

A Game-Theoretical Comparison of Vietnamese Folk Riddles and Folk Riddle-Singing: Verbal Artistry in Strategic Interaction

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Abstract - Vietnamese folk riddles and folk riddle-singing share many similarities in both content and verbal artistry, while each retains its own distinctive generic features. Identifying these distinctive characteristics through comparative analysis has long attracted scholarly attention. Meanwhile, Game Theory has been increasingly adopted as an analytical framework in Vietnamese literary studies. Against this background, the present study applies Game Theory to compare Vietnamese folk riddles and folk riddle-singing from the perspective of verbal artistry, with the aim of clarifying the distinctive characteristics of each genre.

Keywords - Folklore, Compare, Folk Riddles and Folk Riddles-Singing, Game Theory.

I. INTRODUCTION

Despite the long-standing tradition of examining Vietnamese folklore from cultural, historical, aesthetic, and other disciplinary perspectives, approaching folk verbal forms as strategic interactive games remains relatively unexplored. Game Theory, originally developed in mathematics, economics, and the behavioral sciences, provides a valuable analytical framework for explaining how individuals make decisions in interactive situations, where each participant's choices are shaped by the anticipated actions of others (von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944). Within the corpus of Vietnamese folklore, folk riddles and folk riddle-singing function not only as forms of entertainment and vehicles for transmitting traditional knowledge but also as verbal games governed by strategic interaction. In these genres, the riddler and the solver or, in the case of riddle-singing, the performers engaged in the exchange do more than communicate through language. They participate in a dynamic intellectual contest in which every riddle, verse, metaphor, and figurative expression constitutes a strategic move intended to challenge, anticipate, and influence the other participant.

Applying Game theory to a comparative study of Vietnamese folk riddles and folk riddle-singing offers a new perspective on the verbal artistry of these two genres. This approach not only elucidates the interactive mechanisms between participants but also reveals the strategic principles underlying linguistic choices, the construction of riddle texts, and the organization of information. More importantly, it provides a theoretical basis for identifying both the shared strategic thinking embedded in Vietnamese folk verbal traditions and the genre-specific characteristics shaped by different performance contexts. From this perspective, folk riddles and folk riddle-singing can be understood not merely as recreational activities but also as expressions of communal intelligence, creativity, and cultural knowledge.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK, LITERATURE REVIEW, AND RESEARCH METHODS

A. Theoretical Framework

a. Game Theory

Game theory, originally developed in economics, mathematics, and the behavioral sciences, provides a theoretical framework for explaining decision-making in interactive situations, where each participant's choices are shaped by the anticipated actions of others. Since the classic publication *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944), the theory of games has been used in many fields to model

strategic interaction, such as economics, political science, evolutionary biology, and sociology. In the last twenty years, its uses have slowly trickled into linguistics and cultural studies, especially in those that view communication as a language game (Bacharach, 2006; Clark, 1996). In this view, each speech act becomes a tactical maneuver in an interactive event that is controlled by an implicit set of rules and a common communicative goal (Lewis, 1969; Pinker et al., 2008).

Game theory studies situations where the outcome depends on the behaviors of multiple players, with each player selecting a strategy to maximize their own utility. The fundamental elements of a game include:

Table 1. Core Concepts and Fundamental Components of Game Theory

No.	Core Concept	Content & Role
1	Players	The individuals or groups participating in the game. In Game Theory, players make strategic decisions to achieve their objectives. In literary contexts, they may include authors, characters, narrators, performers, or audiences.
2	Strategies	The alternative plans, actions, or decisions available to each player. Players select strategies that maximize their expected outcomes while anticipating the choices of others.
3	Payoffs	The benefits or outcomes resulting from a particular combination of strategies. Payoffs may include profit, success, satisfaction, prestige, knowledge, or other forms of utility depending on the context.
4	Game Forms	The structural types of games, including static (simultaneous), dynamic (sequential), repeated, cooperative, and non-cooperative games. The game form determines how interactions unfold.
5	Nash Equilibrium	A stable strategic outcome in which no player can improve their payoff by changing their strategy alone, assuming all other players maintain their current strategies.
6	Information	The level of knowledge available to players regarding the game, the rules, and opponents' actions. Information may be perfect or imperfect, and symmetric or asymmetric, influencing strategic decision-making.
7	Zero-Sum / Non-Zero-Sum Games	Zero-sum games involve one player's gain being exactly another player's loss. Non-zero-sum games allow players to achieve mutual gains through cooperation or shared benefits.
8	Repeated Games	Games played multiple times, allowing players to learn from previous interactions, adjust strategies, build reputations, and encourage cooperation or retaliation over time.
9	Dominant Strategy	A strategy that consistently provides the highest payoff for a player regardless of the strategies chosen by other players. When available, it is considered the player's optimal choice.
10	Deterrence and Rewards/Punishments	Strategic mechanisms that influence opponents' future behavior through the threat of punishment or the promise of rewards, particularly important in repeated interactions where future consequences affect present decisions.

