# INVENTORY REPORT

# THE ART OF CHÈO

1. **Inventory period:** August 2022 - February 2024
2. **Inventory places:**

* Red River Delta provinces of Thái Bình, Hà Nam, Ninh Bình, Hải Dương, Hưng Yên, Nam Định, Bắc Ninh and Vĩnh Phúc, and Hà Nội and Hải Phòng cities
* Provinces of Chèo diffusion in the North: Thái Nguyên, Bắc Giang, Quảng Ninh, Phú Thọ

1. **Implementing institutions**

* Host institution: Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Thái Bình province
* Consulting institution: School of Interdisciplinary Sciences, Vietnam National University, Hanoi
* Collaborating institutions: Departments of Culture, Sports and Tourism/Culture and Sports of Thái Bình, Hà Nam, Ninh Bình, Hải Dương, Hưng Yên, Nam Định, Bắc Ninh, Vĩnh Phúc, Thái Nguyên, Bắc Giang, Quảng Ninh and Phú Thọ provinces, and Hà Nội and Hải Phòng cities
* With the active participation of community representatives of villages, hamlets, residential quarters and neighborhoods where there are Chèo Clubs and Chèo practitioners.

1. **Contents of the Report**

## Name of Heritage Element

Official name: The Art of Chèo

Other names: The Art of Chèo in the Red River Delta; Chèo; Chèo Singing; Chèo Performance; Chèo Musical Theater.

## Intangible Cultural Heritage Domain

Pursuant to Clause 1, Article 4, Chapter II of Circular No. 04/2010/TT- BVHTTDL dated June 30, 2010 of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism regulating the inventory of intangible cultural heritage, the Art of Chèo belongs to the domain of “*Folk performing arts*”.

## Community bearers of the Arch of Chèo

The community bearers of the Art of Chèo are Việt people who are mainly agriculturalists living in Vietnam’s Northern Delta. In the past, Chèo practitioners gathered in groups/wards/guilds, each led by a head (*ông trùm*), and performed in the courtyards of communal houses during traditional village festivals in villages and communes. Today, Chèo practitioners are not only farmers, but also anyone with a passion for Chèo living in the core area, which includes the Red River Delta provinces of Thái Bình, Ninh Bình, Hà Nam, Nam Định, Hải Dương, Hưng Yên, Bắc Ninh, and the cities of Hanoi and Hải Phòng, and in areas of Chèo diffusion such as Vĩnh Phúc, Quảng Ninh, Bắc Giang, Thái Nguyên and Phú Thọ provinces. Today, the core roles in Chèo activities are fulfilled by folk performance Clubs including Chèo singing and acting, and traditional Chèo Clubs whose leaders are in charge of organizing Chèo activities, training and transmission.

Currently, Chèo is spreading and becoming increasingly popular, with the numbers of people who love Chèo singing, participating in regular activities at local Chèo Clubs, exchanging Chèo and performing Chèo continuing to rise. The main participants in Chèo activities are still people living in agricultural villages in Vietnam’s North, but now they also include officials, civil servants, commune and village officials, residents in residential quarters, workers and other members of society. Important roles in Chèo practice and transmission are key practitioners, the heads (ông trùm) of Chèo troupes and now the heads of Chèo Clubs, musicians, lyricists, scriptwriters, and moderators of practice, transmission and performance activities.

## Identifying the Art of Chèo as an intangible cultural heritage

Chèo is a form of folk musical theater art of the Việt people that has thrived in the Red River Delta and two areas of diffusion, the Northern and North Central mountainous midlands. Chèo performances combine singing, dancing, acting and music, and are staged as part of traditional village festivals and other cultural and social events at the grassroots level.

Chèo has its origins in Việt folklore and folk literature and includes elements of satire and parody. Chèo reflects the life of Việt villagers, their social customs, history, love of homeland, country and people, romantic loves and friendships.

