

Arts Management Curriculum Development - A Case Study of Viet Nam in a Market Economy

Tim Doling

Arts Management Executive, currently based in Ha Noi.

Key words Arts, management, Viet Nam, market, economy, socialisation

Abstract Since the inception of the social, economic and political reform programme known as doi moi ('renovation') in 1986, Vietnamese cultural managers have found themselves operating in a new and harsh environment. Salaries and retainers for key staff of state cultural agencies remain, but hitherto generous operating budgets have been slashed and in some cases abolished altogether in accordance with the new policies of 'socialisation' (xa hoi hoa), which require cultural cadres to diversify their sources of financial support. Recognising that few Vietnamese cultural managers have the training or experience to exploit the opportunities of the growing market economy, the Ministry of Culture and Information has embarked on a four-year Ford Foundation-funded project to develop arts and heritage management curricula in Viet Nam. Visiting Arts, the UK's national agency for developing awareness and promoting cultural relations through the arts, is acting as adviser to the Ministry on this project.

Biography Tim Doling managed theatres in the UK before becoming Chief Executive of Hong Kong Arts Centre in 1989. Since joining Visiting Arts in 1996, Tim has also worked in Central Europe, the Middle East and Southern Africa. A specialist on Asian arts and culture, he is currently based in Ha Noi.

Over the past three years Visiting Arts, the UK's national agency for developing awareness and promoting international cultural relations through the arts, has been working with the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture and Information on the project 'Arts Management Curriculum Development in Viet Nam in a Market Economy Context', which is funded by the Ford Foundation.

This four-year project aims to develop integrated curricula for arts and heritage management at three key Vietnamese educational institutions – the Viet Nam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies, the Ha Noi University of Culture and the Cultural and Information Management School.

This short paper aims to provide essential background information and a brief overview of this ambitious and important initiative.

Background

The government infrastructure for culture introduced in North Viet Nam during the 1950s and extended to the southern half of the country after Reunification in 1975 placed Vietnamese arts and heritage organisations under the direct management of

The Asia Pacific Journal of Arts and Cultural Management is available at: <http://www.artsmian.journal.unisa.edu.au/> and is produced by the International Graduate School of Management: <http://business.unisa.edu.au/igsm/> University of South Australia: <http://www.unisa.edu.au/>



the Ministry of Culture and Information and its comprehensive regional network of Culture and Information Services. Still in place today, this system not only embraces Viet Nam's four major cities (Ha Noi, Ho Chi Minh City, Hai Phong and Hue) and 57 Provinces, but also extends to even the most far-flung urban districts and wards, provincial cities, towns, rural districts and communes.

Having played a crucial ideological role during the long struggle for independence, culture became firmly subordinated to the task of strengthening the Communist revolution and advancing the socialist cause. After 1975 an extensive network of culture houses, culture and information centres and cultural clubs was established throughout the country to encourage participation in cultural activities and disseminate current government and Communist Party directives. Meanwhile, in order to provide appropriate guidance in their work, individual Vietnamese artists were expected to become members of either the national arts and literature associations (such as the Viet Nam Stage Artists' Association, the Viet Nam Fine Art Association, the Viet Nam Writers' Association, the Viet Nam Film Association) or their counterpart associations at municipal/provincial level. Operating outside the ambit of the Ministry and Municipal/Provincial Services of Culture and Information, these associations fell under the umbrella of the Viet Nam Union of Arts and Literature Associations, which in turn reported to the National Ideology and Culture Committee of the Communist Party Central Committee. Even today, membership of such professional arts and literature associations is mandatory for those wishing to work in state-run performing troupes, to produce art on commission from the state, to have their literary works published or to make films, in other words to benefit in any way from state subsidy.

Perhaps the most characteristic feature of the Vietnamese cultural system during the days of the Soviet-style command economy was the 'subsidy system' (*he thong bao cap*), which guaranteed generous state funding for the cultural sector yet provided little or no incentive for efficient management of arts and heritage institutions.

