

APPLICATION OF ENCODING - DECODING OF TUỒNG CHOREOGRAPHY IN THE PRESERVATION OF TRADITIONAL VIETNAMESE TUỒNG THEATRE

MA. Duong Thi Thanh Huyen

PhD Candidate,

Hanoi Academy of Theatre and Cinema

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19232449>

Published Date: 26-March-2026

Abstract: In the context of globalization and the vigorous development of contemporary cultural and artistic life, Tuồng theatre is undergoing profound transformations, particularly in its traditional performance practices. From a semiotic perspective, choreography in traditional Tuồng performance can be understood as a distinctive system of artistic signs, in which each bodily movement not only carries aesthetic value but also embodies deep layers of cultural and ideological meaning. Current shifts in performance environments and modes of reception have diminished the audience's capacity to decode this system of signs, thereby posing an urgent need for its preservation, promotion, and development.

Keywords: encoding-decoding, Tuồng choreography, preservation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tuồng choreography as a traditional artistic sign system is facing significant challenges. Changes in performance spaces, modes of transmission and training, public aesthetic preferences, as well as the impact of digital media, have transformed the processes of creation, performance, and reception of Tuồng choreography.

From a semiotic viewpoint, Tuồng choreography is not merely a sequence of physical movements but constitutes a specific semiotic text, in which:

- The signifier is the system of gestures, postures, rhythms, trajectories of movement, and the relationship between the performer's body and the stage space;
- The signified encompasses character traits, social status, ethical values, aesthetic conceptions, and traditional worldviews;
- The process of decoding depends on the viewer's cultural capital, artistic knowledge, and context of reception.

Therefore, in the current period when audiences are increasingly distanced from traditional cultural frames of reference - the risk of a rupture in the semiotic chain of Tuồng choreography has become evident. This situation calls for an urgent need to preserve, promote, and re-encode the values embedded in Tuồng choreography, thereby contributing to the safeguarding, revitalization, and development of traditional Tuồng theatre. Among these tasks, preservation is more critical and pressing than ever.

2. CONTENT

Preserving Tuồng choreography from a semiotic perspective (preserving it as a system of coded signs): From a semiotic standpoint, the preservation of Tuồng choreography should not be limited to the documentation or reconstruction of movements. More importantly, it involves safeguarding the entire coding system, including:

- Kinetic codes (hand techniques, footwork, standing and walking postures);
- Spatial codes (central stage zone, peripheral zones, movement trajectories);
- Rhythmic codes (the relationship between movement, music, drum, and clapper);
- Symbolic codes (social, ethical, and aesthetic meanings embedded in movements).

Preservation, therefore, must go beyond external forms to encompass the deeper layers of semiotic meaning inherent in each movement. Otherwise, Tuồng choreography risks becoming “hollowed out,” reduced to mere imitative gestures devoid of cultural depth. For instance, the footwork of the *kép tướng* (male general role) in traditional Tuồng with its lowered center of gravity, measured and firm steps is not merely a physical convention but a symbolic signifier of power, dignity, and moral bearing. In contemporary performance practice, when such footwork is simplified or its tempo altered for the sake of efficiency and speed, its semiotic efficacy is significantly diminished.

Thus, preserving Tuồng choreography should be understood as preserving the semiotic logic and the corporeal grammar underlying each system of movements.

Tuồng artisans and performers are both the bearers and transmitters of these codes. In practice, many choreographic codes exist as tacit knowledge, conveyed primarily through embodied practice and hands-on instruction. Artists and master practitioners function as “living archives” of this semiotic system - a role that must be increasingly recognized, respected, and safeguarded.

The application of preservation strategies for Tuồng choreography through the development of a coding system can be effectively integrated into teaching and research, making the study and acquisition of Tuồng choreographic art more systematic and accessible. The preservation of Tuồng choreography should not be confined to retaining the outward form of movements, but must encompass the entire semiotic system, including kinetic, spatial, rhythmic, and symbolic codes. Such preservation must be closely linked with research, systematization, and pedagogical transmission of Tuồng art. This task is particularly crucial in the current context, in alignment with the latest provisions of Vietnam’s national cultural heritage law.

From a semiotic perspective, each movement, posture, gaze, and step in Tuồng constitutes a multilayered sign. When encoded through coding/decoding frameworks, this system becomes a corporeal language that can be archived, analyzed, and reconstructed digital technologies. As Umberto Eco has argued, signs remain open to reinterpretation in new contexts - an insight that enables Tuồng choreography to exist within digital spaces while preserving its original identity.

The application of encoding - decoding methodologies contributes to the establishment of a scientific and sustainable archival system for Tuồng choreography. This includes the development of a Tuồng Motion Database, in which each movement is encoded through geometric parameters and semiotic markers (function, character type, expressive emotion), thereby preserving the intrinsic values of the traditional choreographic system.

3D/VR digitization: The reconstruction of Tuồng choreography through motion capture and 3D scanning technologies provides a powerful foundation for the effective preservation and digitization of cultural, artistic, and social science materials. These technologies can be further employed to develop dynamic visual systems such as webtoon-based motion representations to preserve and disseminate Tuồng choreography in vivid and accessible forms, thereby extending the reach of Tuồng performance art to contemporary and future audiences.

The creation of an interactive multimedia archive (including video, images, audio, and semiotic annotations) serves both educational and research purposes. It also provides a valuable resource for present and future generations to engage with Vietnam’s traditional arts - an art form widely regarded as a classical and scholarly tradition, as well as a precious cultural heritage that must be carefully preserved and sustained.

