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The moon-lute (*đàn nguyệt*) role in the *hát văn* repertoire
Music and ritual in Vietnamese possession cult, *hầu bóng* or *nhập đồng*

LE Ylinh, Paris, France
CHIME, September 2012, Leiden, The Netherlands
With the François Picard collaboration

Dear Colleagues,

I'm very happy to be here today to speak about a topic quite dear to me: the Vietnamese moon-lute's role in a tradition in which artists and masters compose and inspire uniquely with an oral transmission techniques. I feel very close to Antoinet's research methodology, as her most precious field of research is also an oral transmission in a folklore tradition.

Introduction

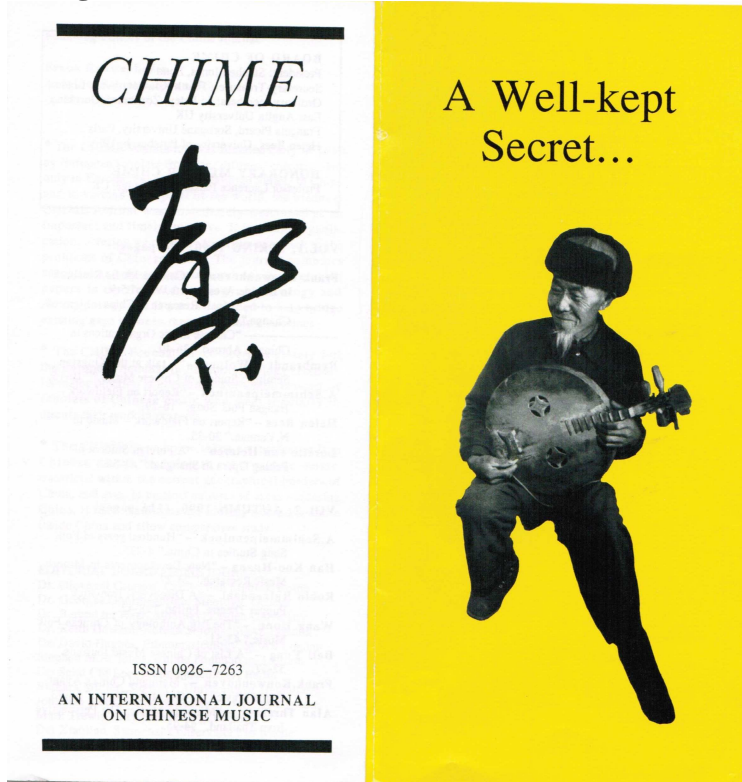
First of all, to start my speech, we are sharing the listening of this piece from the *hát văn* repertoire.

→ **Music as an offering for the Four Palaces spirits** 🎵

- *Quán liễu thanh*, Wipping willow inn (*Auberge des saules pleureurs*): text offered to a Prince

The idea of this speech is inspired by “A Well-Kept Secret”, the title of a CHIME booklet some years ago that shows an old musician from Yunnan playing a type of *ruan*, commonly called a moon-lute.

→ **Figure Chime brochure**



→ **Summary**

Introduction

Historic or origins

Vietnamese moon-lute

Vietnamese moon-lute's use

The moon-lute's role in *hát văn* music

Conclusion

I'm interested in the evolution process of this instrument from its origin to its use in Vietnamese musical tradition. In Vietnam the moon-lute is shown in this picture:

→ **Vietnamese moon-lute with player** ¹



The moon-lute is present in most kinds of instrumental ensembles in traditional Vietnamese music, such as chamber music, drama music, and so on. It is also THE instrument used by Vietnamese *hat van* master-musicians.

→ **Ceremony picture:**

¹ « luth en forme de lune *đàn nguyệt*.jpg », Lê Ylinh, *Le maître et les génies. Musique et rituel dans le culte de possession hâu bóng (Việt nam)*, thèse, Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2012, p. 126



You can see in this picture: the spirits server, the assistants, and musicians.

I'd like to thank to François Picard who gave me the major part of iconographic material concerning the moon-lute in Asia shown during this speech.

→ Vocabulary

Hát văn, literally singing the text or the literature, is practiced by a professional musician: he sings and plays the moon-lute during the time of the ceremonial *hầu bóng*, literally serving the shadows (meaning spirits). This Vietnamese possession cult is practiced widely nowadays after years of governmental proscription. During my fieldwork in Vietnam between 1986 and 1989, at the end of this prohibition period, I collected the material to be studied.

