



Đàn tính

The Marvelous and Sacred Musical Instrument of the Tày People

A *đàn tính*, the musical instrument of Tày shamans, enables the performance of a *Then* (pronounced like the number “ten”) ritual; its music accompanies the journey of the *Then* spirit army, and spirits are resident inside the instrument itself. The author, a Tày native scholar, researched the history of the instrument in relation to the career of the shaman Mrs. Mỗ Thị Kịt, the original owner of the *đàn tính* displayed in the exhibition, and interviewed shamans in several other Tày communities. The author also collected information from instrument makers and musicians who use the instrument in secular folk performances. His research distinguishes secular *đàn tính* from *đàn tính* that have been animated with spirits and describes the compromises that Tày shamans make when they perform sections of their rituals for secular audiences.

KEYWORDS: Vietnam—museum—sacred—Tày ethnicity—material culture—musical instrument

ON THE second floor of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME), a mannequin stands frozen in a dancing posture in front of an elaborately decorated altar for a *Then* ritual of the Tày people while another mannequin strums a stringed instrument. Visitors are usually drawn to the accompanying video monitor where, in a video clip of this same ritual, the venerable *Then*, Mrs. Mỗ Thị Kịt, strums her three-stringed *đàn tênh*.¹ Her assistants shake their brass bells to an urgent crescendo and rise from the floor in a whirling dance. The *Then* spirit army is on the march, going to rescue a client's errant soul. Mrs. Kịt reports the adventures of their journey through her song. The liveliness of the music and the animation of the *Then* women are in marked contrast to the muted three-dimensional exhibit tableau. Equivalent to the drum in many shamanic cultures, the stringed *đàn tênh* enables the work of the *Then* and their spirit familiars. *Then* say that their spirits will only descend when they hear the music from the *đàn tênh* and that its music, like the drum beats in some other shamanic traditions, keeps the *Then* in motion for the duration of her journey. According to an elderly *Then* from Bac Son district, Lang Son province, "Playing the *đàn tênh* is like beating gongs or drums to urge troops on the march or to welcome them with processional music as they enter the banquet hall. If you play the *đàn tênh* but don't have any food for the spirit army, you will be punished."

The *đàn tênh* that Mrs. Kịt strums is the signature musical instrument of the Tày, Nùng, and Thái people, ethnic minorities living in the north of Vietnam who speak related languages. It has a gourd body, long wooden neck, and silk strings.² In every region where Tày people live, there is someone who knows how to make a *đàn tênh*. According to a legend recounted by some *Then*, the Jade Emperor gave the *đàn tênh* to the *Then* in order to "save people" through the work of the rituals that they perform with its aid.³ Historical documents written in Sino-Tày (Chinese ideographs used to write Tày language) relate that the *đàn tênh* was incorporated into court music ensembles at the end of the sixteenth century when the Mạc dynasty retreated to Cao Bằng province. After the August Revolution in 1945, many northern provincial performing arts troops used the *đàn tênh* in agit prop performances. However, the *đàn tênh* is most closely associated with *Then* rituals and with the women and men who perform them. During the long period when these activities were banned as "superstitious," most *Then* abandoned their calling and some discarded their ritual tools by casting them into clear flowing streams.⁴ People avoided any public dealings with those who "carried a *đàn tênh*"



FIGURE 1. While unused, the *Then*'s sacred instrument is hung near the *Then*'s ancestral altar. La Công Ý, VME archive.

as propagators of “superstition,” and *Then* who continued to practice did so in secret. *Đàn tính* were rare, and young musicians were not encouraged to learn how to play them.

