Available on: https://jsshrs.ep-journals.org/ E-ISSN: 3051-3561, P-ISSN: 3051-3553

**Journal of Social Science and Human Research Studies**

**Volume : 02 Issue : 08 August-2026**

# Chèo - A Vietnamese Traditional Stage Art in Ninh Bình Province'

**Vu Dieu Trung**
Vietnam institute of culture, arts, sports and tourism, Hanoi, Vietnam

**Published Date: August 31, 2026** **Article DOI: 10.65150/EP-jsshrs/V2E8/2026-32**

**ABSTRACT :** Chèo is a form of traditional stage art that is made up of a skillful combination of poetry and music, dance and sculpture. Ancient Chèo (also known as *Hát Trò*) - a special art imbued with lyrical and narrative characteristics - has been very popular in the daily life of the people in the North of Vietnam since the Đinh Dynasty in 10th century. The art is closely associated with features of farmers in the Northern Delta in the past, who were attached to wet rice agriculture that led them to a closed life with little interaction. In that context, a natural formation of Chèo zones operating with a same purpose of "praising the good and fighting against the evil", has come into being, and thereby forming artistic styles of Chèo zones having their own characteristics that are diverse and rich in genres.

**KEYWORDS:** traditional Chèo art, Ninh Bình province, intangible cultural heritage, folklore performance

## 1. INTRODUCTION TO CHÈO ART

According to documents and historical books entitled "*Đả cổ lục*" and *"Hải Dương geographical monograph on characters part",* it is recorded that lady Phạm Thị Trân**,** born in 926, died in 976, originally from Hồng Châu, Hải Dương, was a famous singer, dancer and performer in the opera troupe during the Đinh Dynasty. She taught singing and dancing to soldiers in the Đinh royal palace at ancient capital Hoa Lư, Ninh Bình province. She was then credited as "Ưu bà" – i.e. a mandarin position in the royal court by the king and honored by later generations as the first founder of traditional stage art of Chèo in Vietnam. Currently, Vân Thị temple (in Thanh Bình ward, Ninh Bình city) is a place where founder of Chèo art, and famous historical figures of the Đinh Dynasty have been worshipped and the statue of founder Phạm Thị Trân was erected to be worshipped together with historical figures there.

In the past, Ninh Bình belonged to the Nam Thượng Chèo zone (including former Hà Nam province and present Ninh Bình province). The traditional Chèo art of Ninh Bình province originated under the Đinh dynasty, flourished later and lady Phạm Thị Trân has been known as its founder. The traditional stage art of Chèo in Ninh Bình province bears both common characteristics of the Northern Delta and the unique features of the Nam Thượng Chèo zone. Nowadays, the art of Chèo singing has been widely practiced in villages/hamlets, communes/wards in 8 districts/cities in Ninh Bình province including Gia Viễn, Nho Quan, Hoa Lư, Yên Khánh, Yên Mô, Kim Sơn districts, and Tam Điệp, Ninh Bình cities. The art's bearers are communities, practitioners, and folk artists who are practicing, performing, and teaching the intangible cultural heritage in the above – mentioned districts/cities in which 4 districts as Gia Viễn, Yên Mô, Hoa Lư, Yên Khánh are the most famous for the traditional art. Thus, the process of forming and developing the Chèo art of Ninh Bình province has gone through many centuries and the art has been more elaborated, which can be demonstrated by the increasing number of practitioners and artists as well as clubs of Chèo in the province. Besides, both ancient and newly composed Chèo melodies and songs have been practicing, performing and popularizing by communities.

## 2. TRADITIONAL CHÈO ART IN NINH BÌNH PROVINCE

Traditional Vietnamese stage art of Chèo has hundreds of tunes (some documents recorded that there are 500 tunes) of ancient and new lyrics[1], 100 of which are composed, circulated and practiced in Ninh Bình province. It is an extremely valuable heritage, created by the collective intellectuality of the people, handed downed by previous generations.

