

# From Body Language in the Classical Tuong Play *Vo Tam Tu Tram Cao* to the Validation of Roman Jakobson's Poetic Principle: "What Makes a Verbal Message a Work of Art?"

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**Abstract:** Roman Jakobson was a distinguished Russian linguist, theorist of poetics, and cultural scholar. Jakobson distinguished various functions of language, including the emotive, conative, and metalingual functions. He also proposed numerous theories, arguments, and key concepts that have become foundational to modern poetics. Importantly, Jakobson's theory of language functions is not confined to literature or poetry but also applies to the languages of performing arts, such as traditional Tuong theatre, particularly its system of physical expression.

It is precisely through this physical expression, with its multiple layers of meaning conveyed by exaggerated, stylized, and conventionalized gestures, that Tuong generates what may be described as "special linguistic messages" - distinctly characteristic of Tuong.

To further clarify this assertion, and to substantiate Roman Jakobson's claim that "the fundamental problem of poetics is the answer to the question: by what means does a verbal message become a work of art," this study undertakes an in-depth analysis of physical language in Tuong performance as a means of constructing character traits and expressing psychological states in the play *Vo Tam Tu Executes the Fox*, with particular focus on its renowned excerpt, *Ho Nguyet Co's Transformation into a Fox*.

**Keywords:** language, physical language, Tuong.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Roman Jakobson (1896 - 1984) was a distinguished Russian linguist, theorist of poetics, and cultural scholar. He was a founding member of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and a leading representative of Russian Formalism. His works *Modern Russian Poetry* (1921) and *On Czech Verse* (1923) are regarded as seminal contributions to the Formalist school. After a prolonged period of migration to Sweden and subsequently to the United States, Jakobson taught linguistics, general linguistics, and literature at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Roman Jakobson is widely recognized as one of the foremost figures in the fields of linguistics and poetics worldwide.

According to Jakobson, poetics must address the fundamental question of what transforms a linguistic message into an artistic message. In his two influential works, *Essays in General Linguistics* and *Linguistics and Poetics*, he articulated a theory of language functions grounded in information theory, involving elements such as the message, sender, receiver, referent, and code. From this framework, Jakobson distinguished various functions of language, including the emotive, conative, and metalingual functions. He also proposed numerous theories, arguments, and key concepts that have become foundational to modern poetics. Importantly, Jakobson's theory of language functions is not confined to literature or poetry but also applies to the languages of performing arts, such as traditional Tuong theatre, particularly its system of physical expression.

Physical expression in traditional Tuong performance consists of choreographic movements that are stylized, exaggerated, and highly conventionalized. These movements play a crucial role in Tuong acting, contributing significantly to the portrayal of Tuong characters and participating actively in the construction of character traits as well as standardized character models within Tuong theatre.

Physical expression in Tuong performance may be understood as a system of gestures, bodily movements, walking patterns, and choreographic actions that are exaggerated, stylized, and conventionalized in order to depict characters' psychological states and to construct archetypal character models on the traditional Tuong stage. As Tuong is a performance art in which the actor's artistry is central, the constituent elements of acting speech delivery, dramatic expression, and physical movement - are always regarded as equally fundamental.

In Tuong performance practice, practitioners commonly use the term "Tuong dance" (*Mua Tuong*). However, *Mua Tuong* should not be understood as dance in the conventional sense. As Tuong researcher Mich Quang has analyzed and articulated: "*Tuong dance is essentially the actor's physical movement expressed in a rhythmic and balanced manner through the direct and organic interaction between bodily movement and spoken language endowed with rhythm and melody. Tuong dance takes the rhythm and melody of speech as the choreographic foundation, character traits as stylistic orientation, and the expression of dramatic meaning as its ultimate purpose*" (VSK-18 Archive, p. 69).

Similarly, in the research of Professor Le Ngoc Cau, when discussing Tuong performance art, particularly Tuong choreographic movement, he argues that: "...Tuong choreography gives the impression that Tuong closely observes every human action and activity in daily life. It observes the human body from a physiological perspective - sadness, joy, anger, and so forth - before selecting, generalizing, and stylizing these observations according to the principles of theatrical visual art. It is therefore closely related to natural human physical movements..." (p. 104, *Journal of Theatre Arts Research*, No. 9, 1975).

Physical expression enables the performer to convey dramatic content and to clarify the meaning of the sung text of Tuong characters. Each sung line in Tuong inherently contains semantic content; therefore, acting and choreography - that is, physical language always accompany the singing to support and enhance the expression of meaning. Consequently, performers must analyze the lyrics, as well as the psychological state and personality of the character, in order to determine appropriate choreographic and physical expressions that fully articulate the meaning of the sung text and contribute to the construction of Tuong character identity.

Audiences who appreciate Tuong are unlikely to forget the scene in which the elderly Ta Ngoc Lan visits Kim Hung's residence in the classical play *Son Hau*. In this scene, upon seeing his father, Kim Hung says: "Father, please sit... please sit..." while simultaneously executing a physical gesture of abruptly dropping onto the throne, forcefully striking his booted feet together with a loud thud, and crossing his legs arrogantly in front of his father. This physical action - far removed from an ordinary, polite gesture of inviting someone to sit in everyday life- is exaggerated and stylized to reveal Kim Hung's disloyalty, unfilial conduct, insolence, contempt, and disrespect toward his father. Evidently, this physical action also powerfully reinforces the meaning of the spoken and sung lines performed by the actor.

Physical language also plays a significant role in representing spatial and temporal dimensions in Tuong performance. To speak of Tuong is to speak of convention and stylization. On the Tuong stage, elaborate scenic design is unnecessary and may even be entirely absent. Through conventionalized physical movements, Tuong performers are able to enact spatial settings and temporal transitions of scenes and acts. For instance, when a performer raises one leg and rotates the body in a circular motion, the audience understands that the character is entering or exiting a house, without the need for a concrete scenic representation.

Likewise, when a character rides a horse across the battlefield, a simple riding whip combined with stylized bouncing movements that imitate a horse's gallop (*lia xoc*) is sufficient for the audience to perceive a strenuous and arduous journey. Similarly, a performer who rhythmically bends the knees while mimicking rowing motions with both arms whether holding oars or not clearly signifies that the character is crossing a river by boat. Even on a brightly lit stage, through highly stylized and conventionalized movements such as groping, cautious stepping, and attentive listening, Tuong performers can convincingly depict a character navigating darkness at night, and the audience readily accepts this illusion.

Thus, physical language through its system of conventionalized and stylized movements plays a vital role in enabling Tuong performers to construct and communicate the spatial and temporal dimensions of the traditional Tuong stage.

Physical expression in Tuong performance art has the capacity to reveal characters' psychological states in ways that spoken dialogue or sung text alone cannot fully convey. For instance, in the play *Son Hau*, the profound anguish experienced by Kim Lan as he bids farewell to his mother after the exposure of a failed conspiracy is expressed through physical actions such as lifting and rolling the body. These movements effectively communicate Kim Lan's grief and deep affection for his elderly mother, producing a highly moving effect within the scene.

Similarly, through physical actions such as crossing the legs, sharply striking the boots sideways (*hia*), combined with a facial expression of shock and pain, Hoang Phi Ho vividly conveys his anguish, despair, and bewilderment upon learning that his wife, Gia Thi, has died after being humiliated by King Tru. In these moments, physical language becomes a primary expressive medium for emotional articulation.

The character traits of Tuong figures are also clearly delineated through physical language. Physical movements whether performed with bare hands or with the use of props are skillfully employed to portray Tuong character types. A treacherous court official in sycophantic roles, for example, may be characterized through gestures such as flicking a fan, lightly stroking the beard, or clasping the hands behind the back while swaying from side to side like a dog wagging its tail before its master. Such movements effectively reveal the character's obsequiousness, moral baseness, and deceitfulness.

Physical language, characterized by exaggerated, stylized, and conventionalized movements, constitutes an indispensable creative and expressive medium for Tuong performers. Tuong choreographic vocabularies, including movement categories such as *khai*, *khan*, *chi*, *khoat*, and *nhay*, consist of conventionalized and stylized physical actions that enable performers to depict character traits, psychological states, as well as the spatial and temporal dimensions of Tuong performance. It is not uncommon for physical expression to generate iconic character images within traditional Tuong theatre figures that remain unforgettable to Tuong audiences, such as Khuong Linh Ta in *Son Hau* or Nguyet Co in *Vo Tam Tu Executes the Fox*.

Physical language in Tuong performance also functions as a system of linguistic messages endowed with multiple communicative functions, through which meaning is transmitted to the audience as the receiver of Tuong artistic works. The linguistic messages perceived by audiences through the physical language of Tuong characters on stage contribute significantly to the formation of archetypal figures in traditional Vietnamese theatre. It is precisely through this physical expression, with its multiple layers of meaning conveyed by exaggerated, stylized, and conventionalized gestures, that Tuong generates what may be described as "special linguistic messages" distinctly characteristic of Tuong.

## 2. AN OVERVIEW OF THE TUONG PLAY VO TAM TU EXECUTES THE FOX

*Ho Nguyet Co's Transformation into a Fox* is also known as *Vo Tam Tu Executes the Fox* or *Tiet Giao Seizes the Jewel*. The Tuong narrative recounts the story of Nguyet Co, who was originally a fox. Through long and arduous cultivation, she attains immortality and becomes a celestial being. Despite this transformation, Ho Nguyet Co continues to yearn for human life and desires to become fully human. She is granted a Humanity Jewel, which allows her to assume human form as long as she retains it; once the jewel is lost, she is destined to revert permanently to her original form as a fox.

After bidding farewell to her mentor, Ho Nguyet Co descends from the mountain and marries Vo Tam Tu; both are accomplished military commanders. Yet becoming human proves more difficult than being a fox or an immortal, as human beings are easily ensnared by desire and temptation. During a battle between the couple and Tiet Giao, a young and handsome warrior, Ho Nguyet Co becomes infatuated with him. Having suffered defeat and learned the secret of Ho Nguyet Co's supernatural power, Tiet Giao feigns affection for her. During an intimate encounter, he pretends to be gravely ill and asks to borrow her jewel to cure himself. Trusting him, Ho Nguyet Co relinquishes the precious jewel, allowing Tiet Giao to seize it. Deprived of the jewel, Ho Nguyet Co instantly reverts to her original fox form, condemned to remain so forever.

The Tuong play *Vo Tam Tu Executes the Fox*, popularly known to audiences as *Ho Nguyet Co's Transformation into a Fox*, was written by Quynh Phu Nguyen Dieu. Although it may be regarded as one of the shortest plays in the history of classical Tuong, it is arguably one of the most enduring and remarkable. More than one hundred and fifty years after its creation, the play continues to be remembered by audiences primarily under the title *Ho Nguyet Co's Transformation into a Fox*, rather than its original title. The work's enduring vitality lies in its profound and innovative ideological and artistic values, which have secured its lasting presence in the hearts of Tuong enthusiasts.

This play embodies significant achievements in both Tuong dramaturgy and Tuong performance art. Within just a few dozen pages, Nguyen Dieu condenses an entire human tragedy. Through their refined and masterful performance techniques, Tuong artists have brought to life classic scenes that have transcended time and continue to resonate powerfully with audiences.

