## UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA RIVERSIDE

Vietnamese Sorrow: A Study of Literary Discourse in Popular Music Life

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by

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#### ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

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Since 1975, subjects from Vietnam have been resettling around the world in mass numbers, re-positing Vietnamese subjectivities, histories, language, and rituals beyond the nation state. Even outside of Vietnam, many Vietnamese in the diaspora have been affected by Vietnam's postwar and economic reforms. After 1975, the new socialist government deemed the Vietnamese in exile to be the false Vietnamese who betrayed the country (*phån bội*). Their culture was dismissed as being yellow and sickly (*ủy mị*), and their historical presence was erased for reasons of being associated with colonialism and western imperialism. Even today, the Vietnamese refugees are still shunned from Vietnam and cannot be repatriated as Vietnamese citizens.

Without a government, the Vietnamese in exile lost their political identity. In Vietnam, the Vietnamese refugees are conflated with American imperialism, whereas in the United States, they are conflated as communist "gooks." Consequently, Vietnamese popular music became instrumental for many Vietnamese to record and retell alternative histories about the Vietnam War and the old southern Republic of Vietnam. Due to its cultural capital, Vietnamese popular music offer a platform for expressing and fashioning

shared memories and subjectivities. Contrary to the perspective that Vietnamese popular songs point to the Vietnamese as being brainwashed by colonialization and imperialism or refugees trapped in their own trauma and nostalgia, I argue that these songs show advantageous and strategic modes of negotiation in contemporary Vietnamese global cultural politics.

Likewise, as Vietnamese popular music became more politically acceptable in Vietnam, many queer and transgendered performers began using popular music to raise more awareness about queer rights. Ultimately, Vietnamese popular music has been a cultural instrument of expressing social power and critique for subjects bereft of institutional leverage. The soundscape of Vietnamese popular music is an invaluable framework for understanding the interconnected sites and levels of cultural exchange in Vietnam and the diaspora. Not only does it show that Vietnamese subjects and culture are transnational and global, but it also maps them topographically with slopes of power-relations.

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## **Introduction – Regeneration of Cultural Memory and Power**

After the Vietnam War was declared to be over in 1975, the Vietnamese Communist Party dismantled the democratic government of South Vietnam, declaring the country to be unified as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Immediately, structural, social, and cultural reforms swept the country. During the postwar decade, the Vietnamese Communist Party began hunting the Vietnamese affiliated the old southern Republic of Vietnam. Civilians in urban areas were forced to relocate into the wilderness where they had to learn to survive in the new society (*đi kinh tế mới*). As a result, many Vietnamese fled the country as refugees.

Social unrest was further complicated by economic change: private enterprise and trade were forbidden in Vietnam, restricting people's access to food, clothing, healthcare, and other resources. The Vietnamese currency changed on multiple occasions, and the state banks were failing. Although it has been dubbed historically as the period of post-liberation (*sau giải phóng*), many Vietnamese of the older generation also remember it as the era of mass scarcity, "re-education" (*cải tạo*), forced labor, and the Vietnamese boat refugees (*vượt biên* or *tuyền nhân*).

1054 to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> From 1954 to 1975, South Vietnam, known officially as the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) was a democratic state, whereas North Vietnam, officially the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), was a socialist state governed by the Vietnamese Communist Party (Viet Minh).



Figure 0.1: South Vietnamese currency before 1975



Figure 0.2: Vietnamese currency after 1975  $^2$ 

Postwar demilitarization in Vietnam included many cultural reforms to religion, history, education, music, and literature. In particular, Vietnamese popular music was heavily censored due to its association with the fallen southern Republic of Vietnam. Similar to many of the Vietnamese of the old republic, popular music was criminalized and forced to hide behind closed doors or flee abroad.

The more the Vietnamese Communist Party distanced itself from popular music and the Vietnamese refugees, the stronger the association between the two became. Soon, Vietnamese popular songs (*tân nhạc*) became revered as the pre-1975 songs (*nhạc trước* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> This is only one version. After 1975, the currency changed multiple times.

75) <sup>3</sup> of the old country by many of the Vietnamese in the diaspora. Despite its more political name, there has been an overall consensus among the older generation that many Vietnamese popular songs are still apolitical songs about the mundane affairs of everyday life, romance, friendships, family, and country. Regardless, pre-1975 songs have been instrumental in the formation of diasporic communities and subjectivities.

On the surface, the term "pre-1975" serves as a temporal marker, distinguishing the earlier repertoire of Vietnamese songs from the later repertoire of songs produced in Vietnam after 1975. However, during the postwar decade, many Vietnamese in Vietnam and the diaspora were suspicious of Vietnamese songs composed or revised after 1975 as being propagandist. Song repertoires became suggestive of political affiliations. Consequently, pre-1975 songs became culturally and politically significant in the ways people listened, played, understood, and appreciated them.

Many Vietnamese of the older generation refer to the pre-1975 era as the Golden Age of Vietnamese music, due to the prolific amount of songs composed in South Vietnam. Although many pre-1975 composers like Lam Phuong were still composing songs in France and the United States, many Vietnamese of the older generation have suggested that there was an apparent lack of newer songs. Generally, it is believed after 1975 the the production of Vietnamese popular music loss momentum (Reyes 143).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> In most conversational settings, "pre-1975 songs" refers to Vietnamese popular songs composed in South Vietnam during the 1960s and early 1970s. It can refer to earlier popular songs or songs of another genre. However, people are generally more familiar with popular songs from 1960-1975, and the concept of pre-1975 music relies heavily on memory. Understandably, most Vietnamese, old or young, do not recognize the entire repertoire of one composer, much less the entire repertoire of pre-1975 songs. Since many pre-1975 composers continued writing songs in the diaspora, like Lam Phương, Anh Bằng, and Nhật Ngân, it is common to mix the songs from the pre-1975 and post-1975 era.

However, the perception of Vietnamese music in the diaspora as being stagnantly trapped in "bubble" (Valverde 50) is somewhat misleading, because it overlooks the commercial rise of Vietnamese popular music after the war. Particularly, the contributions from technological innovation in the diaspora revived the pre-1975 song repertoire. In the form CD, VHS, and DVD, Vietnamese popular music entered the realm of global commerce.

In addition, new media platforms enabled Vietnamese popular music to become oriented more with the performing arts, which bumped sales tremendously in the 1980s. After the success of their *cåi lwong*<sup>4</sup> venture with Eurovision, the company Thúy Nga started a new division called Paris By Night, which focused solely on uniting the layers of Vietnamese popular music with the awe of dance, costume, and fashion. With the arrival of karaoke, Vietnamese popular music became a video-game, where the microphone was the controller.<sup>5</sup>

New shows and products offered more ways to commodify and disseminate

Vietnamese music and culture. Vietnamese popular music trended around the world like
the pop-up headlights on sport cars, and eventually, it became the most dominant form of

Vietnamese music in the diaspora and Vietnam.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Translated as "reformed theatre," the significance of *cåi luong* shows and performers in Southern Vietnamese life pre-1975 is comparable to cinema culture in the United States. Although South Vietnam did have films and actors, the older generation seem to be more familiar *cai luong* titles and performers, such as Huong Lan, Út Bạch Lan, and Út Trà Ôn. Oftentimes, the Vietnamese went to cinema to watch *cåi luong*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Outside of classroom instruction, karaoke is cultural venue where people acquire or begin acquiring Vietnamese as a written language. In the diaspora, it is not uncommon for bilingual Vietnamese speakers to start learning to read Vietnamese from their contact with karaoke.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Although the production and performance pre-1975 songs were heavily censored in Vietnam until the 21<sup>st</sup> century, pre-1975 songs still circulated in Vietnam due to piracy.

Aside from commerce, there is also a cultural and discursive explanation for the transnational expansion of Vietnamese popular music and culture. As Nhi Lieu suggests, Vietnamese music offers an imagining of Vietnamese diasporic subjectivities that is an alternative to the impoverished refugee (81). In this light, Vietnamese subjects and communities are more visible as transnational and contemporary rather than historical.

Indeed, Vietnamese popular music is not limited to only cultural references of the past. Nevertheless, war and memories have been major themes of Vietnamese popular music songs, transitioning Vietnamese culture and subject-hood from Vietnam to the diaspora and from the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the midst of its glitz and glamour, Vietnamese popular music was also reminding the Vietnamese about their histories and traditions. As such, pre-1975 songs also gave back something old as well as offering something new.

In chapter 6, "Diasporic Sorrow," I discuss the issues of the Vietnamese refugees becoming subaltern through the process of postwar migration. Vietnamese popular music has been an important cultural tool in the diaspora, along with the print capital, transcending the personal memories of many Vietnamese refugees into forms of shared histories and culture. Popular music mobilized many Vietnamese individuals in an overall diasporic effort of creating histories and culture resistant of various hegemonic institutions displacing and erasing the Vietnamese refugees.

Due to the Vietnam War, many Vietnamese from the southern Republic of Vietnam lost more than just their homes and families. They also lost discursive power and authority. Politically and legally, South Vietnam existed no longer after 1975. As such,

the Vietnamese of the old country would no longer be recognized politically, unless they go through some legal maneuvering where municipal sites or objects are deemed as "historical" sites or artifacts. Without a state, the Vietnamese from the fallen republic were mistaken for the Việt Cộngs (VC) of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Vietnamese popular songs have been a crucial medium for the Vietnamese refugees after the war. Songs were used as narrations to organize and explain what-where-why-who-how events. In lieu of political and institutional authority, Vietnamese popular music enabled personal memories to manifest tangibly, where they could be recognized and shared globally via commodification. Although they cannot point to their history in a textbook, national museum, or war memorial, the Vietnamese of the older generation could still play them on DVD and YouTube to their children.

Consequently, the continued relevance of Vietnamese popular songs from the pre1975 repertoire points to an ongoing dialogue between the Vietnamese in the diaspora
and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam that continues to teach the dismissive perspective
where the Vietnamese of the South and the refugees are traitors. Vietnamese popular
songs are also dialogue with the Study of Vietnamese Music and UNESCO, which have
been accusing the South Vietnamese of corrupting the authenticity of Vietnamese culture
with their supposed colonial mentality.<sup>7</sup>

Pre-1975 songs dialogue with United State History where Americans are taught that the South Vietnam was a puppet regime of the Cold War. Vietnamese popular music

n Vân Khê explains that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Trần Vân Khê explains that popular music (westernized music) was derived from a trajectory of Vietnamese culture, where the colonized had an inferiority complex, "confusing progress and modernization with westernization" (205). Trần describes the "native civil servants" as "former men of letters" who upon receiving a western education began imitating western decadence by "[drinking] milk in the morning and champagne in the evening" (199).

dialogues with American literature<sup>8</sup> and Hollywood films<sup>9</sup> where the South Vietnamese are often conflated as gooks and shadows in rice paddies. Lastly, Vietnamese popular music dialogues with the collective voices of Vietnamese American Literature,<sup>10</sup> documentaries,<sup>11</sup> and Asian American scholars, which have been misrepresenting the Vietnamese refugees and their expression of civil engagements as symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD).

To some degree, Vietnamese popular music does reaffirm the points made by Asian American scholars like Yen Le Espiritu who suggest that Vietnamese diasporic histories are located outside of the "state-sanctioned commemorative discourses and practices" (20). However, it does not reveal them as the gestures of "strategic and self-imposed silence" or other variant of traumatic expression. Instead, pre-1975 songs reveal Vietnamese history in the sites of mass narration, surplus goods, and various engagements of cultural performance and practice. Thus, one can buy tickets and watch the subjugated histories of the refugees in live concerts or buy them as DVDs (Figure 0.3).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> e.g. Michael Herr, Tim O'Brien, and Bobby Anne Mason

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Kinney, Katherine. Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Authors like Andrew Lam Quang Pham.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Documentaries like *Oh*, *Saigon* (2007).



Figure 0.3: "Children of the Lost Nation" concert by Asia Entertainment

In this light, the collective memories and stories of the older generated are not silent flashes of shame and anxiety which are withheld from the younger generation. But rather, they are memories and modes of shared grieving which many of the younger generation have been interpreting with embarrassment as F.O.B.<sup>12</sup> culture.

