

Land puppetry in Bao Ha village: The essence of statue carving¹

Vu Hong Nhi

Ph.D., Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences

Email: hongnhivhdg@gmail.com

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Abstract: *Land puppetry (non-water puppetry) and statue carving are two renowned and long-standing traditional crafts of Bao Ha village, located in Dong Minh commune, Vinh Bao district, Hai Phong city. Bao Ha's land puppetry stands out for its distinctive artistry, featuring puppets meticulously sculpted in a realistic style that highlights the personality and expression of each character. During performances, artisans control rods hidden inside the puppets' hands/bodies, making the puppets' movements appear remarkably natural, lively, and captivating. This paper explores the origins of Bao Ha's land puppetry and examines factors that define its uniqueness in puppet-making and manipulation techniques, which are deeply rooted in the village's statue carving craft.*

Keywords: Land Puppetry, Bao Ha Village, Statue Carving, Rod Puppetry, Performance

1. Introduction

Bao Ha's land puppetry troupe is situated in Bao Ha village, Dong Minh commune, Vinh Bao district, Hai Phong city. Approximately 30 kilometers South of the city center, this village is renowned for its statue carving and land puppetry traditions. This paper examines the formation of Bao Ha's land puppetry and elements that define its uniqueness in puppet design and manipulation techniques, which are deeply rooted in the village's carving craft. The primary data for this study were collected

in July 2024 through field surveys, in-depth interviews (IDIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs) with land puppetry artisans and local experts on the local history and culture.

2. An overview of Bao Ha village

Interviews with local elders, the *History of the Party Committee of Dong Minh commune*, and other historical sources indicate that the name of the village and its land puppetry troupe is deeply connected to the region's formation and development. In ancient times, this area was a coastal alluvial plain, sparsely populated and barren. During the late 12th century, under the Ly Dynasty, settlers from various regions came to reclaim the land, forming small hamlets, some of

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which retain their names today, such as Muoi hamlet, Coi hamlet, Nui hamlet, Vo wasteland hamlet (A wasteland that was reclaimed and turned into fields and later into a residential area), and Say reed-field hamlet (Reed fields that were reclaimed and transformed into a residential area) (Party Committee of Dong Minh commune, 2018: 5). By the reign of Emperor Tran Thai Tong (1225-1258), the population grew, and these hamlets gradually expanded into villages named Linh Dong, Bao Dong, and Tu Duong, etc. Besides wet rice cultivation, the locals also practiced various handicrafts, including carpentry. In the early 15th century, after the expulsion of the Ming invaders and the restoration of peace, displaced villagers returned to their homeland, resumed production, and developed statue carving as a new craft. As a result, many believe that the village's land puppetry emerged during this period, alongside the development of the statue-carving tradition. By the 19th century, under the reign of Emperor Gia Long (1802-1820), the population had increased significantly, leading to the establishment of new hamlets and settlements, including Ha Cau hamlet. During the reign of Emperor Dong Khanh (1885-1888), there were administrative changes in village names: Linh Dong village was renamed Bao Dong village and Ha Cau hamlet became Ha Cau village (Party Committee of Dong Minh commune, 2018: 6-15).

Under the colonial-feudal regime, local people endured severe hardship, and Ha Cau land puppetry was unable to be sustained. After the August Revolution of 1945, Ha Cau and Bao Dong villages were merged to form Bao Ha village. In 1954, following the restoration of peace

in northern Vietnam, the Ha Cau puppetry troupe was revived thanks to the support of the government and the dedication of local artisans. It was then renamed after the newly unified Bao Ha village and has been maintained ever since (fieldwork data, 2024).

3. An overview of statue carving craft and land puppetry of Bao Ha village

Statue carving is a renowned traditional craft in Bao Ha village, with a history of more than 500 years. According to historical records, this craft is believed to have been introduced by artisan Nguyen Cong Hue in 1427. He learned the craft while being taken to China to construct temples and palaces for the Ming dynasty. Upon his return, he passed down this knowledge to his descendants and fellow villagers. Since then, in addition to farming, the locals of Bao Ha village have engaged in statue carving as a means of livelihood (Nguyen Van Tuom, 2023: 10-11).

