* (Amateur’s music) can give us an insight into that of the Vietnamese people in general, and the characteristics (identity) of Vietnamese culture, which are manifested in the forms of folk art; it also affirms the noteworthy values of the socio-cultural life of South Vietnam in particular and that of Vietnam in general./.

(1), (2) Trần Văn Khê (2006), “Âm và Dương trong âm nhạc truyền thống” (Yin and Yang in Vietnamese Traditional Music). Cf. http://vietsciences.free.fr/vietnam/amnhac/amvaduongtrongamnhac_truyenthong.html

(3) Võ Trường Kỳ (2013), “*Đờn ca tài tử Nam Bộ*” (*Amateur’s music in South Vietnam*), Culture-Information Publishing House, Hanoi, p. 211-212.

(4), (5) Nguyễn Văn Ngừu (1995), “*Cổ nhạc tổ truyền nguyên lý*” (Inherited Essentials of Traditional Music), Culture-Art Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, pp. 9, 8.

(6) Trần Thanh Hà (2013), “*Tháng năm âm người Việt dưới góc nhìn văn hóa học*” (*The Viet pentatonic scale as viewed from Cultural Studies*), Journal “Social Sciences”, No 1, p. 47.

(7) Trần Văn Khê (2010), “*Nghệ thuật Đờn ca tài tử trong không gian văn hóa Nam Bộ*” (*Amateur’s Music in the Cultural Space of South Vietnam*), International conference: “Amateur’s Music and Modes of Improvised Concert, Ho Chi Minh City.