While it does not have the power to revive love ones or return homes taken forcefully by war, Vietnamese popular music has enabled rituals of remembering, mourning, and commemorating in both the private and public. While it does not represent the perspectives of the all Vietnamese refugees or the old generation, Vietnamese popular music has expressed the most dominate cultural perspective of their generation, from their generation, and in their own mother-tongue.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Fresh-off-the-boat (FOB) is derived as a derogatory term used to refer to new immigrants.

Songs of Vietnamese popular music, including the pre-1975 songs, are transnational cultural objects and perspectives, which have been changing and adjusting throughout its global geopolitical landscape. Despite heavy censorship in the past, pre-1975 songs are still flourishing as contemporary culture in the both the mainstream of Vietnam. As such, they express many perspectives from many different generations transnationally.

For several decades after the war, pre-1975 songs were heavily censored in Vietnam, forcing their production and circulation underground and abroad. Ironically, Vietnamese popular songs became an import of Vietnam. This changed since the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when Vietnam began producing and saturating the market with pre-1975 songs again. In chapter 3, "Cu Ly Sorrow," I explore the rising production and culture of pre-1975 songs in Vietnam as the country transitions economically into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The manner of how pre-1975 resurfaced again in Vietnam is still unclear. The most common explanation has been economics: in 1986, Vietnam's transition to a more liberal economy led to a loosening of Vietnamese popular music censorship. While Jason Gibbs explains that Vietnamese rock music continued to stay alive in Vietnam after the war, <sup>13</sup> he also leaves room to ponder about how many pre-1975 songs in Vietnam went from being almost banned entirely to being mass produced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Even in the decades following the economic renovation of 1986 (Đôi Mới), the production of pre-1975 songs in Vietnam was still attached with the threat of prosecution. In 2006, the singer Đam Vĩnh Hưng was fined for his album of pre-1975 songs, and

<sup>13 &</sup>quot;How Does Hanoi Rock?"

physical copies of the album were confiscated by Vietnam's Ministry of Culture (Việt Báo). However, when compared to earlier cases, Đam Vĩnh Hưng's punishment was a slap on the wrist. During the era Vietnam War, the Vietnamese communist imprisoned musicians for playing popular songs for almost a decade (Nga Pham).

Around 2008-9, Đam Vĩnh Hưng released another album of pre-1975 songs without any reported issues. By 2010, other singers in Vietnam were releasing albums comprised entirely of pre-1975 songs. In 2015, a pre-1975 music themed television gameshow is broadcasted in Vietnam.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, the production of pre-1975 songs had made a huge return in Vietnam.

While it seems to have occurred almost overnight, the renewed production of pre-1975 song in Vietnam occurred in stages. In the late 1990s, the production of pre-1975 songs was still very risky in Vietnam. Consequently, singers like Đan Trường were releasing albums of newer popular songs in Vietnam, not the pre-1975 songs like in the diaspora. Although their harmonies sounded like the Cantonese popular songs from the 1980s and 1990s, the newer Vietnamese popular love songs retained many of the poetic features reminiscent of the pre-1975 repertoire. Hence, many newer Vietnamese popular songs in Vietnam, like Đan Trường's "Returning from Afar" (Đi Về Nơi Xa) has lengthy verses, describing reflections of nature and sorrowful emotions.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Since 2015, many Vietnamese in Vietnam and the diaspora have been referring to pre-1975 Vietnamese popular music songs as *bolero* songs due to the hit television show Solo Cùng Bolero, which is similar The Voice in the United States. Aside from Vietnamese television, the show also streams on YouTube under the VIVA channel. Until recently, the oral transmission of term was limited. In Vietnamese, the term *bolero* was expressed mostly in written text rather oral language: it existed primarily at the header of music sheets, like blues, tango, and slow-rock, suggesting an approach to rhythm and instrumental sounds.

One of the most striking features of the newer popular songs was the reoccurring presence of sorrowful themes, a stylistic feature of many pre-1975 songs which the Vietnamese Communist Party had critiqued exhaustedly in the postwar era. Yet, sorrowful themes resurfaced again in production of newer popular songs during the 1990s. Although not many songs from the pre-1975 era were being produced in Vietnam at the time, pieces of the pre-1975 songs, such as their themes and narrative gestures, were thriving. Through modes re-appropriation, newer Vietnamese popular songs in Vietnam as well as in the diaspora continued to echo the ghost and cultural memories of the pre-1975 repertoire.

At the turn of 21<sup>st</sup> century, Vietnamese popular music in Vietnam took advantage of the rise of home entertainment. VCD formatting allowed for Vietnamese popular music have video sequencing. With video technology, the capacity to narrate stories expanded. While the lyrics were still expressing the traditional tropes of heartbreak and loneliness, the video narratives of the song were more focused on the hyper-realities of Vietnam's modernization, showcasing its tall buildings, wide highways, and the hardworking migrant laborers.

By selectively emphasizing the more optimistic angles of urbanization and sweatshop businesses, popular music songs in Vietnam were less threatening to the censors. Even though they may have echoed the pre-1975 repertoire, the newer popular songs were also reiterating the national rhetoric of economic progress. Even during the global recession of 2008, when Vietnam's cost of living experienced soaring inflation

(VDR 46),<sup>15</sup> Vietnamese popular music kept the Vietnamese citizens focused on the "cruel optimism" of the global economy.

Arguably, the growth of Vietnamese popular music in Vietnam did not manifest organically in the shadows of Vietnam's economic policies. Instead, Vietnamese popular music found ways of working with state censorship by promoting the government's rhetoric about economic progress as well a negative perception of the Vietnamese in the diaspora.

Contrary to reports in English suggesting that economic progress in Vietnam has swept away the conflicts between the Vietnamese Communist Party and many refugees in diaspora, <sup>16</sup> the tropes of the diasporic Vietnamese returning to Vietnam to belittle the poor and extracting the women from the countryside in Vietnamese popular music suggest that the conflicts of the Vietnam War were still being reiterated in the cultural mainstream in Vietnam.

Overall, the cultural capital and authority of the pre-1975 songs have been manifesting in various modes of cultural appropriation transnationally. In the diaspora, the cultural capital of the pre-1975 songs enabled the refugees to construct their own cultural histories and subjectivities. Likewise, in Vietnam, the fragments of pre-1975 songs in the newer composition had been carried over for various agendas, including gender politics.

<sup>15</sup> Vietnam Development Report 2010 written by the World Bank, including James Anderson et al.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> BBC's "Vietnam's diaspora urged to return home." < <a href="http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/8373580.stm">http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/8373580.stm</a> and Bill Hayton's *Vietnam: Rising Dragon*.

In chapter 4, "Queer Sorrow," I examine how singers and performers in Vietnam use popular music songs to leverage a political platform for raising an awareness of queer rights. At their own financial risk, queer performers in Vietnam and the diaspora seek to revise narratives of Vietnamese history to include gender plurality. Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Vietnamese popular music has been excluding and erasing gender plural subjects from its cultural imaginary without any major contestation. Ironically, the same cultural medium has since been turned into a platform for promoting queer awareness. By using the heteronormative tools of Vietnamese popular music against its master, many singers began introducing queer voices and discourses to Vietnamese popular music and culture.

Ultimately, Vietnamese popular songs may be just songs of the everyday for many Vietnamese in the diaspora and Vietnam, but due to their significance transnationally, they are also cultural platforms from where political agendas and strategies are introduced.

### I. Thesis: Popular Songs Have Literary Authority

Nearing the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Vietnamese popular songs from around the 1960s to 1975 were still being remade and released in mass quantities. Today, pre-1975 songs are still commercially competitive in Vietnam and the diaspora, and furthermore, they are consumed across generations of native Vietnamese language speakers.

More than a continuing trend of mass consumptions, pre-1975 songs have been taking part mass cultural appropriation. In the diaspora, pre-1975 songs have been

instrumental in the formation of Vietnamese diasporic subjectivities by enabling the transcendence of cultural history and shared memories. Even in Vietnam, popular songs offer leverage against authoritative discourses from institutions and cultural taboos.

The capacity in which many Vietnamese popular music songs lend itself to the roles of social political functions point to discursive aspects of their cultural capital and authority. While there are many attributes which constitute cultural capital, like memory and nostalgia in the case of the pre-1975 repertoire, I argue that a major discursive feature of Vietnamese popular songs is its literary feature. In chapter 1, "Genealogy of Sorrow," I examine how Vietnamese popular music song ballads share both the poetic form of prose poem from the New Poetry movement and criticisms of Vietnamese literature.

The theme of sorrow has been one of the most popular and prolific themes in Vietnamese popular music. They are often used to fashion expressions of intimacy and sensuality. In doing so, literary elements enable Vietnamese popular songs to take part in various modes of remembering, grieving, and celebrating. Therefore, it is not uncommon to observe Vietnamese popular songs at funerals and weddings in Vietnam and the diaspora.

John Schafer notes that the thematic combination of love and violence in Vietnamese popular songs can be unexpected. In examining songs composed by Trịnh Công Sơn, Schafer explains that many of the songs in Sơn's repertoire are antiwar in a paradoxical sense, "they express sadness at the death and destruction the war is causing, but they are also love songs that ask listeners to cherish love between lovers, between mothers and children" (610). Through these paradoxes, Schafer reaffirms the notion that

Trịnh Công Sơn's songs are distinguished songs of Vietnamese "protest" or "anti-war" music.

However, these paradoxical gestures are not unique to any one composer.

Arguably, they are more like common features shared among many pre-1975 Vietnamese popular songs. In Vietnamese popular songs, gestures of love and hope are often mixed with themes of violence such as collateral damage, survivor's guilt, the social and psychological stress of loss, longing, and the displacement for victims and families. Such paradoxes can also be found in popular songs like Lê Minh Bằng's<sup>17</sup> "Thương Về Vùng Hỏa Tuyến" and "Chuyện Hoa Sim," Trần Thiện Thanh's "Chuyện Tình Mộng Thường," Trúc Phương's "Tàu Đem Năm Củ," Nhật Ngân's "Người Lính Già Xa Quê Hương" and many other songs by composers like Lam Phương, Y Vân, or Nguyễn Ánh 9.

The supposedly unique "protest" or "antiwar" qualities attributed to Trịnh Công Sơn are arguably thematic conventions of Vietnamese popular songs used during the pre-1975 era and beyond. Essentially, one can select a Vietnamese popular song composer or group of composers from 1960 to 1975, and the composer(s) would most likely have written a song that fits the profile. The suggestion that Trịnh Công Sơn's repertoire stands out as being more unique and antiwar fails to situate Trịnh Công Sơn in relation to other Vietnamese popular song composers. Moreover, it is an orientalist perspective of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Lê Minh Bằng was the pseudonym used by a group of pre-1975 music composers from the 3 regions of Vietnam: Lê Dinh (south), Minh Kỳ (central), and Anh Bằng (north).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> http://hopamviet.vn/chord/song/thuong-vung-hoa-tuyen/W8IUWOID.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> http://hopamviet.vn/chord/song/chuyen-hoa-sim/W8IU0F6I.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> http://hopamviet.vn/chord/song/chuyen-tinh-mong-thuong/W8IUI0Z0.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> http://hopamviet.vn/chord/song/tau-dem-nam-cu/W8IU0FD9.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> http://hopamviet.vn/chord/song/nguoi-linh-gia-xa-que-huong/W8IUIZ8I.html

Vietnamese music and culture that is overshadowed by America's cultural discourse of anti-war themes in American rock music.<sup>23</sup>

### II. Vietnamese Popular Music's Literary Past

Vietnamese music and literature, romantic or otherwise, are cultural objects which have relied heavily on the structure and social formation of language. A significant event that took place in Vietnam during the early  $20^{th}$  century was a language reform, where the Vietnamese Romanized script known as  $qu\acute{o}c$   $ng\~u$  (national or modern language) overtook both the traditional Chinese script ( $Hoa\ ti\^en$ ) as well the  $n\^om$  script (the modified Chinese logograms shown in Figure 0.4). Since it was more phonetical, the newer script proved to be more predictable and accessible. The modern script contributed to the boom in literacy and print capital in Vietnam during the  $20^{th}$  century.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> The term "protest" or "antiwar" songs as it relates to Vietnamese popular music in South Vietnam draws a parallel between Vietnamese popular music and American Rock n Roll. In the United States, certain rock songs were also gestures of antiwar protest, critiquing of the United States' choice to be involved in the Vietnam War. Rock n Roll faulted the United States government for its needless military invention. However, the war not just a Cold War conflict between the United States and Vietnam. The war was civil war, a Vietnamese war where North Vietnam engaged South Vietnam, between neighbors and families. Thus, the South Vietnamese did have the luxury of choosing to engage, but rather, it was forced to react to the military actions. To dub Trinh Công Son's songs as "protest" or "antiwar" overlooks the Vietnamese perspective while privileging the American perspective.