Furthermore, "games" are categorized into two primary models:

- First, the Apollonian model emphasizes order, rules, strict formality, control, logic, and a clearly defined structure.
- Second, the Dionysian model accentuates emotional and instinctual experiences, where players are liberated from rigid regulations and immerse themselves in a powerful, highly emotional flow of energy.

b. Vietnamese Folk Riddles and Folk Riddle-Singing

Vietnamese folk riddles and folk riddle-singing are two widely practiced forms of Vietnamese folklore. According to the Dictionary of literary terms, a folk riddle is a genre of oral literature that represents objects and phenomena through concealment, semantic transformation, and deliberate ambiguity. Traditionally performed in communal settings, it serves not only to entertain but also to test participants' reasoning abilities and

knowledge (Le Ba Han, Tran Dinh Su, & Nguyen Khac Phi, 2007). In terms of content, folk riddles draw primarily on familiar objects, natural phenomena, and everyday experiences. Their verbal artistry is characterized by brevity and by strategic linguistic devices including indirect naming, semantic displacement, and intentional ambiguity that obscure the referent and require the solver to infer the correct answer.

Folk riddle-singing, in contrast, is a performative folk genre that integrates riddling with sung dialogue. Pham Con Son (2002, p. 526) defines it as a popular rural cultural activity that entertains and educates the community and develops their minds. Folk riddle-singing is not only a test of logic but also a way of socializing and even court-wishing, especially during traditional festivals and communal songs. Riddle singing differs from the short, formulaic construction of folk riddles in that it is structured as a complete lyrical performance whose content is made up of familiar objects, natural phenomena and practical knowledge in the context of everyday life.

Although both genres are founded on dialogic interaction, logical reasoning, and linguistic creativity, they differ substantially in the strategic organization of verbal communication. Previous studies have examined Vietnamese folk riddles and folk riddle-singing either independently or through descriptive comparison. However, relatively little attention has been devoted to explaining their shared characteristics and, more importantly, their distinctive features from the perspective of strategic interaction. By applying Game Theory as the principal analytical framework, the present study seeks to provide a systematic comparison of the verbal artistry of these two genres and to contribute to a deeper understanding of their distinctive literary and cultural characteristics.

B. Literature Review

Comparative research between folk riddles and riddle-singing remains an under-explored domain with significant research gaps. Nevertheless, this subject has garnered noticeable attention from a number of prominent scholars. Specifically:

- In *Vietnamese Riddles* (1999) by Nguyen Van Trung, the author conceptualizes riddle-singing as a sub-genre of folk music. Although riddle-singing is only presented as a minor section within a broader study dedicated to the riddle genre, it fundamentally highlights the intrinsic relationship between these two forms.
- In *Vietnamese Folk Literature* (1998), edited by Dinh Gia Khanh and published by Hanoi Education Publishing House, researcher Chu Xuan Dien addresses riddle-singing within the chapter titled "Riddles" (Câu đố). In this volume, riddle-singing is classified as a constituent component of the overarching riddle genre.
- In *Vietnamese Folk Literature* (2004), published by Vietnam National University Hanoi Press, Le Chi Que examines the relationship between folk riddles and riddle-singing, postulating that riddle-singing is the developmental byproduct and evolutionary result of the riddle genre. Although Le Chi Que restricts his analysis to a few readily observable characteristics when comparing the two genres, his assertions possess substantial scholarly value in delineating boundaries and identifying inter-genre relationships within the flow of Vietnamese popular literature.
- In the article "The Relationship Between Riddles and Folk Songs/Folk Music" (2006) by Trieu Nguyen, published in the *Journal of Folk Culture Source*, No. 2, the author demonstrates that riddle-singing shares definitive connections with riddles, serving as an intersection between the riddle genre and folk lyrical music. This article was later reintroduced by the author in his monograph *Understanding Vietnamese Riddles* (2010), focusing on differentiating riddles from other folklore genres.
- In *Riddle-Singing and Responsive-Singing in Vietnamese Folk Music Activities* (2012), Trieu Nguyen directly engages in comparing riddles and riddle-singing. The author defines a general description of the commonalities and differences of the two genres, both in terms of content and in terms of expressiveness, trying to rationalize their similarities and differences. While these issues have not been exhaustively unpacked, the arguments presented in the section "A Comparison Between Riddle-Singing and Riddles" provide considerable impetus for further academic investigation.
- In "A Comparison of Vietnamese Folk Riddles and Riddle-Singing" (2013) a master's thesis by Pham Thi Chuc Lien at Ho Chi Minh City University of Education the researcher systematically compares and

