

- **Janys Hayes**
University of Wollongong, Australia

Reframing Tradition: Le Quy Duong's Festival Theatre

*In Vietnam, Le Quy Duong has been dubbed the "king of festivals," producing and directing performance spectacles across Vietnam for major government organised events, where festivals are big business, facilitating trade and highlighting economic strengths of each Vietnamese province. In Australia, Le Quy Duong is better known as the writer of *Meat Party*, one of Australia's seminal Asian-Australian plays and part of his *War Trilogy*, a tribute to those suffering in the Vietnam war (1962-1975). This paper investigates Le Quy Duong's transition from writing and directing in Australian theatre (1994-2004) to influencing Vietnamese festivals, through utilising concepts of "place-making," with particular reference to the use of traditional Vietnamese performance forms. As specific examples of Le Quy Duong's creations, this paper analyses *Journey to Create the Motherland* (2010), from the 2010 Hue Festival as well as the opening ceremony of the second Vietnam Rice Festival, held in Soc Trang in 2011. Janys Hayes is a Lecturer in Performance and Theatre in the Faculty of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong. She has been a member of the Working Group on Popular Entertainments for the International Federation of Theatre Research (IFTR) since 2009.*

Key-words: *Cai Luong; Cheo; Festival Theatre; Hue Festival; Le Quy Duong; Place-making; Site-Based Theatre; Tuong; Vietnamese Traditional Theatre; Vietnam Rice Festival.*

Introduction

Festivals have emerged as a reflection of the transformation of places, their populations and economic bases, ... building reputations for certain 'festival towns' ... and attracting out of town audiences - Chris Gibson¹

We integrate traditional and contemporary culture in a new content and form to ensure, on the one hand, that we don't lose the beauty of tradition, but on the other hand, to make tradition take on new contemporary concepts. - Le Quy Duong²

Across South-East Asia the demise of audiences attracted to traditional performance forms has been a cause for concern, not only for the artists and artisans skilled in highly defined techniques that have required prolonged training, but also for those who perceive traditional performance as protecting cultural values, folkloric narratives and cultural understandings pertinent to the history and development of particular peoples.³ This paper firstly traces the re-emergence of traditional Vietnamese performance forms in the government-backed, provincial festival theatre created by Le Quy Duong. This popular entertainment is then positioned as a deliberate strategy of “place-making” before turning to the artist’s background to establish his mode of direction as being influenced both by his Vietnamese background as well as by his western theatre training and theatrical experiences. The paper will then proceed to describe and analyse a number of Le Quy Duong’s festival performances in terms of “place.”

Traditional performance in Vietnam is highly recognisable, is often televised, present in the national theatre trainings, and persistent as a focus for tourism in such forms as the Vietnamese water puppetry and as the *Cai luong* performances of the Tran Huu Trang Theatre in Ho Chi Minh City. Yet the traditional performance forms of Vietnam, including *Tuong*, *Cheo* and *Cai luong* have been under pressure since the country’s unification with young audiences turning to popularised forms of dance, singing and drama that are widely disseminated through the rise of television and more recently the internet.⁴

The history of Vietnam is complex, and whilst this essay acknowledges that in Vietnam all cultural production is influenced directly or indirectly by the Vietnamese government and its associated cultural and municipal agencies,⁵ it is limited to the work of one theatre artist, Le Quy Duong, one of Vietnam’s principal festival directors.⁶ The author has collaborated and communicated with Le Quy Duong for fifteen years, enabling his first Australia Council arts grant to produce *Market of Lives (Cho Doi)* at the Belvoir St Theatre in Sydney. Through numerous cultural exchanges with the artist as part of the University of Wollongong’s Faculty of Creative Arts Theatre and Performance programmes, the author is aware of the intricate negotiations involved in theatre-making in Vietnam. Le Quy Duong is an artist who traverses the interstices between what is required through policy and his own imperatives as both a Vietnamese and Australian trained theatre director.

At a time in Vietnam, when a return to preserving cultural heritage and traditions is being enthusiastically pursued by the governing Vietnam Communist Party, Le Quy Duong, whilst playing a part in these strategies, has utilised site-based festival performances to structure a popular and eclectic blend of Vietnamese history and folklore using both traditional and contemporary performance techniques.⁷ The integration of well-recognised traditional performance forms with Vietnamese history, myths and fables with globalised commercial technology has enabled Le Quy Duong to meet his

government's aim to preserve Vietnam's cultural traditions, whilst permitting him to experiment with his Western gleaned performance knowledge. The aim of this essay is to integrate an approach to Le Quy Duong's festival works which whilst predicated on "place" inevitably draws on concepts of cultural memory, heritage tourism and constructs of nationalism.

