

## Water Puppetry in Vietnam

### *An Ancient Tradition in a Modern World*

PRODUCED BY SAM PECK

31 MINUTES, COLOR

BERKELEY MEDIA LLC, 2012

Reviewed by Karen Kane

**W**ater puppetry arose in the Red River delta and other rice-growing regions of northern Việt Nam a thousand years ago, during the Lý dynasty. Villagers staged water puppet performances to celebrate the end of the rice harvest, at religious festivals, and simply for entertainment. Today, watching a performance of this unique folk art has come to be mandatory for tourists to Việt Nam, where water puppet shows are often held at sophisticated theaters in major cities, such as Hanoi. Troupes have also been brought to the US for Asian cultural festivals. Few visitors travel to the rural Vietnamese countryside to see the water puppet shows in the settings for which they were intended, the rice paddy deltas.

Sam Peck, a cultural anthropologist at Kenyon College, and a team of graduate assistants have produced a charming—if slightly uneven—documentary exploring the production and reception of the film in a rural village. Peck and his team traveled to the village of Bao Ha with a series of archival, government-made films about the village's famous water puppet shows. A community screening was organized, and villagers were encouraged to express their opinions about them. Five villagers were then selected, including puppeteers, village officials, academics, and students, and trained to make films of their own about water puppetry. In addition, Peck's team recorded short vignettes of the five villagers' daily routines and the craft of the puppeteers. A second screening was organized, which included the new short films made by the members of the community themselves. The team's goal was to have "the process of digital repatriation traveling full circle."

While information about the tradition and craft of puppetry is found throughout Peck's film, students can also gain from it a sense of the role of traditional performances in village life. Several of the villagers interviewed relate that traditional puppet shows taught their children the values of community life and passed down the rich history and folk tales of Việt Nam. One of the puppeteers notes that the performance reflects the five elements: water, fire, earth, wood, and metal. All villagers enjoyed the rich vein of humor in the traditional show's depiction of farming life.

The documentary also shows how traditional village life is embedded in a global economy. Though they have no electricity in their homes during the day, several of the five interviewees watch TV every night; no wonder that, when asked about the quality of the archival films, several responded like urbane film critics, commenting that the films showed "choppy film technique" and could have been more beautiful. And, not neglecting the more practical potential of both the old films and the new ones, the villagers were clearly aware of the possibility such media would draw foreign tourists to their village performances.

In the classroom, American students may be charmed by the way the student filmmaking team worked with the villagers to document puppet-making by giving them cameras and editing their efforts. Each film produced by the villagers shows the distinctive vision of its collaborative team. American students will also warm to the student interviewee discussing how he spends his free time playing volleyball and working out with weights. Unfortunately, the whole is less than the parts.



Screen capture from the film showing the water puppet theater in the village of Bao Ha in the Red River Delta, Việt Nam. ©2012 Berkeley Media LLC.



Screen capture from the film showing villagers critiquing the film. ©2012 Berkeley Media LLC.



Screen capture from the film showing film crew members teaching villagers how to use video cameras. ©2012 Berkeley Media LLC.

Was this a film about Vietnamese water puppets, about old government efforts to document cultural traditions, tourism in rural Việt Nam, or "empowerment" of the subject? It tries to be all of the above, showing "an ancient tradition in a modern world," without reaching a perfect result. But could it be useful in classroom discussions about the study of rural Việt Nam and its traditions? Yes. ■

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