Into a Market Economy

At the 6th Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in December 1986 the Vietnamese government launched a bold new policy of social, economic and political reform under the rubric of *doi moi* ('renovation'), aimed at transforming the old command economy into a market-based one. Since that time free enterprise has been encouraged and foreign investment and dollar-spending tourists welcomed.

The subsequent economic collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent cessation of East Bloc aid which had for so many years helped to offset the effects of a crippling US embargo hastened this process. At the 7th Congress of 1991 the Vietnamese government's commitment to *doi moi* was strengthened, with planners agreeing to decentralise decision-making, cut back on consumer subsidy and introduce state-sector competition. Since that time Viet Nam has made considerable progress on the economic front; industrial production and output from the agriculture, forestry and fisheries sectors has increased and tourism has emerged as a major source of revenue which currently attracts over 2.5 million foreign visitors a year. According to a recent forecast from the Asia Development Bank, Viet Nam is expected in 2003 to enjoy Asia's highest growth rate of 6.9 per cent.

For several years prior to 1986, leading figures in the Vietnamese arts community had been at the forefront of the movement for social, economic and political reform, yet ironically the changes which they helped to implement, demanded a new economic realism which called into question the whole issue of state subsidy for culture in times of financial stringency.

Accordingly during the past decade the drive towards the implementation of a market economy has had far-reaching consequences for the Vietnamese cultural sector.

Salaries and retainers for key staff of state cultural agencies have remained, but hitherto generous operating budgets have been slashed and in some cases abolished altogether in favour of self-financing. Faced with diminishing funds, many government-subsidised cultural organisations have been obliged to reduce their personnel and overheads in order to cut costs. Some performing groups have opted for commercialisation of their activities in order to attract greater box office support, whilst others have been obliged to cease their operations altogether. The Vietnamese film industry has been particularly badly hit by reductions in government subsidy, coinciding as these have with the growing video industry and a new wave of competition from overseas.

In some areas of the arts, *doi moi* has opened up lucrative new avenues of opportunity, enabling entrepreneurs to open commercial art galleries and offering wider publishing opportunities to creative writers. But it is generally accepted that subsidy-reliant art forms such as the performing arts have suffered in its wake, for want of the necessary skills to adapt successfully to the new economic environment.

'Socialisation' of Culture

The combined effects of reduction in state subsidy and inability of cultural organisations to adapt to the new economic environment were discussed at the 8th Communist Party Congress of 1997, which recognised that a new policy was required, not just for cultural activities but also for other subsidy-reliant sectors such as education and health.

The outcome of these discussions was Decision 90/CP of 1997 on the 'Direction and Policy of "Socialisation" (*xa hoi hoa*) of Education, Health and Culture Activities'¹, which exhorts the Party Committee, the National Assembly, People's Committees, state agencies, mass organisations, economic institutions, businesses active in localities and indeed every Vietnamese citizen to join together in mobilising resources for the 'socialisation' of education, culture and health. In this context, the aim of 'socialisation' is to optimise the value of existing government subsidy through the more efficient mobilisation of arts management manpower, and to diversify sources of financial support for artistic creativity – somewhat akin to 'privatisation' in other countries. In the words of the enactment, 'Socialisation does not mean cutting down the responsibility of the state or diminishing the state budget; on the contrary, the state is constantly looking for other potential sources of income in order to increase the proportion of the budget spent on these activities, and at the same time to improve management with a view to enhancing the way in which these funds are used.'²

The directive urges members of the Vietnamese cultural sector to be more enterprising in their work; management of existing government-funded arts companies must be streamlined, new sources of income identified and new audiences reached. It also lays the groundwork for subsequent legislation granting permission for the establishment of private arts and heritage organisations, for paying students to attend arts training schools, for joint venture companies to be set up and for successful cultural enterprises to be part-privatised.