'Place-making'

Joanne Tompkins, writes in her book, *Unsettling Space: Contestations in Contemporary Australian Theatre*, that:

The performing body should be read in terms of place, just as place ought to be read in terms of the bodies that inhabit it. In other words the performer and setting intersect....⁸

Taking Edward Casey's phenomenological approach to bodily in-place experiences, it is possible to witness how cultural events and public art can change the perception of audiences about the places they inhabit or visit.⁹ "Place-making", where new sensory experiences can realign spectators' imaginations about previously encountered places, has become a cultural and economic means to altering sensitivities about urban landscapes.¹⁰ Experientially it cannot be assumed that either the performing bodies or the places in which performances take place are stable entities. Discourses or issues of cultural memory associated with particular spaces may be interacting with the bodies present at the performative event, and as Julian Meyrick has pointed out, individuals experience the meaning of theatrical events in their settings through "the projected reality of the perceiving subject."¹¹ This is particularly so in relation to the Vietnamese cultural events outlined in this essay. Philip Taylor, an Australian Asian Studies anthropologist has noted "the meanings and consequences of the (Vietnam) war...[are]... very much alive in the present."¹² Thus the political divide existing prior to 1975 between those from north and south Vietnam, may still be influencing the viewing of the popular performances in question, for as Taylor writes, "in post-war Vietnam the present is threaded to the wartime past in ties of reciprocation."¹³

Festivals are particular sites of "place-making." Chris Gibson has done extensive interdisciplinary research to reveal the many ways in which festivals, from wine-making festivals to film festivals, to religious and even vintage-car festivals shape economic, cultural and sociological landscapes. He has written of the ability of the arts to re-make places.¹⁴ The growth of festivals throughout Vietnam has become a burgeoning means to promote international trade, international tourism and economic vibrancy. With the opening of the Vietnamese economy to market forces it is also possible to view festival performances as a "mass mobilisation technique" to endorse national interests within a popular context.¹⁵

Le Quy Duong's entry into the world of Vietnamese festival direction and creation began with the Hue Festival in 2006. Festivals in Vietnam are of two

differing structures. Le Quy Duong estimates that there are 8,000 festivals a year in Vietnam, both large scale and small scale.¹⁶ At the lower end of the spectrum there are village festivals where the community organises the festival around the spiritual traditions of the culture. On the other hand, the large scale festivals that Le Quy Duong works for are organised by the Vietnamese government in conjunction with provincial governments in order to promote particular cultural policies as well as the economic strengths of each province. These festivals require funding and sponsorship and in return they operate for profit, expanding trade opportunities and economic growth. Le Quy Duong, however, sees their main benefit in terms of enabling for the provincial populace a new vision of unity and pride in its homeland.¹⁷ This view is consistent with Asian scholar, Greg Lockhart's research on Vietnam's particular modes of "democratisation", where by identifying with traditional values, government policies can support economic growth whilst still retaining centralist power.¹⁸

This essay will concentrate on two of Vietnam's provincially based festivals for which Le Quy Duong has produced and directed major performances. The Hue Festival is a biennial cultural tourism event, which arose from the success of the 1992 Vietnamese-French Festival, held in Hue and organised by Hue City and the Vietnam-France Codev Association.¹⁹ As a result of that festival's success, a number of government agencies, including the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture and Information, the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as the French Embassy to Vietnam, supported the establishment of the Hue Festival in 2000. Hue Festival attracts both international as well as Vietnamese tourists, with the majority of visitors being nationals. The Vietnam Rice Festival, held in 2011 in Soc Trang was celebrated once before in Hua Giang and today attracts primarily regional tourists.²⁰ In comparison with the Hue Festival, the Rice Festival has a more economic aim, promoting the production of rice in the Mekong Delta and facilitating trade both domestically and internationally.

The Hue Festival not only showcases international arts practices ranging from theatre, music, dance and circo-arts to street theatre and installation arts, but also aims to highlight Hue's cultural heritage to an international audience. In 1802, Hue was chosen as the site of the imperial city for the Nguyen Dynasty. It is vital to note that until the 1990s the Nguyen were regarded by Vietnamese communists as "crass feudalists", and "craven puppets of the colonial administration."²¹ David Marr has investigated the changing attitudes towards this period of history and notes the emergence of an historical view that now places Emperor Gia Long (r.1802-1820) as the ruler who unified Vietnam. The imperial palace built by Gia Long was founded on the northern bank of the Huong River which runs through modern-day Hue. The Hue Festival sets the main site of its festivities within the Imperial Citadel, enclosed by a ten metre thick wall and a moat, as if endorsing the acceptance of the once derided dynasty. Within the Citadel the festival commands five outdoor stages as well as showcasing events on the walls of the Citadel itself.²² Le Quy Duong has acted as the director of opening and closing ceremonies as well as producing and

directing key performative events at each of the Hue Festivals from 2006 onwards.

The Vietnam Rice Festival is Vietnam's celebration of the production of rice, in order to "glorify the commodity, which is the lifeblood of the nation."²³ The second Rice Festival, was held in Soc Trang, the capital of the Soc Trang Province, a southern province of the Mekong Delta, and 230 km south of Ho Chi Minh City on November 8-11, 2011. The 2011 festival attracted over 400,000 visitors and hosted exhibitions, seminars, fairs and scientific workshops all with the aim of promoting investment, trade and business relations amongst domestic and foreign partners. Twenty countries sent delegates in 2011, running food pavilions, cultural activities, exhibitions and workshops. Le Quy Duong's role for both Rice Festivals has been as the director of the opening and closing ceremonies.

