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**CAN MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS BE NATIONAL?**  
**THE SYMBOLIC USE OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS**  
**IN VIETNAMESE NATIONAL REPRESENTATION**

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Subject: Musical instruments as a means of national representation in contemporary Vietnam.

Purpose of study: To analyze and interpret the public image of culture and cultural history created by a nation state.

Method: Text analysis and interpretation.

Key words: Musical instruments, *dan bau*, nation, Vietnam, representation, symbol, image, signifying practices.

A glimpse at my bookshelf shows me a number of books with titles like “<...> Japanese Music and Musical Instruments” (Malm 2000), “African Drums [Afrikanische Trommeln]” (Meyer 1997) or “Musics of Vietnam” (Pham Duy 1975). It is usual and common practice to speak of a country’s, a region’s or a nation’s music and musical instruments. Nevertheless, it is difficult to define what a nation’s music and musical instruments are. What, for example, is Vietnamese music?

Is it the body of court musics coined by every dynasty and new regime in Vietnamese history? Is it the sum of genres of traditional music including rural traditions? Is it the Europe-derived and influenced art music, as taught and practised at conservatories in Hanoi and Saigon? Is it the musics of the different ethnic groups living in Vietnam? Is it contemporary popular music produced in Vietnam? And how about the music of Vietnamese migrants now living in the USA, Europe or elsewhere? What about jazz with world music flavour and references to Vietnam performed by a French musician of Vietnamese origin like Nguyen Le?

Is Vietnamese music the music that is performed and played in Vietnam today? Or is it music, which refers to the musical traditions of Vietnam – and could be performed at any place on the globe. It is difficult to answer that question.

And what is a Vietnamese musical instrument? Or should I rather say, an instrument for Vietnamese music? Is it an instrument, which belongs to the body of traditional music? Are instruments of the European art music tradition Vietnamese when taught and played in Vietnam? Are the instruments of ethnic minorities regarded as Vietnamese? And what about those ethnic groups living in border regions – on either side of the frontier? Is every musical instrument played by a Vietnamese citizen a Vietnamese musical instrument? Or is it every instrument on which a piece of Vietnamese music is played? Or has it something to do with the musical instrument itself: all instruments not inspired by Chinese or Indian models, for example, could be considered as truly Vietnamese. The question whether musical instruments can be national is a tricky one, too.

As soon as human beings and culture come into play, things are not plain and easy any more; they rather tend to be complex. We have to deal with ever changing cultural constructions and conceptions, with discourses and acts of symbolization. Thus music is more than “humanly organized sound”<sup>1</sup> – and musical instruments are more than material, construction and tuning.

In this article I will focus on non-musical meanings of musical instruments. Basically I am going to deal with the connections of music, cultural politics and symbolic action. In the following article I will ask how musical instruments are turned into national symbols<sup>2</sup> and used as representational objects in public media. This includes thoughts about the creation of images or clichés and questions about who represents what, how and why. So in a broad sense, my topic is the rhetorics and politics of representation.

The object of my study is the *dan bau* or *dan doc huyen* – a chordophone which is very popular in contemporary Vietnam. The *dan bau* has received an important role in national cultural representation since it is featured as the national musical instrument *per se*<sup>3</sup>.

My article will be divided into three sections. The first one could be entitled “facts and figures about a musical instrument” and provides the reader with some basic knowledge of the organology and history of the *dan bau*. The following section is dedicated to the discourses concerning the instrument. Here I will focus on statements on and descriptions of the *dan bau* as published by state authorities in foreign languages. The third and last part of the text contains my interpretations of the findings.

## **Facts and Figures**

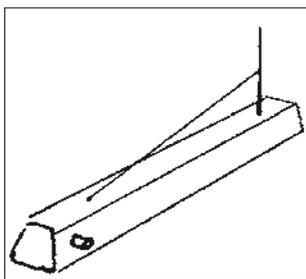
The chordophone – or more precisely the monochord – *dan bau* or *dan doc huyen* is regarded as one of the traditional musical instruments of Vietnam.

It has already been described from an organological point of view in a couple of publications (Nguyen Xuan Khoat 1960; Tran Van Khe 1982: 80ff., 122; Tran Quang Hai 1984; Nguyen Thuyet Phong 1998: 471). I will summarize and complement these descriptions in order to provide the reader with an idea of the instrument's organology, names, sound and playing technique.