'A Progressive Vietnamese Culture Imbued with National Identity'

Decision 90/CP was followed in 1998 by Resolution 5 (VIII) of the Party Central Committee³, now a cornerstone of Vietnamese cultural policy, which sought to address growing concerns about the erosion of traditional values in an age of modernisation and industrialisation – in particular the exponential growth of the Internet, the pervasive influence of western popular culture at the expense of Viet Nam's ancient heritage, the penetration of 'poisonous culture' such as pornographic magazines and videos, and the spread of 'social evils' such as prostitution and drug

abuse among some segments of the population. Crucially, this enactment urges all Vietnamese citizens to work together 'to build and develop a progressive Vietnamese culture imbued with national identity', an oft-quoted maxim derived from a document written in 1943 by then Communist Party General Secretary Truong Chinh outlining policies for the preservation and development of Vietnamese culture, which may still be seen today emblazoned across propaganda hoardings throughout the country. Decision 90/CP provides guidelines for strengthening cultural activity and establishing the basis for a gracious and civilised way of life, stressing the importance of a return to traditional values and strict adherence to the Communist Party Line on Literature and Arts. At the same time it encourages artists and arts organisations to experiment with new forms of creative expression and new styles of cultural management.⁴

On the creative front, individual Vietnamese artists quickly took up the challenge of Decision 90/CP by exploring the new avenues now open to them. Perhaps the most important catalyst in this process since 1998 has been the steady growth in opportunities for Vietnamese artists to participate in creative cultural exchange with their counterparts overseas, encouraging experimentation in multi-disciplinary art forms and inspiring the setting up of a number of independent alternative art spaces in both Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Whilst conceived and nurtured in the non-government sector, contemporary art forms have recently begun to acquire implicit recognition by the state, partly thanks to the adventurous programming policies of such leading organisations as Ha Noi's Viet Nam Opera-Ballet Theatre (a state-run company belonging to the Ministry of Culture and Information which now incorporates a contemporary dance section) and Contemporary Art Centre (an initiative of the Viet Nam Fine Art Association which regularly hosts mixed media work by both local and overseas artists). Restrictions and censorship remain in place, but it is noteworthy that even performance art - once regarded as dangerously spontaneous - is now covered routinely by the state media.

In contrast, by 1999 it had become apparent that the drive to 'socialise' the management of state-run cultural organisations was foundering. Plunged into a new and harsh operating environment, few Vietnamese cultural managers had the training or experience to exploit the opportunities of the growing market economy. Furthermore since many of the prescribed rules and structures of the old centralised cultural economy were still in place, it remained quite difficult for state-run cultural organisations to act in the independent and self-motivated manner which was now expected of them, or - if they did possess the relevant skills to market themselves and their programmes - to benefit from the financial fruits of their success.

The Arts Management Curriculum Development Project

This problem was discussed at length between the Ministry of Culture and Information and the Ford Foundation, which by 1999 was already funding numerous small-scale arts management projects in Viet Nam and was consequently eager to help the Ministry tackle it in a more systematic manner. Out of these discussions came an ambitious project to develop a national training syllabus aimed at equipping tomorrow's Vietnamese arts and heritage managers with not-for-profit management skills.

Managed by the Ministry of Culture and Information, the four-year '*Arts Management Curriculum Development in Viet Nam in a Market Economy Context*' project seeks to develop integrated arts and heritage management training curricula at three educational institutions - the Viet Nam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies (responsible for developing research degrees), the Ha Noi University of Culture (responsible for developing undergraduate and postgraduate taught degrees) and the Cultural and Information Management School (responsible for developing

professional in-service training courses) - the longterm aim being that these curricula can ultimately be replicated in other training institutions throughout the country. The Ministry's Culture and Arts Magazine is entrusted with the task of documenting the project, and Visiting Arts – with Gerald Lidstone of Goldsmiths College London as its Curriculum Development Specialist, Tim Doling as Project Manager in Ha Noi and Tahnee Wade as Project Manager in London – has been appointed as organiser of international study and research programmes and adviser on curriculum development. The task of managing and monitoring the project is entrusted to a Ministry Working Group comprising representatives of the project partners, Visiting Arts and the Ford Foundation.