Figure 0.4: The nôm version of "Autumn" by Hồ Xuân Hương

The rise of the new writing system allowed for opportunities to experiment with new linguistic structures. Even though dictionaries for the modern script were readily available, people were still experimenting with its spelling and syntax: words were often hyphenated to show units of meaning like *Phụ-Nữ Tân-Văn* (Women Modern-Literature), and in some cases, the 'd' and 'gi' consonances were used interchangeably due to their audible resemblance.<sup>24</sup> In addition, French words were being modified and added to lexical corpus of the Vietnamese language. The poet scholar Hoài Thanh often incorporated French words in his Vietnamese prose.<sup>25</sup>

Even though the new  $qu\acute{o}c$   $ng\~u$  script was still developing as it was being implemented, the mass adoption of the modern Vietnamese script, along with the rise of mass printing, created the cultural persona that there was a standardized system of writing was in placed already. Despite the social reality of Vietnam was a French colony that was complicated by regional dialects, different languages, and ethnic diversity, the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Thách Lam's brief anthology of literary criticism in 1930 is titled *Theo Giòng*. Today, "*giòng*" is spelled "*dòng*" as in the flow or course of the river, *dòng sông*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> "Ở Huế, Ngân-sơn tùng-thư ra đời ngày 15 **septembre** 1933" (23).

cultural impact of the language reform contributed to the sense of mass communication and national consciousness.

Furthermore, the modern Vietnamese script also changed modes and forms of cultural expressions. The older Sino-Vietnamese layout for poems, epics, and ballads composed by Hồ Xuân Hương, Nguyễn Du, Đặng Trần Côn, and others using the *lục bát* or double-seven six-eight meter, were no longer in favor with modern poets of the New Poetry movement (*thơ mới*). <sup>26</sup>

The new linguistic conditions on top of Vietnam's social political climate enabled the space for many Vietnamese to experiment with different narrative forms, which included prose poetry, short stories, novellas, novels, various expository genres, and comics. While many urban Vietnamese were experimenting with the poetic potential of the new modern Vietnamese script, some went even further by incorporating the new linguistic structures with diatonicism.

An early form of Vietnamese music, which would later be considered as popular music, emerged in the 1930s as a cultural experiment of combining Vietnamese poetry with western harmony. Lê Thương describes the birth of popular music as more of a coincidence than an organized movement, where a collection of compositions began

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> According to Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân, poets of the New Poetry movement during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century included: Thế Lữ, Vũ Đình Liên, Lan Sơn, Thanh Tịnh, Thúc Tề, Huy Thông, Nguyễn Vỹ, Đoàn Phú Tứ, Xuân Diệu, Huy Cận, Tế Hanh, Yến Lan, Phạm Hầu, Xuân Tâm, Thu Hồng, Bàng Bá Lân, Nam Trân, Đoàn Văn Cừ, Anh Thơ, Hàn Mạc Tử, Chế Lan Viên, Bích Khê, Leiba, Thái Can, Vân Đài, Đổ Huy Nhiệm, Lưu Kỳ Linh, Nguyễn Giang, Quách Tấn, Phan Khắc Khoan Thâm Tâm, Phan Thanh Phước, Lưu Trọng Lư, Nguyễn Nhược Pháp, Phan Văn Dật, Đông Hồ, Mộng Tuyết, Nguyễn Xuân Huy, Hằng Phương, Nguyễn Bính, Vũ Hoàng Chương, Mộng Huyền, Nguyễn Đình Thư, T.T. KH, and Trần Huyền Trân. This information is found in the anthology of essays and poems titled *Thi Nhân Việt Nam (Bards of Vietnam)*; it was first published in 1942 and later reprinted without a date in the United States by the publisher Xuân Thu.

emerging around 1937-8 from the urban areas of Vietnam (1-2).<sup>27</sup> More specifically, both Lê and Gibbs point to Nguyễn Văn Tuyên as being the most recognized composer of popular music at the time. His first public performance was in Sài Gòn (southern Vietnam), where he was living at the time, but Gibbs suggests to Nguyễn's concert in Hà Nọi (northern Vietnam) as being the more successful of his career.

According to Gibbs, Nguyễn Văn Tuyên composed songs by "[soliciting] poems from his friends." This practice of composing songs by taking poems and adapting  $(ph\acute{o}\ tho)$  to western harmony has long been part the inter-discursive relationship between Vietnamese music and literature. Hence, there is a direct link between the new style of Vietnamese prose of poetry and popular music.

Since then, many other Vietnamese popular songs have been inspired by poems: the song composer Phạm Duy drew from poems by Xuân Diệu, Huy Cận, Phạm Thiên Thư, Cung Trầm Trửng, Văn Cao, and Hàn Mạc Tử. The song composer Nhật Ngân drew from poems Trần Mộng Tú; Anh Bằng drew from Du Tử Lê; Trịnh Công Sơn drew from Trịnh Cung; and Anh Việt Thu drew from Thiên Hà. Since its birth, Vietnamese popular music has embodied the intercultural relationship of Vietnamese language and western harmony as well as the interdisciplinary thoughts and techniques of music and literature.

Vietnamese popular music songs and romantic prose poems have overlapped in many ways. Both these cultural forms are derived from experimenting with language and

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> "Thời Tiền Chiến Trong Tân Nhạc (1938-1946)." *Nhạc Tiền Chiến*. Vol. 2. San Francisco: Hương Xưa. No date.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> "Nhac Tien Chien: The Origins of Vietnamese Popular Songs"

styles of narrations during the early  $20^{th}$  century. Both share literary tropes, poetic language, and themes of sorrow. Even though the study of Vietnamese music and literature in Vietnam and abroad are different disciplines with separate canons of scholarship entirely, they both share roots, some of which can be found prior to the  $20^{th}$  century.

The cultural technology of combining poetic descriptions, plot, and music have long existed in Vietnamese culture. According to Nguyễn Định Hòa, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, verses from epic *The Tale of Kiều* were often recited by blind singers ( $x \mathring{a} m$ ) as musical chants (25).<sup>29</sup> Other Vietnamese musical forms, considered to be folk and traditional, such as  $h \mathring{a} t \mathring{a} d \mathring{a} o (ca tr \mathring{u})$ , quan h o, or  $ch \grave{e} o$ , were incorporating narratives of poems and epics prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The cultural capacity of combining music and poetry in a medium was not unique to either the West or colonial Vietnam. Moreover, most Vietnamese in Vietnam and the diaspora refer to Vietnamese popular music as just music. Although Vietnamese popular songs are often referred to as western music, this label can be misleading as it emphasizes the features of instrumentation and harmony while overlooking the lyrics and the discursive formation the narration. The term westernized music appears mainly in scholarly writings, especially from the criticisms by ethnomusicologists<sup>30</sup> and cultural critics.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Blind performers still traverse the streets of Vietnam today. In Hô Chí Minh City, they wander from sidewalk bars/eateries to bars playing an acoustic guitar and singing Vietnamese popular songs (mainly pre-1975 songs).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Until recently, sscholars like Pham Duy or Trần Vân Khê have been referred to as musicologist. I refer to these scholars as ethnomusicologist, because today Southeast Asian researchers of "folk" and "traditional" music are labeled as ethnomusicologist..

After the Vietnamese war with the French, Vietnam was divided into two governing territories: The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (*Việt Nam Dân Chủ Cộng Hòa*) or commonly referred as communist North Vietnam, and the Republic of South Vietnam (*Việt Nam Cộng Hòa*), capitalist South Vietnam. In 1954, many Vietnamese from the North migrated southwards to escape communism (*bắc di nam* or *bắc di cu*).

Since, Vietnamese popular music was censored heavily in the North at the time, many musicians and composers like Anh Bằng and Phạm Duy relocated to the southern capital of Sài Gòn. Eventually, South Vietnam became the center of Vietnamese popular music life. While it may have grown organically from the urban cities across Vietnam, Vietnamese popular music would soon be known as the music of the South Vietnamese.

After the Vietnam War in 1975, the Vietnamese communist took South Vietnam, and the separation between the two governments dissolved into one sovereign state. The new socialist government censored Vietnamese popular music immediately. As a result, popular music was forced to flourish abroad. Due to its strict censorship Vietnam, popular music became more discreet but not necessarily scarce.<sup>31</sup> Through channels of the black market, Vietnamese popular music made its way back to Vietnam as an import. Soon, songs of old southern Republic of Vietnam gained the reputation of being the songs of the Vietnamese in the diaspora (*Việt kiều*), the songs of traitors (*phản bội*).

Postwar reforms in Vietnam, such as re-education (*cåi tạo*), the execution and black-listing ex-southern officials, racial profiling of Chinese Vietnamese, restriction of

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> According to many of the Vietnamese of the older generation in southern California, many cafes in Vietnam continued to play popular songs after the war. However, these businesses had to insert popular songs into their playlist strategically, due to the risk of asset forfeitures and imprisonment.

religious practices, and the overall ban of private enterprise (including medical services by family physicians) forced many to flee Vietnam as refugees. Despite these conditions, popular music still managed to survive. Adelaida Reyes describes popular songs as having a strong presence in the refugee camps and diasporic communities. While at the camps, Reyes reports hearing that popular singers and musicians like Duy Khánh and Hoàng Oanh were visiting (47-8). As such, Vietnamese popular music was more than just songs in the air, but it was also a network of emotional support throughout the diaspora. Thus, it is not unimaginable that today many Vietnamese of the older generation still harbor emotional investments in pre-1975 songs and singers.

After the Vietnam War, the industry of Vietnamese popular music had to rebuild. Based on the risky speculation that there was a market for pre-1975 songs outside of Vietnam, companies like Thúy Nga (Paris By Night) and Lê Minh Bằng (Asia Entertainment) began making copies of songs from master copies as well as recording newer covers. Before it became mass produced on an industrial scale, the repertoire of pre-1975 songs were mix-cassettes with handwritten labels.

Since the songs were being made for the postwar refugees, these garage-companies had to engage with the social emotions of loss and longing, as well the shared struggles of assimilation and alienation. Thus, Vietnamese popular songs, which were mainly war songs, flourished again in the postwar because people were still suffering from the effects of war. As the demand for Vietnamese popular songs grew, themes of sorrow became more transnational.

Despite a century of war, government regulations, cultural reforms, re-education, and mass migration, Vietnamese sorrow could not be eradicated. Even after decades of being exiled, submerged in salt water, and ridiculed by culture experts both at home and abroad in UNESCO, themes of sorrow continue to thrive. Ultimately, sorrow has become one of the most common themes in Vietnamese culture.

As technology became more affordable, the rise of Vietnamese popular music enabled Vietnamese poetic narratives and literary language to be further commodified and accessible to a wider demographic of consumers, regardless of education, literacy, age, or income. If there was ever a title for being the literature and music of the Vietnamese people, Vietnamese popular music would be the champion pound-for-pound.

## III. The Study of Vietnamese Popular Music

Today, Vietnamese popular music has been a topic researched by scholars from various disciplines like Nhi Lieu in Asian American Studies, John Schafer in English, and Tuan Hoang in History. Since the late 1990s, the majority of the scholarship on Vietnamese popular music is housed in ethnomusicology, mostly in the United States. Until the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, academic discourse on Vietnamese popular music was almost non-existent, since it was not considered to be a legitimate topic of research. Part of the reason being that the study of Vietnamese music was founded on the preservation of "traditional" and "folk" music. However, with the rise of cultural studies in academia and the surge of Vietnamese refugees in the diaspora, researchers became more tolerant of Vietnamese popular music.

Publications which would later constitute the study of Vietnamese popular music in the West became more pronounced at turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Prior to this, popular music was mostly a scapegoat of culture criticism. In the writings of Trần Vân Khê, who is arguably the founder of Vietnamese music studies, Vietnamese popular music is mentioned as the cheap mass culture that was ruining the authenticity of Vietnamese culture (205). Later in the 1980s, his son, Trần Quang Hải refers to popular music as the "westernized music" too new to evaluate as Vietnamese music at the time (45). Although it has been overlooked scholars of Vietnamese music, popular music has been the most dominate form of Vietnamese music in the eyes and ears of the public in Vietnam and abroad.