According to authors Hoàng Kiều, Hà Hoa "*the number of Chèo tunes recorded into music and on tapes is about 250. The number may reach to 300 or 400 songs of Chèo as one tune may include more than one song*"[2]. Chèo tunes follow such principles in terms of song structure, poetic form, poetic composing, singing form and lyrics. Thus, Chèo tunes in general and Chèo tunes in Ninh Bình in particular, bear characteristics as follows:

*It is the unity of Chèo tunes in terms of tone and rhythm*, i.e. melody of a *Chèo* song must be "liền mí" (harmonious) with the *Xuyên tâm* and *Ngân đuôi* melodies; rhythm of the song must be melodious with the *Trống lưu không* and *Xuyên tâm,* which makes up a Chèo tun . Therefore,

[1] Musician Thanh Phương, *the appearance of music through the study of 500 newly composed Chèo tunes*. Printed in the Proceedings of the Conference entitled *Discussion on newly composed Chèo tunes*. Published by the Institute of Theatre. Hanoi, 2002, pp. 63-80.
[2] Hoàng Kiều - Hà Hoa, *Selected ancient Chèo tunes*. Culture and Information Publishing House. Hanoi, 2007, p.5.

License: This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

the traditional stage art of Chèo has come into being for four or five hundred years, bearing its diversity in terms of performing styles and names such as *Chèo Đông, Chèo Đoài, Chèo Nam, Chèo Bắc* (Đông, Đoài, Nam, Bắc refers to formerly administrative names of the four zones/areas in Vietnam). And there are hundreds of mats/ guilds/ troupes of Chèo with thousands of performing artists and practitioners, representing Chèo style of a zone.

*In regard to tunes system*, Chèo tunes in Ninh Bình ensure the following basic principles:

1/ A tune has a similar name of a song.

2/There is a similarity between musical structure and that of poetry.

3/ The contents expressed have similar emotions (joy, sadness, etc.).

4/ There is at least one similar musical phrase in a tune.

5/ Melodies of *lưu không, xuyên tâm, ngân đuôi* or accompaniment words are of similar rhythm.

6/ There are three or more tunes that ensure at least one or two of the 5 above – mentioned principles.

It can be said that, traditional stage art of chèo in Ninh Bình has come into being early, which leads to a formation and development of tunes created from an original one, and the tunes share similarities in terms of tone, contents and singing styles, namely *Sắp cổ phong; Sắp qua cầu, Sắp dựng, Sắp song loan, Sắp đan lồng, etc.*

*In regard to classic reference used in chèo tunes*: Although Chinese and Chinese classic reference are rarely used in chèo tunes, through the process of formation and development up to now, there have been melodies and songs using Chinese stories to intentionally feature various themes and personalities such as *Lưu Bình – Dương Lễ, Trịnh Độ Mai*, *Tấm and Cám*, etc.

The system of chèo tunes in Ninh Bình is abundant and diverse. It is possible to classify 121 chèo tunes in a published book[3], most of which are 38 tunes that are being practiced and taught regularly at Chèo singing clubs in the province. The tunes can be divided into various singing types/styles, namely in Vietnamese as:

*Hát Sắp:* Sắp cổ phong; Sắp song loan; Sắp qua cầu; Hát sắp thường; Sắp chênh...

*Hát Hề:* Hề mồi cơm canh; Hề mồi duyên tình; Hề sư cụ; Gánh nước tưới cà; Hát chầu bà chúa con cua; Em ăn phải miếng trầu; Cách cú.

*Hệ thống hát vãn:* Lận đận; Hát vãn (Vãn theo); Vãn cầm.

*Hệ thống hát vỉa ngâm*: Sử xuân; Rỉ vong; Kể hạnh (nhà chùa); Vỉa Huế; Sử dầu- gối hạc.

*Hệ thống hát hơi ả đào:* Bay bổng; Hà vị (or called Chèo Quế).

*Hệ thống hát hơi Huế*: Xuông hời; Dậm chân; Thiếp trả cho chàng; Nhịp đuổi; Bắt hò.