Chèo can be a song, a story, a scene or a complete play. Chèo stories often depict the work, daily life, and cultural and social realities of the village community. A typical Chèo play involves some sort of conflict leading to a just resolution. Traditionally, Chèo practitioners build their characters around five basic character models: Đào (Young Lady), Kép (Gentleman), Lão (Old man), Mụ (Old Woman) and Hề (Clown). Each of these five models will be transformed and extended to represent or suggest figures in society. A typical traditional play stories include *Quan Âm Thị Kính, Lưu Bình Dương Lễ, Từ Thức du tiên,* so on and with the wellknown characters such as Thị Mầu, Thị Kính, Châu Long, Dương Lễ, Mother Đốp and Village Mayor*.* The plays are sung, told and performed with improvisation, in the past on mats in communal houses, in temple courtyards or on large pieces of land, and today on stages, in festive spaces, at shrines dedicated to clan ancestors, in village or commune cultural houses.

Chèo music originates from the folk songs of the Northern Delta region with nearly 200 melodies of different moods and intents – happy, sad, mournful, resentful, witty, humorous, satirical – expressing the psychology, feelings and character of the Việt people. Traditional Chèo uses a mix of 1/4, 2/4 and 4/4 rhythms. Today, Chèo also uses 6/8 and 3/8 rhythms. Sometimes, the rhythm in a song is changed from 2/4 to 6/8 and back again to better show the nuanced nature of contemporary Chèo. Musical instruments used in Chèo include the praise drum, small cylindrical drums, rice drums, flat gong, clappers, woodblock, two-stringed fiddle, flute, zither and moon lute. Drums are indispensable to Chèo, as they are used to keep the rhythm of singing and dancing and to help practitioners emphasize some aspects or movements of their characters.

Traditional Chèo in villages has no performance directors, only the heads (*ông trùm*) of troupes, now the heads of Clubs and key practitioners. These are Chèo bearers who directly transmit Chèo through practice and oral teaching. Chèo singing must be rich and full, clearly enunciated, ringing and resonating, with a voice of the appropriate character. Good Chèo singers master the singing techniques that most authentically and effectively express the content, character and style of each melody. Each melody has its own forms, methods and techniques of expression, with subtle but clear emphasis being given to shape of throat and mouth, vocal timbre, and body language. Practitioners pass on these knowledge and skills to younger generations. They must train their voice to master all of the notes, phrases, beats and rhythms of each song, fully understanding and feeling the song, and acting in accordance with the nature and mood of the character who sings it.

Chèo dance mainly uses wrist and finger movements with props such as the fan, stick, towel, drum, torch and paddle. Practitioners teach these skills to one another, transmit them in Clubs, and teach them to students in homes, communal houses, cultural houses of villages and communes, and schools.

In the past, the Chèo stage was usually just a mat spread out in the yard, with a small curtain suspended behind it, and the actors and musicians sitting on either side of the mat. Through the processes of developing and adapting to the contemporary context, on the basis of Chèo wards in localities, Chèo Clubs gradually formed. The formation of Chèo Clubs is largely spontaneous, involving the simple gathering of Chèo lovers who like to sing Chèo and practice together, and participate in village cultural events at the grassroots level.

Chèo was born and continues to exist in the cultural cradle of the Việt village community of Vietnam’s North. Chèo is a crystallization of traditional forms (parodies, folk songs, folk dances, folk literature) that reflects the thoughts, aspirations, customs, ethics and behavior of the Việt. Through the ups and downs of history, adapting to the constantly changing context of village community life, Chèo continues to be handed down by oral transmission. Chèo depicts the simple life of the farmer, praises people’s noble qualities, or criticizes bad habits. Chèo also reflects humanity’s common concerns about tolerance, kindness, love and forgiveness.

Even in the current context of village life, Chèo remains a form of grassroots culture, continuing to be performed in village cultural practices such as village festivals, festive days in Buddhist temples, and longevity celebrations of villages, families and clans. Chèo Clubs also participate in important national events such as celebrations of the Communist Party and the Lunar New Year in villages and communes.