Application of AI in the Recognition of Tuồng Choreographic Movements:

Machine learning models can be employed to analyze and annotate (semiotic labeling) individual segments or layers of Tuồng choreography in video materials. For example, a scene from *Son Hậu*, in which a general enters the battlefield, may be archived with integrated datasets including: visual data (sequences of hand, foot, and bodily movements); semiotic coding (the signifier: the posture of wielding a halberd; the signified: bravery and loyalty); and semantic descriptors (e.g., character tag: principal general role).

Such an approach not only introduces but also interprets and facilitates the recognition of Tuồng choreography and character typologies for contemporary audiences.

Applications in the preservation and education of traditional Tuồng performance values:

The archiving and encoding of Tuồng choreography serve not only academic research but also play a vital role in the preservation and education of traditional performing arts. These practices help bring traditional theatre closer to audiences, fostering a deeper understanding of its cultural values. Key applications include:

Reconstruction of traditional stage practices:

The revival of lost or fragmented performance segments enables young performers to relearn choreography with “correct codes and correct meanings,” while also making Tuồng more accessible to younger audiences. Canonical scenes from traditional Tuồng plays such as “*Hồ Nguyệt Cô hóa cáo*”, “*Ôn Đình chém Tá*”, and “*Kim Lân qua đèo*” can be reconstructed using archival performance footage or reimagined through webtoon-style animated representations. These may be accompanied by analytical layers, including choreographic decoding, facial makeup patterns, and costume-based character identification, thereby enhancing both dissemination and pedagogical engagement with the semiotic system of Tuồng performance.

Integration of audiovisual archives, 3D models, and semiotic analysis for advanced training:

The consolidation of recorded materials, 3D modeling, and semiotic interpretation can form a comprehensive database for specialized education. Such a repository would enable theatre scholars both in general and in Tuồng studies as well as broader audiences, to access, search, and explore encoded information, semiotic structures, and decoding frameworks of Tuồng choreography in the near future.

Preservation through Interactive Performance:

Audiences may experience Tuồng through AR/VR platforms watching, reenacting, or interacting with virtual Tuồng characters. This approach is comparable to practices in South Korea, where webtoon adaptations of theatrical works or artistic productions are often developed prior to staging, ensuring high levels of audience engagement before full-scale production. Similarly, Tuồng choreography and its canonical excerpts can be developed using AR/VR technologies, enabling their preservation within immersive multimedia environments.

Documentation, Archiving, and Semiotic Systematization:

Systematic recording, documentation, and academic research should be undertaken to construct comprehensive repositories, including semiotic databases and choreographic movement banks for traditional Tuồng character typologies. The encoding and decoding of these semiotic structures function as an effective method of archival preservation.

Integration into Education and Community Outreach:

Introducing Tuồng into school curricula, incorporating it into arts education institutions, and organizing community-based classes are essential strategies. Visual and textual materials illustrating traditional Tuồng character types encompassing choreography, vocal delivery, costumes, and facial makeup should be developed to help younger audiences accurately recognize Tuồng character systems. This is particularly important in preventing confusion with other theatrical traditions and reinforcing the understanding of Tuồng as a classical and scholarly Vietnamese art form (notably, some audiences still mistakenly perceive Tuồng as originating from China).

Promotion and Public Engagement: Tuồng character typologies and their choreographic systems can be disseminated through semiotic texts, illustrative graphics, static imagery, and animated clips across documentaries, social media platforms, and cultural tourism initiatives. Incorporating traditional Tuồng performance excerpts into cultural tourism

programs as fixed itinerary components can further enhance visibility. Additionally, printed programs or visual guides on Tuồng characters and choreography can be produced to communicate effectively with both domestic and international audiences.

Cultural Preservation through Artistic Promotion:

The preservation of national cultural values can be strengthened through the promotion of Tuồng both domestically and internationally, particularly via theatrical and musical theatre festivals. Participation in regional and international stage festivals provides a platform to affirm Vietnamese cultural identity through Tuồng artistic works.

3. CONCLUSION

The application of encoding - decoding approaches to Tuồng choreography holds significant importance for the preservation of Tuồng performance art in particular, and Tuồng theatre as a whole. It opens up new methods for documenting, archiving, and safeguarding the cultural and artistic values embedded in this traditional art form.

At the same time, such approaches create pathways to engage contemporary audiences especially younger generations enabling them to better understand traditional Tuồng theatre, appreciate its aesthetic richness, and recognize the valuable cultural heritage it embodies. These directions also contribute to the development of new modes of audience engagement, thereby supporting the broader and more sustainable preservation of Vietnamese Tuồng art.

REFERENCES

- [1] Roland Barthes (2002). *Elements of Semiology*. Translated by Nguyễn Quốc Thắng. Hanoi: General Publishing House.
- [2] Lê Huy Bắc (2019). *Signs and Intersemiotics*. Ho Chi Minh City: General Publishing House.
- [3] Từ Thành Bắc (2013). *Chinese Peking Opera*. Ho Chi Minh City: General Publishing House.
- [4] Hoàng Chương (1998). *Mịch Quang – A Veteran Tuồng General*. Hanoi: Theatre Publishing House.
- [5] Hoàng Chương. *Tuồng and Martial Arts*. Hanoi: Theatre Publishing House.
- [6] Hoàng Chương (2006). *Issues in Traditional Theatre*. Hanoi: Theatre Publishing House.
- [7] Trịnh Bá Đĩnh (2023). *Literary Semiotics*. Hanoi: Vietnam National University Press.
- [8] Erika Fischer-Lichte (1997). *Semiotics of Theatre and Film*. Translated by Bùi Khởi Giang. Vietnam Institute of Cinema Arts and Archives.