

BÀI CHÒI

*From Daily
Entertainment to
UNESCO Intangible
Cultural Heritage*



A Bài Chòi artist handing a game card to a tourist. Image by Vo Van Tien.

As the sun sets on Hoai River, in the heart of Hoi An Ancient Town – a town located in Central Vietnam, a man in the traditional costume called *Ao Ba Ba* clears his throat, smiles slightly at the audience, and begins singing the opening verse of Bài Chòi. The audience sitting around in small bamboo huts excitingly follows him. Around the gameplay area, tourists pause on their walk as the game draws their attention by the rhythm, atmosphere, and charm of a long-standing tradition that forms the vibe of Hoi An at night.

The Timeless Value of Bài Chòi

Bài Chòi is one of the most unique traditional arts of Central Viet Nam that reflects the lifestyle of local societies. Beyond a form of performance, Bài Chòi carries local memories, communal harmony, and the spirit of Vietnamese folk culture.

Bài Chòi spread across Central Viet Nam, from Quang Binh to Binh Dinh, with a variety of styles depending on each province's own customs. Today, Hoi An is one of the cities where this heritage is seen survived and thrived most remarkably. Through public night performances, cultural workshops, and community activities, the city has played a key role in preserving the art of Bài Chòi, transforming it into a lasting legacy rather than leaving it behind as a forgotten tradition.

Emerging from community life

The early days of Bài Chòi were never officially confirmed. However, it is by word-of-mouth that it had its roots hundreds of years ago. One of the most popular stories

about its origin is during the period of *khan hoang* - when the Central Vietnamese community expanded into newly cultivated forest areas in the 17th century.

As mentioned by Google Arts & Culture, during this time, people built small huts, or *choi*, on newly cleared land where people gathered to protect crops. In these huts, there were musical instruments such as wooden fish, gongs, and drums to create noise to scare away wild animals. In quiet evenings, as the villagers needed something to entertain themselves, they sang humorous verses, exchanged stories, and created games to play. Inherited by later generations, this kind of entertainment was improvised and gradually turned into an art form that combined music, poetry, painting, and literature.

According to UNESCO, Bài Chòi includes two main parts: the games and the performance. The games are a card game played in bamboo huts, which previously only took place during the Lunar New Year. In performances, male and female



Two Bài Chòi artists performing in Vietnamese traditional costume Ao Ba Ba. Image by Khoa Le.

hieus artists perform on a rattan mat or while standing, from place to place or in families' private events. Those who play key roles in preserving the tradition are *hieus* performers, solo Bài Chòi artists, and the artists who create the cards and build the huts, as noted by Viet Nam's official tourism authority.

From folk game to UNESCO heritage

In the past, Bài Chòi was always associated with Lunar New Year celebrations. Huts were built temporarily in village courtyards, and villagers gathered to listen to anh *hieus* - the male artist - sing bright and hopeful verses that added to the vivid atmosphere of the new year. The games and the verses were the perfect combination that helped bring community together

Throughout the 20th century, Bài Chòi gradually evolved with a more organised structure with theatrical elements, staging, and costumes. However, due to the existence of new forms of entertainment, huge changes in urban life and community habits, and fewer young people being taught to appreciate the art, it began to lose its ground.

Everything changed in December 2017, when UNESCO officially recognised Bài Chòi as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. For Hoi An, which was already a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1999, this title is another remarkable honour for its ongoing efforts to preserve both tangible and intangible cultural symbols.

Ms. Thu Ly, a Bài Chòi artist from Hoi An World Cultural Heritage Conservation Center, shared: "I felt very happy and proud. It gave us a strong support and more confidence that Bài Chòi will continue to be greatly valued and preserved. It also allows the artists in the Ancient Town to practice, perform, and pass on our passion to younger generations."

People Who Carry the Tradition

Behind every performance are the artists who dedicate their lives to preserving this heritage. Many learned the art from the elderly in their families, while others trained through cultural programmes organised by local authorities.



A Bài Chòi artist holding game cards. Image by Vo Van Tien.

According to Ms. Thu Ly, her journey began with a childhood love of folk music. "I grew up listening to traditional melodies, learning from my family, my teachers, and later through my work. To me, Bài Chòi is like the chopsticks of Vietnamese culture. We may add forks and knives to the table, but the chopsticks can never be replaced."

Performers must master singing techniques, skills, and symbolic meanings of the cards. Before each show, they rehearse lines, and prepare instruments. While appearing simple to audiences, every performance reflects years of practice and cultural commitments.

Ensuring Bài Chòi's Future

Preserving Bài Chòi requires the whole

community's efforts. There are training sessions, workshops, and festival programmes to introduce young people to the art form. Schools and cultural centres have collaborated to keep the tradition alive.

“Young people may love pop or hip-hop, but they can still sing Bài Chòi if they are guided in the right way. When schools, teachers, and families encourage them, they begin to understand and appreciate the art,” Ms. Thu Ly expressed optimism for the next generation.

Despite challenges, the echo of Bài Chòi every night along Hoai River shows how strongly Central Vietnamese communities continue to uphold and preserve their cultural heritage.

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