Le Quy Duong's influence on festival theatre extends beyond his impact on these two festivals, which may be viewed as illustrative of his style of direction. Le Quy Duong has also directed spectacles at the Tay Son-Binh Dinh Festival, the Nha Trang Sea Festival, the Ben Tre Coconut Festival, the Buon Ma Coffee Festival, the Binh Duong Ceramics Festival, the Bien Hoa-Dong Nai Festival and Indochina's Heritage Road Festival. Whilst Le Quy Duong's festival spectacles must by necessity meet the requirements of the government agencies that facilitate these newly developing social events, his influences through his years in Australia and the USA have enabled him to take individualistic risks in his theatrical direction.

Le Quy Duong

Le Quy Duong was born in Hanoi in 1968 and graduated from the Hanoi Institute of Theatre and Cinema in 1990, the year that he won a gold medal in the National Theatre Festival in Vietnam for his play *Market of Lives (Cho Doi)*. An English version of the script was first introduced to the Interplay Festival in Queensland, an international festival for young playwrights, via Currency Press in 1994. Le Quy Duong came to Australia for the festival and was later granted Australian citizenship as a writer and director under the Special Skilled Class Category in 1999.²⁴ In 1996 he established VACEP (The Vietnamese Arts Cultural Exchange Projects) enabling his writing through cultural exchanges to receive three gold medals at festivals in Vietnam. He has received a series of Australian awards for writing, including the New South Wales Writer's Fellowship (1997), the Australia Council's Literature Fellowship (1999), an Australia Asialink Performing Arts Residency (1999) and a Churchill Fellowship (2001). He graduated from the National Institute of Dramatic Art in Sydney with a Diploma in Directing in 1998. He was the first Vietnamese-born playwright to enter the mainstream Australian theatre, with his best known work being his post-Vietnam War play, *Meat Party*. Michael Kantor, director of the play's first production at Melbourne's Playbox Theatre, calls *Meat Party* "a lament for the dead."²⁵ The narrative follows an Australian girl who travels to Vietnam in search of evidence of her lost father, presumed dead during the Vietnam War.

However the play's strength relies more on its poetic power, with the souls of the dead from both sides of the war singing throughout the dramatic action. *Meat Party* is one of Le Quy Duong's plays in his trilogy *First Play Collection*,²⁶ all of which deal with the social and personal adjustment required of modern Vietnamese following the past turmoils of both French colonisation and the destruction of the Vietnam War 1962-1975.

In November 1999, Vietnamese cultural ambassadors, politicians and theatre directors met with the members of Le Quy Duong's Vietnamese Australian Cultural Exchange Program (VACEP) and expressed their concerns about the young generation of Vietnamese who were no longer interested in the traditional theatrical forms.²⁷ The three major forms of Vietnamese traditional theatre are recognised as *Tuong*, or classical opera, *Cheo*, popular opera and *Cai luong* or renovated opera. Each of these forms involves music, song, dance and movement, with characters developed through gesture and mime. The respect for these traditional forms of performance the government and cultural delegates felt, was being jeopardised. With the influx of popular contemporary forms of music and film, the performance traditions of the past were being swept aside, with young people in particular identifying with western cultural influences, rather than their national cultural heritage. Le Quy Duong responded to this cultural concern of the Vietnamese Communist Party and in 2001 his work entered a new theatrical phase, using his Churchill Fellowship to return to Vietnam to study classical Vietnamese performance forms. Then from 2003-2004 Le Quy Duong, moved in another new direction, studying cinematography at the Los Angeles Film School. In 2005 Le Quy Duong returned permanently to Vietnam and immediately embarked on creating a new eclectic approach to Vietnamese theatrical productions. Whether site-based or in theatres, he juxtaposed recognisably traditional performance forms with a more westernised contemporary performance mode, to create a hybrid theatrical style immersed in high-tech lighting, projection and sound. His production of *The Secret Dream of Teu and Kangaroo*,²⁸ in 2005, combined Vietnamese traditional water puppetry with installation art and modern dance, and was played at outdoor water puppetry venues and festivals. The narrative involves a kangaroo which visits his Vietnamese friend Teu, who suffers from nightmares about war. *Myth of the Living*²⁹ or *Huyen Thoai Cuoc Song* stirred controversy in Ho Chi Minh City in 2006 with Le Quy Duong's experimental form of mixing traditional Vietnamese and western dance techniques, traditional drumming with large-scale A/V projection, skin-tight costumes, and body paint. *Myth of the Living* follows the human struggle to create values in a rapidly changing world. The move into popular large-scale festival works, which had begun with *The Secret Dream of Teu and Kangaroo* has enabled Le Quy Duong to promote his own theatrical visions to his broadest audience.