- Vietnamese possession cult: *hầu bóng* (serving the shadows) or *nhập đồng* (entering in the possession of the medium)
- The music played: *hát văn* (singing la litterature)
- Similar lutes: in Cambodia *chapey*, in Philippines *kysjapiq*, *hegelung*
- Moon lute in Korea: *wŏlgŭm* 월금 月琴
- Moon lute in Japan, *gekkin* げっきん 月琴
- Moon lute in China: *ruan* 阮 (fr. Ruan Ji 阮籍) or *yueqin* 月琴

Historic and Origin

The origin of this instrument is China: the *ruan* 阮, or another similar, the *yueqin* 月琴. The *ruan* takes its name from a famous poet, Ruan Ji 阮籍².

² Ruan Ji 阮籍, one of seven Sages from the Bamboo forest *Zhulin qixian* 竹林七賢

→ Figure 1 Ruan Ji 阮籍, Nanchao 南朝 (420~589) era, stele



It has a very long history. According to these images, the moon-lute has appeared in much Chinese iconography for more than fifteen hundreds years:

→ Figure 2 Northern Wei (386-534) era, mural painting³



³ LIU Dongsheng 劉東升, Yuan Quanyou 袁荃猷, *Zhongguo yinyue shi tujian* 中國音樂史圖鑒 (Guide illustré de l'histoire de la musique chinoise), Beijing, Renmin yinyue, 1988, II.94 p. 63.

→ **Figure 3** Northern Wei (386-534) era, mural painting⁴, Dunhuang



→ **Figure 4** Tang (618-907) era, stone engraving⁵, Luoyang, Henan

⁴ LIU Dongsheng 劉東升, p. 64.

⁵ LIU Dongsheng 劉東升, p. 64.



We also see this kind of instrument in other traditions, such as in Japan:
→ **Figure 5** moon-lute, Shōsō-in 正倉院 museum, Nara 奈良 (Japan), Tang (618-907) era⁶

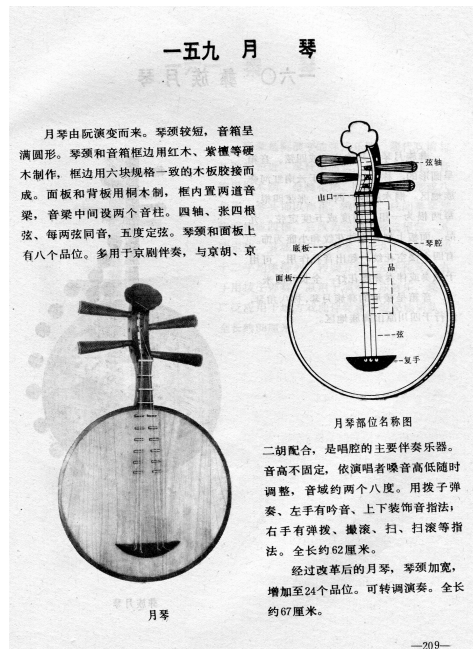


⁶ LIU Dongsheng 劉東升, p. 102

LIU Dongsheng 劉東升, *Zhongguo gudai yueqi* 中國古代樂器, Hubei Meishu chubanshe, 2003, ill. 151

Several versions of this lute are also found in other documents, such as the following:

→ Figure 6 moon-lute *yueqin* 月琴 (1987)⁷



Or other version, as in this picture:

→ Figure 7 moon-lute *yueqin* 月琴 1997⁸

accordage g-d₁-g₁-d₂

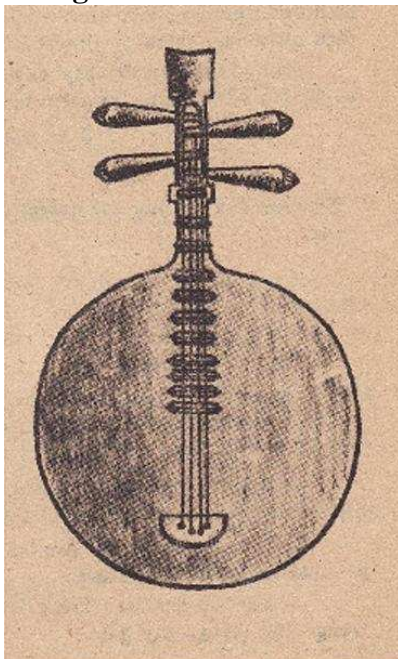
⁷ LIU Dongsheng 劉東升, HU Zhuanfan 胡傳蕃, HU Yanjiu 胡彥久, *Zhongguo yueqi tuzhi* 中國樂器圖誌 (Iconographie des instruments de musique chinois), Beijing, Qing Gongye, 1987, p. 209