contrasts folk riddles and riddle-singing from the dimensions of content and verbal art. This thesis provides unique insights into the intersections and divergences of these two folk genres.

However, the application of Game Theory to compare Vietnamese folk riddles and riddle-singing introduces a distinct and separate research paradigm. This methodological choice allows the article "Applying Game Theory to Compare Vietnamese Folk Riddles and Riddle-Singing from the Dimension of Verbal Art" to shed new light and provide innovative perspectives, thereby more concretely and precisely differentiating these two genres.

C. Research Methods

To achieve the research objectives, this study employs a combination of complementary research methods. Statistical and classificatory methods are used to compile and organize the corpus of Vietnamese folk riddles and folk riddle-singing, thereby establishing a reliable database for subsequent analysis. The descriptive method is employed to examine the characteristics of verbal artistry in both genres and to describe representative texts from which analytical observations are drawn.

The comparative method constitutes the principal analytical approach of this study. Based on the collected corpus, Vietnamese folk riddles and folk riddle-singing are compared according to a set of analytical criteria derived from Game Theory, including strategic organization, the concealment–disclosure mechanism, performance context, and patterns of interaction. This comparison makes it possible to identify both the shared characteristics and the distinctive verbal strategies of the two genres.

Analytical and synthetic methods are applied throughout the study. Analysis facilitates a detailed examination of individual textual features, whereas synthesis integrates these findings into broader conclusions concerning the strategic organization of verbal artistry.

Finally, an interdisciplinary approach provides the overall methodological framework of the study. By integrating insights from Game Theory, folklore studies, linguistics, and cultural studies to move beyond the folkloristic analysis of folk riddles and folk riddle-singing as texts to their analysis as process of strategic interaction. This approach is interdisciplinary, and provided a wider context in understanding their verbal craftsmanship and the intellectual virtuosity that is inherent in the Vietnamese folk traditions.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Within the currents of Vietnamese folklore, riddles and riddle-singing constitute two distinctive forms of communication that are simultaneously artistic and deeply social. Under the lens of Game Theory, these two genres can be approached as communicative models embedded with strategic moves, wherein verbal art is deployed by players to control information, guide deduction, and secure a tactical advantage during the responsive dialogue. By conceptualizing riddles and riddle-singing as informational games, we can decipher more profoundly the cognitive structures, the modes of verbal organization, and the artistic strategies employed by the Vietnamese folk in their cultural activities.

A. Verbal Artistry as a Strategic Move

According to game theory, every strategic move aims to create an advantage for a player under conditions of information asymmetry. In Vietnamese folk riddles and folk riddle-singing, the riddle text functions as the primary medium through which the riddler regulates the disclosure of information, maintaining both the challenge of the game and the solver's opportunity for inference. The selection of lexical items, rhythm, and rhetorical devices such as metaphor, metonymy, and inversion not only enhances verbal artistry but also guides the process of interpretation. Verbal artistry therefore functions as a strategic form of interaction that contributes substantially to the intellectual appeal of the riddling exchange.

Vietnamese folk riddles use verbal artistry mainly as a means to generate semantic ambiguity as a way of controlling information. The riddler intentionally provides clues that are ambiguous with respect to the referent, uses figurative language, and/or uses symbolic imagery that leads the solver away from the true referent. According to Pham Thu Yen (2012), "The riddling process involves a unique communicative interaction between

the riddler and the solver, whereby information is encoded and decoded using linguistic strategies and inference. A strategic use of language is a process that demands logical thinking, cultural knowledge and associative thinking skills to determine the right answer.

For example:

Con chi ăn no,
Bụng to mắt híp,
Tiếng kêu ụt ịt,
Nằm thở phì phò?

*Which creature eats until it is full,
With a swollen belly and narrowed eyes?
It grunts "ụt ịt,"
Then lies breathing heavily?
(Author's translation)*

Answer: Pig (lợn or heo) (Trieu Nguyen, 2013).

The initial description "a swollen belly" and "narrowed eyes" is sufficiently general to evoke several domestic animals. However, the onomatopoeic expression ụt ịt together with the image of heavy breathing gradually narrows the range of possible answers. The riddler first introduces misleading information before providing more specific clues, thereby extending the process of inference and gaining a strategic advantage. Within the corpus examined in this study, this strategy of semantic ambiguity appears consistently across different thematic groups, although its degree of complexity varies according to the age and social background of the intended participants.

Vietnamese folk riddle-singing adopts a more open-ended verbal strategy. Rather than restricting interpretation, the riddler intentionally leaves greater semantic space for the respondent to construct a plausible answer. This openness allows multiple lines of reasoning and reflects the interactive nature of the performance. The following examples illustrate this strategy.

Riddle 1

Đố em chi bén hơn dao
Chi rộng hơn biển, chi cao hơn trời
Anh hỏi em, em phải trả lời
Đông tây nam bắc, cái đầu ông trời chỗ mô?

– Thế gian miệng bén hơn dao
Bụng rộng hơn biển, trán cao hơn trời
Anh về kêu đất mà đất ơi
Tới đây em chỉ đầu ông trời anh coi!
(Triều Nguyên, 2013)

*What is sharper than a knife?
What is wider than the sea and higher than the sky?
Answer me if you can:
Where is the head of the Lord of Heaven?
— The tongue is sharper than a knife,
The belly is wider than the sea,
The forehead is higher than the sky.
Go and ask the earth itself,
Then I shall show you where the Lord of Heaven's head is.
(Author's translation)*

Riddle 2

Em ơi chi sắc hơn dao
 Chi sâu hơn bể chi cao hơn trời?
 – Anh ơi mắt sắc hơn dao
 Dạ sâu hơn bể trán cao hơn trời.
 (Nguyễn Chung Anh, 1958)

*What is sharper than a knife?
 What is deeper than the sea and higher than the sky?
 — The eye is sharper than a knife,
 The heart is deeper than the sea,
 The forehead is higher than the sky.
 (Author's translation)*

Although the two riddles pose almost identical questions, their responses differ in the interpretation of images such as the belly, heart, and eye. This openness of meaning allows more than one acceptable solution, thereby encouraging creativity and sustaining interaction between the participants. Such a verbal strategy enhances the attractiveness of riddle-singing, particularly in courtship performances where wit and responsiveness are highly valued.

Folk riddle-singing also employs verbal competition as a means of displaying intelligence, eloquence, and social charm. Consequently, strategic moves extend beyond concealing information to include performative expression. The following example illustrates this feature.

Con mèo nào là mèo không chân không cẳng?
 Con rắn nào là rắn không đầu?
 Con đường nào lắm mưa nắng dãi dầu?
 Con sông nào không có nước, vẫn bắc cầu hàng năm?
 – Con mèo mỡ ái ân là mèo không chân không cẳng
 Con rắn rỏi trường đời là rắn không đầu
 Con đường đời lắm mưa nắng dãi dầu
 Con sông ngân hà không có nước, nhờ quạ bắc cầu hàng năm.
 (Triều Nguyên, 2013)

*Which "cat" has neither legs nor feet?
 Which "snake" has no head?
 Which "road" endures endless sunshine and rain?
 Which "river" has no water, yet a bridge is built across it every year?
 — "Promiscuity" (mèo mỡ) is the "cat" without legs;
 Resilience (rắn rỏi) is the "snake" without a head;
 The journey of life is the "road" weathered by sun and rain;
 The Milky Way is the "river" without water, where magpies build a bridge each year.
 (Author's translation)*

Translator's note: This exchange relies on Vietnamese homonymy and figurative meanings. Words such as mèo ("cat"), rắn ("snake"), đường ("road"), and sông ("river") are reinterpreted metaphorically rather than literally, creating the verbal play that underpins the riddle.