Tuong and Cheo

In considering Le Quy Duong's use of Vietnamese traditional performance forms it is worth drawing attention to the fundamentally site-based and popular nature of both *Tuong* and *Cheo*, two of the earliest theatrical styles to emerge in

Vietnamese cultural history.³⁰ *Cheo* can be traced back to its emergence in the 14th century as a combination of mimicry and song depicting daily rural life through comedy and satire. Impromptu performances mainly occurred at festivals, where a performance area was created in front of any communal house through setting out a mat with an audience seated on three sides and the theatrical props located at the back of the thrust stage. The stage in *Cheo* is basically bare, with the performers creating the narratives through dance, song and gesture. The skill in *Cheo* lies in improvisation. Old stories are told in numerous ways, the “clown” character is given an unlicensed freedom and as well there is an “off-stage” voice, usually an actor seated in the audience who is free to comment about the on-stage action.³¹ The audience is encouraged to participate as well. In comparison, *Tuong* emerged through the courts of the Nguyen dynasty as classical opera, similar in some respects to Chinese opera. From the mid-1600s plays with varying numbers of acts were written addressing issues of loyalty to the monarchy and patriotism. *Tuong* troupes were established to tour provinces and the plays could be performed in any village or in the open countryside. The writers of *Tuong* were regarded as poet-playwrights distilling epic dramas through poetic language, songs and symbolised and stylized movements. The movement sequences in *Tuong* were strictly adhered to passing from generation to generation. Neither movements nor the spoken language are naturalistic, even the facial make-up is symbolic. *Tuong* performances aim to capture the emotional world of the characters through stylization. Both *Cheo* and *Tuong* survived as well-recognised popular theatre forms into the 20th century and even throughout the wars with the French and Americans. Dinh Quang³² notes that during these times the travelling troupes performed in remote mountain areas with small populations. Performances took place in trenches during these periods of conflict with the audiences scattering if enemy planes flew over the area.

The impact of colonisation on traditional Vietnamese theatre included the movement of *Cheo* and *Tuong* into city centres. *Cheo*'s traditional use of the three-sided stage fitted easily with European proscenium arch stages, retaining an audience on one side and the musicians and actors lined as before on the two juxtaposed sides. With the influence of French drama and opera, *Cheo* became modified with the addition of scenery, dramatic dialogues, and new songs.³³ *Tuong* on the other hand, through French influences, evolved into a new form, *Cai luong* or “renovated opera.”³⁴ *Cai luong* emerged in the early part of the 20th century, utilising Western instruments to accompany the singing of Vietnamese folk songs. The lyrics and narratives emerged from popular songs of the period, to which gestures, dramatic interludes and choreography were added. Popular melodies often dominate the music of *Cai luong*.³⁵ From the 1920s *Cai luong* became established particularly in the Mekong Delta, performing stories from Vietnamese literature and also adapting stories from Molière and Shakespeare.

From the 1920s, anti-French resistance movements utilised the popularity of the traditional Vietnamese theatre to instil nationalistic fervour into the general populace. Noelle Janaczewska notes that theatre companies touring from France influenced the Vietnamese theatrical circles of the early 20th

century, popularising realism.³⁶ Nationalistic themes emerged in Vietnamese traditional forms even before 1920. *Cheo* artists were gathered to revive traditional forms and newly created *Cheo* plays were written with modern revolutionary themes. As well after the August Revolution, with the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, created in the north by Ho Chi Minh in 1945, *Tuong* plays with particular references to Vietnamese struggles against invading foreign forces were revived as a means of anti-French propaganda.³⁷

Hue Site-based Festival Performance

Much has been written of the multi-faceted readings offered by site-based performances,³⁸ embedded as they are in landscapes already redolent with social, political, historical and cultural memories. As Marvin Carlson has noted:

The physical surroundings of performance never act as a totally neutral filter or frame. They are themselves always culturally encoded, and have always, sometimes blatantly, sometimes subtly, contributed to the reception of the performance.³⁹

Hue's history has positioned the Hue Festival as being the premiere heritage tourist event in the Vietnamese year. As already noted, interest in the previous Nguyen Dynasty (1802-1945) has burgeoned amongst the populace. During the split between the north and south of Vietnam Hue was a contested city and in 1968 had been virtually demolished through a North Vietnamese offensive that lasted over a month before the South regained the city. It has only been since unification of the country in 1975, and the "opening up" of Vietnam to an international world, that the heritage sites of Hue have begun to be restored. Culturally it is now acceptable to be curious about the elitist world of the Royal Court. Le Quy Duong from the inception of the Festival in 2006 has capitalised on this placement and has produced and directed *The Royal Palace by Night (Dem Hoang Cung)* every two years, where audiences enter the Palace and witness the lives of the Royals, their traditional entertainments, including dances (*Luc Cung Hoa Dang*), singing (*Ca Hue*) and refined music (*Nha Nhac*) and their food. The popularity of the evening rests on the fascination with the past's extravagance, and the fact that the Nguyens were Vietnam's last royal family.

Perhaps for scholars, Le Quy Duong's re-animation of the historical sites in Hue with a revisionist history as presented by *The Royal Palace by Night*, may appear to be a political ploy; for the author, however, in watching the throngs of people who regularly attend this show there is little doubt that Le Quy Duong taps into deeply held fascinations about a wealthier world. If the post-war years have resulted in sacrifice and hardship for the Vietnamese then his images bear out the reciprocal bargain that the future can offer something more luxurious.