Toward the end of the 1980s, following significant policy changes, perceptions changed. *Then* rituals are now valued as an important expression of ethnic culture in many Tày and Thái speaking communities, and *đàn tính* music has been revived. Tày people play the *đàn tính* for pleasure and for celebration. For example, in some communities they will now play it at weddings where it would not have been heard in the past. Young people are learning to play the *đàn tính*, and some district and provincial cultural offices have opened training classes. *Then* ritual masters are invited to perform on television and at performing arts festivals where they have won gold and silver medals. Their presence in this new context poses a paradox. In pure performance, the *đàn tính* is a secular instrument; however,

in the hands of a *Then* performing a ritual, it is a powerful and potentially dangerous instrument of magic.

In this paper, I shall explore the distinction between sacred and secular *đàn tính*. How does an ordinary musical instrument become sacred, and what does its transformed identity imply? Given the special power attributed to the *Then's* *đàn tính*, and the potential danger of misusing it, I shall also consider how *Then* are negotiating the boundaries between sacred ritual and secular performance. In my conclusion, I will bring this discussion back to the VME and share my thoughts on how a sacred *đàn tính* should be treated as a cultural artifact.

THE *THEN* MRS. MỠ THỊ KỊT AND HER *ĐÀN TÍNH*

The *đàn tính* in the collection of the VME was purchased in 1997 from Mrs. Mỗ Thị Kịt⁵, a spry octogenarian and well respected *Then* who has used it in many rituals.⁶ A resident of Tô Hiệu commune, Bình Gia district, Lạng Sơn province, Mrs. Kịt is the most renowned *Then* in the region and is invited to perform in the neighboring districts in Đồng Đăng township, Lạng Sơn city, and in the Võ Nhai district of neighboring Thái Nguyên province. The nine fringes on her ritual hat indicate that Mrs. Kịt commands many battalions of spirit troops, which she acquired through three initiations into ascending grades of shamanship. She has eight apprentices and hundreds of regular clients including not only Tày and Nùng people but also Kinh (Việt) living in Bình Gia township and Yao in some remote communes in Bình Gia district. Like other *Then*, Mrs. Kịt is busiest before



FIGURE 2. A *Then* in Bắc Sơn district (Lạng Sơn province) performs a ritual to remove bad luck that has caused neighbors' ducks to peck at each other. Magic water in the bowl will be sprayed onto the ducks. La Công Ý, VME archive.



FIGURE 3. A *Then* in Bình Gia district (Lạng Sơn province) is making magic on a string so that it can be tied around her client's wrist to chase away evil spirits. Her *đàn tính* rests on the altar behind her. La Công Ý, VME archive.

and after the lunar New Year when she says she has to run from place to place, coming home from one ritual and finding clients waiting to take her to another. Her son jokes that during this season, her schedule is as busy as that of the district chief.

While some *Then* inherit their spirits through a line of family transmission, Mrs. Kịt, along with many other *Then*, shares the experience of shamans in other places who are tormented by the spirits until they agree to accept the spirits' calling. When Mrs. Kịt was thirteen years old, she became violently ill and vomited whatever she ate. Weak and pale, she was forced to acknowledge her destiny and make a vow to accept the spirits. Her health improved but when her parents both died a few years later, she could not afford an initiation ceremony because she was poor and had used her resources for her parents' funerals. Because she had failed to become initiated, her illness returned. Now she would plunge into the river and spend long hours immersing herself. Once she even extinguished a burning torch by jumping on it with her bare feet. The signs were clear. When she was eighteen years old, she apprenticed herself to a famous female *Then* and was initiated when she was twenty-four years old. Soon after her initiation, she also became her teacher's daughter-in-law.

Then like Mrs. Kịt perform a variety of rituals to remove bad luck, prolong one's life fate by petitioning the Southern Star to change one's entry in the book of life, celebrate longevity, offer wishes for good health, retrieve souls that have been startled out of the body by falling trees or stones or the cry of a crow, settle tombs disrupted by buffalo or by falling stones or trees, send off the multiple



FIGURE 4. The instrument is disassembled and then reassembled to make it easy for the *Then* to transport it. La Công Ý, VME archive.