⁸ YING Youqin 應有勤, *Zhongguo minzu yueqi tuzhi* 中國民族樂器圖卷 (Iconographie des instruments de musique chinois), Shanghai, Shanghai Yinyue Chubanshe, 1997



This one looks like the same one shown in the CHIME booklet. It's interesting to outline that this same kind of instrument is known in Vietnam as *đàn tu*, a lute with 4 strings, or *đàn đoản*, a short lute, as we see in this picture:

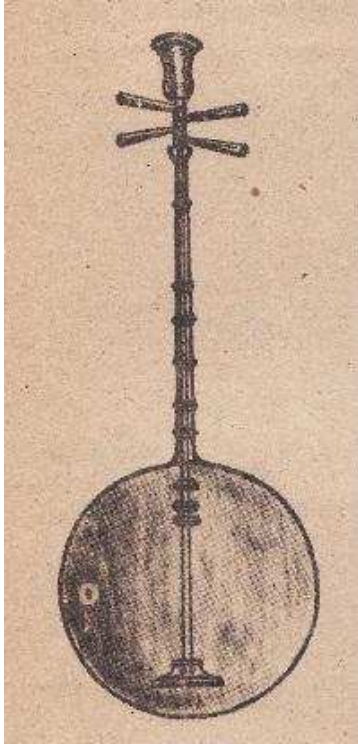
→ **Figure *đàn tu***⁹



The Vietnamese named moon-lute is as follows:

→ **Figure *đàn nguyệt***

⁹ LÊ Huy-Huy Trân, *Nhạc khí dân tộc Việt nam* (Instruments in Vietnamese traditional music), Nhà xuất bản văn hóa (Edition Culture), Hà nội, 1984



That looks more like these models:

→ **Figure modern *ruan* 1997**

(Donation by Wang Mengshu 汪孟舒, Zhongguo yinyue yanjiusuo 中國音樂研究所. The neck length is 117 cm, and the resonance-box diameter is 38 cm¹⁰).



We can see other version of *ruan*, with a longer neck¹¹:
(accordage A-d-a-d₁)

→ **Figure *ruan* Qing era**

¹⁰ LIU Dongsheng 劉東升, *Zhongguo gudai yueqi* 中國古代樂器, Hubei Meishu chubanshe, 2003, ill. 271
LIU Dongsheng 劉東升, HU Zhuanfan 胡傳蕃, …… p. 127

¹¹ YING Youqin 應有勤, *Zhongguo minzu yueqi tuzhi* ……., 1997



Vietnamese moon-lute

We go now for the Vietnamese moon-lute examination:

The instrument has a very long neck, the longest one amongst all we have seen up to now of the *yueqin* and *ruan*. We can see such a long neck in other type of lute here:

→ **Figure 8** hexagonal resonance-box lute called *shuangqing* 雙清, Qing (1644-1912) era¹²

(Donation by Yang Dajun 楊大鈞, Zhongguo yinyue yanjiusuo 中國音樂研究所. Neck length 102 cm, box width 20 cm)



The ancient versions of the Vietnamese moon-lute had four strings, similar to their Chinese predecessors; in newer examples you can see only two of them, so that the number of bridges

¹² LIU Dongsheng 劉東升, *Zhongguo gudai yueqi* 中國古代樂器, Hubei Meishu chubanshe, 2003, ill. 277

également LIU Dongsheng 劉東升, HU Zhuanfan 胡傳蕃, HU Yanjiu 胡彥久, *Zhongguo yueqi tuzhi* 中國樂器圖誌 (Iconographie des instruments de musique chinois), Beijing, Qing gongye, 1987, p. 125

is reduced to just two as well.