In the contemporary context, although many traditional practices may have become obsolete, traditional village festivals still function as a cultural cradle and remain at the center of Vietnamese village life and cultural identity. The close relationship between traditional village festivals and other community activities is the premise and context for the Art of Chèo to live and spread today in the spirit of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Beyond the support of state and local authorities, the role of communities in the practice and transmission of Chèo is a crucial factor in protecting and nourishing the heritage. Many practitioners put great effort into organizing Clubs in their villages and gathering people to take part in Chèo activities together. Some practitioners themselves organize Chèo teaching sessions for their children and high school students at home and in the cultural houses of villages and communes. With great passion and love for Chèo, they regularly organize exchange performances and competitions in districts and communes, creating Chèo “playgrounds” – contexts in which Chèo can be practiced and performed with joy, increasing the intense vitality of this traditional cultural form and way of life.

## The development of the Art of Chèo

### 5.1 The birth and existence of the Art of Chèo

Scientists agree that Chèo originated from folk music and dances, especially the 10th-century parodies of the Đinh Dynasty. Hoa Lư Capital (Ninh Bình Province) is the ancestral land of the Chèo stage, the founder of which was Ms. Phạm Thị Trấn, a talented dancer. Over time, the Việt developed Chèo short stories based on parodies into longer full-length plays. Later, Chèo developed and spread naturally as part of the folk life of the Việt communities of the Red River Delta and in some provinces in Vietnam’s North and North Central regions.

Today, Ms. Phạm Thị Tran is honored as the Chèo ancestor. She is worshipped at the Chèo Theater Temple in Khuốc Village, Phong Châu Commune, Đông Hưng District, Thái Bình Province, and at Vân Thị Temple in Ninh Bình city. Every year, on the 12th day of the 8th lunar month, people and Chèo singers in the region hold a ceremony to honor the Chèo ancestor according to tradition.

### 5.2 The spread of the Art of Chèo

**Communal house courtyard Chèo:** Courtyard Chèo, as its name implies, in ancient times was often performed in the courtyards of communal houses, temple, or noble houses. The stage of this type of performance was relatively simple and rustic: a mat spread out in the yard, with a small curtain hung behind it and the orchestra and actors sitting on its sides to create the base. Communal house courtyard Chèo was performed according to convention, showing the stylized movements and language of the actors, who were farmers capable of singing, acting and self-studying with the heads of Chèo troupes.

**Folk Chèo:** Since the 15th century, when Chèo spread throughout rural areas in the North, regional forms of Chèo have been recognized. Chèo troupes were considered to belong to the Chèo guilds of certain cultural regions, and Chèo came to be divided into four regions – East, Đoài, South and North – each with its own style, skills and characteristics based on the local folk songs, folk dances, voices and culture.

* **Development of Chèo troupes/guilds:**

Traditional Chèo used to exist only when troupes, guilds, groups and folk Chèo practitioners gathered together to perform Chèo plays in village festivals. Chèo was not ever-present in the daily life of folk practitioners or in group or family activities. Following the model of Chèo troupes, Chèo activities increased in number and form as they were spread by groups of performers and Clubs throughout the villages of the North.

A folk Chèo division forms the professional Chèo line in theaters in the North. Folk Chèo is a form that is still transmitted orally and is collectible with the guidance of the heads of Clubs and other active members who may know who knows how to compose music and write scripts, with the participation of retired professional artists, or with the support of professional composers.

* **The birth of Chèo Clubs adapted to the contemporary context**

Since the 2000s, after the period of Renovation (Đổi Mới) in Vietnam, with the development of the economy and the improvement of people’s lives, it can be said that Chèo Clubs have blossomed in many villages in the North. Chèo lovers are willing to spend time learning to sing Chèo and participating in Chèo activities. Chèo Clubs organize and schedule their own activities, self-training under the guidance of the Club heads and people who are knowledgeable about Chèo music and singing. In addition to Club activities, there are also inter-commune, inter-district, online and offline associations.

Today’s Chèo performance space extends beyond festivals to many other community cultural activities. In some villages, it can seem that Chèo singers are everywhere, even at weddings and congratulating offspring and relatives when they have good news. They are invited to perform at the events of factories and enterprises. The area of operations of today’s Chèo Clubs is much broader than that of Chèo troupes of the past. Their presence of the Chèo Clubs, groups and associations at the grassroot cultural life in the 14 provinces and cities reflect the vitality of the Chèo in the contempory context.