The study of Vietnamese popular music emerged in the West when ethnomusicologists like Adelaide Reyes were examining the mass exodus of refugees fleeing Vietnam after 1975. At the time, psychology was one of early disciplines with researchers on the ground. However, psychological evaluations and assessments, like "Race Related Illness in Vietnamese Refugees" (1984) by M. Farrukh Hussain, offered only a glimpse into the harsh conditions of being stranded without any future security. Much about the Vietnamese culture and everyday routines remained unknown by these reports.

Capitalizing on the opportunity to address social and cultural gaps of the Vietnamese refugees, Reyes began publishing on the refugees in the late 1980s. Favoring a more ethnographic approach, Reyes contrasted herself against the existing scholars of Vietnamese music at the time. Like an anthropologist, her researched emphasized more

of the social and cultural aspects of Vietnamese music life rather than echoing the paradigm of cultural preservation. Along with others examining the Vietnamese refugees, Vietnamese popular music was part of a movement where researchers were fleshing-out the patterns of mass migration and resettlement occurring throughout North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia. Ultimately, the study of Vietnamese popular music emerged as a social and cultural inquiry about the Vietnamese refugee.

The lack of scholarly interest on Vietnamese popular music until the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be also attributed to exoticism. Many pre-1975 Vietnamese popular songs have rhythms derived from Latin, Spanish, or Italian ballads. For this reason, the Vietnamese of the older generation would sometimes refer to popular songs as *bolero* songs. These western rhythms are common in popular songs in the United States and around the world, not just Vietnamese popular music.

As such, its familiar soundscape often deterred foreigners from being curious about Vietnamese popular music. Terry Miller's early impression of Vietnamese popular music was that it was an imitation of American culture. In his journal entry, Miller writes that it was best to avoid the urban city of Sài Gòn and travel to old imperial city of Huể instead for a more authentic experience of Vietnamese culture (23-4). Consequently, foreigners often interpreted Vietnamese popular music as a wannabe of western culture.

In the past, Vietnamese popular music did not emerge as a topic by itself. In scholarly writings, Vietnamese popular is rarely presented an object of music appreciation. For Trần Vân Khê, Vietnamese popular music is the manifestation of Vietnam's colonial history; for Reyes, popular music is more a cultural platform for

examining the social formation of Vietnamese communities abroad. Flip through the pages the *Garland Handbook of Southeast Asian Music*, the section on Vietnamese popular music is unique in that it lacks the photos and captions of instruments or costumes. Vietnamese popular music is omitted entirely from *Dance of Life: Popular Music and Politics in Southeast Asia*. In the concluding paragraphs of *The Grove*, Vietnamese popular music is described as a plague killing Vietnamese tradition and folk art.<sup>32</sup> Overall, it is a marginal topic in study of Vietnamese music and Southeast Asian music. With the help of the Vietnamese refugees, Vietnamese popular music became posited at the cultural and political intersections of transnational migration, immigrant communities, and mass trauma.



Figure 0.5: Album sold on Amazon.com

Outside of western scholarship, Vietnamese popular music has a huge fan base with blogs, discussion boards, YouTube channels, and various websites dedicated to its

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Popular music is omitted in Phạm Duy's book *Musics of Vietnam* (written in 1966 and first published in 1972). This may seem odd since the author is also a composer of Vietnamese popular songs. However, the title of his book Đặc Khảo Về Dân Nhạc Ở Việt Nam was mistranslated. In Vietnamese, the word for "the people" or "citizens" and ethnics or ethnicities (dân or dân tộc) are used interchangeably. In this particular case, "dân nhạc" refers to folk music or folk songs: as in "folk music of Vietnam" and not "music of the people in Vietnam." Thus, Vietnamese popular music was mostly omitted, with exception of *cải lương*, because the book was dedicated to the study of folk music in Vietnam and not music in general.

appreciation. Within the recent years, there has been more interest in the United States for 1960-70s Asian popular music, including Southeast Asian music. Bands like Dengue Fever, who play pre-1975 Khmer rock songs, have become more mainstream in the United States. Their popularity has transcended the boundaries between majority and minority cultures. While these old Vietnamese songs have always been available to the general public, pre-1975 Vietnamese popular music has become more accessible to non-Vietnamese consumers. Due of capitalism, a Vietnamese friend or informant with special insights is no longer needed. Just search for a general description like "Vietnamese Rock" on Amazon and Vietnamese culture can bought without any Vietnamese language or cultural prerequisites.

During the third wave of the Vietnamese refugees in the 1990s, ethnomusicologists like Adelaide Reyes and Phong T. Nguyen reiterate Vietnamese popular music as a mode of understanding Vietnamese Americans and the diasporic community in an anthology of essays, *New Perspectives on Vietnamese Music*. Rather than focusing on the textual narratives of popular music songs, these scholars emphasize performance and cultural practice to show popular music in the everyday. In this light, popular music glows of Vietnamese music rather than a foreign imitation of "westernized music."

In 1999, Adelaide Reyes's book, *Songs of the Caged, Songs of the Free*, provides a more in-depth discussion on the significance of Vietnamese popular music and the Vietnamese refugees. Although she had limited knowledge of the Vietnamese language, Reyes' scholarship has made one biggest contributions in solidifying Vietnamese popular

music as a legitimate topic of study in the West. Reve may not be cited as frequently as Pham Duy, but she wrote one of the first books where Vietnamese popular music was a major topic of discussion.

Soon other scholars like Jason Gibb and Philip Taylor would emerge to further establish a foundation for studying Vietnamese popular music. Although the study of popular music grew out of the cultural inquiries of the Vietnamese refugees, the publications of Gibbs and Taylor have been focused on the Vietnamese music in Vietnam during the 20<sup>th</sup> century rather than abroad. In 2008, Dale Olsen's research extends the study of Vietnamese popular music of Vietnam further into the 21<sup>s</sup> century. And since 2015, Norton Barley, who has published on the folk ritual of *châu vân* spirit mediumship, has been publishing research on the cultural censorship of Vietnamese popular and protest songs.

In the diaspora, Deborah Wong has one of the last interviews with the song composer and scholar Pham Duy before he passed away in 2013. In her 2004 book *Speak it Louder*, Wong incorporates Vietnamese popular music and karaoke in southern California, along with other Southeast Asian musical practices, into the general movement of Asian American music. In the diaspora, Vietnamese popular music is becoming more of a popular avenue to approach Vietnamese Americans and Asian American cultural politics.

Today, Jason Gibbs remains to be one of the most active researcher of

Vietnamese popular music. He publishes essays in both English and Vietnamese, and
some of his publications, like "Nhac Tien Chien: The Origins of Vietnamese Songs" are

free to read online, if one can find them still. Oftentimes, Gibbs displays a degree of insider knowledge which many ethnomusicologists seem to lack. <sup>33</sup>

For instance, Gibbs often uses the terminology that many Vietnamese would use. He refers to prewar music (Vietnamese's war with the French) as *nhạc tiền chiến* which is consistent with Lê Thương as well as many of whom I have spoken to in the diaspora like Phạm Phú Thiện Giao, the chief editor of Người Việt Daily News. Whereas Phong T. Nguyen would use the term "reformed music" *nhạc cải cách*, a term that seems to circulate among a small network of ethnomusicologist. Overall, Gibbs' writing reflects a paradigm of knowledge that contrasts him against many researchers and closer to the informant.

Generally speaking, there are two noticeable discussions on Vietnamese popular music in academia, Vietnamese popular music in Vietnam and the diaspora. Since the social and cultural contexts between these various sites are different, ethnographic divisions based on geographic communities are necessary to show the nuances at local levels. Unfortunately, geographic limits have invited misconception that the cultural politics of the Vietnamese is more national than transnational.

The notion that Vietnamese popular music in Vietnam is separate from the diaspora is an illusion of area studies. Until a decade ago, pre-1975 songs were mostly imported into Vietnam from abroad. Hence, if one went to Vietnam during the 1990s to research Vietnamese popular music, one would encounter a similar situation to Jason

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Unexpected, Gibbs' name popped-up when I ran into Tuấn Khanh and Việt Dũng at a café in Little Saigon. Since he publishes in both English and Vietnamese, Gibbs is also read by many Vietnamese musicans. Việt Dũng passed away in 2013.

Gibbs' tale of sitting in Hanoi watching a VHS copy of a music concert in Los Vegas (57). Today, websites like YouTube call attentions to Marc Augé's "non-places" and David Harvey's hypermodernity, where geographic borders are more of a "traditional" method.

In this work, I want to offer a more transnational perspective of Vietnamese popular music from the interdisciplinary perspective of music and literature that is informed by issues being discussed by the Vietnamese diaspora and Vietnam, and scholars in Asian America and Southeast Asia. Consequently, I want combines the concerns of Asian American discourses with Vietnam Studies, and literature with music.

## **Chapter 1 – Methodology and Theory**

Vietnamese popular music is a vague concept due its of audible diversity. Take for example, "Phố Đêm" (Night City) is a Vietnamese popular song composed by Tâm Anh in 1968. Today, there are more than eight remakes of the songs. In an early recording from Sài Gòn featuring the singer Thanh Thúy, <sup>34</sup> the song sounds like an Spanish or Italian ballad with licks from an electric guitar. In contrast, the more recent 2006 remake, featuring the singer Đam Vĩnh Hưng, <sup>35</sup> has a Latin jazz rhythm, conveyed by a rhumba beat, Cuban sounds, and tremolos from an acoustic string instrument. The latter has a faster tempo and higher melodic range. Consequently, the performance and recording of Vietnamese popular songs often utilizes a wide variety of instrumental sounds, including traditional instruments like zithers and monochords and various technological innovations like filters and loops.

This is further complicated by cases where Vietnamese popular songs are not always composed or sung in the Vietnamese language. Sometimes they are written or rewritten in French, English, Chinese, or Khmer. As of late, company's like Thúy Nga (Paris By Night) have been trying to engage the younger generation of diasporic Vietnamese by promoting more songs in English. In Vietnam, a contestant of the show Solo with Bolero (2017) went on national television and sang a pre-1975 song in Khmer. In addition, Vietnamese popular songs are not always performed by persons of

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<sup>34</sup> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19qsW46NQWM

<sup>35</sup> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKmTxzgpHeE

Vietnamese heritage or decent. The well-known singer Dalena is a Scott-Irish American who sings Vietnamese popular songs in both Vietnamese and English (Figure 1.1).

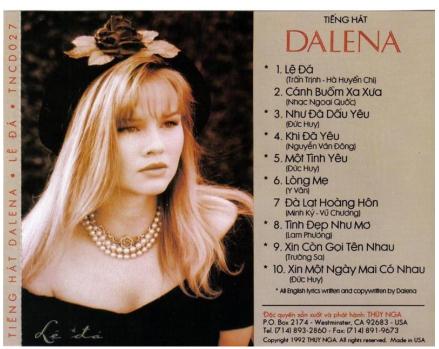


Figure 1.1. The 1992 album "The Singing of Delana"

While most Vietnamese popular song are ballads, not every song uses plot sequencing, nor does it have to have sorrowful themes and poetic language. While most popular songs situate the narrative in the past, the song "Tomorrow's Farewell to Arms" (Một Mai Giã Từ Vũ Khí), 36 composed by the group Trịnh Lâm Ngân, is one of the few Vietnamese popular songs which takes place in the future. Inspired by the Paris Peace Accord, where both North and South Vietnam agreed on a peaceful resolution, the song heralds an optimistic prophecy where the Vietnam War comes to a somber ending with Vietnamese soldiers returning to their families, romantic acquaintances resuming their relationships, and people visiting the graves of the fallen.

<sup>36</sup> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFubRd6jUz8

In terms of production, Jason Gibbs notes that Vietnamese popular music has been tied to a Tin Pan Alley-like division of labor, comprising of "[s]ongwriters, publishers, radio and dance orchestras, arrangers, and singer" (6).<sup>37</sup> While the Tin Pan Alley model is still a part of the industry today, the technology to self-produce and self-distribute through sites like YouTube have expanded the mode of Vietnamese popular music. Songs like "Wasting Money on Women" (Lấy Tiền Cho Gái) by Phong Lê was uploaded to YouTube in 2005 from the United States, viewers on the internet liked it and shared the song globally. Now it generates revenue based on internet ads. Thus, shifts in 21st century technology and lifestyles have complicated historical observations of Vietnamese popular music.