In order to avoid the danger of trying to cover too many subject areas within limited resources, it was agreed from the outset that this project should focus primarily on the key sectors of performing arts, visual arts and museums/heritage, whilst also taking into account those aspects of cultural tourism which relate to the three aforementioned sectors.

Fundamental guidelines laid down for the project envisage that arts and heritage management curriculum development in Viet Nam should be a co-operative process between academic staff and practising arts and heritage managers, and furthermore that rather than simply translating and assimilating teaching materials and curricula from the west, those undertaking postgraduate training, research and practice overseas should apply what they have learned to the task of devising curricula which are truly relevant to the Vietnamese context. It is essential that Vietnamese arts and heritage management teaching materials and curricula are developed in response to the particular social, political and economic needs of the community they will serve, and specifically to the experiences of the local cultural sector. In this way, having learned from what has been achieved in the United Kingdom, Australia and the USA, the project partners can decide for themselves which elements of overseas arts and heritage management practice can be used to develop 'Vietnamese solutions to Vietnamese problems'.

The project comprises both domestic and international programmes. The international programme is made up of international study tours⁵, three-month combined research/placement programmes⁶, MA courses⁷ and a series of 12 visiting professor seminars⁸ and is designed to enable staff from the three partner colleges to learn from the widest range of overseas arts and heritage management experience, at the same time equipping them with the skills to devise arts and heritage management curricula appropriate to the Vietnamese context. A complementary domestic programme seeks to provide those studying overseas with the necessary English language skills and also to develop a political and ideological context within which the new curricula can develop in Viet Nam.

Now in its fourth year, the *'Arts Management Curriculum Development in Viet Nam in a Market Economy Context'* project has already begun to benefit from the input of returnees who have studied arts and heritage management in the UK and Australia. These individuals now make up the core team responsible for devising arts and heritage management curricula pertinent to their national context.

Along with the design of curricula to train a new type of cultural manager, there is also recognition in Vietnamese government circles of the need for reconsideration at policy level of how Viet Nam's arts and heritage organisations can move into a market economy. To date therefore, the project has additionally involved not only administrative and finance staff from the Ministry of Culture and Information but also - since any change of policy will necessarily involve co-operation by other government ministries and departments - key personnel from the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Planning and Investment and the Government Office.

In 2001 the Ford Foundation made an additional grant to the Ministry to enable it to set up a Project Office. This is now known as the Viet Nam Arts Resource and

Information Centre (VARIC) and functions as both a co-ordinating office for all programmes and activities organised within the framework of the Arts Management Curriculum Development Project and an arts and heritage management service centre for Vietnamese and overseas arts and heritage managers, policy-makers and researchers.

During the first three years of the project, Visiting Arts researched and developed in collaboration with the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture and Information a comprehensive directory of arts and culture for Viet Nam, aimed at encouraging and facilitating creative international cultural exchange. The 564-page *Viet Nam Arts Directory*⁹ was published in December 2002 as the third volume of Visiting Arts' *South East Asia Regional Arts Profile* series¹⁰, and in early 2004 it will become the first of Visiting Arts' back-catalogue of 40-plus country-specific arts directories to be launched on the Internet. The Ministry of Culture and Information is currently developing its own Vietnamese-language version of this directory which in future, along with its English-language counterpart, will be managed and updated by the Viet Nam Arts Resource and Information Centre (VARIC), thereby enhancing that centre's role as a key contact point for international exchange with Vietnamese artists and arts managers.

Additional funds are currently being sought to ground the project more firmly in an Asia-Pacific context by allowing the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture and Information to host a *Regional Conference on Arts Management Curriculum Development*. To date those arts and heritage management courses developed in neighbouring countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia have evolved largely in isolation from each other. Yet whilst the great majority of issues facing the Asia Pacific cultural community are no different to those experienced in other parts of the world, the common linguistic and cultural threads running through many countries of the Asia Pacific region surely offer a conducive foundation for the development of a regional approach to shared problems such as the management and development of traditional dance, music, theatre and handicrafts. It is hoped that it will be possible to organise a regional forum for discussion of these and other arts and heritage management and management training issues in Ha Noi in late 2004.