Our field research indicates that many locals believe Bao Ha village's land puppetry dates back to the 15th century, emerging alongside the statue carving craft. *“During the process of carving statue, artisans used of leftover wood pieces to make human and animal figures for amusement. Initially, only a few people engaged in this activity for fun, but over time, this practice gradually developed into performances that served as entertainment for the villagers during festivals”* (IDI with Mr. Bui Van Vuoc, Bao Ha Village). *“In their spare time, craftsmen would use leftover wood pieces to create wooden puppets known as “con thó” for recreation and relaxation. These figures were attached to strings and rods, allowing them to move, and eventually transformed into a game called “đánh*

con thó". The elders gradually turned this game into land puppetry performances. Additionally, puppet-making techniques also advanced, incorporating lifelike expressions inspired by traditional statue carving" (IDI with To Xuan Hien, Director of Dong Minh Handicraft Cooperative).

Upon his passing, Master Nguyen Cong Hue was venerated by the villagers as the founding master (the progenitor) of statue carving craft. In his honor, they built the Bao Ha Shrine, where he is worshiped, and composed a couplet in his praise, which is: *He studied in China, upholding his heroic spirit/Upon returning to Vietnam, he passed down his craft with his merit towering like the North Star and Thai Son Mount*) (Party Committee of Dong Minh commune, 2018: 23).

At Bao Ha Shrine, there is also a statue of Linh Lang Dai Vuong, the village's tutelary deity. Legend has it that Master Nguyen Cong Hue crafted this statue, which was life-sized and possessed delicate and noble facial features while wearing a dragon-adorned headdress and silk robes. Notably, the statue can smoothly rise and sit in sync with the opening and closing of the entrance door, thanks to its articulated joints connected to the door. *"This design exemplifies the ingenious combination of statue carving and land puppetry, which creates a mechanical system transferring forces and enabling push-and-pull movements between the door and the statue's articulated joints. Similar principles of leverage are also applied in certain Bao Ha's land puppet performances, allowing puppets to gracefully lift their arms to take off a garment and drape it over their arm or to pick up a fan and wave it"* (IDI with Dang Van Thanh, Bao Ha village).

The flourishing legacy of Bao Ha's statue-carving craft is closely associated with renowned artisans who earned official recognition from the feudal court. Among them, master To Phu Luat was honored as "Diệu nghệ bá"¹ (Baron of exquisite craftsmanship), master To Phu Vuong as "Kỳ tài hầu"² (Marquis of extraordinary talent), and master Hoang Dinh Uc³ as the "Deputy Head of the Statue Carving Bureau". This recognition underscores the

¹ Royal Edict dated March 28, the 6th year of the Vinh Hieu reign (1725).

² Among the artisans recognized by the imperial court, the most outstanding was Master To Phu Vuong. According to folklore, he was entrusted by Emperor Le Du Tong (1720-1729) with the prestigious task of carving the imperial throne. However, after completing the throne, he dared to sit on it and was accused of "lese-majesty" (lèse-majesté), leading to his imprisonment while awaiting trial. While in prison, he used seven grains of glutinous rice to carve seven miniature elephants, each retaining intricate details such as tusks, trunks, ears, and tails. When the emperor heard of this and upon witnessing the exquisitely crafted figures, he was astounded and deeply impressed by the exceptional craftsmanship. He immediately issued an edict granting the artisan a pardon, bestowed upon him the noble title of "Kỳ tài hầu" (Marquis of extraordinary talent), and sent him back to his homeland to further develop and promote his craft. To this day, the ancestral hall of the To family in Bao Ha (Mieu hamlet) still preserves the royal edict conferring upon To Phu Vuong the title of Hoang tin dai phu, dated March 26, the ninth year of the Bao Thai reign (1728). His official stipend record indicates an income of 38 quan tien (official currency at that time), 40 phuong (a traditional unit of measurement that period) of unhusked rice, and 254 bowls of polished rice. These stipends accounted for 35% of the total monetary tax, 90% of the rice tax, and 100% of the polished rice tax that Bao Ha village were required to submit to the imperial court in a year (Party Committee of Dong Minh commune, 2018: 23).

³ The Royal Edict dated October 14, the 18th year of the Canh Hung reign (1757).

high esteem in which the imperial court held Bao Ha's statue carving craft from the early 18th century onward.

Additionally, some scholars suggest that land puppetry emerged after the craft of statue carving. Accordingly, the art of Bao Ha's statue carving flourished in the 18th century with the rise of talented sculptors who received royal stipends, such as Master To Phu Vuong. With financial support from the court, sculptors had the opportunity to explore their creativity. Furthermore, puppetry performances were initially performed to the king's entertainment before gradually spreading to the courts of lords and high-ranking officials, and eventually becoming popular in village festivals and among affluent households (Nguyen Thu Trang, 2006: 70).