Ultimately, Vietnamese popular music has a profile of fickle instrumentation, rhythm, narration, language, or ethnicity. This makes it difficult to define the genre using a unique feature. It is a lived culture that was never intended to be translated, explained, or defined. In Vietnamese, there is not a term that translates directly to "popular music." Even though it is easy to buy, Vietnamese popular music is difficult to define.

However, concepts of musical categories do exist in Vietnamese culture. The repertoire of songs that I refer as popular songs is often referred to as "new music" (*tân nhạc*) by many Vietnamese the older generation. The notion of "new music" refers to forms of Vietnamese music that utilizes western harmony, whereas "old music" refers to musical forms prior to mass diatonicism in Vietnam.

<sup>37</sup> Gibbs, Jason. "How Does Hanoi Rock? The Way to Rock and Roll in Vietnam." *Asian Music* 39.1. 2007

However, the concept of "new music" gets confusing very fast. For instance, many Vietnamese distinguish between high-class ( $nhac\ sang$ ) and low-class ( $nhac\ seng$ ) music. Other sub-categories include  $nam\ b\hat{\varphi}$  (southern folk style), folk style ( $dan\ t\varphi c$ ), or rock ( $kich\ d\hat{\varphi}ng$ ). In the context of Vietnamese popular music, folk styled popular songs should not be confused with the folk or traditional songs discussed in ethnomusicology; in general, popular songs which are folkish refer to the use of traditional instrumentals with lyrics which convey themes about home ( $qu\hat{e}$ ) or homeland ( $qu\hat{e}\ huong$ ). Thus, there is a complex matrix of intersecting relations of sounds and themes in imagining "new music." In short, to echo Philip Tagg<sup>38</sup> and Peter Manuel, <sup>39</sup> the most simplified categorization of Vietnamese popular music is that it is not state, ritual, religious, folk (traditional), or an "intangible cultural heritage."

## I. Popularity and Mass Appeal

Vietnamese popular music is often associated with urban life and western influence. For instance, during his military tour in Vietnam, a younger Terry Miller complains that the music and culture in cities like Sài Gòn were overwhelmed by western influences (23). Likewise, in 1976, during the postwar period, the magazine *Văn Hóa* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Tagg, Philip. "Analysing popular music: theory, method and practice". *Popular Music*. 1982.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Manuel, Peter. *Cassette Culture*. University of Chicago Press. 1993.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> "1. The 'intangible cultural heritage' means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development." < http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/convention#art2>

Nghệ Thuật (Cultural Arts) (Figure 1.2) denounced Vietnamese popular music as part of the South Vietnamese's cosmopolitan life style (Phillip Taylor 40-4). And during her fieldwork in the 1980s, Adelaida Reyes mentions that there are certain Latin harmonies which many of the Vietnamese refugees recognized as being Vietnamese music (67-8). Today, western influences and cosmopolitanism are still associated with Vietnamese popular music.



Figure 1.2. Vietnamese Communist propaganda against popular music

However, these features are also found in every other genre of Vietnamese music. Since 1975, Vietnamese traditional/folk, ritual, and state music have been produced commercially, using diatonic scales (Đào, Arana, Norton, Meeker). Although they may not be associated with western harmony, commercialization, urbanization, and mass distribution, Vietnamese state, ritual, and folk traditional music in the 21<sup>st</sup> century share these cultural attributes alongside popular music.

Today, Vietnamese popular music may not have many or any unique features, but its most striking feature is still its popularity. Many Vietnamese songs composed in the old southern Republic of Vietnam (pre-1975 songs) are still widely recognized songs by

many Vietnamese language speakers in Vietnam and throughout the world. In many cases, one only needs to hum the melody of a pre-1975 song to a group of adult native Vietnamese language speakers anywhere in the world, and the song would most likely be recognized.

In 2016, I incorporated pre-1975 songs in a learning activity at the California State University of Fullerton. Before the demonstration, I was informed that the class was comprised mostly of Vietnamese speakers. The class had students spoke Vietnamese natively, bilingually, and others who were not as proficient. The youngest student was around 20 years old.

During the demonstration, I hummed a few notes, and as expected, most of the songs were named without much effort by the native speakers. Out of the four songs hummed, "Nỗi Buồn Hòa Phượng" (Sorrow of the Phượng Blossom) composed Thanh Son was the only song that the class failed to name.<sup>41</sup> However, one older male student hummed the rest of the melody back to me to show that he knew the song, even though he could not recall its title.

The wide recognition of these pre-1975 songs is nothing out of the ordinary. In Vietnam, many cafes, shops, bars, eateries, street vendors, and buses still play pre-1975 songs. Vietnamese television gameshows often incorporate pre-1975 songs, such as the show Do Sức Âm Nhạc (The Music IQ Test), where contestants have to identify song

Châu Kỳ and Hồ Đình Phương (http://hopamviet.vn/chord/song/con-duong-xua-em-di/W8IU0F8Z.html)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> The other songs were "Thành Phố Buồn" by Lam Phương (http://hopamviet.vn/chord/song/thanh-phobuon/W8IUIIW.html), "Đêm Buồn Tình Lẻ by Bằng Giang and Tú Nhi http://hopamviet.vn/chord/song/dem-buon-tinh-le/W8IU0F87.html), and "Con Đường Xưa Em Đi" by

based on melodies. A popular gameshow today in Vietnam is Solo Cùng Bolero (Solo with Bolero) which is like The Voice in the United States.

In Vietnam, it is common to see young adults singing pre-1975 songs from large speakers on their motorbikes (Figure 1.3). Outside of Vietnam, pre-1975 songs are still widely recognized throughout the diaspora. In southern California, there is a man who sometimes stands in the parking lot of the ABC Supermarket on weekends, singing pre-1975 songs for tips. He runs an amp and speakers from car batteries. Remakes of pre-1975 songs can be found where ever there are Vietnamese language speakers, even in the Midwest of Wisconsin. As such, the popularity of pre-1975 songs have a noticeable presence in Vietnamese culture. Many pre-1975 songs are still taking part in the cultural consciousness and memory of many Vietnamese language speakers.



Figure 1.3. Motorbike karaoke in Vietnam

While popularity is a major characteristic of Vietnamese popular music, standards for evaluating popularity in the study of music have been ambiguous. According to Middleton and Manuel, one measure of popularity is sales, but they also point out that this does not account for the number of times a song has been played or the number of persons listening its performance.<sup>42</sup> Today, Wi-Fi and smartphones have enabled songs

 $^{\rm 42}$  Middleton, Richard and Peter Manuel. "Popular Music".  $Grove\ Music\ Online.$  Oxford Index.

to float seamlessly as bits and bytes. Counting songs in their performative or transferative state is still as challenging as numbering the air.

Popularity is not so much a measured value as it is a social quality that many Vietnamese popular songs embody. Historically, Vietnamese popular music and culture have existed in communal settings. During the 1960s and early 1970s, Vietnamese popular songs were difficult to acquire privately for most in Vietnam. Since most household were in the rural areas outside of the power grid, electricity and audio equipment were scarce. Oftentimes, electricity in households was produced by fuel and a generator (Figure 1.4).<sup>43</sup>



Figure 1.4: Diesel engine used as a generator

Thus, urban life has been the dominate background of most scholarly narratives about Vietnamese popular music life. However, such portrayals offer a narrow view of popular music culture and Vietnamese life. According to anecdotal accounts, many the Vietnamese of older generation have stated that Vietnamese popular music existed in

<sup>43</sup> According to one 65year-old woman reflecting on the 1970s, the generators were strong enough to run a small black-and-white television set but not a color television.

rural areas before 1975. A reoccurring explanation is that government radio ( $D\dot{a}i$   $Ph\dot{a}t$  Thanh) and stations with public speakers existed throughout South Vietnam. Oftentimes, the speakers were in the marketplace, playing various programs during the busy hours of the day.

At night time, the public radio would broadcast a music program called Night Orchid ( $Da\ Lan$ ), which aired popular songs and  $cai\ lwong$ . Other sites of Vietnamese popular music included cafes, local festivals, or a neighbor's radio/record player. Through sharing, cultural elements associated with urban life were able to exist in the darkest parts of Vietnam's public sphere ( $ngoai\ \hat{o}$ ).

Although they were a scarce surplus at the time, many Vietnamese popular songs were still popular in Vietnam due to networks of culture. Even before people had electricity in walls or water under floors, Vietnamese popular music was already living in people's homes. From memory, popular songs were hummed and sung, even as lullabies swaying children to sleep. Laborers and illiterates have been reciting lengthy monologues of *câi luong* and popular songs. Today, pre-1975 songs are still part many Vietnamese domestic spaces as well as the more cosmopolitan bars and tearooms.

Vietnamese popular songs are "popular" because they have been practical.

Regardless of social class, Vietnamese popular music songs are forms of literature and music existing as cultural knowledge among many Vietnamese language speakers. In an anthology of Trúc Phương's songs, an unnamed editor of Hồng Lĩnh Press in the United States describes the historic presence of popular songs in Vietnamese daily life. 44

44 ...những bài hát về

... songs of the soldier and songs of love, composed by Trúc Phương, have long been songs uttered on the lips of many: from grunts in the outpost to young women at home, from the boys in classrooms to men driving taxis, from the blind begging at bus stops to the girl vendors standing the behind stalls... (my translation)

The passage reads as a poetic ode to the late song composer who passed away in 1995, positing Vietnamese popular music songs as having a relationship to the people. Popular music songs are vessels of high art in low culture. While many pre-1975 songs are composed using forms of romantic pose poetry, echoing a tradition of Vietnamese literature, Vietnamese popular music is still a mundane cultural practice in Vietnam, not just among the urban middle-class or elites. While the composers of Vietnamese popular songs have been mostly urban educated men, the consumers of Vietnamese popular music are comprised of a rich demographic of diversity in social class, education background, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, who have all contributed to the cultural charisma and memory of Vietnamese popular music songs.

With tourism and multiculturalism becoming more important to Vietnam's economy and nationalism, most category of Vietnamese music has become more commercialized. The musical rituals of *châu văn* spiritual mediumship are now performed on stage, and its sacred ceremonies have been commodified in VCD or on YouTube. Even in karaoke bars, popular songs share space with folk songs (*dân ca*) and

lính chiến và tình yêu của Trúc Phương luôn luôn được thầm thì trên môi hầu hết mọi người, từ anh lính tiền đồn đến cô em gái hậu phương, từ thú bé học trò đến anh tài xế, từ d người hành khất mù nơi bến xe đến cô gái đứng bán sau quầy hàng...

The anthology does not have page numbers. This passage is located within the first 2 pages.

state songs ( $nhac\ do$ ) songs (Figure 1.5). Despite their categorical separation, Vietnamese folk, ritual, religious, and state music have been coexisting with popular music.



Figure 1.5: Song menu for karaoke

In social reality, Vietnamese popular songs also serves as ritual music, since they are often used in weddings, funerals, and other ceremonial functions in Vietnam and the diaspora. Furthermore, Vietnamese popular songs often incorporate the sounds of "traditional instruments," such as from the *sáo* flute, zither (dan tranh), monochord (dan bau), and the moon lute (dan nguyet). Although they are not classed state songs, Vietnamese popular songs have been used to promote nationalist rhetoric and agendas. Although they are not part of UNESCO's purview of "intangible cultural heritage," Vietnamese popular songs, like the pre-1975 songs, are also forms of shared culture and

<sup>45</sup> Vietnamese ritual music becomes even further complicated when global popular songs like Ricky Martin's "Livin La Vida Loca" are appropriated in Vietnamese rituals.

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memory for many Vietnamese in the diaspora, especially for the refugees and their children.