Recognising their importance as a backbone of national identity and the important contribution they can make to educational, social and economic life, the Vietnamese government remains firmly committed to nurturing and developing its rich and vibrant cultural heritage. Yet economic realism demands new thinking and new skills which alone can guarantee a secure future for the Vietnamese arts and heritage sectors. It is hoped that this important project will help Viet Nam's arts and heritage organisations to build their audience base, diversify potential sources of funding and strengthen appreciation, not just for the traditional heritage but also for more contemporary forms of Vietnamese cultural expression.

References and Footnotes

¹ *Nghi quyết số 90/CP của Chính phủ về phương hướng và chủ trương xã hội hóa các hoạt động giáo dục, y tế, văn hóa*, 21/8/1997 ('Resolution no 90/CP of the Government regarding Orientations and Directions for the Socialisation of Education, Health and Cultural Activities, 21/8/1997'), not currently available in print.

² Op cit.

³ *Nghi quyết Hội nghị lần thứ năm Ban Chấp hành Trung Ương Đảng (Khoa VIII, 16/7/1998) về xây dựng và phát triển nền văn hóa Việt Nam tiên tiến, đậm đà bản sắc dân tộc* ('Resolution of the Fifth Conference of the Communist Party Central Committee (Eighth Session, 16/7/1998) for Building and Developing a Progressive Vietnamese Culture Imbued with National Identity', *Các Nghị Quyết của Trung Ương Đảng 1996-1999* (Dang Cong Sang Viet Nam, Nha Xuat ban Chinh tri Quoc gia, Ha Noi, 2000), pp 156-188.

⁴ Oscar Saleminck, '*Huong toi the ky XXI: Vai tro cua cong tac quan ly nghe thuat trong viec giu gin ban sac van hoa Viet Nam*' ('Into the 21st century; the role of arts management in preserving Vietnam's cultural identity'), *Tap chi Van hoa Nghe thuat*, 11 (Ha Noi, 2000) pp 91-97.

⁵ Week-long study tours focusing on arts and heritage management were organised for cadres of the Ministry of Culture and Information in November 2000 (London and Manchester, UK), October 2001 (New York, USA) and October 2002 (Melbourne and Sydney, Australia). A further study tour to London was arranged in April 2003 for personnel from other government ministries and departments whose co-operation and support will in future be required to create the legal framework for the new curricula.

⁶ A formula combining two days a week sitting in on foundation-year arts management lectures at a host university with three days a week placement in professional arts organisations was devised in order to prepare the ground more thoroughly for Vietnamese project participants with little or no previous experience of contemporary international arts management practice. For reasons of administrative complexity all such combined research/placement programmes to date have been organised in the United Kingdom by Visiting Arts and hosted by Goldsmiths College, University of London.

⁷ Masters degree programmes followed by Vietnamese project participants to date include the MA in Arts Management at City University, London (1 year FT), the MA in Arts Administration and Cultural Policy at Goldsmiths College, University of London (1 year FT), the MA in Arts and Heritage Management at London Metropolitan University (1 year FT), and the Master of Business (Arts and Cultural Management) at University of South Australia, Adelaide (2 years FT).

⁸ Week-long seminars comprising four 6-hour days of intensive teaching on specific arts management subjects (including Audience Development, Sponsorship and Fundraising, Heritage Management, Visual Art Management, Cultural Policy, Festival Management, Copyright/Performing Rights, Cultural Industries, Arts Education) which are intended to provide core teaching material for the creation of teaching modules as well as meeting short-term training needs.

⁹ The Viet Nam Arts Directory is designed as an essential reference tool for those developing arts activity from or in Viet Nam or researching the country's culture. It provides comprehensive contact details for more than 1,600 different organisations involved in arts and culture throughout Viet Nam, plus an essential overview of Vietnamese cultural policy and all aspects of the traditional and contemporary Vietnamese arts and heritage.

¹⁰ Directories on Cambodia and Thailand were also published by Visiting Arts in 2002; future plans include arts directories on Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam.