



Cải Lương artists struggling with hard life

By **Hong Nhung**

The domination of modern arts has pushed many Vietnamese traditional art forms into oblivion, including Cải Lương (reformed opera) with lots of its artists faced with diseases and poverty in old age.

No more good times

Cải Lương originated in Southern Vietnam in the early 20th century, and blossomed in the 1930s as theatre for the middle classes during the country's French colonial period. Cải Lương is now promoted as a national theatrical form. Unlike the other folk forms, it continued to prove popular with the masses as late as the 1970s and the 1980s, although it is now in decline.

Cải Lương can be compared to a sort of play with the added aspect of *Vọng Cổ* (this term literally means "nostalgia for the past", it is a special type of singing with the background music often being the *Đàn Tranh* zither or the *Đàn Ghi-ta* (Vietnamized guitar). In a typical Cải Lương play, the actresses and actors would use a combination of regular spoken dialogue and *Vọng Cổ* to express their thoughts and emotions.



A scene in a Cải Lương play (photo by *Nguoi Lao Dong* Newspaper)

Cải Lương normally highlights Vietnamese moral values. There are mainly two types of Cải Lương: Cải Lương *tuồng cổ* (ancient) and Cải Lương *xã hội* (modern). The Golden Age of Cải Lương started in the 1960s and lasted for around three decades. In HCM City, many Cải Lương troupes were established such as Kim Chung, Hoa Sen, Kim Chuong, Phuoc Chung with lots of famous artists. The wave then quickly spread to the central and northern region, becoming the food for the mind of many people. People who are Cải Lương fans can easily recognise the singing voice of an artist they like.

By late the 1980s, Cải Lương began losing its popularity. Theatres attracted smaller audiences, particularly among the young. Cải Lương troupes had to perform in remote areas. Nowadays, young people prefer modern arts rather than folk arts; technology developments have offered people more chances to enjoy art programmes at home through their electronic devices, so they come to live performances less often. Bad investment in traditional art genres also slows down Cải Lương's development.

Artists in difficulties

Many Cải Lương artists are facing a hard life. Among these are Artist Trang Thanh Xuan, who was famous in the 1970s and her sister, Thanh Dao. The sisters now live in a six square-metre deteriorated room in HCM City's District 8, coping with many diseases of old age. Artist Trang Thanh Xuan is qualified to be given treatment at the nursing centre for artists in the district, but she does not want to leave her sister alone. Trang Thanh Xuan's sister sang Cải Lương for eight years but is not eligible for the centre.

The 60-year old confided that the difficult situation pushed her son to commit an offense and now he is still imprisoned. She sells lottery tickets everyday, and in the evening, she collects scraps.

Artist Trang Thanh Xuan at present →

She is just one among many Cải Lương artists who are suffering from disease and poverty. Artist Phuong Hai is now being treated for heart failure at Hospital 115, Artist Vu Linh Vuong whose legs were amputated due to diabetes and Artist Minh Hung who's faced with kidney problems. Recently, Artist Vu Minh Vuong was taken to Hospital 115 for a cerebral haemorrhage. Thanks to newspapers' call for readers' help, he has received some donations for the treatment.



The majority of Cải Lương artists are poor, except for some senior ones, namely Thanh Loc, Huu Chau and Bach Long who have moved to the drama area for survival. Having a detached house like Artist Thanh Loc is a dream of many because most of them now live in hired houses.



Some other Cải Lương artists are facing diseases

According to Nguyen Hong Dung, Vice Chairwoman of the HCM City Stage Association and head of the board supporting local artists, admitted that in the context of the economic downturn, many artists have to face a hard life. She, however, pointed out that some artists had fallen into the low life and gambling, like the case of Artist Kim Tu Long.

Artists can attend further training courses to become directors, instrumentalists or business people after leaving the stage, Dung said, noting that the most important thing is their determination to change their lives.

Currently, the board supporting HCM City artists provides 250 members with 10 kilos of rice and VND200,000 per month (USD9.52).

The board set up in 1946 attracts a circle of stage critics, journalists and artists. Due to limited financial condition, the board only receives members from HCM City.