souls of the dead, and escort the dead to the realm of the ancestors. They perform divinations when someone is sick, when small children cry at night, when pigs go off their feed, and when ducks peck at each other. Although many people express skepticism about the *Then*'s work and some will state flat out that it is “useless to rely on the *đàn tính* when someone is sick,” others—including some civil servants who are supposed to shun “superstition”—recount miraculous cures. They will speak, for example, of a client whom the Thái Nguyên provincial clinic had dismissed as hopeless and who was cured after Mrs. Kịt performed a ritual.⁷ Mrs. Kịt said, “They must believe because they invite me to perform rituals,” sentiments echoed by other *Then*. A member of the land survey administration in Bình Gia district, a civil servant, lost her eldest child, and when the second was ill she sent for Mrs. Kịt, who performed a divination and prayed. After the child was cured, the grateful mother asked Mrs. Kịt to perform a ritual to take away the bad luck, accepting the *Then*'s diagnosis of ultimate causes.

Not just a powerful *Then* who commands many spirit soldiers and performs powerful magic, Mrs. Kịt is also the best *đàn tính* performer in the district. She won a gold medal at a performing arts competition for the eastern provinces and,

in the spring of 2005, she was honored as the oldest participant performing in a cultural festival of *Then*. Her apprentices claim that no one can match the quality of her playing or the range of melodies she can perform. They relate that her music invariably moves listeners to tears.

Following a custom among *Then*, Mrs. Kịt received a *đàn títb* from her teacher. The most precious of her three *đàn títb*, it is almost one hundred years old, and Mrs. Kịt only uses it for the rituals she performs at home in front of her altar where she honors the founding ancestor of *Then*. Mrs. Kịt considers this instrument a family treasure which she “would never give or lend to anyone.” Mrs. Kịt’s second *đàn títb* was made during the anti-superstition period when *Then* rituals were still banned, before the easing of strictures in the late 1980s. The neck of the instrument is unusual, composed of two parts that can easily be disassembled and reassembled. When Mrs. Kịt went to perform the forbidden *Then* rituals in the dead of night, she could carry the disassembled *đàn títb* unobtrusively in a bag, reassembling it when she arrived at her client’s house. A third *đàn títb*, the one that Mrs. Kịt gave to the Museum, was made for her by her second son and used in many *Then* rituals. Recently, she had a fourth *đàn títb* made so that her children and grandchildren could perform with it. While she did not want them to touch her own sacred instrument, she did want to encourage their playing, thinking that “the child who is loved by the gods will become a *Then* while the others could become performing artists.” This fourth *đàn títb*, an ordinary musical instrument that ordinary fingers can play without fear of pollution, is fundamentally different from her others, which are, or once were, sacred objects.

Spirit armies, who can cause happiness or harm to living people, inhabit the *Then*’s *đàn títb*. When Mrs. Kịt agreed to sell her third *đàn títb* to the VME, she



FIGURE 5. Calabash used to make the body of the *đàn títb* are dried on a shelf above the hearth. La Công Ý, VME archive.



FIGURE 6. Classes for playing the *đàn tính* have become very popular in Cao Bằng province, especially among recent graduates who are still looking for work. La Công Ý, VME archive.

first removed the spirits. She took the *đàn tính* in her hands, pressed the strings, and whispered a spell, adding a prayer for the good fortune of the Museum staff. The *đàn tính* was now a secular instrument; spirits would no longer follow it. It could be placed in a storeroom of the VME with other secular artifacts. In 2003, when it was used in the exhibition *Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind, and Spirit*, those of us who were familiar with Tày culture insisted that the *đàn tính* be displayed upright, rather than flat on the floor; it would never be placed on the floor in a ritual setting. Our conversation with the American curator highlighted the sacred quality of the *Then's* *đàn tính* and prompted my research into why and how the *đàn tính* is a sacred object and what this means for our work as museum professionals who have been entrusted with it.