### 3. PHYSICAL LANGUAGE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF CHARACTER IN THE TUONG PLAY HO NGUYET CO'S TRANSFORMATION INTO A FOX

*Vo Tam Tu Executes the Fox* is regarded as a particularly distinctive work within classical Tuong theatre due to the rare and striking transformation of character traits it presents. This uniqueness lies in the transformation of Nguyet Co's character from a human being to a creature governed by animal instincts after the loss of the Humanity Jewel. As a fox transformed into a human, Nguyet Co possesses a passionate, intense, and sharp personality; she is enamored with beauty yet naïve and overly trusting. She readily descends the mountain to marry Vo Tam Tu and, together with her husband, fearlessly enters the battlefield to fight the enemy. However, once she loses the Humanity Jewel, Nguyet Co reverts to her original form, embodying the instinctual and untamed nature of a wild animal. This transitional scene encompassing both bodily transformation and character change from human to beast constitutes one of the most remarkable and canonical scenes in traditional Tuong performance.

The physical language of the characters in *Ho Nguyet Co's Transformation into a Fox* is exploited to its fullest extent, playing a crucial role in the construction of character. When Ho Nguyet Co appears as a young woman, her physical language is gentle, supple, and alluring. Through refined footwork, fluid movement, and graceful arm gestures, the Tuong performer creates an image of Nguyet Co that is profoundly human and imbued with emotional depth. During her combat scenes with Tiet Giao, the choreographed physical exchanges between the two characters are condensed yet highly expressive, vividly revealing Nguyet Co's strength and her determination to conquer him.

The fox-transformation scene marks a dramatic turning point in Nguyet Co's character. As her body gradually reverts to that of a fox, her physical language shifts from human movements to those characteristic of the animal affecting her gait, hands, facial expression, and gaze. At this stage, Nguyet Co's character is no longer wholly human but oscillates between human consciousness and animal instinct. When her human nature prevails, she suffers intensely from her naïveté and sensual desire, which have caused her to lose the fruit of a thousand years of cultivation. When her animal nature dominates, she howls, thrashes, and struggles violently. This scene has been interpreted with remarkable creativity and virtuosity by generations of traditional Tuong performers. The transitions between human and fox physicality, between human character and animal instinct, and between humanity and bestiality are rendered with coherence and artistic mastery, generating a powerful and enduring appeal for Tuong audiences across generations.

The transformation from human to fox is articulated not only through external physical form but also through character psychology. As the fox nature overtakes her body, Nguyet Co develops claws, a tail, and fur; she can no longer speak human language, uttering only the characteristic howls of an animal. She is unable to mount her horse, which recoils in terror at her bestial form and flees into the forest. Nguyet Co thus transforms from a passionate woman into a wounded fox, emotionally shattered and crouching within the body of a beast. Ultimately, she returns to seek her husband, only to face the merciless blade of Vo Tam Tu. This entire scene has been rendered with extraordinary expressiveness by generations of Tuong performers such as People's Artist Man Thu and People's Artist Minh Gai, through their masterful and exhaustive exploitation of physical language. Every movement, every convulsion of Nguyet Co as her body shifts from human to fox, is articulated through physical expression with exceptional skill, creating a powerful dramatic impact across the entire play. Tuong performers flexibly employ traditional choreographic vocabularies such as *khoan tay*, *chi*, *lan*, *xien xia*, and especially *keo ngua*, in combination with physical movement, to portray Nguyet Co's character both in her human state and in her animal transformation - producing a distinctive and highly creative aesthetic unique to Tuong theatre.

Tiet Giao represents a quintessential wartime villain scheming, cunning, and deceitful - and is constructed as a canonical model character in traditional Tuong performance. Depicted as a young general with a red-painted face and a handsome appearance, Tiet Giao embodies the archetype of a treacherous hero who seeks victory and military glory by any means necessary, including deception and the exploitation of a woman.

Tiet Giao's cunning and duplicity are sharply articulated through physical language, particularly in his combat scenes with Nguyet Co and most notably in the jewel-seizing episode. Despite losing to Nguyet Co in three successive encounters, he becomes determined to uncover the source of her power. Upon discovering that her strength derives from the Humanity Jewel cultivated over a thousand years, he devises a plot to seize it. Aware of Nguyet Co's attraction to his handsome appearance, Tiet Giao - despite lacking genuine affection deliberately seduces her. Through supple physical movements, choreographed hand gestures, *xien* and *chi* techniques within the Tuong movement system, combined with expressive acting, the image of Tiet Giao as a calculating seducer who deceives Nguyet Co and steals her jewel is vividly established, reinforcing his character traits.

Vo Tam Tu is constructed as a character embodying the virtues of a gentleman, yet marked by haste and impulsiveness. Although he fights wholeheartedly for his country and his king, he persistently urges his wife, Nguyet Co, to participate in battle and to secure swift victory. It is precisely this character trait that leads to tragedy. Upon learning that Nguyet Co has returned defeated, Vo Tam Tu hastily seeks her out. In the darkness of night, without careful consideration, he encounters only a suffering fox writhing in agony and pleading desperately, unable to recognize his wife. Without hesitation, he strikes down the fox. Only afterward does his mentor reveal that the creature he killed was Nguyet Co, plunging him into profound grief.

The scene of Vo Tam Tu executing the fox is regarded as a canonical moment in traditional Tuong theatre, performed almost entirely through choreography and physical language. Vo Tam Tu holds a torch, employing circular footwork across the stage in search of Nguyet Co, while she rolls and writhes in desperate attempts to escape. When she is discovered and pursued by Vo Tam Tu's drawn sword, Nguyet Co moves almost entirely on all fours, dodging the blade, pleading through prostrations and physical gestures, and struggling vainly to produce human speech—until she finally succumbs to Vo Tam Tu's fatal strike.

Through *Ho Nguyet Co's Transformation into a Fox*, Tuong performance art reaches a pinnacle of classical refinement in the construction, exploration, and portrayal of character. Employing a language of estrangement, symbolic convention, and stylized abstraction, the play depicts phenomena that do not exist in reality but only in human imagination. Yet it has captivated generations of audiences, who continue to be fascinated by both the story and its characters. The archetypal qualities of these characters have permeated everyday discourse, reflected in sayings such as “do not be naïve like Nguyet Co” or “as cunning and deceitful as Tiet Giao,” thereby attesting to the profound and lasting appeal once achieved by traditional Tuong theatre.

#### 4. PHYSICAL LANGUAGE IN THE REPRESENTATION OF CHARACTERS' EMOTIONAL STATES IN THE TUONG PLAY HO NGUYET CO'S TRANSFORMATION INTO A FOX

The use of dance and physical language by Tuong performers to depict the emotional states of characters in *Ho Nguyet Co's Transformation into a Fox*, also known as *Vo Tam Tu Executes the Fox*, has generated profound artistic value and enduring fascination for audiences. Through stylized choreography and codified bodily expression, Tuong artists convey complex inner emotions with remarkable intensity and clarity.

Tuong performers skillfully employ conventionalized and stylized movement vocabularies to articulate the intricate psychological states of Nguyet Co as she stands on the brink of tragedy forced to relinquish her greatest happiness, that of being human, and return to the existence of a fox. Her overwhelming fear is expressed when she gazes into the water and sees her human features gradually vanish, replaced by those of a fox. The frenzied itch as her fingernails and toenails lengthen into claws, the blurring and eventual loss of her human voice, the tongue stiffening and failing to articulate human speech all are rendered through physical language rather than realistic depiction. Overarching these physical changes is an emotional state of despair, regret, and profound anguish, interwoven with terror, as she realizes that the hard-earned reward of centuries of cultivation has been lost in a single moment of passion and weakness. This inner collapse is crystallized in her lament, as she struggles to sing of years of cultivation undone in an instant and desperately implores Tiet Giao to return the jewel.

All of Nguyet Co's inner emotional states are expressed through the highly integrated and refined system of Tuong performance art, painstakingly developed by generations of artists. Central to this achievement is the masterful use of physical language, which creates scenes of extraordinary dramatic power and aesthetic singularity. Choreographic sequences and bodily movements are continuously condensed and creatively transformed to reveal the complexity of Nguyet Co's emotions - both after the loss of the Humanity Jewel and before it, when she is still infatuated with Tiet Giao.