Another site-based event produced biennially by Le Quy Duong for the Hue Festival is the *Myth of The Huong River (Huyen Thoai Song Huong)*, which includes a dragon boat ride down Hue's famous river with historical and spiritual enactments, including traditional dance and song, occurring at various stations

along the river. This journey attracts international visitors who may know little of Vietnam's religion or history, as well as local festival goers and national tourists who may be aware of the significance of the visited sites and performances. However each group is gathering differing understandings of the river journey, as "place" is always present in relation to the audiences' unique set of perceptions and requires that any interpretation of the event remains provisional and incomplete. "Place" in these circumstances is able to "speak louder than the human mediator or actor who enters place."⁴⁰ The phenomenological understanding of the intersecting relationship between the setting, the performers and any viewer underscores the individuality of the interpretation of these festival events. The popularity of *Myth of the Huong River* may lie in an experiential realm, where the sensations of being on the water as the day turns to evening, or the beauty of the surroundings, or the intensity of the final gathering of the many dragon boats in the gloom of the evening in Hue city, or the spectacle of the final fireworks and impressive on-shore performances form a new and lasting impression. Le Quy Duong's major artistic themes then have emerged from the Hue Festivals as: "the philosophic premise [that] life is a myth,"⁴¹ the intermeshing of traditional and contemporary theatrical forms as an expression of the harmonising of difference and the reinforcement of the values of peace and freedom from constricting ideologies.

Journey to Create the Motherland (Hanh trinh mo coi)⁴²

Le Quy Duong's *Journey to Create the Motherland (Hanh trinh mo coi)* at the 2010 Hue Festival becomes pertinent to consider with this background of the use of culturally popular and recognisably site-based traditional Vietnamese theatrical forms in "place-making."⁴³

Hanh Trinh Mo Coi has been variously translated as *Journey To Open The Realm*, *Voyage to Reclaim The Country's Land*, *The Process of Founding the Country*, *Itinerary to Reclaim the County's Land to the South* and *Journey To Create the Motherland*, primarily by heritage tourist websites and publications.⁴⁴ Directed by Le Quy Duong, staged by the Lequyduong company in association with the Hue Monuments Conservation Centre, the entire work is a tribute to *Thang Long*, the original Hanoi, which in 2010 celebrated its 1,000 year existence. This epic presentation with over 1,000 performers is staged at the Flag Tower (*Cot Co*), built into the exterior walls of the Citadel. The walls of the Flag Tower, which are topped by the largest Vietnamese flag in the country, blaze with lights, and are adorned with hordes of performers stretching out on each level. At one time they are historical troops, then guards or drummers, and then finally they become the contemporary citizens of modern Vietnam. Le Quy Duong utilises the internal moat around the Citadel, with boats bearing villagers, explorers or troops being taken to a new settlement. The water motif is a vital aspect of the action with the moat becoming at one point a surprise setting for a comic interlude of water puppetry. Characters for each scene either march over the walls and down to the stage or arrive by boat and disembark to greet one another. The audience is seated on the opposite side of the moat, primarily on the

grassy banks whilst an official government party are seated in a pavilion (*Phu van lau*).

The five historical episodes, moving towards a vision of a unified Vietnam are clearly designed as a nationalistic pageant. Music, dance and spectacle allow the audience, as Justin Gibbs writes, to “witness, listen to, and participate in the enactment of a nation.”⁴⁵ Le Quy Duong, however, insists that this is more than a revision of history:

The point is we have people from different locations, different provinces in Vietnam who are totally different to each other. *Journey To Create the Motherland* is the opportunity to have them see the flow of the whole story of their country, to let them know that their perspectives are not the only ones. They are *in* the whole journey. That’s why I put “Journey” in the title. However it is not an historical show. We pull them into the flow. We let them see the desire of their Vietnamese ancestors to spread out and to be distinguished in the South-East Asian region. So it is more than a lesson in history, this is an art form and it touches the hearts of the people –to let them recognize, “Oh! I am only a small contributor to this pathway, on this journey.”⁴⁶

The first scene is set in 1306 and celebrates the royal wedding between Princess Huyen Tra, the daughter of one of the then reigning kings of the Tran dynasty. Each tier of the Flag Tower is alive with young women romantically dancing with their silk scarves. The marriage to take place is to a king of the Champa kingdom, a kingdom to the south, and will result in the Tran dynasty gaining two new regions of land around the Hue area. Le Quy Duong’s depiction places the Champa king as one of the comic *Cheo* characters, whilst the Tran clan are depicted as more traditional contemporary Vietnamese. The second scene is set in 1558, during a period of instability between two warring dynasties, the Le (Southern Court) and the Mac (Northern Court), indicating the previous historical divisions in Vietnam’s history. Lord Nguyen Hoang, from the Le, travels south separating himself from war and instead, exploring and setting up strong trading posts along the southern coastline. Scenes of villagers sifting rice, and boats with villagers float past the audience. Nguyen Hoang still pays homage to the northern leaders. However in the following scene set in 1635, Lord Nguyen Phuc Nguyen, the sixth son of Nguyen Hoang, moves all his followers by boats to Kim Long Village on the Huong River. Nguyen Phuc Nguyen separates himself from the northern provinces at this point and the country becomes divided into north and south. The fourth scene, set in 1698, depicts a later Nguyen, Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu, ordering the building of a new centre and city in the south, Saigon. Finally the fifth scene takes place in 1802 with the Emperor Gia Long inspecting the Huong River and choosing the site for Hue as his capital city. He also chooses the name Vietnam for the whole country. The earlier periods of division and struggle are replaced by contemporary figures, modern music, modern military and Vietnamese flags culminating in a unified Vietnam as fireworks and light projections flood the Citadel walls.