SACRED ĐÀN TÍNH

In 2004, I went back to talk with Mrs. Kịt and to interview other *Then* in Lạng Sơn, Cao Bằng, and Thái Nguyên provinces, as well as instrument makers and secular performers. Many of the people I interviewed described how they had personally experienced the *đàn tính's* power. A young man from Bình Gia district, Lạng Sơn province, the relative of a *Then*, claimed that in the past, he did not believe that this *Then's* *đàn tính* was sacred and he sometimes brought it out to play. One day he forgot to return the *đàn tính* to its proper place near the altar but put it in his room. Later, he heard mysterious noises, like the sounds created when people adjusted the instrument's strings, followed by the distant notes of a

đàn tính. Since then, he has never touched the *Then*'s sacred *đàn tính* but instead made himself a new, ordinary *đàn tính* to play. A young woman from Bình Gia who has been practicing *Then* for ten years said, "If you recite the words and songs of the ritual in a secular context, apart from a ritual setting, you don't remember them correctly. But when you perform a ritual, the spirit's support enables you to recite everything fluently. Just burn some incense, hold the *đàn tính*, and open the fan three times. Suddenly you remember it all." This same *Then* claims that when she is away from home, if she feels her ears turn warm, or if she goes to the market but forgets what she is going to buy, she goes straight home and always finds that a client is there waiting for her. She attributes these summonses to her *đàn tính*, which she keeps near her altar. If she has trouble sleeping at night or if she forgets to loosen the strings of her instrument, the next day someone will invite her to perform a ritual or make a divination. According to a male *Then* from Cao Bằng province, when he plays the *đàn tính* for entertainment he does not feel anything special, but when he puts on the *Then*'s ritual clothing and burns incense, playing the *đàn tính* causes him to feel light, in a transcendent state.

This power is not inherent in the instrument itself. An elderly *Then* from Lạng Sơn explained, "The *đàn tính* itself is not sacred; only the spirits are sacred. The *đàn tính* is sacred only because the spirits follow it." A sacred *đàn tính* resembles a secular *đàn tính* and producers observe the same procedures when they make *đàn tính* for *Then* and for secular performing artists. During production, they do not observe any taboos and can do this work anywhere at any time. In the workshop, people can even step over a *đàn tính* intended for *Then*. However, once they give the *đàn tính* to a *Then*, many instrument makers are afraid of their own products and avoid touching them.

The *Then* inducts the spirits into a new *đàn tính* by performing a special ritual of *hồ thần nhập đàn* and this is the source of her *đàn tính*'s magical power. To invite the spirits to reside in a *đàn tính*, the *Then* places offerings on her altar—usually a boiled chicken, a bunch of bananas, some fruit, and flowers—burns incense, reports the new instrument to the founding ancestor of all *Then* and the ancestors of her line of *Then*, and recites spells.⁸ These spells, and the spells a *Then* uses to desacralize an instrument, are a secret among *Then*. The words would lose their power if the *Then* revealed them to lay people.

When a *Then* goes to perform a ritual, she or he observes a strict ritual protocol. Before going to pray at a client's house, the *Then* burns incense on the *Then* ancestral altar, asking permission to bring down the *đàn tính* and the bells that are suspended from or hung next to the altar and to call out the spirit army. Then he or she casts out a lump of rice from the offering tray to mark the army's departure. On the way to a ritual, a porter who is usually a member of the client's family carries the *đàn tính*, with a special protective covering, and the other ritual equipment. The *Then* follows behind the porter. These things must arrive first, in advance of the *Then*, on the way home as well. To pay respect to the sacred *đàn tính* and prevent pollution, people who transport it on bicycles or motorbikes