In this example, the artistic effect lies in the exploitation of homonymy and figurative association. Rather than identifying literal objects, the respondent reconstructs the semantic field of each key word through metaphorical interpretation. The success of the response therefore depends not only on logical inference but also on linguistic

creativity and cultural knowledge. This verbal strategy enhances both the performative appeal of the exchange and the audience's appreciation of the respondent's wit.

Another distinctive feature of Vietnamese folk riddle-singing is the close relationship between language and musical performance. Rhythm, rhyme, and meter not only enrich the aesthetic quality of the performance but also influence the participants' cognitive expectations. Through carefully structured sound patterns, the riddler subtly guides the respondent's reasoning while maintaining the uncertainty essential to the game. For example:

Cái gì nó bé, nó cay?
Cái gì nó bé, nó hay cửa quyền?

– Hạt tiêu nó bé, nó cay
Đồng tiền nó bé, nó hay cửa quyền.
(Triều Nguyên, 2013)

*What is small yet spicy?
What is small yet often exercises power?
— Pepper is small yet spicy;
Money is small yet often rules over people.
(Author's translation)*

The regular rhythm and the repeated -ay rhyme (cay / hay) create both musicality and mnemonic effect while subtly directing the respondent's expectations. Here, sound functions not merely as an aesthetic device but also as part of the riddler's strategic control of the interaction. Overall, both Vietnamese folk riddles and folk riddle-singing employ verbal artistry as a strategic resource that increases the intellectual challenge and expressive appeal of the game. However, for each genre, this strategy is developed in different ways for communicative purpose and performance context. Folk riddles are mainly about information control and logical inference, while folk riddle-singing focuses on performative interaction, aesthetics, and the continuation of the dialogue. These differences constitute an important basis for distinguishing the two genres from the perspective of game theory.

B. Concealment and Disclosure of Information through Verbal Artistry

The fundamental mechanism underlying both Vietnamese folk riddles and folk riddle-singing is the concealment and disclosure of information, a form of information asymmetry central to game theory. The questioner knows the answer while the respondent has no such knowledge to start with. The interaction can only be maintained if the questioner is careful not to give too much information (to stimulate inference) while keeping the game challenging. This is the mechanism of concealment and disclosure that also is the artistic ground of verbal expression in both genres.

Vietnamese folk riddles frequently and frequently use metaphor, symbol and sometimes paradox to mask essential attributes of the referent. According to Nguyen Xuan Kinh (2001), folk riddles have a special structure in which the riddler uses metaphor, comparison and associative thinking to obscure the object of the riddle, thus placing an intellectual challenge on the solver. Likewise, as noted by Tran Thi Nhung (2017), generally a folk riddle has two parts: the descriptive text and the answer, while the descriptive part is created using artful devices to intentionally obscure the real referent. From a game theory point of view, this process of information concealment is far from random and is implemented with many different verbal strategies.

For example:
Cá không phải cá,
Chim không phải chim,
Rõ ràng cây có lá,
Mà đẻ ra trứng mới kì.

*(Answer: the Jamaican cherry tree and the egg-fruit tree)
(Ngo Van Canh, 2002)*

*Fish, yet not a fish;
Bird, yet not a bird.
Clearly it is a leafy tree,
Yet strangely, it bears "eggs".
(Author's translation)*

The riddle constructs a sequence of paradoxes "fish, yet not a fish" and "bird, yet not a bird" to disrupt the solver's habitual patterns of categorization. Rather than describing the referent directly, the questioner intentionally creates conceptual conflict that compels the respondent to abandon conventional reasoning and seek an alternative interpretive path. From the perspective of game theory, paradox functions as a strategic signal: it withholds essential information while simultaneously encouraging the solver to revise their reasoning strategy. In this way, the concealment of information stimulates imagination, inference, and intellectual engagement. Another common strategy involves personification, through which animals or objects are represented as human beings. For example:

*Mẹ đi trước đánh cồng đánh mõ,
Con đi sau vừa khóc vừa la.
(Answer: a sow and her piglets)
(Ngo Van Canh, 2002)*

*The mother walks ahead, beating gongs and drums;
The children follow behind, crying and calling.
(Author's translation)*

Although the referent is a sow leading her piglets, the riddle presents them as a human mother and her children. Expressions such as "beating gongs and drums" and "crying and calling" deliberately redirect the solver's perception away from the literal referent. This strategy of personification disguises the object's essential characteristics, creating a gap between linguistic representation and reality. As a result, the respondent must reconstruct the intended meaning through inference rather than direct observation, thereby increasing both the strategic complexity and the artistic appeal of the riddle.

In Vietnamese folk riddle-singing, however, personification serves not only to conceal information but also to enrich the expressive quality of the performance. Consider the following example:

*Cái gì nó bé, nó cay?
Cái gì nó bé, nó hay cửa quyền?
– Hạt tiêu nó bé, nó cay
Đồng tiền nó bé, nó hay cửa quyền.
(Triều Nguyên, 2013)*

*What is small yet spicy?
What is small yet often exercises power?
– Pepper is small yet spicy;
Money is small yet often rules over people.
(Author's translation)*

In this exchange, personification extends beyond the strategic concealment of information. The expression *cửa quyền* ("the exercise of power or authority") metaphorically attributes human agency to money, thereby adding emotional and social resonance to the response. Through this device, the riddle not only preserves the intellectual challenge of the game but also conveys implicit reflections on human relationships and social life. Personification therefore contributes to the lyrical quality of folk riddle-singing, transforming it from a purely intellectual contest into a performative genre through which participants express attitudes and emotions.

In addition to concealment, information is slowly revealed is also vital to maintaining the riddling interaction. In a game theoretical sense, the questioner needs to give the questioner enough clues so that the respondent can

deduce the answer, but not so many that the questioner is certain. These clues are communicated via imagery, symbolism, and rhetorical devices, and information about the referent is gradually revealed, but not compromising the challenge of the game. In Vietnamese folk riddles, information is typically disclosed through metaphorical or personified descriptions that highlight salient characteristics of the referent. These features function as strategic cues, enabling the solver to narrow the range of possible interpretations step by step. For example:

Cho hay duyên nợ bởi trời,
 Vợ chồng âu yếm chẳng rời nhau ra.
 (Answer: the horseshoe crab)
 (Triều Nguyên, 2013)

*Heaven has destined their union;
 Husband and wife never part from one another.
 (Author's translation)*

Although the referent is never mentioned explicitly, expressions such as "destined by Heaven" and "never part from one another" provide essential clues. Rather than describing the animal directly, the riddle foregrounds the symbolic image of inseparable companionship. Within the context of Vietnamese folk culture, these clues naturally evoke the horseshoe crab, an animal traditionally associated with marital fidelity and reflected in the well-known Vietnamese expression *dính như sam* ("as inseparable as horseshoe crabs").

The disclosure of information therefore proceeds incrementally, guiding the respondent from symbolic imagery to the intended referent while preserving the strategic balance between concealment and revelation. The information in folk riddles does not come to reveal the answer; it is meant to lead the person who is trying to solve the riddle by logical inference.

The questioner must carefully regulate the amount of information provided: too few clues make the riddle unsolvable, whereas too many reduce its intellectual appeal. It is closely related to the principle of optimizing information in game theory, in which players try to optimize the information they reveal and withhold to increase the game-theoretic value of their interaction. In Vietnamese folk riddle-singing, the disclosure of information is more dynamic and flexible because it unfolds within a dialogic performance.

Participants alternate between posing and answering riddles, so that each riddle functions not only as a question but also as a cue that encourages the next response. In many cases, the questioner deliberately draws upon familiar images from everyday life, making the clues more accessible while still leaving room for interpretation.

Rather than being disclosed all at once, information emerges progressively through successive exchanges. This reflects the characteristics of folk riddle-singing as a repeated and partially cooperative game, in which maintaining the interaction is as important as producing a correct answer. Consequently, information is generally disclosed more gradually and suggestively than in folk riddles.