→ **Figure 8 Musician playing *đàn nguyệt***¹³



The resonance box doesn't have sound holes, as it does in most Chinese or Japanese versions. Also, the height of the frets and the neck length make it look much more like the Cambodian *chapey* than the *yueqin* or the *ruan*; even though the *chapey*'s resonance box doesn't have the moon-shape.

→ **Figure Ylinh *Chapey*, Cambodia**¹⁴



→ **Figure *chapey*'s frets**

¹³ « photo deux musiciens.jpg », Lê Ylinh, *Le maître et les génies. Musique et rituel dans le culte de possession hâu bóng (Việt nam)*, thèse, université Paris-Sorbonne, 2012, p. 352

¹⁴ <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapey>



We can infer that the Vietnamese moon-lute picks up its main attributes from its predecessors, but this is not exactly the same.

Vietnamese moon-lute, characteristics

→ Vietnamese moon-lute, characteristics

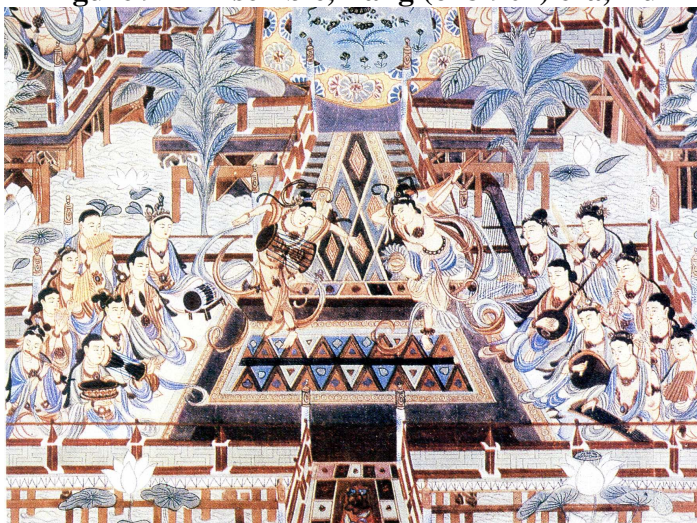
- It takes its high frets from the *chapey*
- Neck length from the *Shuangqing*
- The moon-shaped resonance box from the *ruan* and the *yueqin*
- No sound holes
- Four (or two) bridges with only two strings

Vietnamese moon-lute use

Common use

Quoting the LÊ Huy and Huy Trân citation in “Instruments in Vietnamese Traditional Music,” the Vietnamese moon-lute, the *đàn nguyệt*, in the past, was used to take part from many kinds of musical-ensemble contexts similar to those in Chinese tradition. In some ancient Chinese iconographies we can see the role of instruments in a drama context, together with other instruments such as the *zither*, and the *pipa*, as shown on this picture:

→ **Figure 9 Ensemble, Tang (618-907) era, Dunhuang**¹⁵



Or, in other:

¹⁵ LIU Dongsheng 劉東升, Yuan Quanyou 袁荃猷, *Zhongguo yinyue shi tujian* 中國音樂史圖鑒 (Chinese music illustrated guidebook), Beijing, Renmin yinyue, 1988, III.9 p. 80.

→ Figure 10 Zhou Wenju 周文矩 (c. 905), painting « Scenery at palace » 宮中圖, Five Dynasties (907-960) era¹⁶



From the 1950s, modern composers at conservatories, as with other traditional instruments, create pieces for soloists or for new ensembles playing modern pieces as well. But, as I already mentioned, the most popular use of the *đàn nguyệt* is by the *hát văn* musicians during the possession-cult ritual. Let's see its role.

A hát văn ensemble

The *hát văn* ensemble composition can be very different, depending on the context: Basically there is always a singer, the moon-lute, and percussion instruments. I could observe that, in the 1960s and 1970s, when the practice was strictly prohibited in Hanoi, there was minimal use of percussion instruments: bamboo clappers, small gongs and a singer. The bell and the drum were beaten discreetly, and only for very specific moments. The moon-lute was rarely present; we will back to this detail later.

→ Figure: *trông, phách, canh* (drum, bamboo clappers and gong)¹⁷



¹⁶ *Zhongguo yinyue shi tujian* 中國音樂史圖鑒 (Chinese music illustrated guidebook), Beijing, Renmin yinyue, 1988, ill. 10.