## Organology

The instrument basically consists of three elements: a long, slim box resonator, a single string and a flexible stick, which is joined with the resonator at one of its small ends. The string is diagonally tightened between the stick at one side and – led through a small hole in the surface of the box and supported by a small bridge – the tuning peg at the opposite side of the resonator. A usual size for the resonator is a length of around 100 cm, but one can find a lot of varying sizes.

The materials and details of construction can vary too. The resonator can be built out of either wood or a bamboo-tube. The stick can alternatively be made out of bamboo or buffalo horn. The string used to be silk, but today it is metal. Modern instruments often have a pick-up for amplification. Some of the modern *dan bau* just have a board as a basis instead of a box-resonator.



Sketch of a *dan bau*, showing the basic shape of the instrument.

Realisation: Ingrid Bertleff

Frequently a small gourd or coconut shell is fixed to the stick right at the position where the string is attached to it. On modern instruments, the gourd or nut shell is replaced by a bell-shaped piece of turned wood. In some sources it is described as an additional resonator (Tran Van Khe 1982: 80); others say that it merely has a decorative function (Vietnamese Institute for Musicology, n.d.). Some instruments – older as well as newer ones – don't even possess this element.

The shape of the *dan bau* can also vary from simply fashioned to elaborate and from plain to richly ornamented.

## Names

The instrument is known under two different names: *dan bau* or *dan doc huyen*. Today the latter is rarely used. The name *dan bau* refers to the gourd-element of the monochord – *bau* means 'gourd' in Vietnamese<sup>4</sup>. The syllable *dan* is a classifying word for string instruments.

*Dan doc huyen* literally means single string instrument, since *doc* can be translated as 'only' or 'single' and *huyen* means 'string'. These are the usual translations of the instruments' names, but there are also other connotations going along with both terms. The Vietnamese language contains many homonyms; words usually have multiple meanings.

So *bau* cannot only be translated as gourd. It has also two other meanings: the one is 'pregnant' the other is 'friend', 'comrade' or 'fellow'.

*Doc* does not only mean 'single', it can also be translated with 'reading, learning or 'studying', and *huyen* can also mean 'mysterious', 'hidden' or 'secret'. It is likely that at least some of the alternative translations could make sense too, and could be related to different types of the instrument or to certain meanings attributed to the instrument in different historical periods or in different social or regional contexts. At present, very little is known about the names and their uses.

### Sound and playing technique

Playing the *dan bau*, the musician touches a certain nodal point of the string with his right hand while at the same time plucking the string with a pencil-shaped plectrum. This produces a flageolet tone. With his left hand he modifies the tension of the string by moving the flexible stick back or forth. This way he is able to produce any desired pitch within the ambitus of two or three octaves and to add ornamentations to the melody. The instrument's sound resembles a singing voice and results from the combination of the flageolet sound and the legato pitch variations obtained by the movements of the flexible stick.

### Discourses

The *dan bau* as such is nothing but a resonator, a stick and a string, all put together in a certain manner and producing a characteristic sound when played. Symbolic meanings are created elsewhere. The names of the instrument alone indicate certain contexts in which the *dan bau* is embedded and meanings to which it is linked.

In order to find out which role the *dan bau* is given in the rhetorics of cultural representation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, I have analysed a number of officially launched or authorised publications addressed to readers abroad. Assuming that promotions of one's public image are intended to be found and consumed easily, I have directed my attention towards webpages. For comparison, reflection and completion, I also refer to scholarly literature on the *dan bau* (Nguyen Xuan Khoat 1960; Tran Van Khe 1982: 80ff., 122; Tran Quang Hai 1984; Nguyen Thuyet Phong 1998: 471; Olsen 2000a, 2000b; Midori 2004).

A brief description of my sources is followed by a summary of the major themes expressed in these publications concerning the *dan bau*'s 'nationness'.

### Sources

Webpages containing the official point of view on Vietnamese culture are those of the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, n.d.), of the Embassy of Vietnam in Sweden (Embassy of Vietnam Stockholm, Sweden, n.d.), the Vietnam Cultural Profile published under the head of the Visiting Arts webpages (Visiting Arts 2005a, 2005b, 2005c) and the homepage of the Musicological Institute in Hanoi (Vietnamese Institute for Musicology / Vien Am Nhac, n.d.).

Responding to Vietnam's constantly growing importance as a destination for travellers, Vietnam's National Administration of Tourism is running a homepage under the name "Vietnamtourism". Providing the prospective traveller with a broad spectrum of information for an eventual trip to Vietnam, the webpages are also used as a vehicle to transport the official image of Vietnam's history and culture. Musical instruments are listed and described in a separate paragraph. There, a full page is reserved for the portrait of the *dan bau* (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, n.d.).