*Hệ thống đường trường*[4]: Đường trường tiếng đàn; Đường trường thu không; Đường trường trong rừng; Đường trường phải chiều; Tình thư hà vị.

Besides, *single tunes are abundant and diverse* as well, namely in Vietnamese as Xẩm Xoan; Lới lơ; Lão say; Gà rừng; Sử bằng; Du xuân; Sa lệch bằng; Hát cách; Sử chuyện; Đào liễu một mình; Đào lý một cành (Luyện 5 cung); Chức cẩm hồi văn; Quân tử vu dịch; Tòng nhất nhi chung; Bình thảo; Sa lệch chênh; Dương xuân; Tò vò, etc.

Up to now, the traditional stage art of chèo in Ninh Bình province has been widely practiced in villages/hamlets, communes/wards of 8 districts/cities, in particularly, ancient tunes of Chèo have been well preserved and promoted by clubs of Chèo in villages and communes of Yên Nhân, Yên Phong (Yên Mô district); Gia Trung, Liên Sơn (Gia Viễn district); Khánh Hồng, Khánh Cường, Khánh Nhạc, Khánh Trung, (Yên Ninh town). Every tune has its own characteristics and carries a message of expressing either joyfulness or satirical criticism, such as *Hát sắp, Hát sắp song loan, etc;* tunes that feature lyrical, romantic nature and convey love feelings and messages are *Sa lệch chênh*, *Đường trường tiếng đàn, Đường trường bắn thước, Tình thư hạ vị, Nhịp đuổi*, etc; The tune *Sa lệch xếp* expressing optimism and pride is performed while working and moving on.

In addition, there are many newly composed Chèo lyrics based on ancient Chèo tunes, being practiced and taught widely by Chèo singing clubs and schools in the province. New songs that are composed and compiled by authors, excellent artisans, artists and actors are diverse, increasingly being performed in districts/cities of the province.

Composing or writing lyrics for the stage art of Chèo is also a matter of concern in Ninh Bình province. By relying on available verses, combined with the rules/ principles of Chèo tunes, or basing on the melody structure, lyrics are composed. Either newly composed or ancient lyrics of a Chèo tune has to follow the principle of musical harmony, i.e. internal and external sounds must be harmonious in the Chèo intonation.

Ancient Chèo plays with contents reflecting the daily life, social and cultural activities of farmers in villages include *Tấm and Cám*, *Lưu Bình- Dương Lễ, Trịnh Độ Mai, Tống Trân - Cúc Hoa* in which *Tấm, Châu Long, Dương Lễ, the boat man and his wife, the rich man, the village chief*, etc are the main characters.

The most easily recognizable characteristic of Chèo is the parody guy (a recurring character playing a role similar to clowns) and satirical characters. A comic role is indispensable in any Chèo play since without a comic role, the play lacks entertainment, relaxation and can not satisfy the satirical taste of the people. For this reason, clowns and charmingly satirical roles are often liked by the audience. A Chèo play mostly bases on a folk story that is of lyrical, humorous/ridiculious and satirical contents.

The characteristic of the performance form and space for performing ancient Chèo is on square mats in the middle of the communal house yard. After work, in the evenings, local residents often go to the communal house yard to watch Chèo performances performed by actors who are farmers having great passion for the art of Chèo. They themselves have made the folk stage of Chèo be attractive to viewers and listeners.

[3] *Some of Chèo tunes* (1970), Ninh Bình Department of Culture.

[4] *đường trường* is the general name of a system of tunes, including long songs of lyrical narrative and highly technical sung. The tune *Điệu đường trường trong rừng* is also named *đường trường trên non*.

License: This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Up to now, the Chèo stage has been expanded. It is not only performed on a small stage of communal houses, but also on large stages during village and commune festivals, or cultural festivals in districts and provinces. If it is performed in the communal house, the space is usually in front of the altar where village's elders and officials perform a ceremony to worship the gods. The stage is 2 or 4 mats spread on the floor of the communal house yard. In addition to Chèo singing in the communal house, *hát gõ* is at the same time performed in the house where good actors and actresses are invited to perform and family members sit around to listen to. The performance does not use a big drum, just a small drum used to maintain the pace together with other musical instruments such as flutes, two – string violins, etc added to accompany the music.

To sing well a tune of chèo, the singer must have a restrained, resonant, staccato voice with a vocal range so that the lyrics are sung in a clear and elegant way. A truly great performer of Chèo requires techniques of singing in addition to his/her vocal ability, diligence in practicing and learning by heart lyrics. Knowing how to take a breath, pause, maintain the pace and combine harmoniously with the accompanied musical instruments is essential in singing every tune of Chèo.

Singing is the most useful way to express human feeling rather than any good speech. Singing is different from speaking since it encompasses both poetic lyrics and musical melody that are combined to compose songs for expressing emotion and feeling of the people.

A song includes two elements: lyrics and music.

Lyrics are the specific expression of a song's contents, which conveys either joyfulness, love, pride, tolerance or sadness, anger, hate. A tune may include two different contents, depending on the performing situation and the character being built.

Tunes of Chèo are relatively independent. It is possible to insert different lyrics into a certain tune. Therefore, when singing, artists and practitioners have to carefully study and adjust the tempo, rhythm, vibrato, internal and external beats to most fully express the emotional content of the tune. It is the folk nature of Chèo art, which requires a singer's creativity and ability to improvise in expressing different feeling and mood of a character.

A technique of "nhả chữ" – i.e "pronouncing words" in the art of singing chèo is difficult as it depends on various low and high notes. To sing well a tune of chèo, the singer has to pronounce every word in a clear way so that lyrics are as distinctly recognizable as natural speech with rhythm, emphasis, and vibrato accordingly to the music.

*Cầm chầu (playing a big drum)* is a cultural characteristic of *Chèo*: A big drum (trống chầu) also called a female drum (trống cái) is often played by a person of high status in the village, commune or a distinguished guest of the village to accompany Chèo singing. Beating the big drum for the first time in a performance (Khai chầu) must be played by *Tiên chỉ* (a person bearing the highest position in terms of rituals in the village under the old regime) or the distinguished guest as it is considerd as a great honor. If the *Tiên chỉ* is too old to beat the drum, or the guest does not know how to play the drum, he must beat 3 times to produce the sound *thùng thùng thùng* and then give the drum to someone else. The person playing trống chầu must be a connoisseur who knows how to appreciate and enjoy the art of *Chèo* singing so that he can make the performance become more lively and attractive, because the actors and actresses understand that their talent is appropriately appreciated and criticized, so they try their best to sing better.

*Roles of characters in Chèo*: A main male role in a play is the parody guy (like a clown) who is a recurring character. The parody guy often plays roles of a servant, a broken teeth boy, a shopkeeper, a fisherman, a drunkard, etc. He needs to be knowledgeable, psychological, humorous, and lively. Clown scenes are meant to make all the audience laugh and laugh a lot. Although he conveys messages of irony and mockery but no one can get angry as his sarcasm is neither rude nor vulgar but ridiculious and satirical. The effect of the clown's role is to use the art of satire to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, and at the same time to make the atmosphere of the performance more exciting.

Female characters playing romantic, flirtatious, mad, and jealous roles are the most special ones in Chèo.

A female romantic character plays a role that makes the audience feel pity, regretful and even cry for a real victim in society through her gestures and singing voice.

A female flirtatious character like Thị Mầu in the play Quan Âm Thị Kính is a role that tries to flirt with Tiểu Kính Tâm so seriously that the male audience get infatuated and want to leave their wife and children to follow the call of love and female audience get jealous, angry, and frowning.

A female mad character like Kim Nham's wife is a role that expresses her gestures to be changed suddenly, her posture is unusual, speaking and singing nonsense, sometimes logically but contrary to reality, sometimes logically but paradoxically, making the audience feel sorry and sympathetic.

A female jealous character like Đào Huế -Tuần Ty's wife, Hoạn Thư - Thúc Sinh's wife is a role that exposes something much more than a real jealousy through her terribly angry facial expressions, which makes the male audience both angry and laughing, and the female audience couldn't help laughing, a little bit ashamed because they feel as if they themselves were involved in the jealousy.

Unlike romantic, flirtatious, and mad characters, jealous character in Chèo portrays the ridiculousness of jealousy to warn women, because according to traditional Vietnamese ethics, jealousy is both bad and immoral. Thus, female roles often express the inner thoughts of characters very deliberately. The role of Châu Long, who takes care of her husband's friend, is in her youth, three years of loneliness, but still keeps her virginity intact. Singing and acting to express her inner turmoil, conveying emotions to the audience are typical female roles.

In regard to costume of traditional stage art of Chèo, there are differences between men and women's costume, which brings about its unique features. Men's costume includes a turban and a shirt worn accordingly to character's role in a Chèo performance. Women's costume includes áo bà ba (a long – sleeved, button down shirt with a scooped neck, split at the waist sides), áo tứ thân (a four- part dress,) a head scarf, a skirt and a bib (an ancient bodice worn as an undergarment).

The costume must be appropriate for a certain role and contents of a play so as to highlight characters, for example, brown clothes with patches are suitable for the role of a farmer, white or red bibs, green belts, and black silk pants are adapted to a leading female character.

In addition to folk music and tunes, dance is also an important element included in Chèo singing to express character emotions and images. Chèo dance is similar to other folk dances in the Northern Delta such as *múa tay* (dance with hands), *múa quạt* (dance with a fan), *múa*

License: This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

*gậy* (dance with a stick) and so on. Chèo dance language (the way of dancer's movements) is used flexibly by artists to express different types of character (protagonists and antagonists), which has contributed significantly to the vitality of every Chèo performance.

The artists'fingers movement curling and opening like blooming flowers, together with their arms's movement creating graceful waves like flowing water attracts the audience most. In addition, the artists' feet with steps are both slow and fast, sometimes gliding as if their feet were making velvet and silky steps on the ground. The most difficult technique of chèo dance is the ability of a dancer in delicately expressing a character's emotions. Instruments of percussion are used to maintain rhythm for the dance, in which the drum's sound plays a key role. A drummer using small drumsticks may either beat on the drum's surface, knock at drum- barrel, or covers its surface with one hand, and the other hand knocks, which produces exciting sounds.

Chèo uses string musical instruments including a moon – shaped lute (đàn nguyệt), a two – string violin (đàn nhị), a one – string chord (đàn bầu), three – string chord (đàn tam) in addition to flutes, drums and cymbals. The percussion section consists of big drums, small drums, cylindrical drums, and tocsin. The small drum is used to maintain the pace for dancers and singers. There is a saying that goes "no drum, no Chèo", indicating that drums are indispensable in a Chèo performance.

**3. THE VALUE OF CHÈO ART IN THE CURRENT LIFE**

Traditional stage art of Chèo has been created by the people as a result of their creative improvisation and artistic appreciation. It is used to express the awareness, viewpoint, emotion and talent of Vietnamese farmers in the Northern Delta in general and Ninh Bình province in particular, serving as a typical folk art to satisfy the cultural and spiritual life of communities in Viet Nam.

For centuries, the ruling feudal classes opposed Chèo, issued decrees and laws to eliminate it from social life, luckily, Chèo has been existed. It reveals a fact that traditional stage art of Chèo is of great strength and artistic values in the course of Vietnamese history. The content of Chèo plays often describes national heroes in the heroic struggles of the army and people during the resistance wars as well as the current working life of Vietnamese people.

Chèo is a comprehensive stage art that encompasses literature (script, lyrics, narrations), music (rhythm, melody, timbre), choreography (dance, stylized movements, gestures, actions, acting, etc.). The uniqueness of Chèo art is an improvisation when actors may improvise and perform on the stage. As it is a form of folk opera, singing element plays a key role in describing mood and personality of characters. Although music works as a background in Chèo art, lyrics and melody are a unified entity to create artistic images. It requires songs to have a unity in music and lyrics. If music is lyrical, lyrics must be elaborated, if music is cheerful, lyrics must be clear and lively. A complete Chèo song must have three elements that are of musicality, literary quality, and image to suggest dance movements.