In the early 20th century, wars, turmoil, and famine led to the decline of Bao Ha's statue-carving craft. By the mid-20th century, thanks to the policies of the Party and the State, both the village's statue carving craft and land puppetry gradually recovered (fieldwork data, 2024).

According to 2023 statistics from the People's Committee of Dong Minh Commune, Bao Ha village currently comprises over 1,000 households engaged in this craft, including 200 households specializing in wood carving and 20 workshops. While the village's product range has diversified significantly, its most renowned items remain traditional works such as Buddhist statues and puppets (People's Committee of Dong Minh Commune, 2023).

Another view also concurs that the craft of statue carving laid the foundation for the formation of Bao Ha's land puppetry, yet it is argued that the creation of puppets for performances did not originate from Bao

Ha's artisans but rather from puppetry troupes in other localities. Upon receiving commissions for puppet-carving, the village's artisans and craftsmen leveraged their expertise and craftsmanship to make puppets with their own distinctive style. Over time, they contributed to shaping the structure of folk performances, leading to the establishment of a land puppetry troupe and the subsequent development of the village's puppetry craft (fieldwork data, 2024).

Although no specific records document the exact time or the individuals who created and passed down Bao Ha's land puppetry, all perspectives converge on the view that that the village's statue-carving craft laid the groundwork for the emergence and growth of this art form.

4. Bao Ha village's land puppets: Embodying the essence of statue-carving

The art of puppet carving in Bao Ha strongly reflects the distinctive characteristics of the village's statue-carving craft. The troupe's land puppets are half-torso rod puppets, designed to resemble real people as closely as possible, with particular emphasis on facial expressions. However, the production process differs in certain aspects. For instance, the proportions and facial features of puppets are often stylized and symbolic, allowing for creativity, whereas statues demand meticulous precision down to the millimeter.

The heads and faces of the puppets are carved in one piece with the body, with a supporting rod embedded in the center of the torso for balance. Additionally, only the hands are individually carved, with a rod hidden in each hand for manipulation. The incorporation of internal rods in puppet performances is a distinctive feature unique to Bao Ha's land puppetry.

However, crafting puppets with this control mechanism is highly challenging, requiring precision and artistic mastery. Our field research indicates that, fundamentally, the process of making the village's land puppets consists of the following steps:

Research and design: Puppet artisans design puppets based on real historical figures and events or on fictional characters from folklore. Building on these designs, puppeteers strive to capture the spirit of their creations in the final carving.

Wood selection and cutting: Land puppets are typically made from wood of jackfruit tree, chinaberry (cây xoan), or manglietia conifera (cây vàng tâm). These woods are soft, lightweight, flexible, durable, widely available, and resistant to warping or cracking. Jackfruit wood, among others, is the most commonly used. Once the wood is selected, puppeteers cut it into pieces and shape it according to the intended puppet size.

Initial shaping: Based on the puppet character, artisans sketch rough outlines and carve the initial form (face, neck, body) following the drawn lines. Bao Ha's human-shaped puppets are traditionally carved as half-torso figures, measuring 18-20 cm in height and 8-15 cm in shoulder width. Once the initial shape is formed, puppet makers refine the carving and define the puppets' faces.

Carving initial features: Unnecessary wood is removed, and the block is roughly chiseled to shape key facial features such as the nose, eyes, and mouth. At this stage, puppet artisans first chisel larger holes and then work on the smaller ones.

Chiseling down to shape facial features: This is a crucial stage in shaping the puppets' essential details, ensuring balance, harmony, and appropriateness of

the character's appearance. The chiseling down technique follows a top-to-bottom principle, proceeding from higher to lower sections. At this stage, the artisans must exercise their artistic creativity. For instance, a jester puppet is carved with upturned lips and protruding teeth, creating a mischievous smile, while a puppet of Ly Thong features a plow-shaped face and sharp, cunning eyes, emphasizing his sly gaze.

Detail carving: The puppet makers meticulously chisel the puppets' features to achieve proportionality, gracefulness, and artistic sophistication. When carving details, they must start with the secondary elements before moving on to the primary ones. For example, when chiseling the nose, the nasal alae are shaped first, followed by the nasal bridge and tip, and finally, the nostrils are carved.

Whittling: A specialized carving knife is used to whittle away excess wood, smoothing out rough, uneven surfaces left from the chiseling process. The artisans must maintain a steady hand throughout the process to achieve a polished and sleek finish.