On Facebook, there are now many accounts of regional Chèo Clubs, such as the Association of Chèo Lovers, Chèo singing, and Đông Hừng Chèo Club. An online social network is a communication channel, a teaching channel and a channel that connects people in different rural areas. Online social networking groups provide virtual spaces for Chèo lovers and singers to express their abilities and passions. Members of these groups, bound by their common passion for singing Chèo, live-stream and enjoy time online together in their free time every night.

Currently, the number of Chèo Clubs and members in 14 provinces and cities in the Nothern Delta is as follows:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| No. | Provinces | Number of Chèo Clubs | Members |
|  | Thái Bình | 234 | 8,375 |
|  | Ninh Bình | 115 | 1,589 |
|  | Hải Dương | 131 | 2,624 |
|  | Nam Định | 17 | 295 |
|  | Bắc Ninh | 25 | 430 |
|  | Hà Nam | 61 | 1,743 |
|  | Hải Phòng | 17 | 279 |
|  | Hà Nội | 24 | 591 |
|  | Vĩnh Phúc | 21 | 485 |
|  | Hưng Yên | 76 | 1,557 |
|  | Phú Thọ | 5 | 65 |
|  | Thái Nguyên | 25 | 706 |
|  | Quảng Ninh | 15 | 222 |
|  | Bắc Giang | 18 | 487 |
|  | Total | 784 | 19,448 |

## The value and function of the Art of Chèo

### 6.1. Social functions of Chèo

Chèo is an integral part of social life, reflecting the lives of the village communities of the Northern Delta. Chèo is festive in nature. The festive nature of the Chèo stage is reflected in the content of the practitioners’ art work (or play) and in the exchange relationships between Chèo character, performer and viewer.

In the exchange relationship between the stage and the audience of Chèo, the festive nature of the art form also becomes clear. Festival performances on the mat in the communal house yard create a special harmony between actor and the audience. The audience interacts verbally with the actors and the characters of Chèo, asking questions or making requests of the actors or cheering for the characters. Such harmonious exchange creates an atmosphere of co-creation, inspires viewers, makes Chèo viewers feel that they can watch Chèo, live and have fun in a real festival.

### 6.2. Spiritual value of Chèo

The Art of Chèo occupies an important position in the cultural and spiritual life of the Việt in the North of Vietnam. Việt people love to listen to Chèo singing anytime, anywhere – in village festivals, on festive days and at cultural events, on the celebration days of families and the community. Chèo singing is an artistic means to express and exchange thoughts, ideas, moods and feelings, and thus to connect with the community. Chèo songs have diverse content: they describe and reflect life, customs, history, love of homeland, country and people, friendships and romantic love. Many Chèo songs are deeply educational: they teach respect for parents, loyalty, gratitude, honesty, the importance of preserving good customs and traditions in social behavior.

### 6.3. Values of community engagement

Chèo is a type of folk performance that is considered an essential part of festivals and other grassroots cultural events and activities. In the past, troupes/guilds of Chèo (now Chèo Clubs) were groups of people who could sing and act. They connected with each other and other groups then, and connect with each other and interact with other groups now, in the same commune, district, province and beyond. A social network of Chèo lovers is a meaningful connection between regions, communities, villages, friends and people with the same passion for the Art of Chèo.

Chèo is collective, from the troupes/guilds of the past to the Chèo Clubs and villages/residential quarters and communes/wards of today. The collective exchanges are sympathetic, and mutual affection supports cultural and social activities related to Chèo. Villagers contribute to purchases of costumes and musical instruments, and rentals of practice and performance spaces. The community connection is also apparent in the content of Chèo songs and plays, which exude humanity, human affection, and social and community connectedness.

## The community proposes measures to safeguard and promote the value of Art of Chèo

### 7.1. Support from government, authorities and cultural sector

- Vietnam’s Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism coordinates with the Provincial People's Committees, Departments of Culture, Sports and Tourism/Culture and Sports of 14 provinces and cities to support heritage safeguarding activities, amending cultural policies following a community-based approach so that practitioners can actively participate in heritage safeguarding activities in general and the Art of Chèo in particular.