The internet presence of the Embassy of Vietnam in Sweden also contains a page on “music and unique musical instruments” (Embassy of Vietnam Stockholm, Sweden, n.d.). It is brief in content but stresses some basic themes that can also be found at the just mentioned webpages of Vietnamtourism. One paragraph – entitled “Unique Musical Instruments” – is dedicated to some of the musical instruments in Vietnam. The first description is of the *dan bau*, the instrument “that inspires passion in every Vietnamese <...>” (Embassy of Vietnam Stockholm, Sweden, n.d.).

The webpage called Vietnam Cultural Profile is the result of collaboration between the Great Britain based association Visual Arts and the Ministry of Culture and Information of Viet Nam. The pages on Vietnamese culture are one of a number of national cultural portraits published under the head of Visiting Arts. The aim of the creators is to provide people with a network of easily accessible information on the world’s cultures. Since the contents of Vietnam Cultural Profile are provided by the Ministry of Culture, they also serve as a cultural self-portrait (Visiting Arts 2005a, 2005b, 2005c).

The last source used and analysed here is the webpage of the Musicological Institute of Vietnam. Founded in 1975, it is assigned to the ministry of culture and information and has the direction to work towards the formation of a national and socialist music (Sudestasie 1980). One of its webpages paragraphs on musical instruments is devoted to the *dan bau* (Vietnamese Institute for Musicology / Vien Am Nhac, n.d.)<sup>5</sup>.

### Major themes

Analyzing and comparing the mentioned sources, it becomes apparent that a number of shared topics or major themes emerge in all of the publications. These main aspects of the official discourse are the history and age of the instrument, its uniqueness, its origin and statements about the cultural ownership.

### History & age

We don’t know when, where or by who the *dan bau* was invented or how it has evolved through the course of history. Statements about the history and age of the instrument vary widely. Some authors, like Nguyen Xuan Khoat, who wrote an article on the *dan bau* in 1960, refer to a Vietnamese myth about its origin, which says that the *dan bau* was a gift of the gods and became the instrument of blind beggars (Nguyen Xuan Khoat 1960: 31f.).

Shino Midori, a Japanese *dan bau* player and researcher on the history of the instrument, says that there are no written sources concerning the history of the *dan bau*, but she states that “maybe it is as old as from the 11th century” (Midori 2004).

Nguyen Thuyet Phong writes in the Garland Encyclopedia of World Music that, “It has had a remarkable history. Discriminated against at times, it has been an instrument of blind street beggars, yet it was also an instrument of choice at the Tran imperial court [during the 13th and 14th century] <...>” (Nguyen Thuyet Phong 1998: 471).

At the homepage of the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism one can instead find the remark that “the first *dan bau* was made in 1770” (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, n.d.).

The common denominator seems to be that the instrument is considered to be old.

### Uniqueness

A frequently mentioned aspect in the discourses around the *dan bau* is its uniqueness. In this respect all authors seem to share the same opinion. While most instruments played in Vietnamese music are known in other musics of the world too, the *dan bau* is described as an instrument only present in the music of Vietnam. There are other types of monochords in Kampuchea, China and Japan, but all authors agree that those monochords are so different from the *dan bau* that they cannot even be distantly related.

### Origin

Closely connected to the aspect of uniqueness is the question of where the instrument was invented. Here too, all authors claim that the *dan bau* has its roots in Vietnam. While most instruments played in the traditional music of Vietnam are of Chinese or Indian origin, the *dan bau* is described as one of a few truly Vietnamese musical instruments.

### Cultural Ownership

A result or conclusion of the above mentioned aspects are the statements about the cultural belonging or ownership of the *dan bau*. Being an instrument which is said to be deeply rooted in the very past of Vietnam's history, singular in construction and sound and uninfluenced by other musical cultures, the *dan bau* apparently is perceived as cultural property of Vietnam and has been chosen to represent the Vietnamese nation.

I will illustrate this statement with a couple of quotations from different sources:

At the Vietnam Cultural Profile webpages one can find the statement that “<...> the *dan bau* or monochord, <...> has become almost as much of a national instrument to the Vietnamese as the *khène* is to the people of Laos” (Visiting Arts 2005c).

Tran Quang Hai writes in a brief introduction to Vietnamese music that, “<...> the national entity is reflected in the creation of three (sic!) purely Vietnamese musical instruments <...>” (Tran Quang Hai, n.d.). One of the mentioned instruments is the *dan bau*.