The overlapping attributes and sites of various musical categories bring us back to the initial inquiry of what is Vietnamese popular music. Arguably, Vietnamese popular music, like the pre-1975 songs, are the most recognized, played, and produced by and for many Vietnamese in the everyday. As mundane and simple as it may seem, Vietnamese songs which have the capacity of be named, sung, or hummed in Vietnam and around the world by a broad spectrum of native and bilingual Vietnamese subjects of various generations are limited mostly to Vietnamese popular songs.<sup>46</sup>

## **II.** Dominate Features

Songs considered to be Vietnamese popular music have been generally ballads. Their narrations are usually written in a very lofty style of Vietnamese language that contrasts with vernacular language. Their stories often take place in a social realist setting, and their themes usually sorrowful. While these points are not true for all Vietnamese popular songs, they have been the most dominate ones thus far.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Certain folk songs like "Lý Ngựa Ô" (Black Horse) are also popular among many Vietnamese language speakers globally.

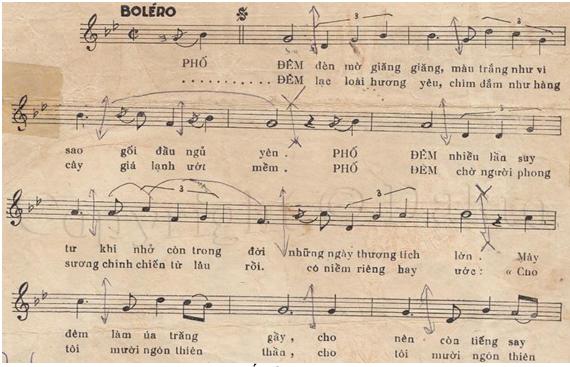


Figure 1.6: Phố Đêm (Night City) Part 1



Figure 1.7: Phố Đêm (Night City) Part 247

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> In my translation, I try to preserve the word order of the original as much as possible to emphasize the impressions derived by its form. Also, it should be noted that the word "dìu" means to guide or lead, but I chose to translate it as "bring back" emphasize the song's tone of desperation and regret.

Phố đêm đèn mờ giăng giăng Màu trắng như vì sao gối đầu ngủ yên Phố đêm nhiều lần suy tư Ghi nhớ còn trong đời Những ngày thương tích lớn.

Mây đen làm úa trăng gầy Cho nên còn tiếng say mềm Trước thềm ngàn lời vu vơ Vì người hay mơ dòng đời như thơ.

Nhớ ngày nao hoa nắng ngủ trên cây Thương lá vàng úa tàn Mây bơ vơ bay khắp nẻo vô tình Cho người yêu ước mơ

Người đi khai phá nét kiêu sa Tuy lính chiến xa nhà mà vẫn luôn yêu đời. Bằng câu ca tiếng cười Tìm vui trong giấc mơ Dù bâng khuâng chữ ngờ

Phố đêm lạc loài hương yêu Chìm đắm như hàng cây giá lạnh ướt mềm Phố đêm chờ người phong sương Chinh chiến từ lâu rồi Có niềm riêng hay ước

Cho tôi mười ngón thiên thần Cho tôi mười ngón thiên thần Để rồi dìu người tôi yêu Dìu người không yêu và người chưa yêu. Night city lights glaring glaring White like stars covering sleeping head Night city, reflections Memories of life Days of regrets.

Dark clouds tired with sleepiness Voices sound drunken Awake 1000 random words From you or a dream Life flows as a poem.

Recall those days
Noon blossoms asleep on boughs
Loving leaves tired with yellow
Clouds wandering alone
Waiting for that person

You've followed your calling
A solider far from home
Still loving life
Singing and smiling
Finding joy in dreams
Though your letters are filled with regret.

Night city, scent of tastelessness Stuck like a row of trees Cold and wet Night city, waiting for the dew The war is long already Do you still think of me?

Give me 10 fingers heaven
Give me 10 fingers heaven
To bring back the persons I love
The person that cannot love
And the person that has yet to love.

Figure 1.8: English translation of "Night City"

The plotline to "Night City" is less orderly than other pre-1975 songs, such as

Nhật Ngân's "Tôi Đưa Em Sang Sông" (I Will Be Your Ferry). Instead of a linear

chronology, "Night City" uses repetition to convey a story suggestively. Similar to the notion of "inner melody" discussed by scholars of Javanese gamelan, where the relationships of tempo convey a sense of melody (Lysloff 4),<sup>48</sup> the narration of "Night City" uses the relationship of repeating themes to impress a sense of an overall narrative.

In the song, it is very difficult to reconstruct the plot, because various shifts between time and place displaces the speaker and events. In the first stanza, someone is falling asleep. As the songs continues, it remains unclear if the speaker is the person who is waiting for the soldier to return or if the speaker is the soldier who is dwelling on the past. Elements of dreams and memories move in and out, overlapping with various forms of speech and stream of consciousness. For four to five minutes, the song's narration progresses with gaps and pieces of description.

In "Night City," narrative progression is not linear. Instead, it slowly unveils a sequence of repeating themes and then nuancing them to convey a sense of progression. In first couple of stanzas, the sense of sleep is conveyed by various descriptions of night stars, dark clouds, autumns leaves, blossoms resting, and sound being distorted. It may not be clear what events are unravelling, but whatever it is, the themes of rest and fatigue are consistent.

The lack of a clear plot structure shows that plot progression is secondary. Affect descriptions, such as longing, regret, pity, and loss caused by war, take up most of the song's contents. Thus, it is much easier to summarize the story in terms of emotional themes than a sequence of events.

... /l.: D ....

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Srikandhi Dances Lènggèr: Shadow Puppet Theater in Banyumas (West Central Java)

Although there are pre-1975 songs with more plot content, there is always enough ambiguity for further contextualization. Hence, for decades after 1975, pre-1975 songs were performed in diaspora with dancers and singers dressed in military costumes (Figure 1.8), adding more context to song narratives. Despite being love songs mostly, themes of war and loss are highlighted by these performances to construct memories and stories about the old southern Republic of Vietnam.



Figure 1.9: South Vietnamese soldier played by Dan Nguyên

Ironically, similar acts of appropriating pre-1975 songs are also being done in Vietnam. Pre-1975 songs have been performed on national television, where performers redress as Vietnamese Communist guerilla fighters instead of South Vietnamese soldiers. On a television program called "We Are Soldiers" (Chúng Tôi Là Chiến Sĩ) air in 2016, pre-1975 songs like "Sài Gòn Đep Lắm" (Saigon Is Very Beautiful)<sup>49</sup> by Y Vân were

program played the pre-1975 song "Sài Gòn Is Very Beautiful."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> After Vietnamese communist took South Vietnam 1975, the city of Sài Gòn was renamed Hồ Chí Minh City. Although there is a song titled "Spring In Hồ Chí Minh City" composed after 1975, the television

used to commemorate the communist soldiers of the both the past and present (Figure 1.9).



Figure 1.10: North Vietnamese by VTV4

It was somewhat unexpected to hear the chorus of "Saigon is very beautiful" in the background while the narrator is describing Hồ Chí Minh City. Although pre-1975 were once banned or heavily censored in Vietnam, today they are being used in Vietnam to convey the struggle of Vietnamese communist in the "American War." The lyrics may seem the similar, but the stories of pre-1975 songs have been changing in relation to its geopolitical soundscape.

To some degree, pre-1975 songs are still being censored today by the Vietnamese Communist Party. This is evident in the revisions of pre-1975 songs narrative, where war references are strategically omitted. In 2005, the remake of "Night City" by Đam Vĩnh Hưng in Vietnam, the original line "tuy lính chiến xa nhà" (the soldier is far from home) has been revised as "năm tháng cách xa nhà" (five months far from home), and "chinh

chiến từ lâu rồi" (war since long ago) has been changed to "vai áo bạc phai màu" (shirts are faded).

In 2015, when the contestant Mai Trần Lâm performed the gameshow Solo with Bolero, the song "I Will Ferry You" (Tôi Đưa Em Sang Sông), composed by Nhật Ngân and Y Vũ's was revised. The line "My life is a soldier marching across the earth" was replaced by "My life is a bird's wing flying across the earth."

Song lyrics are sites of discursive power-relations, where acts of revisions regulate history. In these revised pre-1975 songs produced in Vietnam, the South Vietnamese are erased and replaced as the Vietnamese communist of the North. Consequently, the struggles and sorrows of war render by pre-1975 songs are relocated from the South to the North. The literary sentiments and themes of popular songs are discursive features which enable subjects to imagine, feel, and engage memories and subjectivities. In this light, the themes of Vietnamese popular music songs are also forms of discursive power, evident by how it has been directed and redirected.

#### **III.** Theme as Discourse

Many pre-1975 Vietnamese popular songs have sorrowful themes. However, they are not necessarily sad songs. Instead, I argue that their sorrowful themes are used to express more sensuality and intimacy than sadness, not that they are mutually exclusive. Similar to how the lyrics of American R&B can have sexual content without necessarily

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Đời tôi là chiến binh, đi khắp phương trời.

being pornographic, Vietnamese popular music, like the pre-1975 songs, have discursive features which enables sorrowful themes to be imagined as more soulful than depressing.

While having coffee at the Wind and Water Café (Gió Nước) in the southern city of Bình Dương, a neighbor of Hồ Chí Minh City, the song "I'll Make Love to You" by Boyz 2 Men began to play. Enjoying the song, my cousin requested for my translation, "This is such a beautiful song. What are they singing about?" I listened for a moment and then I replied, "the man wants to remove the woman's clothes, throw her shirt on the floor, and then have sexual intercourse with her multiple times throughout the night." To my surprise, they laughed. After convincing them that it not a ruse, their laughter turned into disgust.

In 2007, I failed Boyz 2 Men. For some reason, their soulful and intimate expressions of lovemaking were not as obvious in Vietnamese as they were in English. I tried to explain that the song's erotic-ness was a good sexy, but somehow my explanations were interpreted as inferences of pornography. This was frustrating, because it is not uncommon for Vietnamese people to fall in love and have sex. From my perspective at the time, that should have been enough for my cousins to understand the soulful qualities of "love making." Furthermore, lovers staying awake throughout the night is a very common trope in Vietnamese popular music, e.g. "thức trọn đêm nay" in "Nhớ Người Yêu" (Missing You) by Hoàng Hoa and Thảo Trang.

However, Vietnamese popular music never had a Donna Summers who went out in search or "hot stuff" or a Pat Benatar who pined for the "right kind of sinner," even though it does have a history rock music and a-go-go mini-skirts, which stemmed from

its contact with American culture. Consequently, Vietnamese popular music is not like mainstream American popular music.

While themes of sexual desire and eroticism are common of Vietnamese poetry, poets and song composers have tended to convey sexuality indirectly by using gestures of metaphors or personification. For instance, in the poem "Nắng Tươi" ("Morning Rays") Han Mặc Tử renders sexual desire by personifying the rays of sunlight, gnawing on the rosy cheeks of a young woman. Consequently, elements of sexuality are often expressed as glimpses through a veil from a distance.

Likewise, in Vietnamese popular music songs, sentiments of intimacy are bounded to a history of sorrow themes. In the song "Tàu Đem Nam Ců" ("The Night Train of Old") by Trúc Phương, sensuality and intimacy are expressed by the coldness of the morning train station where the speaker waits for the solider to return. Historically, the emotional angst has been used to express intimacy in Vietnamese literature and music. The implicit and discreet nature of Vietnamese erotica echoes what Roland Barthes refers to as "the seductive, erotic gap of the cloth" in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century French realism (Schehr 10). Therefore, Vietnamese popular songs are not sad, because there is a cultural discourse in Vietnamese culture that enables sorrowful themes to be inmate, sensual, and beautiful, just as there is one in American culture that enables Boys 2 Men to transcend the gestures of "making love" to be not pornographic.

While it is not uncommon for Vietnamese people to have intimate encounters,

Vietnamese culture has protocols for the public expression of sexuality. Vietnamese

popular songs are forms of mass culture and therefore mass meaning. Themes are

discursive in that they are also modes of regulated meaning in the public sphere (Geertz 12).

In a singular instance of a song, a theme may seem like nothing more than a collection of literary elements, a configuration of words, used to effect descriptions and emotions. However, Vietnamese popular songs are living forms of cultural practice, connected by movement. Their themes are suggestive of a cultural network of dialogues and cultural imaginings. If themes of sorrow were enclosed narrowly within the furrows a song, immune to any discursive relations of power beyond its body, then there would not have been any issues with my 2007 translation of Boyz 2 Men in Vietnam.