Le Quy Duong obtained the services of talented artists to assist in his production; “choreographers Truong Van Hai, Bach Hac, Thu Huong Mai Trung, musician Dai Dung, Dao Tan *tuong* troupe and the martial art-music troupe of Quang Trung museum from the central province of Binh Dinh”⁴⁷ all worked on his program. As well, the Hue Royal Art Theatre arranged for 1,000 amateur and professional artists to perform. With this cultural hallmark Le Quy Duong was able to impress an audience with his own vision of Vietnam. The Citadel and the Royal Palace within it in Hue had become “spaces [that] act as sites for the performance of identity,”⁴⁸ offering him at the same time opportunities to stretch his artistic imagination. Repopularising traditional musical and performance forms within a mass tourist attraction has enabled Le Quy Duong to reinstate a vision of a unified Vietnam, which, whilst open to the homogenous mass media of the west, still retains its strength through the country’s particular traditions.

Opening Spectacle at 2011 Vietnam Rice Festival⁴⁹

Soc Trang is a province with a substantial Khmer minority. The Mekong Delta was originally part of the Khmer kingdom, with the Khmer still retaining close ties with the Cambodian Khmer. Le Quy Duong incorporates local Khmer traditions and local myths into the opening spectacle for the 2011 Vietnam Rice Festival in order to equally portray the three races of Chinese, Khmer and Vietnamese living in the region.⁵⁰ The spectacle revolves around the symbolism of the Mekong delta, represented by nine dragons, one for each of the tributaries that flow to the coast. Chinese, Vietnamese and Khmer dancing, singing and drumming form the bulk of the program, including over 300 performers. The stage is built as a floating deck with an overarching screen, on a lake within Soc Trang’s Industrial Park. National, live telecasting of the event and the soaring on-stage projections testify to the technically proficient world to which Vietnam, even in its far-flung provinces now belongs. A professional troupe of Khmer chorographers and dancers highlight the Khmer collaboration, with the telling climax of the spectacle for the audience being the appearance of a Khmer longboat, carrying around 40 rowers; the popularity of the Khmer longboats, a traditional style of dragon boat which are raced throughout Cambodia, is legendary in this region. This inclusion produced a huge roar from the audience, on the evening of the author’s viewing, from all around the lake. The Chinese sections are choreographed around swirling umbrellas whilst the spectacle returns over and over to the rice fields themselves, with peasants scattering and later reaping their crop and huge projections of the Mekong delta’s rice fields playing over the performers’ heads. At one point a Soviet-style scene full of imagery of machinery and scientists examining strains of rice is accompanied by fervently nationalistic music singing culminating in the appearance of Ho Ch Minh as a gigantic projection. This harkening to a 1980s style past is at odds with Le Quy Duong’s Hue spectacles and as with the final sequences in which huge rice kernels are carried, projected, and set afloat as balloons, suggests that a rural agrarian region needs a different projected concept of “place” for a performance event to remain popular.

Le Quy Duong in this spectacle, attended by delegates from many countries, resisted the inexorable move to the monoculture of global capitalism, instead holding on to a past image of a socialist Vietnam but with localised and traditional cultural differences.

Speaking of his artistic vision Le Quy Duong offers a view of traditional performance which accords with his desire for a new “place” for Vietnam. In his words:

If we just present *Cheo* or *Tuong* or *Cai Luong* then people from outside Vietnam will find it alien. It can't work, but by putting these traditions in amongst international forms, multi-media, lights, television, modern music, we create a new form. The tradition is still recognised but now international visitors find something Vietnamese but attractive.⁵¹

The comparison between Le Quy Duong's works in Hue and in Soc Trang suggest that he is offering more than shows which merely reflect a party line. Rather, he is presenting his own adaptable vision of “place” to his audience, a Vietnam which, whether cosmopolitan or provincial, belongs to an international stage and yet retains a uniqueness; this is a “place”, full of hope for an enriched future to which, whether from south or north, Khmer or Chinese, the average person can feel proud to belong. My suggestion is that his new contemporary concepts are endeavours for a socialist Vietnam based more on harmony than on ideology.

¹ Chris Gibson, “Music Festivals: Transformation in Non-metropolitan Places, and in Creative Work,” *Media International Australia, Incorporating Cultural Policy* 123 (2007): 65-81.

