Chameleon: a story of adaptation and transformation of theatre ownership models during the transition period in Vietnam

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Abstract
This paper addresses the question of how the changed environment from a subsidised and centrally planned economy to a socialist-oriented market economy has shaped the management of theatre companies in Vietnam, particularly concerning theatre ownership models. It aims to capture the correlation and interaction between the ambiguity, the experimental essence of the transitional context through the adjustment and adaptation of theatre companies’ ownership models. The research tracked the lives of different theatre companies over time and examined how theatre ownership models have evolved, adapted and changed throughout the transition period from the mid-1980s to the present.

A perspective offered by systems thinking about the organisation-environment relationship is employed in the research, ‘the webs of connections’ (Wheatley 2006), allowing the dynamics of change to be understood.

Biography
Thuy Do commenced her PhD candidature in Arts and Cultural Management at the University of South Australia in June 2008. She has worked as a researcher at the Vietnam Institute of Culture and Arts Studies (VICAS) since 1997. She has been involved in the project on Developing the Arts Management Curriculum at Bachelor Degree and Master’s Degrees (2005-2009), funded by the Ford Foundation and coordinated by the Center for Research, Support and Development of Culture (A&C). She participated in compiling and teaching the subjects Arts Marketing and Arts Fundraising with other colleagues from the Hanoi University of Culture. Her current research interest is in the dynamics of change in the cultural sector in Vietnam, during its transformation from a subsidised economy to a market economy, both from a policy and practice perspective.
Introduction

The doi moi (reform) policy initiated in 1986 marked one of the most important turning points in the macroeconomic reforms of Vietnam’s modern history. It aimed to mobilise every resource, stimulate economic growth and international collaboration, conduct administration reform within a legal framework towards the market economy for socialism orientation (Economist Intelligence Unit 2008, Nguyen ed 2006; National Politics Publishing House 2006). In the common drive towards a ‘socialist-oriented market economy’, in 1997 the government introduced the Policy of Socialisation in the cultural sector, aiming at more efficiently mobilising resources for cultural and arts activities (Decision 90/CP at the 8th Communist Party Congress 1997). These policies provide the legal foundation for a tendency towards the decentralisation and diversification of resources and ownership in the cultural sector presently occurring.

At first glance, the cultural sector in Vietnam shares some similar features with the arts sector in many countries worldwide, where government funding has decreased and a new demand for the arts to become business-oriented has been encouraged (Caust 2005; Byrnes 2009; Caust 2003; O’Hagan 1998; Pick & Anderton 1996; Le 2005, 2006, 2008). Even so, this is not the whole story if a closer view is taken. A literature review on the transitional process in Vietnam reveals issues of an ambiguous, experimental, contingent and multidimensional transition (Guo 2004; Diamond 1997; Wolff 1999). Overall, doi moi is characterised by the introduction of market-type mechanisms and business practices into the economic sector, but under the control of the government and without a change in the political system (Jeffries 2006, pp. 96, 100; Guo 2004, pp. 393, 410; Nguyen 2006). It demonstrates features of an ‘incomplete transformation’ (Wolff 1999), a market-central duality (Gillespie 2002; Wolff 1999; Florde & Vylder 1996), with a combination of and compromise between a socialist ideology and market economy rationale (Quang 1996, pp. 6–7).

In the cultural sector, while the doi moi and socialisation policies have enabled new resources to be released and promoted in a market-responsive management manner, critical components of the centrally planned system have not been changed. For example, old government administrative apparatus remains in use and old regulations co-exist with the new ones. There are multi-layers of the legacy of the subsidised economy that do not marry completely with the evolving fragile components and framework of a market economy. While the socialisation policy has been put into practice, the content of cultural activities is still subject to government censorship and review. Thus, the situation is viewed as complex, muddling and likely to enable things to be adrift (Vietnam Stage Artists’ Association 2006, pp.7–39). Conversely, it also has given room for trials and incentives at the grassroots level. It is noted that doi moi ‘has given mixed signals to artists within the country – or, as one director put it, “doi moi is the opening of one door and closing of another”’ (Diamond 1997, p. 372).