Had I been aware of this earlier, I could have suggested a translation that would have been more culturally analogous to my cousins' expectations. In the future, I will be ready for when the next time a Boyz 2 Men song is played in Vietnam. By selecting and emphasizing the song's aspects of loneliness and longing, like how the lovers are apart and must long for each other's company, I will provide a more relatable context for when shirts are being torn off for multiple intercourse. Perhaps then, the notion of "making love all night long" will interpreted more as the intensity of love and longing as opposed gestures of molestation.

# Chapter 2— Yellow Sorrow: A Genealogy of a Post-Colonial Affect<sup>51</sup>



Figure 2.1. Một Người Đi composed by Mai Châu

Many Vietnamese of the older generation refer to Vietnamese popular music songs from the 1960s and early 1970s as "new music" (*tân nhạc*). In contrast to the music of zithers and monochords, the fresh use western rhythms and instrumental sounds can be heard in an early recording of Hoàng Oanh singing "One Person Leaving" (Một Người Đi) composed by Mai Châu, where midway into the song, an electric guitar effects a distorted *wah-wah*.<sup>52</sup>

In the late 1960s, the use of envelope filters was cutting edge technology in Vietnam. However, not everything in the soundscape of Vietnamese popular music was new. The narration in pre-1975 songs, where lovers are torn apart by war, are familiar

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> The prefix "post" does not necessarily refer to the temporal state of after-ness. In the case of "postwar," it does refer to time, but in the case of "post-colonial," it refers a "critical standpoint" (Chari and Verdery 11) in thinking or reflecting on colonialism, regardless of the fact if Vietnam was still a colony of France or not.

<sup>52</sup> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRf70iY1W6g

and predictable themes of its time. Even its verses of lovers holding hands in a world filled with meaningless violence is more repetitive than unique.

While such songs were new compositions with original melody and story, most Vietnamese popular songs were not heralding anything newsworthy, especially with their refrain of life as being filled of suffering and injustice. The experience of these cultural axioms expressed through modes of auditable innovation may have been exciting, but those impressions were also informed by many cultural discourses of Vietnamese life, such as religion, philosophy, and literature.

Themes of sorrowful emotions, used by many Vietnamese popular songs to fashion their sentimental narratives, can be traced to earlier writings, such as Nguyễn Du's 19<sup>th</sup> century epic *The Tale of Kiều*. Similar to the opening of the Chinese epic *Romance of the Three Kingdoms (Tam Quốc Diễn Nghĩa)*, the tale begins with a sage-like survey of time and events.

Trăm năm trong cõi người ta, Chữ tài chữ mệnh khéo là ghét nhau. Trải qua một cuộc bể dâu, Những điều trông thấy mà đau đớn long. (Nguyễn Du 1-4) Hundred years of human history,
Talent and fate have been warring.
From its shores to the forest of mulberries,
These sights wrench the heart.

(my translation)

However, in *The Tale of Kièu*, the sage-like attention of history is more psychological than that of the Chinese epic. The broad temporal and spatial brush from *the sea shores to the mulberries* (1-3) is used to qualify the idea of a "wrenched heart," giving the emotion a sense great significance: hence the "wrenched heart" is not an ordinary feeling of pain or discomfort. Although it is translated as "these sights," in Vietnamese the word for "seeing" and "experiencing" are the same, "*thây*." The passage

refers to both visual sight and emotional insight. Therefore, the "wrenched heart" is a concept of emotion that is linked to worldly perception and knowledge. In this light, emotions are forms of observational analysis and critical assessment rather than impulse.

The notion of a "wrenched heart" is carried over into Vietnamese popular music, where sorrowful emotions often express a sage-like evaluation of social, natural, or spiritual matters. While its narrative is often grounded in a genre of social realism, where divine intervention is absent, Vietnamese popular music is deeply imbedded in the cultural sensibilities of the worldliness. Through the use of lofty language and literary tropes, there is a sense that the narrator is wise and insightful. Without Vietnamese literature, most Vietnamese popular songs would sound more moot than thoughtful.

While Nguyễn Du does not refer to this worldly emotion by name, it has often been translated into English as "sorrow"  $(n\tilde{o}i\ bu\dot{o}n)$ . Sorrow is a poetic emotion that is shaped by the discourse of Vietnamese literature as well as its authority. Hence, it is not expected then that the history of Vietnamese popular music criticism would also overlap with the criticisms of Vietnamese literature during the  $20^{th}$  century.

In Vietnam's history of Confucian statecraft, themes of sorrow can be found in the domain of high art and political matters, like the imperial exams. With the rise of mass literacy, print capital, and mass culture of the 20<sup>th</sup>, material traces of sorrow in prose poems, short stories, novellas, and songs became more prevalent in the realm of low culture. Since it was often used to convey expressions of love and intimately, sorrow

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> This discourse does not have a standardized name. The term sorrow (*nỗi buồn*) has been selected, because it is the most recognized English word, e.g.: Bảo Ninh's *Sorrows of War* (*Nỗi Buồn Chiến Tranh*) or James M. Freeman's *Hearts of Sorrow*.

became associated with romantic narratives, like with Hoàng Ngọc Phách's novella  $T\hat{o}$   $T\hat{a}m$  (1925) and Vietnamese love songs.

Phạn Bội Châu states that the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a new era for the Vietnamese, where writings would be more attentive of "the people" (*quốc dân*) of Vietnam, rather than its kings and dynasties (12-15). While romantic narratives are usually focused on the affairs of ordinary people throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many public intellectuals like Phạm Quỳnh, <sup>54</sup> Self-Strengthening Literary Group, and socialist thinkers, seeking to modernize Vietnam, favored more political themes. Unfortunately, romantic works were seen as the opposite of politics, and as a result, they were criticized as being too sentimental for the new Vietnamese of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite its popularity in Vietnamese culture, sorrow has also been the target of many cultural criticisms.

I argue that the cultural perception of sorrow as being too sentimental and unhealthy for the Vietnamese originated in the literary criticisms of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which were derived mainly from the interpretations of poems and novellas. In the late 20<sup>th</sup>, the literary theories of sentimentality crossed over to Vietnamese popular music.

After 1975, The Socialist Republic of Vietnam declared themes of sorrow to be was an emotional disorder caused by a colonial mindset. Consequently, in fashioning itself with the devices of literature, Vietnamese popular music also inherited the cultural criticisms of Vietnamese literature. In adapting literary theories to songs and music, new technical and cultural challenges had to be addressed, including dancing and rock 'n roll sounds.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Phạm Quỳnh's *Discussing Novels (Bản Về Tiểu Thuyết)* in 1921 heralds the need novels to have guidelines, since it was new genre.

## I. Sorrow Seen as Sentimentality

The conceptualization of sentimentality as a colonial disorder was institutionalized in Vietnam through the process of postwar demilitarization, rehabilitation, and policing. After 1975, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam began to institutionalize the concept of "sentimentality" by banning  $\dot{u}y$   $m\dot{t}$  culture, arresting  $\dot{u}y$   $m\dot{t}$  persons, and educating the public about the  $\dot{u}y$   $m\dot{t}$  disorder. Violators or victims of this disorder were often sent to labor camps for re-education ( $c\dot{a}i$  tao).

Prior to this, notions of sentimentality were mostly cultural dialogues found in public venues of newspapers, pamphlets, booklets, and conversations about good and bad culture. Due to the lack of a standardized terminology and a set of conceptual borders, notions of sentimentality were mostly fragments perpetuated by mass printing, mass culturing, and mass dialoguing until 1975.

After 1975, competitors of the socialist state either went underground, abroad, or to prison. The new socialist government enacted several economic, educational, social, and cultural reforms, where cultural practices associated with the old cosmopolitan life of Sài Gòn (renamed as Hồ Chí Minh City) were swept from urban cities and rural provinces. These cultural reforms included the reevaluation and revision of religion, religious music, and ritual practice. Moreover, the Vietnamese Communist Party reserved the name Hồ Chí Minh for having historical and political value, forcing people

with the same name in the south to change their names. <sup>55</sup> The Socialist Republic of Vietnam became a monopoly of knowledge and culture production, proving that the state is capable of being more than "a monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force" (Weber).

While most Vietnamese popular music songs were being censored, the state was simultaneously promoting revolutionary music (*nhạc đỏ*, red music) and neotraditional music (*nhạc dân tọc hiện đại*). State songs about the revolution and its heroes were operating alongside state censorship to dominate the soundscape of Vietnam. It was an attempt to remove popular music from the apex of Vietnamese culture, society, and memory. In Vietnam, popular music became the forbidden sounds behind closed doors, and outside of Vietnam, it was the bittersweet music of the refugees to the west, east, north, and south.<sup>56</sup>

Capitalizing on the artificial scarcity of popular music in Vietnam, the communist party generated its own stories about its revolutionary heroes and nationalism, using music and other medias of culture. By positing propaganda in the cultural mainstream, the state was disseminating its historical narratives as cultural memories in modes of everyday consumption. Consequently, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was attempting to engineer its own popular cultural discourse and practice.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Unlike many cultures where taking the name of an important figure is considered to an expression of respect, such as parents naming their children Jesus or Mohammed, in Vietnamese culture, such acts are usually considered to be disrespectful. Vietnamese culture is hieratical, where one's relationship to others are based on various factors likes age, social class, and family relations. Showing respect is linked to acts of humility, where one shows an awareness of the other's higher social position. Hence, the Vietnamese usually do not appropriate the names of divine figures, which would be considered disrespectfully arrogant. Ultimately, in reserving the name Hồ Chí Minh for one person, the Vietnamese Communist Party is transcending their iconic leader to a god-like status.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> After the war in 1975, many Vietnamese fled Vietnam as refugees.

#### II. Sorrow Seen in Yellow and Gold

After 1975, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam referred to Vietnamese popular music as yellow music (*nhac vàng*). The term "yellow" was inspired by the Cultural Revolution in China (Arana 33, Taylor 43). Yellow music was intended to have a derogatory reference to the Chinese notion of "yellow culture." The term yellow music was a trash-bag holding together a blurry list of songs and features considered to be popular music (Taylor 39), including *cåi lurong* (reformed theatre). It was not intended originally to be a specialized term that would discern between the vast gradations of musical features with technical precision.

Instead of being "yellow," many Vietnamese in the diaspora prefer the translation of "gold music." When asked if *nhac vàng* translates into English as "yellow music," many Vietnamese of the older generation would clarify that it translates as "gold music" because many of the songs were composed and produced during "golden age" of Vietnamese popular music. In this light, the pre-1975 era is remembered as the golden era for Vietnamese music instead of the yellow era of moral and cultural decay. These mixed meanings are due partly to the word *vàng*, which means both "gold" and "yellow" in the Vietnamese language.

Prior to notions of yellow culture, the word *vàng* in Vietnamese was associated with the richness of the imperial courts and celestial patterns. Its cultural reference of

<sup>57</sup> Although "yellowness" in the Vietnamese context has been associated more with sentimentality, according to Jones, the etymology of yellow music in China is associated with pornography (6).

gold and wealth stem from its Sino-Vietnamese origins. Today, Vàng is still a common Vietnamese name.

While the term "gold music" refers to the same repertoire of songs as that of "yellow music," it does so under a strong contrasting gaze. Despite the institutionalization of *nhac vàng* as being colonial yellow music, its intended meaning is not universal with many Vietnamese. Even during his fieldwork in Vietnam, Phillip Taylor reports that only few people had "a clear idea of [yellow music's] derivation or its meaning" (39). The responses were mixed: "feudal" (i.e. Confucian association), weak, sick, romantic, lustful, poisonous, and anti-revolutionary (39-40). Likewise, many Vietnamese of the older generation in the diaspora may recognize the term, but they cannot always explain its meaning. Unlike Taylor's report from Vietnam, however, many Vietnamese in the diaspora have suggested that the term *nhac vàng* means something more positive.

## **III.** Questioning Vietnamese Post-Colonial Theories

In the United States, many Vietnamese of the older generation rejected the concept that there are negative colonial affects in Vietnamese popular music songs.

While they are very aware of the cultural influences of French and American to Vietnamese culture and music, many of the older generation do not accept the theory that there is a master-slave dynamic manifesting through the songs. A common explanation is

 $^{58}$  The term  $t\hat{a}n\ nhac$  (new music) seems to be more popular with the Vietnamese of the older generation.

that Vietnamese popular songs are sad because the songs are illustrating the "truth" about the social conditions of war and postwar life.

