

UNESCO have added Vietnam's 'Bai choi' and 'Xoan' to its representative list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity during the 12th session of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage.



A performance of Bai choi singing in ancient Hoi An city, Quang Nam province □ □

UNESCO recognition for the two art forms not only honours Vietnam's unique culture but also secures effective preservation and promotion of the country's heritages.

Bai choi singing: From folk entertainment to the professional stage

Bai choi, a diverse art form combining music, poetry, acting, painting, and literature, is an important and indispensable spiritual and cultural practice for people from the south central region of Vietnam over past centuries. Dated to the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century, the art form has been kept alive through music, lyrics, and acting.

Starting from a type of work song performed for entertainment among farmers on the fields during their time keeping watch for wild animals who damage their crops, Bai choi has developed into two main forms Bai choi games, which is a card game played in bamboo huts under the instruction of male and female Hieu artists, and Bai choi performances.

Traditionally, Hieu artists, who lead the game, only read short lines, but as the art form has developed, they now read 10 to 20 sentence-long lines, narrate extracts from folktales of specific characters, events and happenings as well as extracts of popular Tuong (classical drama) pieces. They also perform quite a lot of stage acting to help audiences navigate the characters and the background of each scene in the story.

Bai choi art troupes were first established in the south central region during the national anti-France resistance war, which laid the foundation for the art form to reach professionalism after that. The first professional Bai choi troupe was formed in 1957 under the decision of the Ministry of Culture (now the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism).

Since the country's reunification in 1975, only three professional Bai choi art troupes from three provinces of Binh Dinh, Quang Nam, and Khanh Hoa have proven their continued and effective operation, delivering regular performances to audiences. There are also amateur Bai choi art troupes in other localities throughout the region, which attract enthusiastic participation of local residents and are greatly appreciated by audiences.

The art of Bai choi not only serves as a form of entertainment but also provides an environment for social interactions among the community, drawing participation from people of all walks of life.

Thanks to researchers and efforts made in the preservation and promotion of the heritage's value, as well as supports provided by leaders of the cultural sector and local authorities, and the admiration of the audience, Bai choi singing has embraced pressures and challenges posed

by market mechanisms and commercialisation to win UNESCO status as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

This accolade illustrates UNESCO's recognition of the efforts and passion of Bai choi artists, as well as the positive involvement of the cultural sector and local authorities.

Reward for efforts to save Xoan singing

Soon after Bai choi singing won the UNESCO honour, Xoan singing, a folk music genre in Vietnam's northern midland province of Phu Tho, was removed from UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding and added to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

It was a reward for six years of strict implementation of Vietnam's commitments to UNESCO on safeguarding, promoting and reviving the art form in its community.

In 2011, Xoan singing was recognised by UNESCO as being in need of urgent protection. At that time, there were roughly just 100 practitioners of Xoan singing, more than half of whom were over 60, and only seven out of over-80-year-old practitioners were capable of teaching more locals.

But today, Xoan singing is practiced in four original guilds and local Xoan singing clubs have been set up in hamlets in Phu Tho province, which have more than 1,900 members in total, increasing by dozens as compared to six years ago. In addition, 42 similar clubs have also been established in communes throughout the province, with a total of more than 1,300 members.

Xoan singing has also been taught to schoolchildren, as every school in the province, from kindergartens to primary, secondary, and high schools give their students the opportunity to learn about the singing in music class or through extracurricular activities.

The local authorities have paid attention to honouring outstanding Xoan practitioners, restoring the temples where Xoan singing is usually performed. A concerted effort, with the involvement of authorities at all levels and organisations, has been made to bring the heritage closer to the community.

UNESCO recognition for 'Bai choi' and 'Xoan' singing is a deserving reward for the huge efforts to preserve and promote heritage value and the assistance from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Vietnam National Commission for UNESCO, and research institutes.

With the addition of the two art forms, Vietnam now has a total of 11 elements of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity which have been recognised by the UN's cultural agency.

UNESCO acknowledgement for the 11 heritages will contribute to advertising and affirming Vietnamese cultural essence. It also demonstrates Vietnam's commitment to safeguarding the cultural heritage of humanity in respect of cultural diversity while encouraging dialogues among individuals, communities, and ethnic groups in order to facilitate love, compassion, and tolerance, in accordance with UNESCO's goals and objectives.

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