² The author travelled with the Lequyduong company from 31 October 2011-1 December 2011, in Ho Chi Minh City, Soc Trang and Hanoi and previously in 2010 at the 2010 Hue Festival. Le Quy Duong e-mail message to author, 23 January 2011).

³ Numerous Asian studies scholars refer to the decline of traditional performance forms due to the influx of western mass media. See Kevin Brown, “Dancing into the Heart of Darkness: Modern Variations and Innovations of the Thai Shadow Theatre,” *Puppetry International: Art in the Shadows* 26 (Fall and Winter, 2009); Stephen Davies, “Balinese Legong: Revival or Decline?” *Asian Theatre Journal* 23 (August, 2006): 314-341; Kathryn Hansen, *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 2.

⁴ “Vietnam: A Dying Art: Hollywood Productions have Mortally Wounded Traditional Vietnamese Theatre,” *Vietnam Economic News* (September 28, 1998): 1

⁵ Greg Lockhart charts the modes by which a national network of mass organisations in post 1990s Vietnam has enabled a centralist government to resist the development of political and cultural pluralism despite the opening of the economy to market forces. Greg Lockhart, “Mass mobilisation in contemporary Vietnam,” *Asian Studies Review* 21 (November, 1997): 174-179. Adam Fforde asserts that even in 2011 Vietnamese families must deal with state officials regarding health, education, business etc on a daily basis. Adam Fforde, “Vietnam in 2011: Questions of Domestic Sovereignty,” *Asian Survey* 52 (1, 2012): 176-185.

⁶ Le Quy Duong was awarded the Australian Alumni Award, as an alumnus from NIDA, for his contribution to the arts in Vietnam, in particular his extensive direction of festivals on 11

November 2011. Australian Alumni Awards are hosted through the Australian Embassy in Hanoi and cover a range of fields such as education, innovation and research, business, arts, sustainable social development, and culture. See "Embassy of Australia Honours Director Le Quy Duong," *TheThoa&VanHoa* (13 November 2011, Ho Chi Minh City). See also Saigon Daily, "2011 Australian Alumni Award Winners to be Announced," (10 November 2011), accessed 17 February 2013, http://www.saigon-gpdaily.com.vn/Culture_Art/2011/11/98064/.

⁷ David G. Marr notes the Vietnamese government's promotion of a particular endorsed secular view of history and tradition in, David G. Marr, "History and Memory in Vietnam Today: The Journal *Xua & Nay*," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 31 (2000): 1-25.

⁸ Joanne Tompkins, *Unsettled Space: Contestations in Contemporary Australian Theatre* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 15.

⁹ Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 47.

¹⁰ Michael Cohen, "Tracing New Absence: Events for Place-Making and Place-Faking," *About Performance* 7 (2007): 183-196; Rhona Warwick ed., *Arcade: Artists and Place-Making* (London: Black Dog, 2006).

¹¹ Julian Meyrick, "Filthy Spaces: The Investment of Non-Theatre Venues in Melbourne 1990-95," in *Body Show/s: Australian Viewings of Live Performance* ed. Peta Tait (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000): 155; see also Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (New York: Cornell UP, 1989), 2, he maintains that theatre needs to be comprehended in terms of being a "sociocultural event," where "the experience of the audience... share[s] in the creation of the total event."

¹² Philip Taylor, "Special Focus on Post-War Vietnam," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 6 (3, 2005): 193-196.

¹³ *Ibid*, 196.

¹⁴ Chris Gibson, *Festival Places: Revitalising Rural Australia* (Buffalo: Channel View Publications, 2011).

¹⁵ Lockhart, "Mass mobilisation," 176.

¹⁶ Interview with Le Quy Duong, 30 November 2011, Ho Chi Minh City.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ Greg Lockhart, "Vietnam: Democracy and Democratisation," *Asian Studies Review* 17 (1, 1993):135-142.

¹⁹ Vietnam VNO, "Hue Festival 2012," accessed 18 February 2013, <http://www.vietnamonline.com/destination/hue/hue-festival.html>; "Festival Hue 2010," accessed 19 February 2013,

http://www.cinet.vn/upLoadFile/HTML/9_46_0_562010/index.html.

²⁰ VNO, "2nd Rice Festival Held in Soc Trang City," accessed 18 February 2013,

<http://www.vietnamonline.com/news/2nd-rice-festival-held-in-soc-trang-city.html>.

²¹ Marr, "History and Memory," 6.

²² Active Travel Vietnam, "Hue Travel Information," accessed 9 December 2012,

<http://www.activetravelvietnam.com/city/hue.html>.

²³ New VietNam Net, "Water Rice Festivals in Soc Trang," accessed 9 December 2012,

<http://english.vietnamnet.vn/en/travel/13389/water--rice-festivals-in-soc-trang.html>.

²⁴ Biographical information about Le Quy Duong has been drawn from his play *Meat Party* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2000); also "Le Quy Duong," accessed 7 December 2012,

<http://lequyduong.com>; "Australian Literary Resource," accessed 7 December 2012,

<http://www.austlit.edu.au/run?ex=ShowAgent&agentId=AOP2>.

²⁵ Le Quy Duong, *Meat Party*, iii.

²⁶ Le Quy Duong, *First Play Collection: Market of Lives, Meat Party, Graveyard for the Living* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2002). *Market of Lives* was rewritten and produced for performance by the Faculty of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong and was staged at both Theatre South in Wollongong and Belvoir St Theatre in Sydney in 1998.

²⁷ From 1-15 December 1999 the author travelled to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City with Le Quy Duong's VACEP (Vietnamese Australian Cultural Exchange Program). At an official theatre forum on 7 December 1999, at the Hanoi Opera House, chaired by Professor Dinh Quan, with staff from the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture and representatives from major theatre companies, the issue

of the need for the preservation of traditional theatre practices formed the principal topic of discussion.

²⁸ "Le Quy Duong," accessed 7 December 2012, <http://lequyduong.com>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See Dinh Quang *et al*, *Vietnamese Theatre* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1999); Tran Bang, "Modern Cheo in Vietnam," *Vietnamese Studies: Special Edition: Vietnamese Theatre and Other Theatres of Asia* 130 (4, 1998): 19-24; Hoang Chau Ky, "Classical Opera *Hat boi*," *Vietnamese Studies: Special Edition: Vietnamese Theatre and Other Theatres of Asia* 130 (4, 1998): 25-31; Dinh Thi Nguyen, "Theatre Internationalisation: A Vietnamese Perspective," (PhD Diss., University of Wollongong, 2005).

³¹ Noelle Janaczewska, "They're dancing the Lambada in Hanoi," *Australasian Drama Studies: Theatre in Southeast Asia* 25 (October, 1994): 158.

³² Dinh Quang *et al*, *Vietnamese Theatre*, 7-8.

³³ Tran Bang, "Modern Cheo," 19-24.

³⁴ Le Duy Hanh, "*Cai luong*: its national identity and modernization," *Vietnamese Studies: Special Edition: Vietnamese Theatre and Other Theatres of Asia* 130 (4, 1998): 32-35.

³⁵ Dinh Quang *et al*, *Vietnamese Theatre*, 70.

³⁶ Janaczewska, "They're dancing the Lambada," 153.

³⁷ Hoang Chau Ky, "Classical Opera *Hat boi*," 28.

³⁸ See Gay McAuley, "Introduction," *About Performance: Local Acts: Site-Specific Performance Practice* 7 (2007): 7-11; Cohen, "Tracing New Absence;" Simon Persighetti, "Wrights and Sites and Other Regions," *Studies in Theatre and Performance Supplement 5: Site-Specific The Quay Thing Documented* (2000): 7-15; Mike Pearson, "Special Worlds, Secret Maps: A Poetics of Performance," in *Staging Wales: Welsh Theatre 1979-1997*, ed. Anna Marie Taylor (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 95-96.

³⁹ Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (New York: Cornell UP, 1989), 206.

⁴⁰ Persighetti, "Wrights and Sites," 9.

⁴¹ "Vietnam's Annual Hue Festival Draws to a Close," *Intellasia/ New Tang Dynasty Television*, 16 June 2010.

⁴² Descriptions of the scenes in *Journey To Create The Motherland* are taken from the author's personal notes of the experience as well as Thu Phong's outlining of the historical events depicted. Thu Phong, "Creating The Motherland; a Thousand Year Journey," *Heritage Fashion* (June-July, 2010, Hanoi): 46-47.

⁴³ The translation of *Hanh Trinh Mo Coi* as *Journey to Create the Motherland* is the author's adherence to the title of the work given in English on Le Quy Duong's list of productions on his website: "Le Quy Duong," accessed 19 February 2013, http://lequyduong.com/web/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=351%3Aduong-le-quy-biography&catid=66%3Agtct&Itemid=199&lang=en.

⁴⁴ Vu Pham in Vietnam, "Hue Festivals," accessed 19 February 2013, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/wuinvietnam/sets/72157617787391582/>; "Hue Festival 2010," accessed 19 February 2013, http://www.cinet.vn/uploadFile/HTML/9_46_0_562010/index.html.

⁴⁵ Jason Gibbs, "The Music of the State: Vietnam's Quest for a National Anthem," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2 (2, 2007): 129-174.

⁴⁶ Le Quy Duong interview.

⁴⁷ "Famous Director To Chair Hue Festival's Key," accessed 7 December 2012, <http://www.tuanlinhtravel.com/Vietnam/newsdetail/7649/Famous-director-to-chair-Hue-Festival%E2%80%99s-key-event.htm>.

⁴⁸ Kevin Hetherington, *Expressions of Identity: Space, Performance, Politics* (London: Sage, 1998), 105. In the same text Hetherington (18) states that "identity spaces as well as being places for change or resistance are also, therefore, spaces that produce alternate social orderings."

⁴⁹ Details of the opening spectacle in Soc Trang's Rice Festival are taken from the author's personal notes of the experience.

⁵⁰ Le Quy Duong spoke of this deliberate performative tactic to the author in interview, indicating that the process of being sensitive to local traditions and ethnicities is part of what has enabled the lequyduong company to win large numbers of festival contracts.

⁵¹ Le Quy Duong interview.