always put the instrument in front of them, never behind them. Some *Then* prefer to carry their own *đàn tỳn* in order to protect it from pollution. In Lạng Sơn, whenever people bring the sacred *đàn tỳn* to a ritual they cover the surface carefully with cotton padding for protection, and in Cao Bằng province they decorate the gourd with a rooster's neck ruff feathers. In Lạng Sơn, the gourd head of a sacred *đàn tỳn* is always covered with a red cloth. Some people say the red cloth indicates that they are going to do some auspicious work while others say that it is just for decoration or to protect the *đàn tỳn*. Many people believe, however, that the red cloth wrapping has a spiritual meaning, hiding the sacred instrument from the sun and preventing pollution; without this precaution, the *đàn tỳn* will not produce a good tune and the ritual will not be efficacious. An old female *Then* ritual master from Bắc Sơn district, Lạng Sơn province, who has fifty years of experience, said that en route to and from a ritual, a *Then* should not stop along the way, and he or she must never bring the *đàn tỳn* into a house other than the house where the ritual will be held. Otherwise, spirits associated with the *đàn tỳn* will follow the instrument into the house to ask for food and drink, causing losses among the family's pigs or chickens and necessitating a ritual to chase away bad luck. If the *Then* must stop at a house along the way, he or she leaves the *đàn tỳn* and other ritual equipment outside. Even civil servants, who are not supposed to believe in such things, would not dare to bring a sacred *đàn tỳn* into their homes.

Then can only play *đàn tỳn* after the offerings have been placed on the altar and incense has been lit. They must not strum the instrument before or after the ritual. However, during a rest period that occurs in the ritual anyone can play the *đàn tỳn* without risk of punishment because the spirits are busy enjoying an offering meal. People, including those who are not *Then*, do take this opportunity to play the *Then's* *đàn tỳn*. When the *đàn tỳn* is not in use, *Then* hang it on the wall or set it in a high place. To avoid pollution, they never put it on the ground or bring it into a bedroom. In 2003, when Mrs. Kịt and her assistants came to Hanoi to participate in a television show called *Cultural Journeys* (*Hành trình văn hóa*), Mrs. Kịt laid her cloth shoulder bag on the floor before putting the *đàn tỳn* down, even though the floor was clean.

If someone steps over the *đàn tỳn*, especially a woman, it will be polluted and the *Then* will be punished, but some people say that the danger only exists if the pollution happens in a sacred hour. In addition to this, *Then* have many other taboos, which they must observe to avoid punishments, such as illness for the *Then* or a family member, accidents, or the death or loss of livestock. On the first and the fifteenth day of the month, the day "without souls," the day of "three funerals," and while performing a ritual, *Then* never let a layperson touch their sacred *đàn tỳn*. On other days, ritually "clean" people may touch the *đàn tỳn*. People who have recently been to a funeral, menstruating women, and women who have given birth within the last forty days cannot touch the instrument. For their part, most lay people avoid the sacred *đàn tỳn*. Even the *Then* say that they

were hesitant to touch the *đàn tính* before they were initiated, and many had never played one before becoming *Then*.

The most common punishment for allowing the *đàn tính* to become polluted is a bad headache or vomiting, or the victims “die and come back to life,” paralyzed so that they cannot move from their beds. In these cases, offending *Then* must put incense on the altar, pray, and apologize because they have not been able to protect the sacred *đàn tính*. A *Then* may also be punished if one of her apprentices comes to assist at one of her rituals but fails to bring the *đàn tính* that the teacher gave her when the apprentice began to perform rituals on her own. When a *Then* gives a *đàn tính* to a student, he or she considers it a loan, not a gift, and when her spirits descend and do not see their *đàn tính*, they punish the *Then*.

Then mentioned other prohibitions and avoidances. A *đàn tính* with a long neck is difficult to play because the player’s hand tires from stretching to press the string. Some *đàn tính* are made with shorter necks, but only a few people would dare to cut the neck of the *đàn tính* that their teacher gave to them because *Then* fear the consequences of giving offense to the spirits associated with the instrument. *Then* in Bắc Sơn district, Lạng Sơn province, still recall the story of a *Then* who accidentally broke the neck of his instrument. Even though he killed one pig to make a ritual of apology to the spirits, his family still lost their ten-year-old son.