It should be acknowledged that arts and cultural businesses in Vietnam since doi moi have been operated in an ongoing and shifting complex paradigm with diverse dimensions, including not only artistic and economic but also ideological and/or social ones (The Central Culture and Ideology Committee & Institute of Culture 1990; Tran 1987; Mackerras 1987). These result from the new intersection of government ideological norms for cultural products with a new shift towards the business end of cultural consumption, in addition to expected artistic integrity. Arts managers in the time of doi moi and socialisation generally face a new burden of ensuring that artistic values are in accordance with political goals and economic efficiency.
Since the opening up to a market economy, a number of so-called ‘socialisation theatres’, including private and semi-private ones, government-private partnerships have flourished in Ho Chi Minh City, attracting large audience numbers and achieving significant financial and artistic successes (Vietnam Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism [MCST] 2006). This new movement has made the theatrical arts scene become more diversified and dynamic. At the same time, Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam, which has over ten leading state theatre companies and has experienced ‘a golden age’ of Vietnam theatrical arts in the mid-1980s, is now viewed as mostly lifeless (Nguyen 1993; Ngan & Khanh 2008; Tuan 2009; Nguyen 2009; Vietnam Stage Artists Association’s website 2009). This interests and challenges Vietnamese arts managers and policy-makers to discover the answers (MCST 2006).

In this context, with a concern over dynamic theatre management practices in Ho Chi Minh City, this study investigates three socialisation theatre companies in the city and examines in-depth how the transition context has interacted with the evolution and adjustment of theatre ownership models since the mid-1980s.

The theory of the ‘organisation-environment’ relationship within a systems thinking model

The argument surrounding the adaptive process of theatre ownership models in Vietnam in a time of change within this research is grounded in the theory of the ‘organisation-environment’ relationship within a systems thinking model (Robbins & Barnwell 2006, pp. 11–16; Senge 2006; Senge 1999, pp. 9–10; Clancy & Webber 1995; Burke & Litwin 1992, pp. 523–545). The study aims to take a new look at the relationship between external environments and adaptive capacities of theatre ownership models in Ho Chi Minh City and provide an insight into ‘the webs of connections’ (Wheatley 2006) and the dynamics of change.

There is an assumption in strategic management that to be able to adapt or evolve in an increasingly uncertain and fast-changing environment, organisations must ‘match the internal resources and capabilities of the organization ... with the demand of the environment’ (Learned, Christensen, Andrews & Guth, Ansoff cited in Hubbard 2000, p. 3). They must become flexible, in order to be able to change continuously and find new bases of competition (D’Aveni cited in Hubbard 2000, p. 6); they should be proactive according to the situation or ‘concern[ed] about creating the future of their industry rather than having others create the future for them’ (Hamel & Prahalad cited in Hubbard 2000, p. 6). As with an organism in biology, an entity in quantum physics and chaos theory, an organisation learns the ‘rules of the game’ and adapts continuously to environmental changes to survive (Robbins & Barnwell 2006, pp. 253–288; Wheatley 2006; Clancy & Webber 1995) and in turn, affects its environment. In business terms, the adaptation process is one of innovation and learning (Robbins & Barnwell 2006, pp.483, 492; Senge 1999, 2006), or ‘change management’ (Hayes 2007, p. 30). According to Robbins and Barnwell (2006, p. 483), organisational learning is defined ‘as the process of improving organisational action through better knowledge and understanding’ by its constant adjustment to the organisation’s external and internal environment. Throughout the literature, it is generally accepted that organisations that fit well with their internal and external environments grow and reproduce, whereas those that do not, eventually fail or die out (Robbins & Barnwell 2006; Morgan 1997, p. 274; Allmendinger & Hackman 1996, p. 337; Nadler & Tushman 1980; Hodge & Anthony 1979). An organisation should act like an ‘open system’ (Robbins & Barnwell 2006, p. 12); ‘a living organism’ (Clancy & Webber 1995, p. 15) to be able to interact with, absorb and respond to its environment (Hubbard 2000, p. 3). If the organisation fails to adapt adequately to its environment, resulting in its underperformance, the main reason is that they have a ‘learning disability’ and are unable to adapt or evolve (De Geus cited Hubbard 2000, p. 6; Senge 2006).

Some key concepts in systems theory include interdependency, wholism and synergism (Hodge & Anthony 1979, p. 49). In addition, the grounding of the argument
within the systems thinking model is that the examination of a system needs to be guided by the particular purpose of a study (Hayes 2007, p. 124; O’Connor & McDermott 1997; Hodge & Anthony 1979, p. 50). Thus, this study does not attempt to examine all the factors that influence a theatre company’s ownership model; instead, it investigates some parts of the system that are recognised to be more critical than others (Hayes 2007, p. 130; O’Connor & McDermott 1997, pp. 19–22). This paper will discuss the framework within which the theatre functions; an environment that includes not only the economic and cultural context, but also political, governance and legal issues that function within the context, in relation to each theatre’s internal situation.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research study developed through the case study method, which was chosen because ‘it is an ideal methodology when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed’ (Feagin, Orum & Sjoberg 1991 study cited in Tellis 1997). The case study approach has the well recognised advantage of enabling basic ideas to be tested in a practical context (Descombe 2003, p. 32; Yin 2003). A distinct advantage of case study research is that it enables the researcher to understand ‘why and how contemporary real-life organisational phenomena occur’ (Tharenou, Donohue & Cooper 2007, p. 76). Through investigating the phenomenon in a particular context, the researcher is able to ‘build a plausible explanation or to discover a causal relationship that links the antecedents to the results’ (Tharenou, Donohue & Cooper 2007, p. 76).