Scraping: A paring knife is used to scrape away excess wood, creating flat surfaces or shaping gentle curves. During this process, artisans press their hands evenly and precisely along the wood to prevent accidental over-trimming or damaging the intricate, delicate details of characters.

Making puppets' hands: Only the puppets' hands are crafted, with their size corresponding to their facial proportions. Accordingly, the hand's length equals the distance from the forehead to the chin, while its width matches the face's width. Additionally, the fingers are shaped to reflect the puppets' intended gestures.

Sanding and polishing details: Sanding is done to smooth the puppets' surface, requiring skills and precision to maintain the depth and contours of its carved details. To achieve a shinier finish, artisans in Bao Ha use bundles of shredded dried banana leaves, dip them in melted beeswax, and wipe the puppets' surface for a final polish. Alternatively, they use powdered chinaberry charcoal (made from burning chinaberry wood), mix it with tangled hair, and use it to further smooth the details.

Painting: Once the wooden structure is completed, multiple layers of paint are applied to finish the puppet. Each coat of paint must fully dry before the next one is added (taking approximately 48 hours). Once the painting is done, the puppet is entirely covered to maintain a smooth, beautiful finish and to prevent dust accumulation.

Painting details: Painted details on the puppets are stylized and do not require strict standards or high precision like those on wooden statues. For example, one eye may be larger than the other, or both eyes might be glancing sideways to depict the cunning and deceptive nature of characters like Ly Thong. The puppet makers must grasp the characters' nature and roles to effectively capture them through the painted details.

Assembling and attaching arms: Once the paint layers have dried, artisans assemble the puppet's body and arms using wooden pegs, bamboo nails, and screws to create the complete figure. Each hand is attached to a slender, chopstick-like rod, measuring about 25-27 cm in length for manipulation during performances. To enable movement, puppet makers tie a fabric cord from the puppet's shoulders to the tip of the rod attached to its hand. The inner control rod, concealed beneath the puppet's clothing,

is also a thin, chopstick-like rod that is directly inserted into the hand and linked to the shoulders with fabric cords. This setup enables the arm movement at three joints: the shoulder, elbow, and wrist. During performances, this rod remains hidden inside the puppet's sleeve, creating natural, lifelike, and captivating movements.

Making puppet costumes: The costumes are sewn to fit the puppet's proportions, with colors and patterns designed to match each character's personality and role. The design consistently features two long tunics that drape over the puppet's body and extend to twice its length. This design creates the illusion that the puppet has legs while also concealing the puppeteer's hands during performances.

Bao Ha's puppets emphasize detailed characterization and a realistic style, conveying a strong sense of familiarity with real-life human figures in everyday life. The artisans flexibly and delicately apply the "truyện thần" (expressive portraiture) woodcarving technique to craft lifelike puppets that vividly capture their characters' personalities. They have explored and enhanced the artistic and intellectual essence of woodcarving to craft lively and soulful puppets.

5. Key characteristics of Bao Ha village's land puppetry

Bao Ha village's land puppetry is a form of folk performance presented on a traditional stage, where puppets convey emotions, gestures, and movements. It also serves as a spiritual nourishment and a wholesome source of entertainment for villagers during festivals and communal celebrations. The primary characteristics of Bao Ha village's land puppetry are most clearly reflected in its performance stage, acts and theatrical narratives/plays.

5.1. Performance stage

The performance stage embodies a strong folk style, featuring a neatly square structure measuring 3.5m x 3.5m. It is a tabletop stage, using a curtain to separate the performance area from the puppeteers' booth. Notably, the puppets are manipulated horizontally, which is a unique feature of the Bao Ha village's land puppetry troupe (fieldwork data, 2024).

The performance stage is positioned in front of the curtain, while the puppeteers' operating area is behind it. The curtain also serves as the backdrop, made from the hard outer layer of bamboo, measuring 1 meter in height and 2 meters in width. Its front surface is painted with dragon and cloud patterns. On either side of the curtain are two small gateways, each 50 centimeters wide, designed to resemble the entrances of village communal houses and temples. These gateways serve as entry and exit points for the puppets during performances. *“Conventionally, puppets are brought out onto the stage through the right-hand gate at the start of a performance and are brought back in through the left-hand gate when it ends. In our local terms, we call the right-hand gate the birth gate and the left-hand gate the death gate”* (IDI with Bui Trong Ngoan, Vice Head of Bao Ha village's land puppetry troupe). The curtain on the stage not only allows puppeteers to see and control their puppets but also enables them to observe audience's reactions. Additionally, it defines the spatial limits of the puppets' performance area.