Then periodically purify their sacred *đàn tính* so that their prayers will be efficacious. Before using a *đàn tính* for the first time or on returning from a polluting encounter such as a funeral or from visiting a new born baby, a *Then* will boil pomello, peach, and *thanh thảo* leaves, put the pot in front of the altar, burn incense, and put a piece of iron or a scorched tile into the pot to make it steam. The *Then* puts the *đàn tính*, bells, and fan above the pot in the steam and later



FIGURE 7. Mrs. Mỗ Thị Kịt and her apprentices perform at the VME (in 2004?).
La Công Ý, VME archive.



FIGURE 8. The first festival of *Then* and *đàn tinh* performance in Thái Nguyên city in 2005. La Công Ý, VME archive.

cleans them using this water. *Then* perform a ritual of cleansing called *bột lầu* on the second, seventh, and eleventh lunar months, including an incantation to purify the *đàn tinh* and then steaming it to strengthen the spirit army. They also do this on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month (the festival of wandering ghosts) and on the New Year.

If a *đàn tinh* is damaged and cannot be repaired, the family burns it in the area in front of the altar for the founding ancestor of *Then*.⁹ In Cao Bằng province, if a *Then* dies but leaves a successor, people burn votive offerings and the personal belongings of the dead such as clothing and pass the *đàn tinh* through the smoke in order to transmit it to the deceased *Then*. The successor then brings the *đàn tinh* to his or her altar. If there is no successor, the *đàn tinh* is burned with the *Then*'s other belongings. An old *Then* in Bình Gia district, Lạng Sơn province, said that when she dies, the *đàn tinh* that her teacher gave her long ago will be burned so that she can carry it to the spirit world. Elsewhere in Lạng Sơn, however, if the *Then* passes away and there is no descendant, *đàn tinh* and other ritual tools usually stay in place near the altar; they are not to be burned or thrown away. On the fifteenth day and the first day of the lunar month, the family burns incense on the *Then* altar to wish for harmony, health, and luck for the family. In Hưng Đạo commune, Bình Gia district, Lạng Sơn province, the *đàn tinh* of a *Then* who died several decades ago still hangs in front of her altar even though it is now damaged by insects.

PERFORMING

During a ritual, *Then* sit tailor-fashion (named after the way a tailor might sit to sew) facing the ancestral altar while they play the *đàn tinh*. Participants can imagine the terrain of the spirit army's march by watching the instru-

ment and the position of the *Then*'s fingers. If the *Then* holds the neck of the *đàn tính* upright in her right hand, but without playing, she implies that the troops are marching uphill or climbing the mountains to go hunting, or that they are entering the gateway of a mandarin's hall to report and give offerings. If she inclines it at an angle, holds the neck, and presses the strings with her left hand while her right hand strums, the spirit army is crossing a river or an ocean on a boat. *Then* also play the *đàn tính* while performing certain dances during the ritual.

Then usually play two basic melodies on the *đàn tính*: *tàng nặm* or *tàng lừ* (low tone) and *phja nua* or *tàng bóc* (high tone). The melodies vary depending on the ritual action. In a ritual to take away the consequences of a bad horoscope, where the main purpose is to present offerings, the spirit army travels at its own pace and *Then* play the *đàn tính* slowly. The ritual for retrieving the client's soul is like a battle, an emergency where a sick person is rushed to the hospital, and the *đàn tính* matches the speedy pace. To illustrate the steady march of the spirit army, the *Then* just strums without fretting the strings.

Mrs. Mỗ Thị Kịt contrasted the precision of playing the *đàn tính* in a ritual versus the relative freedom of playing the instrument on a stage:

Staged performers don't have experience. They just play for fun and entertainment. They can play whatever they want. But playing for *Then* has rules. If the spirit army crosses the river, the *đàn tính* has to have a bass tone and the *Then* must sing with a lower voice, but when the spirit army is on the road, the sound has a higher pitch. When the spirit army comes to a magistrate's court and passes through the gate, a characteristic sound is associated with each particular gate. For example, if the army enters the mandarin's gates, the sound must be supple, and yet suppler still when they enter the shaman's gate. When entering the gate of heaven, the music slows to show the dignified pace of the army in procession.