For example:
 Con chim trắng cánh mỏ vàng,
 Bay qua cây thị đổ chàng con chi?
 – Con chim trắng cánh mỏ vàng,
 Bay qua cây thị có phải con phượng hoàng không em?
 (Ninh Viet Giao, 2002)

*A white bird with golden wings and a golden beak
 Flies past the persimmon tree which bird is it?
 – A white bird with golden wings and a golden beak,
 Flying past the persimmon tree is it the phoenix?
 (Author's translation)*

In this example, the clues are presented in a relatively straightforward manner. The reference to the bird's white wings, golden beak and connection to persimmon trees is sufficient for the respondent to infer the intended answer. The respondent's reply is not the end of the interaction but it does start a new round of verbal interaction.

A similar pattern appears in the following example:

Đố anh mấy thứ cá đồng
 Một câu anh hát trọn, mới hòng đáng khen?
 – Rô, trê, lóc, sặc, dầy dầy
 Rồng rồng, hũn hũn lộn bầy lia thia.
 (Triều Nguyên, 2013)

*Can you name the freshwater fish?
 Only a complete answer deserves praise.
 – Snakehead, catfish, climbing perch, gourami, and many more:
 dragon fish, hũn hũn, and schools of fighting fish.
 (Author's translation)*

Here the question establishes a relatively easy task, to name freshwater fish. The clues create a well delineated semantic field but give the respondent enough time to show what he or she knows by using a longer answer. Information disclosure thus ensures that the interaction is solvable and interesting, allowing the riddling exchange to proceed further.

From the perspective of game theory, the concealment–disclosure dynamic in Vietnamese folk riddles and folk riddle-singing should not be viewed as two separate processes but as complementary strategies that maintain the balance of the interaction. In folk riddles, the information is gradually revealed, which plays a major role in the process of logical inference, allowing the person who is being riddled to find the answer step by step.

This mechanism is also important to folk riddle-singing, however, for sustaining conversation and inviting further involvement. Linguistic devices in both genres for hiding and revealing information exemplify the high level of folk verbal artistry and the strategic thinking of traditional folk culture in Vietnam.

C. The Influence of the Performance Context on Verbal Strategies

In game theory terms, the game context is of great importance for influencing the strategies used by the players. Strategic decision making is affected by various factors including the nature of the relationship between the players, the goals of interaction, and the communicative context (Myerson, 1991). This point is particularly vivid when applied to the comparison of the performance context of Vietnamese folk riddles and folk riddle-singing, where differences in performance context can profoundly influence verbal artistry and the organization of riddling discourse, thus bringing into play the unique features of each genre.

Vietnamese folk riddles can be performed in different contexts including festivals, social life, work, etc. Vietnamese folk riddles are performed in a relatively flexible context. Despite these varied contexts, they share several common features: at least two participants engage in the riddling exchange, and the primary purposes are entertainment, intellectual training, and the transmission of folk knowledge. The focus of the riddle is not performance itself, so they are usually brief, ordered and succinct in their expression.

Questioners strategically employ descriptive imagery, salient attributes of the referent, and rhetorical devices to conceal the answer while presenting an intellectual challenge for the respondent. Consequently, folk riddles emphasize cognitive competition rather than the maintenance of prolonged social interaction.

By contrast, Vietnamese folk riddle-singing is closely associated with communal performance settings, including traditional festivals, spring celebrations, and courtship singing traditions such as hat vi, hat gheo, hat xoan, and antiphonal singing.

In these contexts, the exchange is not limited to the riddle-solving aspects, but also involves social interaction, friendship, and courtship. Therefore, verbal strategies do not just aim to hide and/or show information, but to sustain performance, musicality and dialogue. Riddle-songs are typically written in a regular rhythm, rhyme, rich imagery, and expressive language and are very flexible in form and often have many social connotations.

Viewed through the lens of game theory, the verbal strategies of folk riddles are designed to achieve immediate effectiveness, whereas those of folk riddle-singing prioritize the continuity of interaction. The difference is mainly dependent on the performance contexts. In folk riddles, each riddle generally constitutes an independent game that concludes once the correct answer is identified. As a result, the questioner's strategy focuses on producing an immediate cognitive challenge, corresponding to the characteristics of an Apollonian mode of play.