Using four selection grounds on the basis of ‘suitability’, case studies selected for this research are based on ‘typical instance’ and ‘test-site for theory’ grounds (Denscombe 2003, pp. 33–34). In particular, they are representative of State, private and semi-private theatre models in Ho Chi Minh City. A private theatre is a theatre registered under the Enterprise Law to operate as a private business and that is subject to pay special tax for entrepreneurs operating in the cultural sector. A State theatre is a theatre that has basic government support to cover recurrent expenditure (staffing, administrative and programming costs, more or less depending on the theatre type). State theatres also have their venues provided by the government, and do not have to pay tax for their business, as their products are considered a public service. A semi-private or private-government partnership theatre is a theatre that has legal status as a public organisation and benefits from public infrastructure but is operated in conjunction with non-government resources. While applying these definitions, in reality, the line between State, private and semi-private models can be blurred.

To be able to gain insight into the adjustment and adaptive process of theatre ownership models in Vietnam, only theatres that have existed for a long time in the transition period were studied. In addition, Ho Chi Minh City was chosen as the research location because it is one of the most representative cities of an environment in transition to a market economy in Vietnam.

The following theatres were selected: (1) 5B Vo Van Tan Small Stage Drama Theatre, a private-government partnership model; (2) Thai Duong Theatre and Art Limited Company, a private theatre company under the Law of Business; and (3) Tran Huu Trang Cai Luong Theatre, a State theatre.

Organisational profiles and development history of theatre ownership models

The Small Stage Drama Theatre at 5B Vo Van Tan (5B Theatre)

Beginning even before the policy of socialisation had been issued, 5B Vo Van Tan Small Stage Drama Theatre, hereafter abbreviated as 5B Theatre, was a pioneering small stage drama theatre in Ho Chi Minh City that experimented with the government-private partnership model.
The theatre was initially set up as a Director’s Club in 1984 by a group of young southern theatre practitioners, aiming to create a ‘playground’ for graduates of the College of Stage Art No. 2 in Ho Chi Minh City, and supporting them to stage experimental plays in a voluntary, teamwork spirit. From a modest club, poorly equipped, the Director’s Club was subsequently offered a home by the Ho Chi Minh Stage Artists’ Association (HSAA). In August 1984, the theatre was renamed 5B Vo Van Tan Experimental Stage Club according to the decision number 1900/UB dated 1 August 1984 signed by the Deputy Chairman of the Ho Chi Minh City’s People Committee.

Since its establishment, the club has been constantly renewed with experimental plays and became a close and friendly atmosphere in which drama theatre fans could meet. The club’s members were actively involved in organising two experimental theatre festivals in 1989 and 1993, which were very successful and ‘blowed a fresh energy into the scene of the city’s theatres’ (Ho Chi Minh Stage Newspaper 1989, p. 6). All the plays introduced in the festivals were then staged in turn at the club and received an enthusiastic welcome from the audiences.

In 1992, funds were given by the Ho Chi Minh City People’s Committee to renovate the club’s stage into a studio theatre with 240 removable seats. In 1997, the club was renamed 5B Vo Van Tan Small Stage Drama Theatre. The theatre was then evaluated as ‘a good model in carrying out the policy of socialisation and worth learning from for the other arts organisations’ (Comments of Deputy Chairman of the Committee for Culture of the Vietnam National Assembly during his visit to the club in 1999 cited in HSAA 2002, p. 3). It was acknowledged as a ‘cradle’ for many generations of stage artists and significantly ‘influence[d] the establishment of numerous other popular mini-theatres’ in Ho Chi Minh City (Visiting Arts 2002, p.230).

In 1999, 5B Theatre encountered an audience crisis as well as a serious financial shortage due to the increasing competitiveness of other emerging small stages that were established by former members of the 5B Theatre, and the popular domination of media entertainment. The theatre struggled with the confusion that arises between market-driven trends and artistic and ideological driven trends.