BETWEEN SACRED AND SECULAR PERFORMANCE

Many *Then* make a distinction between the sound of *đàn tính* used to perform *Then* and those popularized in secular performances. A *Then* from Lạng Sơn said that on a visit to Hanoi she spent a lot of time in the shops that sell musical instruments searching for a *đàn tính* but she could not find one with the right tone for performing *Then*. She said, "The *đàn tính* for stage performances has a different sound and it is not appropriate (for rituals)." Many *Then* said that the stage *đàn tính* are too loud, sometimes louder than the performer's voice. A male *Then* from Cao Bằng province who has taught *đàn tính* in the Việt Bắc Culture and Art School (*Trường Văn hóa-Nghệ thuật Việt Bắc*) for many years contrasts the instrument's range of tone: "*Then* can sing a full range of secular and ritual music but it is very difficult for a stage performer to sing the *Then*'s ritual music, which has a lower, warmer sound, and is said to penetrate the very depths of the human heart. The *đàn tính* of the stage performer has a shriller tone and hurts the

ear.” For this reason, in the Third Festival of Ethnic Minorities in the Northeast (*Ngày hội văn hóa các dân tộc vùng Đông Bắc*), organized in Hạ Long city, Quảng Ninh province, in 2002, the Director of Culture and Information for Lạng Sơn province requested that the artists, who were also *Then*, use their own sacred *đàn tính* to perform rather than the *đàn tính* of the provincial performing arts troupe.

The appearance of *Then* in these festivals is already a departure from tradition, suggesting that a sense of the *đàn tính* as a sacred and magical object is diminished. In the past, *Then* used *đàn tính* only to perform rituals and did not allow others to touch their *đàn tính*. In contrast, during my own research, many *Then* did not hesitate to show me their *đàn tính*, to bring it down and let it be photographed, and to play any of the pieces that I requested. Some *Then* are even willing to perform their rituals with secular *đàn tính*. A *Then* from Bắc Sơn district, Lạng Sơn province, said that when she brought her sacred *đàn tính* to a ritual, she felt that people she encountered along the way looked askance at her. To avoid their stares, she brought only her smaller items of ritual equipment such as bells and stamps that she could hide in her pockets. She left her long and obvious *đàn tính* with its prominent long neck at home and used the *đàn tính* of the client family instead. A male *Then* from Cao Bằng province also thinks it is possible to use a secular *đàn tính* in rituals but adds that one must loosen the strings to produce a more bass tone. In 1993, when he performed a ritual for a family in Cao Bằng township, he borrowed a *đàn tính* from the provincial radio and television station where he used to work. Later he made an additional secular *đàn tính* that he could keep in his brother’s home in the township to use when he makes rituals there. Some of the other *Then* that I spoke with felt that the borrowed *đàn tính* must be a sacred *đàn tính*. Some insisted that one should only use the *đàn tính* given by one’s teacher, not any other, because “When using a borrowed *đàn tính* your visions are confused, you cannot see things clearly,” or “If you borrow the *đàn tính* it will not be sacred and the result will not be good.” Some *Then* refuse to loan their sacred *đàn tính*. A male *Then* from Bắc Sơn district, Lạng Sơn province, said, “The spirit gives us the *đàn tính* to keep and there’s a seal mark on the head of a sacred *đàn tính*, so it is impossible to loan it to anybody.”