In contrast to the despair that follows her deception, Nguyet Co's emotional state during her encounters and combat with Tiet Giao is that of an infatuated lover, captivated by his handsome appearance and martial prowess. This fascination overwhelms her reason and drives her desire to conquer him. As she engages in martial combat, she simultaneously flirts with him; gestures such as caressing his cheek, casting flirtatious glances, or teasingly swinging his spear when she seizes it are exploited by the performer to vividly convey Nguyet Co's emotional turbulence and romantic obsession in this scene.

The intimate encounter staged between Nguyet Co and Tiet Giao is a scene in which the emotional states of both characters are laid bare. While Nguyet Co is consumed by sensual passion, Tiet Giao embodies curiosity, calculation, and deception,

driven by his ambition to seize the Humanity Jewel and appropriate her power. Nguyet Co's actions are instinctive and emotionally driven, evident in her movements and stage postures; Tiet Giao, by contrast, reveals his duplicity through calculated gestures, postures, a sly smile, and self-satisfied, scheming glances. The physical language of both characters, as interpreted by traditional Tuong performers, plays a crucial role in heightening the dramatic appeal of the play and in clearly articulating their respective emotional states.

The emotional state of Vo Tam Tu upon realizing that he has mistakenly killed his wife is likewise conveyed through choreography and physical language, leaving a deeply moving impression on Tuong audiences. When informed by his mentor that the fox he struck down was in fact Nguyet Co - who had cultivated herself from a fox into a human - Vo Tam Tu spins his body on his feet, stretches out his trembling arms, leaps upward, and then collapses heavily onto the ground, his face and eyes vacant with shock. He begins to sing words of sorrow, trembling as he kneels and slides toward Nguyet Co's body, cradling her in his arms and weeping in profound grief.

Tuong performance art is fundamentally grounded in principles of stylization, convention, and symbolic representation. The language of physical movement in Tuong adheres to these same principles and enables performers to express an extensive range of emotional states from the simplest to the most complex. Through this highly codified yet flexible system of physical language, Tuong artists are able to render the inner lives of characters with exceptional depth and expressive power.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The analysis of physical language in Tuong performance, as manifested through the construction of character and the expression of emotional states in the play *Vo Tam Tu Executes the Fox*, has shed light on the linguistic function of performance and on a fundamental issue in poetics articulated by R. Jakobson: "*The basic problem of poetics is the question of what makes a verbal message a work of art.*"

In *Vo Tam Tu Executes the Fox*, physical language in performance is embodied in Tuong choreography, codified movement patterns, and the gestural lines of the performer's body-exaggerated, stylized, and conventionalized - to convey archetypal character models within traditional Tuong theatre. The elements of convention, symbolism, and stylization in Tuong physical language serve a dual purpose: they articulate the inner dimension - the expressive content of the character - while simultaneously shaping the outer dimension - the formal mode of expression. Together, these elements construct a distinctive theatrical world, a unique mode of existence governed by shared conventions and tacit agreements between Tuong performers and audiences. It is precisely this mutual understanding that allows physical language to function as an artistic language and to transform performance into a work of art - an archetypal artistic image created by the performer through the character they embody.

Tuong performers employ physical language with remarkable mastery to depict emotion, environment, inner psychology, and outward appearance. This virtuoso use of bodily expression plays a decisive role in constituting physical language as a fundamental component of Tuong performance art and in shaping the aesthetic integrity of a Tuong theatrical work. The uniqueness of physical language in Tuong - realized through the performer's expressive transmission and the audience's active reception - endows Tuong theatre with an extraordinary and compelling artistic identity. It is this distinctive quality that makes Tuong profoundly singular, unmistakably expressive, and quintessentially Tuong.

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