In the difficult conditions, 5B Theatre embarked on a new application of the theatre ownership model to survive in an increasingly competitive environment. In 2001, the theatre decided to open a second stage, at the Phu Nhuan District Cultural Centre, called Phu Nhuan Small Stage Drama Theatre, which was run mainly towards market demands. 5B Theatre was Phu Nhuan Theatre’s legal sponsor, although in reality, Phu Nhuan Theatre was a privately owned company, under the capital investment and management of a well-known artist who is also a member of the HSAA. As a sub-entity of 5B Theatre, Phu Nhuan Theatre did not have to go through government censoring procedures when a new script was chosen and benefited from government tax
exemption. Ten per cent of the total income of Phu Nhuan Theatre then returned to 5B Theatre for the theatre’s operation (Interview with the Director of Phu Nhuan Theatre 2003). In 2006, after many successes, Phu Nhuan Small Stage Drama Theatre separated and became an independent cultural enterprise according to the enterprise law.

Learning from the experiments of Phu Nhuan Small Stage Drama Theatre, since 2006, 5B Theatre has taken another initiative using a partnership model between the theatre and freelance artists in order to solve the problems of a shortage of new plays and financial difficulties. Any theatre individual practitioner, such as a freelance director or an actor, can have their play staged at 5B Theatre if they have a script that meets the theatre’s artistic requirements. 5B Theatre provides the artist-impressor with its legal sponsor, rehearsal, performing venue and professional consultations. The impresarios have to invest their capital and mobilise their network to conduct their artistic experiments. Up until now, there have been six frequent artists-impresarios who have produced half of the total number of plays staged at 5B Theatre since 2006, among which there are many best-selling and high quality plays.

Since 5B Theatre’s foundation in 1984, approximately 150 plays have been staged in total, focusing on experimental drama, among which many have been highly praised for their artistic style, attracting large audiences of predominantly young people and intellectuals.

**IDECAF Mini Theatre owned by Thai Duong Theatre and Art Limited Company**

IDECAF Theatre is the first privately run theatrical enterprise in Ho Chi Minh City, officially established under the name of Thai Duong Theatre and Art Limited Company in 2000 by its current Director and a well-known artist, right after the Law of Enterprises was issued. At this time, the theatre set its three main functional tasks as: consulting and organising performing arts; props and set making; and producing and distributing video tapes and CDs.

Back to the year 1983, IDECAF Theatre already had its roots as a puppetry arts troupe for children, named Smile Puppetry Centre. Smile Puppetry Centre was managed by the current Director of the IDECAF Theatre, run by its own capital, but in collaboration with the Children’s Cultural House of District 1 and used its legal status as a sub-entity of the Cultural House.

On 10 August 1997, the Director established a new children’s drama theatre named IDECAF Theatre from the previous Smile Puppetry Centre. The IDECAF Theatre received an enthusiastic welcome from the city’s artists and drew a large audience. On 2 September 1997, the Director of the IDECAF Theatre broadened the theatre’s aims from serving drama to only children to include adults. It is noteworthy that although IDECAF Theatre was privately owned and managed, it was established under the legal form of the Institute of Cultural Exchange with France, *Institut d’Echanges Culturels avec la France* (IDECAF), and was named after the Institute. IDECAF was established in 1982 under the management of the Ho Chi Minh Department of External Co-operation in which the latter is governed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Collaborating with a public organisation and borrowing its public legal shell as a secure ‘adaptor’ to legally run a privately owned cultural business was the solution used by IDECAF Theatre in its evolution and development process. The ambiguity of the IDECAF Theatre ownership model stems from incoherent and incomplete government legislation for cultural businesses in the transition to a market economy. Since 1997, the government had advocated the *Policy of Socialisation*, which aims at the mobilisation of every resource for culture. Soon after the issue of the Enterprise Laws
(2000) allowing the establishment of cultural enterprises, the IDECAF Mini Theatre was renamed the Thai Duong Theatre and Art Limited Company and registered as a cultural enterprise on 18 April 2000. Nevertheless, the theatre still had to rely on the IDECAF Institute to facilitate its government censoring procedures until 2004 when private theatres were allowed to have plays staged in public if they obtained a performing licence from the Ho Chi Minh City Service of Culture, Sports and Tourism (formally known as the Ho Chi Minh City Service of Culture and Information) (Interview with the Director of the IDECAF Theatre 2009). The IDECAF Theatre’s Director described this conflicting situation ‘like a drum and clarinet which are played out of tune although, the working mechanism in examining and approving artwork by government authorities generally has become more open and quicker than it was later on’ (Interview with Director of the IDECAF Theatre 2003, 2009).

At present, Thai Duong Theatre and Art Limited Company and IDECAF still keep their mutually beneficial partnership. They can popularise or promote each other. Thai Duong Theatre and Art Limited Company hires IDECAF’s auditorium as a performing venue and still uses the brand name of IDECAF because the city’s audiences are familiar with this name. On its current website, IDECAF refers to the theatre as a sub-entity.

Up until now, IDECAF Theatre has staged more than 100 plays for adults and children. The main auditorium at IDECAF Theatre (28 Le Thanh Tong, District 1) has 326 seats. In 2001, the theatre opened another small stage at 7 Tran Cao Van. It received a number of awards from government authorities and has been praised in the media as a ‘well-lit theatre all the year around’. Some plays have been performed continuously for ten years but are still loved by the audience. The number of short-term contract performers ranges from forty-five to over 100 people at different points in time. Plays produced by the IDECAF Mini Theatre emphasise the core values of ‘being young, new and creative’ and focus on human issues of daily life. Its main audiences are the youth and intellectuals. Although the theatre is a privately owned company, the theatre’s executive managers aim to achieve both artistic values and financial outcomes. The theatre also actively engages in charities and social welfare activities. Of the 2,150 performances held between 1997 and 2002, fifty-four free performances were run for disabled and homeless children. Up until early 2010, 35,000 disadvantaged children have benefitted from the theatre’s free performances.

Tran Huu Trang Renovated Drama Theatre (or Cai Luong Theatre)

Tran Huu Trang Renovated Drama Theatre (hereafter called Tran Huu Trang Cai Luong Theatre) is a State theatre company that is under the direct management of the Ho Chi Minh City Service of Culture, Sports and Tourism. It was founded in 1976 by the former Southern Region Cai Luong Company (Doan Cai Luong Nam Bo). In 1998, it was amalgamated with the Cai Luong Cultural and Artistic Troupe (Doan Cai Luong Van Cong Thanh Pho), formerly the Liberation Cai Luong Company (Doan Cai Luong Giai Phong).

Tran Huu Trang Cai Luong Theatre's functions are to serve cai luong (renovated drama arts) to the masses, preserve and develop cai luong art, and promote the public’s interest in and understanding of cai luong art. The theatre sets its mission as ensuring artistic, aesthetic values in accordance with the government’s ideology. Its other tasks include the provision of training courses on cai luong arts and capacity building for the theatre’s staff, research and experiments on cai luong.

The theatre’s management board is composed of one Director and two Vice Directors. Its organisational structure includes two original arts troupes: Arts Troupe Number 1
established in 1960 and Arts Troupe Number 2 founded in 1976. Besides these two arts troupes, there is an artistic division, a performance organising division, a training section and a management unit of Tran Huu Trang Stage. Tran Huu Trang theatre is the largest stage of cai luong in the city with an auditorium of 970 seats.

Facing economic challenges due to limited government funding and the increasing competitiveness of other forms of entertainment, the theatre established three additional arts troupes, socialisation arts troupes, employing a collaborative model between the theatre and freelance artists. This partnership model materialised in Tran Huu Trang Theatre in the late 1990s. In particular, in 1997–1998, the theatre collaborated with groups of artists led by Ngoc Giau, Huu Quoc, Thanh Dien, Vu Luan and Hoang Song Viet to stage plays. After several years of trials, some socialisation arts troupes have gradually been incorporated into the theatre. These include the Vu Luan Arts Troupe established in 2001, the Unforgettable Imprints Arts Troupe founded in September 2004 (renamed in May 2008 as the Golden Stage Arts Troupe), and the Lighting Up Belief Arts Troupe established in October 2004. Each arts troupe has its own unique characteristics. For instance, the Golden Stage gathers many talented and well-known artists at the age of fifty and sixty years old, and emphasises the restoration of classical cai luong plays. Conversely, Lighting Up Belief Arts Troupe gathers young artists and aims to create new cai luong plays. Among these socialisation arts troupes, only Lighting Up Belief Arts Troupe is officially incorporated in the organisation. By 2009, it had twenty-four government contract staff and more than ten additional freelance artists, and had to generate income from ticket sales to pay these artists.

Since 2006, the Director of Tran Huu Trang Theatre has embraced so-called ‘satellite systems’ to mobilise more resources for the survival and development of cai luong arts. By 2010, the theatre had a network of thirty impresarios-collaborators in twelve provinces in the Southwestern Vietnam (Mekong River Delta). These impresarios are local artists or local officers who have close connections with local systems of social organisation and government authorities along with a thorough understanding of the needs of the local residents. They take the responsibility for performance organising, such as to hire performing venues and selling tickets, and reaching agreement with the local counterparts on the performance's benefits and responsibilities. Tran Huu Trang Theatre is in charge of obtaining government authorisation for performances and it receives an agreed payment for the performance, regardless of the actual income of the shows. According to the Director, the establishment of these satellite networks has facilitated the theatre to meet the quota of earned income from ticket sales as required by Ho Chi Minh City Service of Culture, Sports and Tourism. While the original two arts troupes are mainly on tour, the three socialisation arts troupes are assigned to perform primarily in the city on the theatre's stage.