¹⁷ LÊ Ylinh, *op. cit.*, p. 125

At the time of my investigations at the end of the 1980s, and right now in the countryside, this ensemble, which we can refer to as a “common ensemble,” still includes a singer who very often plays the moon-lute, and a percussionist playing a drum, bamboo clappers, a small gong, and a bell.

→ Figure: a common *hát văn* ensemble: 2 musicians¹⁸



This common composition has increasingly developed since the 1990s. Since then, of course, government authorities have shown more open tolerance towards the ritual practice, ceremonies can be normally organized. At the same time of flourishing and auspicious ceremonies, musicians very often add to the ensemble flutes (*sao*), sixteen-string zither (*thập lục*), and the two-string fiddle (*nhi*); however, the main performer is still the moon-lute. So it's difficult, even inconceivable, to imagine **any** *hat van* ensemble without the moon-lute, *đàn nguyệt*.

The *đàn nguyệt* role

I suggest that we focus on its three main characteristics.

The đàn nguyệt as rhythmic instrument role substitution

The *đàn nguyệt* substitutes even in the role of rhythmic instruments in a sequence accompanying a dance:

→ ***Lưu thủy, flowing water***, 🎵

- Piece picked up from a professional repertoire to underline the official character or the mandarin's spirit.
- Using the moon-lute also as a rhythmic function accompanying the dance.

The đàn nguyệt as the singer alliance

As a common ceremony lasts more than four hours and there is no moment of silence for the musicians, one or two singers will tire very quickly if they have to sing for the whole duration. Percussion is played alone only for a specific and short moment: calling the spirits. During the ancient era (in the 1960s and 70s), the *đàn nguyệt* wasn't always present due to the

¹⁸ LÊ Ylinh, *op. cit.*, p. 352

lack of musicians and the illegal character of the organization, even though its role in this music is mandatory. For this reason, ceremonies I assisted at back then did not last very long. As I already mentioned in my dissertation, the nature of such organization is different depending on the context: some must do it as a duty toward the Four Palaces' spirits. Others do it for duty but add a lot of personal marks for the contents of the ceremony (adding spirits, presents, instruments, and so on); however, we always observe that, after the role the percussion instruments play, the *đàn nguyệt* occupies first place.

In this sample, you can see a sequence where, for a good two minutes of music, the *đàn nguyệt* takes up a very large space in comparison with the sung text:

→ **Hàn sơn** 🎵

*Hàn sơn phong mục ba bông
ấy nơi cứu khách thoát vòng gian nguy
Qua cơn binh lửa bất kỳ
Ngọc chìm đáy nước cô Bơ về thủy cung*

The moon-lute role doesn't only follow the song: the musician plays it instead of the song; he makes a dialogue with the song, making a real alliance between two **elements**. That permits the singer to have some rest, to compose new texts, and to think about the best music to be played as an offering to the spirits.

The *đàn nguyệt* as identification element

The *đàn nguyệt* is one of the *hát văn* ceremony's structural identification matters.

The identification marks or signature effects are among the most important elements in *hát văn* music execution. Spirits and the public are able to recognize the world, the spirit, and the step for the ceremony sequence.

This signature notion can be found in every element of the ritual: the Four Palaces colours, the hierarchical-level structure of the pantheon, the poetic form, and the structure of every sequence form. In addition of the vocal signature in each labelled melody, we can observe the same signature made by the moon-lute.

→ **Dâng văn tiên thánh thượng ngàn**, 🎵

Usually we see such signature notion appearing in the delivery of the singing, but rarely it is applied to the instrument accompaniment. That does the moon-lute using in *hát văn*.

CONCLUSION

For this intelligent mixture of its role, the *đàn nguyệt* contributes with songs to form a real *hát văn* music identity. This is the reason many people consider the moon-lute, *đàn nguyệt*, as the *hát văn* instrument *par excellence*, that's to say it is the *sine qua none* of the ensemble. This role is very far away from its origin and its original function in China.

To finish, I'd like to have you listen to and enjoy two pieces performed by Mr. Pham Van Kiêm, the greatest Vietnamese master of *hát văn* from the 1950s to the 1990s, recorded at his house.

First piece: *Mỹ nữ thanh tân*, offering to the Ninth Princess 🎵

Second piece: *Bóng giăng loan*, offering to the First Mother Goddess 🎵

I'd like to thank you very much for your kind attention.