Another statement can be found on the webpages of a workshop for musical instruments in Hanoi and of a Saigon-based ensemble. They both say that “(i)f one sound had to be chosen to evoke Vietnam, for many it would be the sound of the *Dan Bau*, as it is one of only two (sic!) traditional musical instruments of purely Vietnamese origin’ (Thanh Cam, n.d.; Tieng Hat Que Huong 2006).

Finally, Dale Olsen summarizes in an introductory text for a university seminar on Vietnamese music that “(t)he *dan bau* is, after all, the Vietnamese national musical instrument” (Olsen 2002a: paragraph 5).

Today the *dan bau* is featured as a solo and ensemble instrument in several representational contexts. By this I mean performances that are mainly focused on the promotion of national culture and are often directed towards a foreign audience.

For example, the *dan bau* was the main musical attraction at a so-called Vietnam Event at the Expo 2005 in Japan (Japan Association for the 2005 World Exposition 2005).

In Hanoi, tourists interested in traditional music and theatre will most probably find the place at the central Hoan-Kiem lake where *cheo* – popular theatre – is performed and the nearby building of the Thang-Long water puppet theatre. At both sites performances do not exclusively focus on theatre – which in Vietnam traditionally is music-theatre – but include presentations of traditional musical instruments. Here too, the *dan bau* is particularly featured<sup>6</sup>.

### Interpretations

Today’s representations have a historical and ideological background I want to describe briefly.

According to different sources, the *dan bau* used to be an instrument of courtly and popular entertainment and intimate chamber music and was also played by blind beggars (Nguyen Xuan Khoat 1960: 32; Tran Van Khe 1982: 82f, 84, 122; Tran Quang Hai 1984 540 f.; Nguyen Thuyet Phong 1998: 471). Today it has evolved into an ambassador of Vietnamese culture. From the 1950s on, this development has been promoted by the government of the Democratic or Socialist Republic of Vietnam<sup>7</sup> in order to bring the musics of the country in line with the state doctrine. The aim was not the preservation of musical culture, but the transformation into a socialist folk culture. These attempts have resulted in what is now known as neo-traditional music: the fusion of regionally and ethnically diverse musical practices into a homogenous music of national representation (Arana 1999).

The preferred genres and instruments were those which were thought of as unique, folk-rooted, old, visually attractive and truly Vietnamese – or endemic, as a biologist would say.

It was within this development that the role of a national symbol was attributed to the *dan bau*.

How can the creation and dissemination of this national imagery be interpreted and what are the repercussions of this development?

Apparently a certain image of the Vietnamese musical landscape has been created and music has been transformed into a national brand. In my opinion, the visual aspects of performances and verbal expressions of Vietnamese music have become more important than the music itself. Music has become a show for sightseers. The listening experience has become secondary.

It can also be stated that traditional musical instruments have become political in contemporary Vietnam. One aspect is that instruments are used as a means to create boundaries. Music and musical instruments have been and are used as tools to clearly define cultural properties, to distinguish what is ‘ours’ and what is ‘yours’.

Moreover, it seems to me that political influence and control was and is regarded as more important than musical diversity and creativity. Cultural politics in contemporary Vietnam are directed towards canonizing national culture and creating a national cultural heritage<sup>8</sup>.

But why is it so important to interpret musical traditions nationally? What is the aim behind these symbolic constructions? Is it cultural production for national legitimization? Is it to promote business and tourism? Or to shape a national identity? Is it to preserve or revitalize a tradition? Does it have to do with political control or domestic policies? Is the motive to make the best out of a history with manifold destructions and ruptures or to interpret and transform traditions according to ones political goals? Probably it’s a bit of everything. An interpretation favouring one only dimension would be insufficient. But possibly music and instrument making as creative arts suffer from the representational use of music and musical instruments along with political control.

Dale Olsen claims that the Vietnamese government pursues a cultural “politics of forgetting” (Olsen 2002a: paragraph 1). I’d rather think that they exert a policy of control and strive to shape the arts and artistic expressions according to their political values. This goes along with formalization, standardization, canonization and a specific promotion of certain genres and musical instruments. So in my opinion it is rather a cultural policy of partial and guided memory.

So after all, can musical instruments be national? The answer will be yes and no: musical instruments as such are not national. But they can be transformed into national symbols through the fabrication of discourses and by using tools of cultural politics like financial support and the establishment of cultural institutions for teaching, training and research.

The creation of these images is not just a surface or a mask but has – like self-fulfilling prophecy – repercussions on the musical realities. Cultural knowledge can be reinvented and transformed. What's left as the big unknown is the cultural history of the *dan bau* apart from politically created images: its development, variants and changes in repertory, construction, contexts and practices of performance and social meanings. This history still has to be written.