In fact, to be able to survive in a market economy and address different aims, the theatre not only incorporates socialisation arts troupes as its legally extended new entities, but also allows for the two original arts troupes to mobilise private resources in their activities. Besides offering performances to the masses as a social good, these two arts troupes simultaneously organise contract performances to create additional revenue. They can engage freelance artists to take part in the theatre productions if the market demands and use their income to pay these freelance artists. For example, in 2008, Arts Troupe Number 1 organised thirty free shows and had fifty-four contract shows.

**Striving for an appropriate ownership model and constant adjustment of ownership model in a transition period**

The empirical case studies indicate that as a living and adaptive system, theatre companies have continually evolved, restructured and found ways to fit their changing...
environment. Their ownership models have been constantly modified and changed to be able to adapt in a transition period. In general, all three theatres have gradually developed into more open and flexible multiple institutions, jointly mobilising public and private owners and resources in some aspects or at different periods. State theatres such as Tran Huu Trang Cai Luong Theatre mobilised private resources, using socialisation theatre and a centipede-foot shaped network of local collaborators to allow the cai luong arts to survive and to create more earned income with limited government funding. In the case of the IDECAF Theatre, it borrowed the legal shell of a public organisation to run their privately owned business. 5B Theatre had to mobilise resources through the establishment of a privately owned sub-theatre and then use a model of freelance theatre partnerships.

A collaborative model between a private owner and a public organisation has been popular because this partnership can avoid possible conflicts between bureaucratic and business interests in the transition period. In addition, in this way, different parties can have mutual benefits and take advantage of their available resources to the full, such as their infrastructure and human resources. For example, in terms of human resources, in December 2009, Tran Huu Trang Theatre had a total number of seventy-eight permanent staff including two directors and thirty-six performers, while the number of freelance artists working under the brand name of Tran Huu Trang Theatre in three socialisation arts troupes reached more than 100 people. Through this partnership model, Tran Huu Trang Theatre has tried to reduce the amount of cumbersome administration tasks, promote project structure and encourage teamwork structure for freelance artists in staging new plays. It enables human and capital resources from the private sector to be mobilised and therefore encourages a new vitality in the endangered cai luong theatrical arts scene (Kim 1998). Freelance artists gathered in socialisation art troupes are supported by the theatre, which facilitates government censoring procedures for their plays. They are provided with a performing venue, free transportation, and are under the theatre’s legal sponsorship (Interview with the Director of Tran Huu Trang Theatre 2009). Participants in socialisation arts troupes are allowed to choose their own plays, invest their capital, mobilise their working team and network.

Nevertheless, each ownership model has its own constraints and opportunities. For example, the cooperative or government-private partnership model of 5B Theatre requires a general direction in terms of artistic and ideological criteria for its staged plays. It established Phu Nhuan Theatre as a second venue under the shadow of the Small Stage Drama Theatre to generate more income, and free up its main stage for more serious work. Talking about this new incentive, managers of 5B Theatre humorously compared the 5B Theatre to an image of ‘a person wearing a monk’s robe but having a gun under his belt’ (Interview with the Vice Director of 5B Theatre 2009). Phu Nhuan Theatre could be named ‘5B Comma’ because it was a subsidiary of 5B Theatre and it was established to experiment, explore and learn from the laws of a market economy (Interview with the Director of 5B Theatre 2009). The Vice Director of 5B Theatre then described the collaborations with freelance individual artists as follows: “it can be compared to an image that 5B Theatre is a block of flats which is composed of a lot of units, each unit has a similar outside appearance but its interior decorations is diverse. At the same time, in comparison with 5B Theatre, other private owned theatres in the city, such as IDECAF or Phu Nhuan Small Stage Drama Theatre can be called “private villas”’ (Interview with the Director of 5B Theatre 2009), which means these theatre can have more freedom in the orientation of their arts products. Similarly, the former Vice Director of 5B Theatre commented on this situation that ‘saying humorously 5B likes a kind of “joint-venture company”’ (Interview with the former Vice Director of 5B Theatre 2003).