Since *Then* are recognized as virtuoso *đàn tính* players, they now find themselves navigating a new role in cultural performances, ever mindful of their responsibilities as *Then*. When Mrs. Mỗ Thị Kịt and her assistants performed for the public or at the VME, they did not ask permission from their spirits as they would at a *Then* ritual, and most critically, they did not ask the spirits to descend because they did not have appropriate offerings for them. While reading prayers, they left out the sections related to the spirits, such as preparing the spirit soldiers and invoking the generals. Mrs. Kịt and her assistants recited only the most crowd-pleasing portions of the ritual such as catching cicadas (*pat meng pat ngoang*), hunting deer (*thầu quang thầu nạn*), and fighting demons (*túc tậu Dả Dỉn*), regardless of the relative importance of these segments to the ritual. This was very clearly a cultural performance, not a *Then* ritual. Even so, once the ritual was complete, they felt

obligated to bring home some of the offerings for distribution to the audience as a sign of the spirits' favor. The offerings they took home would be placed on their altars as though they had gone to a real ritual. "We would not be at peace with the spirits if we did not bring anything home," a *Then* explained.

CONCLUSION: THE ĐÀN TÍNH IN THE MUSEUM

When Mrs. Kịt gave her *đàn tính* to the Museum she removed the spirits and transformed it into a secular object. Even so, she hopes that its new owners will respect her *đàn tính* as she respected it in the past. As it was once a sacred object that was part of the community's spiritual life, she hopes that the Museum community will heed the proverb, "veneration brings efficacy, observing taboos brings good fortune." Although it is no longer sacred, we should consider Mrs. Mỗ Thị Kịt's *đàn tính* as a special artifact, imbued with a sacred history. We should not ignore this history when we practice conservation and exhibition work, keeping the *đàn tính* in a high and clean place. Additionally, we should exhibit it in such a way that visitors not only see its shape but also hear its sounds to evoke its sacredness. Only in this way can we express our respect to cultural bearers like Mrs. Kịt, to the local community, and to the spiritual life of the local people.

NOTES

1. Also called *đàn then* or *tính tấu*, in Cao Bằng province the *đàn tính* has only two strings and this is the usual form, but in Lạng Sơn province the instrument has three strings and it is more difficult to play. For additional information on the *đàn tính* see (ĐOÀN 1995–1999; LÊ and LÊ 2002; LÊ and LÊ 1978 and 1984; NÔNG 2000).

2. If a family raises silkworms they cannot play the *đàn tính* when the silkworm is still eating mulberry leaves. Music from the *đàn tính*'s silken strings is painful to the silkworms as it reminds them of their own destiny, and they will stop eating and die. A male *Then* from Cao Bằng province relates that when he was young and played the *đàn tính*, his mother told him to stop and then she hid the *đàn tính* in a safe place. When the worms had produced their silk, he would be allowed to play it again.

3. There are many other legends about the origin of the *đàn tính*, some describing the source of the seeds that produced the gourds for the sounding board, wood for the neck, and mulberry leaves to feed the silkworms that produce the strings.

4. This is a respectful way to discard a *đàn tính* because moving stream water is clean, pure, and cool, in contrast to the still water of a pond.

5. Her ritual name is Pháp Quang (The Law's Illumination) but she is usually addressed as *Then Tăng*, using the name of her eldest son.

6. *Đàn tính* are used by female *Then* and by male ritual specialists called *dàng* and *pút*.

7. I heard many other examples of dramatic cures during my fieldwork. An eighty-one-year-old lady from Tân Văn commune, Bình Gia district, Lạng Sơn province, got sick regularly and dreamed of her deceased relatives but after a *Then* ritual she felt much better. Now, whenever the woman feels poorly, she invites a *Then* to make a ritual. A man from the same commune turned sixty years old and was ill. He thought it was because of a bad horoscope year and held a *Then* ritual, which seemed to have the desired effect.

8. In Lạng Sơn province, *Then* keep two separate altars: one for the founding ancestor of all *Then* and the ancestral *Then* of her own line, and a separate altar for the family ancestors. In Cao Bằng province, ancestors and ancestral *Then* are honored on a single ancestral altar.

9. In some cases, this is also the family's ancestral altar, while in other cases the *Then*'s founding ancestor is honored on a separate altar.

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