In Chèo performance, before singing, characters usually have dialogues in many ways including *nói sử*, *nói lệch*, *nói vần*..., it is like a bridge to singing. In a Chèo play, there are many characters, each of them has a different personality portrayed by a certain tune. However, such tunes as *nhịp một*, *sử*, *sử lệch bằng*, *sắp, etc* can be all used for different characters.

*vỉa* in Chèo art is a technique to transfer from speaking to singing, which is very suitable for the development of music. In ancient Chèo, the way of singing from *cách* transferred to *sa lệch chênh* then *sa lệch xếp* sounds very natural and comfortable. From tune of *sử truyện* transferred to tune of *sử đọc sách* and then tune of *sử bằng* sounds natural and comfortable as well because they are in the same of singing system *hát sử.* The performance technique of Chèo is both simple and lively, based on the six - eight meter poetic form (lục bát), a treasure of Vietnamese folk poems that consists of hundred thousands of verses has been created by the masses, which brings about simplicity and purity of a folk literature developed rapidly in Chèo art. It is a synthesis art performed with string musical instruments, flutes, drums, cymbals, tocsin and dances, which clearly expresses characters in Chèo plays.

Thus, the art of Chèo has become a source of fun, entertainment, and solidarity in the community. It helps farmers to reveal their abilities and artistic talents when they play a role of a character on the stage. Chèo is an ancient art form closely associated with the Vietnamese people, which has been carefully selected and preserved by many generations, its artistic values handed down through the generations are continuously protected and promoted./.

**REFERENCES**


1) An, V. D. (1960). *Chèo Singing [Hát Chèo]*. Ninh Binh Department of Culture and Information.
2) An, V. D. (1962). *Chèo Singing [Hát Chèo]*. Ninh Binh Department of Culture and Information.
3) Fieldwork and Interview Data. (2023). *Local Chèo tunes of Ninh Binh province [Các điệu chèo quê hương tỉnh Ninh Bình]*.
4) Hoàng, K. & Hà, H. (2007). *Selected ancient Chèo tunes [Những làn điệu Chèo cổ chọn lọc]*. Culture and Information Publishing House. Hanoi.
5) Lê, T. H. (1996). *Overview of Chèo art in the second half of the 20th century (Vol 1) [Tổng luận nghệ thuật chèo nửa sau thế kỷ XX (Tập 1)]*. Culture and Information Publishing House & Vietnam Chèo Theatre. Hanoi.
6) Nguồn Việt Group. (1974). *Chèo Singing of the Vietnamese people [Hát Chèo của dân tộc Việt Nam]*. Đường Sáng Publishing House. Saigon.
7) Nguyễn, V. M. (1970). *How to sing Chèo well [Làm thế nào để hát Chèo hay]*.
8) Ninh Bình Department of Culture. (1958). *Guidelines for composing and performing ancient Chèo [Hướng dẫn sáng tác và biểu diễn Chèo cổ]*.
9) Ninh Bình Department of Culture. (1970). *Some of Chèo tunes [Một số làn điệu Chèo]*.
10) Thanh, P. (2002). The appearance of music through the study of 500 newly composed Chèo tunes. Printed in the Proceedings of the Conference entitled *Discussion on newly composed Chèo tunes*. Published by the Institute of Theatre. Hanoi. 63-80.
11) Tran, B. *Chèo: A form of Vietnamese folk theatre [Chèo một hình thức sân khấu dân gian Việt Nam]*. Vietnam Chèo Theatre.
12) Tuấn, H. (1970). *Some opinions on using tunes in Chèo scripts [Vài ý kiến về dùng làn điệu trong kịch bản Chèo]*.
13) Vũ, K. K. (1974). *Understanding Chèo theatre [Tìm hiểu sân khấu chèo]*. Lửa Thiêng Publishing House. Saigon.


License: This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/