In contrast, folk riddle-singing unfolds as a continuous sequence of exchanges in which each response resolves the preceding challenge while simultaneously creating the conditions for the next one. This sequence is designed such that the participants must develop verbal strategies to maintain the dialogue and audience engagement for a long period of time.

In addition, the communal atmosphere provides an audience that in turn compels the performers to be witty and demonstrate their verbal abilities and aesthetic sensitivity. As a result, the verbal craftsmanship of the folk riddle-singing is in general more rich and more complex, including symbolic images, figurative language and expressions that are multi-layered in meaning. These add to the aesthetic and performative quality of the genre, making it more akin to a Dionysian mode of play.

Overall, the performance context plays a decisive role in shaping the verbal strategies of both Vietnamese folk riddles and folk riddle-singing. The differences between the two genres, from a game-theoretical point of view, correspond to two different game structures.

Folk riddles are similar to a one-shot competitive game, while folk riddle-singing has the features of a repeated game in a social context, and verbal strategies are continually adjusted according to the communicative context and the interaction participants' goals. From this perspective, riddling discourse should not only be interpreted as the reflection of language creativity, but also as the result of strategic adaptation to the cultural and social context of the Vietnamese folk communities.

D. Future Research Directions

This study represents an initial attempt to apply game theory to a comparative analysis of Vietnamese folk riddles and folk riddle-singing, contributing to a clearer understanding of their similarities and differences in terms of verbal artistry from an interdisciplinary perspective. However, there are a few drawbacks. The analysis is mostly based on texts that have been published in collections, which may not fully reflect the nature of the original performance context. Moreover, this approach has yet to encompass the broader cultural and social dimensions of the two genres.

Future research may therefore proceed in several directions. The importance of fieldwork should be increased more in local communities where folk riddles and folk riddle-singing are still being performed, in order to study these genres in their live performance setting.

Second, game theory could be combined with complementary approaches such as pragmatics, cultural anthropology, and performance studies to provide a more comprehensive understanding of their verbal strategies and social functions.

Finally, further research may explore the pedagogical potential of folk riddles and folk riddle-singing in the teaching of Vietnamese language and literature, thereby contributing to the preservation and promotion of folk literary heritage in contemporary education. These directions would not only help to verify and extend the findings of the present study but also deepen our understanding of the artistic, cultural, and educational values of Vietnamese folk riddles and folk riddle-singing in contemporary society.

IV. CONCLUSION

Comparing Vietnamese folk riddles and folk riddle-singing from multiple perspectives contributes to a clearer understanding of both the shared characteristics and the distinctive features that have shaped the development of these two genres. By applying game theory to the analysis of their verbal artistry, this study demonstrates that strategic interaction provides a productive analytical framework for explaining how linguistic creativity operates within Vietnamese folk traditions.

First, verbal artistry functions as a strategic move in both genres. Through semantic ambiguity, metaphor, personification, and other rhetorical devices, questioners regulate the disclosure of information while maintaining the intellectual challenge and appeal of the riddling interaction.

Second, although both genres employ the concealment-disclosure dynamic, they differ in its strategic function. Folk riddles generally emphasize intellectual challenge, requiring respondents to infer the answer from carefully controlled clues. Folk riddle-singing, by contrast, adopts a more flexible strategy in which information disclosure also serves to sustain dialogue, reinforce social interaction, and support the performative nature of the exchange.

Third, this comparison indicates that the role of performance context is important in determining verbal strategies. Folk riddles are typically of the Apollonian type of game, with an orderly pattern, explicit rules, logic and quick problem solving. In contrast, folk riddle-singing shows signs of a Dionysian style of play, characterized by emotional involvement, perpetual interaction, and performative expression in a communal setting.

Overall, the findings suggest that the verbal artistry of Vietnamese folk riddles and folk riddle-singing is not merely the product of spontaneous linguistic creativity but reflects a sophisticated system of strategic thinking embedded in folk culture. These genres are a window into the ways that traditional communities made language the medium for intellectual exchange, social interaction, and cultural transmission, and allows you to view it through the lens of game theory. The goal of this interdisciplinary approach is to stimulate ongoing discussion and new approaches to the study of Vietnamese oral traditions and to reaffirm their continued cultural value in historical and contemporary contexts.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declare that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publishing of this paper.

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