- Authorities at all levels continue to support the Art of Chèo, particularly with funding for the purchase of sound equipment, lighting, musical instruments and costumes, and the hire of practice and activity places for Chèo Clubs at the grassroots level.

- The government continues to honor people's practitioners and meritorious practitioners of Chèo, and to provide financial support to key practitioners to transmit Chèo, especially key practitioners of folk music.

### 7.2. Organize regular Chèo performances

- Chèo Clubs continue to actively participate in performances in traditional village festivals and local cultural events.

- Every year, the Departments of Culture, Sports and Tourism/Culture and Sports in 14 provinces and cities collaborate with Chèo Clubs to organize inter-commune, inter-district and inter-provincial Chèo performances, competitions and festivals in order to give practitioners more opportunities to perform and interact.

### 7.3. ICH transmission

- Key Chèo practitioners teach singing, performing and playing musical instruments to Chèo Club members and younger generations in homes and cultural institutions such as communal houses, Buddhist temples, and cultural houses of villages and communes.

- Key Chèo practitioners who want to further promote the instructions for applying cultural heritage in teaching at high schools jointly issued by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism and the Ministry of Education and Training in 2013 have been visiting schools to introduce and practice Chèo melodies, plays and musical instruments for pupils.

### 7.4 Revitalization, composing, doing research, documentation and inventorying

- Communities in villages continue to revitalize traditional Chèo melodies of past Chèo troupes such as Chèo of Khuốc village, Chèo of Hà Xá village and Chèo of Sáo Đền village. Researchers support communities to develop requests for funding from various foundations to restore and transmit traditional Chèo melodies.

- The government has policies to support and guide key practitioners and practitioners who are capable of composing music and scripts for new songs and plays based on traditional Chèo melodies.

- The Association of Vietnamese Folklorists supports and publishes collections and research works on Chèo by local folklorists and key practitioners.

- Local Departments of Culture, Sports and Tourism/Culture and Sports, with the active participation of the community, continue to update and inventory Art of Chèo in 14 provinces and cities and report to the National Department of Cultural Heritage every year.

### 7.5 Raising awareness and promotion

- Voice of Vietnam (VOV3 and VOV2) continues to broadcast a Chèo program every Thursday, Saturday and Sunday with the participation of key practitioners.

- Under the auspices of the Folk and Traditional Music Department of the Voice of Vietnam, associations, groups and Clubs of Chèo lovers gather to perform and exchange Chèo every year.

## Conclusion

Chèo was born, existed and developed in the cultural cradle of the Việt people in the Northern Delta. Over the years, through the ups and downs of economic, cultural and social life, Chèo performers of the Chèo troupes led by Mr. Trùm (head) went around the communes performing in communal houses and pagodas during traditional village festivals, in communal arts teams, villages, and regular Chèo Clubs. Today, Chèo has spread throughout 14 provinces and cities in the North and become a part of grassroots cultural and artistic life. With 784 Chèo Clubs and nearly 19,448 members, Chèo is certainly a type of folk performance that has been spreading and continues to spread widely in the contemporary context.

The adaptation of Chèo to contemporary society reflects the dynamic development of this traditional art form of the Việt people. Today, Chèo song excerpts and modern variations of Chèo songs reflect contemporary interpretations of traditional themes that are still consistent with eternal ethical and social themes. The adaptation of Chèo to contemporary society includes the updating of themes and emergence of new themes, the reinterpretation of traditional themes, the continuation of eternal moral themes, and the integration of nostalgic melodies in new contexts. These adaptations reflect the dynamic development of Chèo as it continues to be loved and to convey relevant messages to the people in grassroots cultural life.

The mass participation of the people, the Chèo lovers in Clubs, and Chèo’s continuing role in the spiritual life expresses the cultural identity and the continuity among generations of the Việt people. It is an important criterion by which to identify Chèo from the perspective of UNESCO intangible cultural heritage. The Art of Chèo is a synthetic folk performance art, inherited from the past, and developed and spread in contemporary society. Chèo adapts and develops in response to the changing context of community life in villages in the North of Vietnam. Chèo is a part of community life that gives practitioners and ordinary people a sense of belonging, identity and continuity, as well links to the past, the present and the future.