## **Conclusion**

My starting point for this examination were webpages containing information on Vietnamese musical instruments. At first glance these publications look like introductory texts for tourists or persons interested in a general overview on Vietnamese culture. Regarded as speech acts in a political discourse, the webpages examined contain much more than basic descriptions of musical instruments.

They reveal certain ideas and topics in the use of musical instruments for national representation.

In these publications, one instrument – the *dan bau* – is considered to represent the Vietnamese nation in the most appropriate way. The texts on the webpages show a uniform picture of the *dan bau* as a national musical instrument. They can be regarded as an officially created image which is the result of a historical process: half a century ago the country started its cultural policy aiming for the establishment of a socialist Vietnamese culture – a cultural policy of partial and guided memory, which has deeply transformed the country's musical landscape. This policy is directed towards creating a canon of Vietnamese musical practices and constructing a national cultural heritage. Some of its tools are the representational use of music and musical instruments and the control of cultural expressions. Within this context the *dan bau* was transformed into a national symbol by the Vietnamese state. Today the *dan bau* is used to represent the state in public media. Thus the *dan bau* is used as a vehicle for non-musical messages. It stands for the Vietnamese nation's long and glorious history, its unique and rich culture and at the same time transcends regional differences within the nation. The symbolic use of the *dan bau* can also be regarded as paradigmatic for the ways in which musical instruments and music in general are used by the Vietnamese state to represent the nation. These representations tend to ignore historical and social complexities. Cultural transformations and ruptures are hardly mentioned. Moreover, the knowledge on Vietnam's musical history is small and research in this field is scarce – a fertile ground for the replacement of knowledge through ascriptions.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I have borrowed this phrase from John Blacking. It is the title of one chapter in “How Musical is Man?” (1973).

<sup>2</sup> According to Nettl (who refers to Charles Sanders Peirce) a symbol is “an arbitrary but agreed-upon sign” (Nettl 2005: 306). I will follow this definition. A study that inspired my thoughts about the production of symbols and images, is Peter Burke's work on Louis XIV (1995).

<sup>3</sup> The *dan bau* can be regarded as an example for a number of musical instruments and genres like the *dong son* bronze drums, the lithophone, the *klong put*, *cheo*, water puppet theatre or *quan ho*, which are promoted as national cultural heritage. The *dan bau* is usually ranked as the ‘most national’ musical instrument. See e.g. Olsen 2002a, paragraph 5; Tieng Hat Que Huong 2006; Tran Quang Hai (n.d.), introduction.

<sup>4</sup> For the translations see Karow 1972.

<sup>5</sup> Fragments of the text on the *dan bau* published here can also be found on the homepage of the instrument maker's workshop *Thanh Cam* in Hanoi (Thanh Cam, n. d.) and the webpages of the Saigon-based ensemble of traditional music *Tieng Hat Que Huong* (Tieng Hat Que Huong 2006). The respective passages of the text vary slightly but differ mainly in the quality of the English translation.

<sup>6</sup> Field research by the author, December 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Vietnam's official name from 1945–76 was *Democratic Republic of Vietnam*. In 1976 the name was changed into *Socialist Republic of Vietnam*.

<sup>8</sup> Another dimension of cultural representation that plays a role in cultural politics and the transformation of cultural practices – but won't be discussed in this article – is the fact that cultural heritage can be marketed as tourist attraction.

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**AR MUZIKOS INSTRUMENTAI GALI BŪTI TAUTINIAI?  
SIMBOLINIS MUZIKOS INSTRUMENTŲ VAIDMUO VIETNAMIEČIŲ  
TAUTINĖJE SAVIRAIŠKOJE**

INGRID BERTLEFF

**Santrauka**

Greta savo muzikinės paskirties ir funkcijų muzikos instrumentai neretai naudojami siekiant anaipol ne muzikinės prigimties tikslų ir skleidžiant ne vien su muzika susijusias idėjas. Straipsnio objektas – vienastygis vietnamiečių instrumentas *dan bau* ir jo, kaip nacionalinio simbolio, svarba. Tyrimo tikslas – išnagrinėti ir interpretuoti pagrindines diskurso, Vietnamo valstybėje siejamo su *dan bau*, temas. *Dan bau* pasirinktas kaip paradigmintis pavyzdys, itin gerai atskleidžiantis muzikos instrumentų panaudojimą šiuolaikinio Vietnamo saviraiškoje.

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