The evolution and adjustment of theatre ownership models stem from the market-central duality, the ambiguity, and the experimental essence of a transition period in
which legislation has been incoherent and in the process of being transformed. For example, the case studies indicate that even before the socialisation policy was officially introduced by the government in 1997, government-private partnership models as a form of socialisation policy had been practiced in Ho Chi Minh City, as the cases of 5B Vo Van Tan and IDECAF Theatre revealed.

The vague meaning of socialisation theatre and the question of the sustainable development of theatre

The term ‘socialisation’ is very vague in its meaning. In essence, it means the mobilisation of private and non-government resources while it maximises government resources for the most efficient use. A private theatre, private-government partnership or a government theatre could be referred to as a socialisation theatre if they mobilise or incorporate private resources. As a State theatre, Tran Huu Trang Cai Luong Theatre has also recognised socialisation as having incentives, as mentioned above. Evidence provided from the case studies shows that the changes in theatre ownership models are emergent in nature, rather than being set strategically and consistently by government policy-makers. These changes have mostly occurred through a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down approach. The question of the sustainability of theatrical arts is frequently raised by theatre managers, as they have to bear the burden of the task in a transition period. The partnership model between the theatre and freelance individual artists of 5B Theatre is predicted to be uncertain because it depends on the freelance artists (the Editor in Chief of Ho Chi Minh City Stage Magazine 2009). The socialisation arts troupes of Tran Huu Trang Cai Luong Theatre have helped to warm up the cai luong arts scene and mobilise significant non-government resources in a context of limited government subsidy. Conversely, this initiative does not ensure the sustainable development of cai luong arts and has left many issues adrift, such as the threat of artwork commercialisation to achieve quick profits rather than to produce high quality plays.

Socialisation makes ‘a hundred flowers burgeon’, nevertheless its accompanying consequence is that the artistic quality has become uncertain ... If this situation persists, the picture of cai luong arts will be increasing[ly] distorted (Interview with the Head of Lighting Up Belief Arts Troupe 2009).

Regarding IDECAF Theatre, the Director mentioned that there is adventure in his cultural business, especially ‘the bad luck and good luck’ partly due to the inconsistent legislation (Interview with the Director of the IDECAF Theatre 2009). In addition, there are a wide number of challenges facing the stage that demand clear strategies and specific, timely action plans from the government. Issues that need to be resolved include the issue of arts education and audience development, better infrastructure investment for stage, the needs for training and capacity building for creative human resources, and more appropriate funding mechanisms (Interview with the Editor in Chief of Ho Chi Minh City Stage Magazine 2009 and Interview with the Chairman of HSSA 2009). These issues could not be solved exhaustively by each theatre as their resources are limited.

Leadership for a flexible adjustment

Consideration of the internal factors of these case studies demonstrates that they share some similar traits; for example, the leaders of these theatre companies are very creative and flexible in their management. Besides being fully aware of the government laws and regulations, ‘they need to be brave enough to carry out “soft solutions” which suit their conditions the most’ (Interview with the Director of 5B Theatre 2009). They all dedicate themselves tirelessly to the success of their theatres and are highly energetic,
achievement-oriented people. They are concerned with encouraging change, and creating a culture of trust and involvement. They understand that the work of a manager of an arts organisation nowadays requires not only knowledge of or passion for the arts, but also, importantly, other sophisticated administration skills for use in the transition period. In general, there is an absence of bureaucratic management patterns and a family-like atmosphere has been nurtured in these theatres. For example, at the Small Stage Drama Theatre, ‘we only have a “verbal contract” or “heart-based contract” …If artists come to work at this theatre, they simply have to share their joy and sorrows with their fellows. If they are unsatisfied they can leave’ (Interview with the Vice Director of Small Stage Drama Theatre 2003). Networking and trust-based management provides a foundation for the adaptation of these theatre companies’ ownership models and provides a workable match among evolving and fragile components of a socialist-oriented market economy.

The specific economic, social and cultural situations of Ho Chi Minh City where small stage drama theatres are located have allowed greater adaptability to the market economy

Throughout the literature, it is generally claimed that Ho Chi Minh City has more favourable conditions for the development of socialisation theatre in comparison with those of other cities in Vietnam. First, Ho Chi Minh City had the basics of a relatively developed market economy from the beginning of the 18th century, when the city carried on trade activities with China and Japan. Thereafter, under French colonisation in 19th century, Saigon became the leading and most Westernised city of Indochina. When Saigon later became the capital of the State of South Vietnam in 1954 and served as military headquarters for the United States (US) and South Vietnamese in the Vietnam War, a consumer society developed. Nowadays, Ho Chi Minh City is seen as the most ‘dynamic city in terms of economic development and emerging entrepreneurism’, and one of the commercial and industrial centres of Vietnam (Economist Intelligence Unit 2008).