Besides, at the front of the performance stage, there is a pole-mounted velvet curtain, where puppets perform standing and sitting movements on the pole. This curtain not only conceals the puppeteers'

hands and feet during the performances but also blocks the audience's view of the control area (fieldwork data, 2024).

5.2. Performances and theatrical narratives/plays

Performances (acts) on the village's stage mainly consist of independent skits, creatively adapted from folk performance forms originally performed by actors from other troupes in the village such as *chèo* (Vietnamese traditional opera), classical *tuồng* (Vietnamese classical drama), and *tứ linh* (four sacred animals) dance troupes (Nguyen Huy Hong, 1974: 136-138).

“Traditional performances of Bao Ha's land puppetry include: The tứ linh dance, Truong Vien, Thach Sanh, Trống cơm (rice drum), and the rabbit dance” (group discussion with the village's puppet artisans). Each of these acts is independent, with its own distinct characteristics: Some incorporate dialogues and singing, while others are wordless, relying entirely on music. Some performances are linked to specific narratives/plays, while others are associated with local beliefs and seasonal rituals. The *tứ linh* dance is a non-verbal performance, using only drumbeats for rhythm, expressing the villagers' aspirations for prosperity and abundant harvests. Meanwhile, *Trống cơm* and the rabbit dance integrate lyrics and music with poetic and lyrical qualities, blending the stylized melodies of *chèo* and *quan họ* folk songs. These performances evoke deep emotions in the audience about sentiments of love, familial bonds, communal unity, as well as a deep affection for their homeland and nation (fieldwork data, 2024).

A distinctive feature of the performances in the village's land puppetry troupe is the prominent incorporation of *chèo*

(Vietnamese traditional opera) elements, particularly in the *Truong Vien* (Pair of Lapis lazuli) play. The *chèò* style is reflected throughout the entire performance, with the puppets' actions and gestures often accentuating those of mythical figures and animals (such as demon couples, fairies, and tigers). The satirical and lively nature of comedic characters (Xa clown, servants, Cam, Quyt, etc.) enhances the *chèò*'s essence, ensuring its seamless harmony with the puppets' movements, stylization, and the language of puppetry performance (fieldwork data, 2024).

In 1954, Bao Ha's puppetry troupe was revived, bringing back traditional performances that quickly gained public favor. Consequently, the troupe was invited to perform at various events, including the celebration of Hai Phong's liberation (May 1955), the Puppetry Festival in Hanoi (1960), and numerous locations across northern Vietnam from 1965 to 1973. Between 1980 and 1998, the troupe performed at local festivals and conferences and neighboring districts. In 1994, the *Truong Vien* play won first prize at the National Puppetry Festival in Hanoi, organized by the Ministry of Culture and Information (now the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism) (fieldwork data, 2024).

At the beginning of the 21st century, with the emergence of various modern art forms and entertainment, Bao Ha's land puppetry struggled to attract audiences, particularly younger generations. *"For a long time, traditional performances have drawn little interest. We only perform when research groups visit or when television crews come to film"* (IDI with Do Van A, a local of Bao Ha). This situation indicates that the village's troupe

needs to adapt to public preferences through innovation and creativity in both content and performance style. Moreover, most of the village's puppetry artisans are elderly and hope that younger generations will carry on the village's puppetry tradition. However, in reality, very few young people are willing to pursue the craft due to its low and unstable income. *"Since 2000, our troupe has performed only once or twice a year, and in some years, not even once"* (IDI with Dao Thi Gion, a local of Bao Ha). Therefore, preserving and promoting this cultural heritage requires greater attention from government authorities and active support from cultural institutions, organizations, and relevant agencies.

6. Conclusion

Land puppetry has long been a traditional craft in Bao Ha village. It is a form of folk stage performance that has reached a high level in both content and artistic presentation through puppetry. The art of the village's land puppetry originated and evolved from the wood statue carving. Puppet makers were both skilled woodcarvers and artisans who controlled the puppets on stage. The troupe's puppets have long excelled in capturing the expressions and spirit of their characters. The craftsmanship of statue carving has been inherited and further advanced by puppet artisans, enabling them to create lifelike and expressive puppets.

As evidenced by the foregoing analysis, Bao Ha village's puppets and land puppetry are the crystallization of the artistry and intellect of the local statue carving craft. This invaluable cultural heritage must be preserved and promoted □

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