Performing arts in Ho Chi Minh City adapted dynamically to a market economy several decades before 1975, when the Vietnam War ended and then in 1976, North and South Vietnam were officially unified under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Interview Chairman of HSSA 2009). Although from 1975 to 1985, the cultural and arts sector was re-set within a framework of a government subsidy model and a free market mechanism was often seen as taboo, it is evident that the seeds of a market had taken root in this city before the reform policy was introduced in 1986. However, in Hanoi, there are no basics of a market economy in its history. Managers of the three theatres evaluated commented that Ho Chi Minh City has a more supportive environment for drama arts and is more responsive to a market economy in comparison with Hanoi. It was argued that Ho Chi Minh City ‘has a more democratic atmosphere and freedom for creativity’ and administrative procedures in performing arts are kept to a minimum in comparison to those in Hanoi (Interview with the Chairman of HSSA April 2009). The stage’s reviewing committee has gradually changed from ‘a gatekeeper’ to a ‘midwife’ for theatre works from the late 1990s (Interview with the Editor in Chief of Ho Chi Minh City Stage Magazine 2009). This situation may be true for drama art in Ho Chi Minh City, but may not be true for other art forms, such as contemporary arts.

Moreover, Ho Chi Minh City is the largest and the most populous city of Vietnam with the highest standard of living and highest immigration rate. In 2008, Ho Chi Minh had 6.3 million people, which is nearly double the population of Hanoi (with 3.3 million) (Economist Intelligence Unit 2008, p.2). Cultural values and models in this system are not fixed but instead are very flexible and constantly changing. The people of Ho Chi Minh City can be characterised as open minded and generous spenders, especially when it comes to entertainment.
Data from empirical research shows that in Ho Chi Minh City, more than three quarters of the total human resources working in the field of drama are freelance. This is different to Hanoi, where most artists are permanent staff. Due to this situation, theatres companies in the city have a chance to develop their partnership/collaboration with freelance artists and take advantage of these significant human resources.

In addition, as the result of history and environment, the lifestyle of people in Ho Chi Minh City is characterised by dynamism, openness, and outgoing and relaxed people, all of which could be favourable for the development of stage arts. The climate in Ho Chi Minh City is considered advantageous for the performing arts in general and stage drama theatres in particular, and especially favourable when compared with the north of the country. Art managers mentioned that the hot and sunny weather all year round is a natural favourable condition for performing arts troupes in the south, while the northern humid and cold weather during winter could be another challenge for the stage there.

Conclusion

The research reinforces the proposition about the organisation-environment relationship within a systems thinking model. It contributes to the conversation about the multi-layered, overlapping, fluid nature of the transitional context in a transition period that involves both the legacy of a subsidised economy and the adaptation to a new and an incomplete/unformed fragile market economy. It throws light on information not available elsewhere on the correlation and interaction between the ambiguity and the experimental and disordered essence of the transitional context through the evolution, adaptation and changes in ownership models of particular theatre companies from the mid-1980s to the present. The investigation shows that these theatres have continuously been looking for a more flexible application of their ownership models to be able to survive and develop in a transitional period. Like adaptive, living systems in the internal and external environment, they have been constantly changing to conform with the legal framework and economic, socio-cultural circumstances in Vietnam in general and in Ho Chi Minh City in particular. The research therefore affirms the viability of the strategic theories about the adaptation of an organisation in an uncertain and fast-changing environment and in turn affects its environment.

It should be acknowledged that ‘socialisation’ is a very loose term that can be considered a government guideline rather than a specific action plan. All the case studies have been considered as socialisation theatres, even in the case of Tran Huu Trang (a State theatre, because this theatre is subsidised but is operated by private resources in collaboration with the theatre’s legal status). It is noteworthy that the role of government in specifying the socialisation policy has been lacking. It has been said that ‘Socialisation is still referred as a common resolution of MCST since 1990s...At present, theatre managers themselves have to use their incentives and experiment to find the best solutions’ (Interview with the Vice Director of Vietnam Performing Arts Department 2009). Although this so-called Socialisation Policy has offered new opportunities for theatres to carry out their own incentives, encourage diverse players and mobilise different resources for the stage, it calls into question the sustainable development of theatres, as the changes that have occurred are emergent and fragile in nature rather than being strategically planned and well-monitored.

Thus, the story of theatre ownership models and their adaptation in Ho Chi Minh City in a transition period have not yet provided an exhaustive answer to what leads to a dynamic and successful operation of a theatre. Nevertheless, it indicates that decentralisation, empowerment and flexibility are all essential for the survival and development of these theatre companies in the transition period to a market economy in Vietnam.
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