A Vietnamese veteran who served as an artillery officer under the southern Republic of Vietnam elaborated, "People were sad during the war because of the hardships of war, not because of [love] songs." He explained that the Vietnamese communist would take over people's property in the south and directed them to go live in the jungles. Although the capacity for popular songs to compel emotions were never dismissed, the possibility that they were products of a post-colonial technology responsible for making people sad and weak was widely rejected by many of the older generation as propaganda, "it's just what the communist told people."

In examining the criticisms of Vietnamese popular music, Taylor refers to a few articles in *Văn Hóa Nghệ Thuật* (*Cultural Arts*), a series of magazines published in 1976, which suggest that there are certain traits of sentimentality in popular songs. Some of the traits include sad themes like "separation, loneliness, sadness, and nostalgia" and sad singing like "sobbing" or "mourning" sounds (43-4). According to these articles, the combination of sad themes and sounds compelled people to feel sad.

Many pre-1975 love songs were played with a slow tempo and in a style dubbed as "bolero" or "slow rock." A song that fits the build is Lam Phương's "Thanh Phố Buôn" ("Sad City" or "City of Sorrow"). 59 It is commonly played as A-A-B-A. Before

the city of Cần Thơ was nicknamed the capital city of the southern region known as *miền tây* (the west), because it was the most modern city of the region.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> There is speculation that the title "Sad City" refers to the city of Đà Lặt (VN Express). It is not uncommon for composers like Lam Phương to refer to cities/provinces by their local names. For instance, Lam Phương references the city of Cần Thơ by the alias of "Tây Đô" (the capital city in the west) in his song "Chiều Tây Đô" (Afternoon Western Capital). According to the Vietnamese of the older generation,

1975, the song "Sad City" was associated notoriously with the singer Chế Linh (Figure 2.2 and 2.3). He often sings in a narrow range, similar to an American crooner. To reach the higher notes of the song, he would often sing in head-voice, where sound is channeled through the nasal cavity, effecting an intimate resonance of timid lovers. Hence, the "sobbing" and "mourning" being reported may be referring to the soft and slow crooning of Vietnamese singers like Chế Linh.



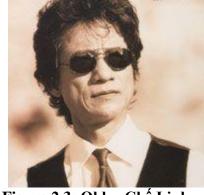


Figure 2.2: Younger Chế Linh

Figure 2.3: Older Chế Linh

On the other hand, the "sobbing" and "mourning" could also refer to the expressions of intense grief rather than intimate whispers. In this case, the singing style of the late Duy Khánh (Figure 2.4 and 2.5) would be more appropriate. While his repertoire also overlaps with Chế Linh's, Duy Khánh often sings in higher range of notes, where he uses a *vọng cổ* style vibrato to lengthen the end of notes. In contrast to the Vietnamese crooners, the oral dynamics and vibrations of Duy Khánh offers the impression that the singer is being overwhelmed with emotions.



Figure 2.4: Younger Duy Khánh



Figure 2.5: Older Duy Khánh

Ultimately, whether it is intimacy or intensity, these singers often manipulated modes of articulation to highlight the struggle between expression and in-expression, emotionally, musically, and linguistically. The features of these contrasting singers, which are complicated by vocal timbre and nostalgia, are commonly attributed to emotional sensations triggered by Vietnamese popular music songs. While some critics describe these attributes as being negatively iy mi (sentimental), many of the Vietnamese of the older generation would refer to them as being more emotionally moving, mùi.

A complication with the overall criticisms of sentimentality is that they cover a wide selection of genres of Vietnamese music songs. Traits of sentimentality, like sad themes and sound, do not fit well with all pre-1975 songs, particularly the rock songs which have a faster dance rhythm of A-Go-Go and Surf (*nhạc kích động*). To address the new sexual jive of Vietnamese rock songs, cultural critics began using the term "yellow"

 $<sup>^{60}</sup>$  Mùi is short for mii  $l\partial ng$ . The closest English translation is cathartic or something that is emotionally moving. The term often describes sorrowful expressions as positive and pleasurable sensations.

music."<sup>61</sup> Borrowing the theory of pornography music from the Chinese Communist Party, the Vietnamese notion of sentimentality (*uy mi*) as being this colonial disorder could now account for the wider range of upbeat scales. In the case of rock music, sentimentality targeted the musical aspects of high tempo, hyperactive, and overly sensual, which supposedly offered a false sense of utopia (Taylor 49).

Consequently, the cut-and-pasting of various theories used to criticized Vietnamese popular music makes sentimentality a confusing concept with contradictions. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, sentimentality was a theory that is derived from the literary criticisms of romantic narratives, and when it was later applied to music, sentimentality could not keep up with the upbeat tempo of American rock and blues funk.

Indeed, Vietnamese dance songs and love songs generally have some shared characteristics: they are composed by educated men in urban cities mostly, even though the narrative may feature rural landscapes. They are often associated with the southern mode of consumerism and cultural hybridity. At events, music bands like the famous group Shotguns (Figure 2.6) performed a wide repertoire of Vietnamese songs with the same instruments (e.g. electric guitar, bass guitar, saxophone, keyboard, and various percussions). Furthermore, rock songs like Y Vân "20-40" (Hai Muroi Bốn Muroi) also expressed emotional themes and tropes characteristic of Vietnamese literature. Hence, many Vietnamese rock and non-rock songs overlapped in terms of instrumentation and mode of composition.

 $^{\rm 61}$  Yellow music in China was associated with pornography (Jones 6).

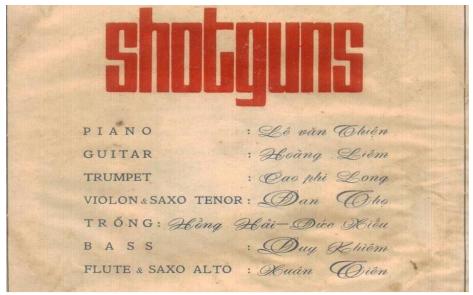


Figure 2.6: Members of the Shotgun Band

However, the distinctive features of many Vietnamese rock songs become more obvious at the limits of the sentimentality theory. Unlike the singers who melt the hearts with nasals and vibratos, rock singers like the duo Hùng Cường and Mài Lệ Huyện (Figure 2.7 and 2.8) would often hit their notes with a growl. In contrast to the *aó dài* dressed female singers who stand proudly in self-restraint like Hường Lan and Hoàng Oanh, Mài Lệ Huyện "the mountain girl" pumps her hips and thighs wildly while wearing mini-skirts and camouflage pants. While the themes of war and the military are not particular of any genre in popular music, rock music does have stronger association to the foot soldier. As such, sorrow themes in Vietnamese rock songs are often adjusted to the grunt's point-of-view rather than the worldly insights of the sage.



Figure 2.7: Pre-1975 in Vietnam



Figure 2.8: After 1975 in the diaspora

In terms of its narrative voice, romantic expressions in pre-1975 rock songs are often more direct than other pre-1975 song ballads. Verses like, "100% baby, this afternoon 100%" (Một trăm em ơi chiều nay một trăm phần trăm)<sup>62</sup> or "Wherever you are, I'm there" (Anh ở đầu thì em đó)<sup>63</sup> are blunt, favoring vernacular language over literary. Hence, Hùng Cường and Mài Lệ Huyện were not the shy Vietnamese lovers, pining for one another through the poetic landscapes of seasonal cycles, ambiguous metaphors, and various trajectories of conscious. Their rock personas were fashioned with the cultural attributes of social indifference to tradition. The combination of Vietnamese and American rock tempo, shuffle, blunt lyrics, and sexy aesthetics enabled Vietnamese popular music culture to convey a new era of youth and cosmopolitanism.

Many Vietnamese rock songs express a counter-cultural response to the clichés of sorrowful themes. Lyrics like, "No! No! I don't love you anymore" (*Không, không tôi không còn yêu em nữa*) or "Liquor versus love, liquor is wins" (*rượu so với tình là rượu* 

 $<sup>^{62}</sup>$  "Một Trăm Phần Trăm" composed by Ngọc Sơn and Tuấn Hải

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> "Anh Đâu Em Đó" composed by Y Vân

*hon*), are gestures reacting to other Vietnamese love songs by taking a position that is not as invested in embracing sorrow.

In contrast to songs like "Sad City" composed by Lam Phurong, rock songs like "NO" ("Không") by Nguyễn Ánh 9<sup>64</sup> or "Drunk" ("Say") by Giao Tiên and Y Vũ do not dwell fondly on the past. With these rock songs, to love and to be loved are not quintessential of life or living. While many rock songs may still prefer to cherish memories or hope for bliss, the genre does not require such expectations. To overlook the distinctions between many rocks songs and ballad songs in Vietnamese popular music would be to overlook the differences between the features of modernism and postmodernism in literary styles.

In general, the post-modernist attitudes of Vietnamese rock songs set Vietnamese rock music apart from many pre-1975 song ballads. Even songs considered to be "protest songs" (*nhạc phản chiến*) like "Singing Over Corpses" ("Hát Trên Những Xác Người") by Trịnh Công Sơn, do not abandon hope for humanity even in the darkest of moments of the war when people have gone mad, clapping and cheering over the corpse of children. This is not to say that rock songs like "NO" or "Drunk" express a nihilistic view of life as having no meaning or hope, but rather these songs do not care enough dwell on them. Rock songs may portray a world of suffering, where the narrator chooses to self-indulge and rejects the sage-path of enlightenment.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Real name is Nguyễn Đình Ánh

These co-existing styles in Vietnamese popular music and mass culture during the same era points to a cultural dialogue between composers, consumers, and producers. <sup>65</sup> Many Vietnamese popular songs during this era shared similar themes, imagery, tropes, and lines of lyrics within their own conventional genre or across genres. Ultimately, in the midst of war, consumerism, mini-skirts, western harmonies, and multi-lingual songs and singers like Elvis Phương and Julie Quang, Vietnamese popular music composers were also reacting, sharing, and experimenting with Vietnamese music and its fans.

Hence, the suspicion that there is more going on in Vietnamese popular music than just colonial influences by many Vietnamese of the older generation is echoed by complex soundscape of Vietnamese life. As Mary Louise Pratt's notion of "contact zones" suggests, cultural innovation and hybridity emerge from a negotiation of cultural contact, even when it is colonial.<sup>66</sup>

Nevertheless, Vietnamese popular music has a history of being evaluated as being culturally inauthentic. While many cultural critics in Vietnam were trying to locate a common feature of the colonial mindset in Vietnamese popular songs, they failed to account for the evidence that many revolutionary songs and poems written by communist

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> Anh Bằng's "Chuyện Hoa Sim" (Story of the Sim Flower") and Trần Thiện Thanh's "Chuyện Tình Mông Thường" (Story of Mông Thường) are songs by two composers who knew each other. These songs have many similarities, such as similar titles, the theme about civilian casualties and survivor's guilt, and the verse of "the boy soldier does not die, but instead, the girl civilian does." The irony is that the soldier who fights in the front somehow survives the war while the civilian far the front dies in the war. These poetic verses refer to risks of urban and guerilla combat during the Vietnam War, where boundaries between war and civilian life were at times very fluid.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Story of the Sim Flower," "Nhưng không chết người trai khói lửa mà chết người em nhỏ hậu phương." "Story of Mộng Thường," "Nhưng không chết người trai khói lửa mà chết người gái nhỏ phương xa"

Side-by-side, the verses are 85.7% similar in both diction and word order. Moreover, these two lines are almost identical in terms of semantic meaning.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Mary Louise Pratt's "Art of the Contact Zone." *Profession*. MLA. 1991. 33-40.

guerilla fighters also used similar heart-wrenching themes.<sup>67</sup> Sorrowful theme were not historically exclusive to only popular songs composed by the South Vietnamese. Moreover, many song composers like Anh Bằng, were northern Vietnamese who migrated southwards to escape communism.

Arguably, the colonial mindset is a theory based on the features which Vietnamese popular music did not have. Popular songs were sentimental because they were not state music songs with propagandist lyrics, praising the communist and their revolution. Vietnamese popular music was culturally inauthentic because it was not folk or traditional. Consequently, Vietnamese popular music was just an easy target to criticized so that people could have a soapbox of conviction to stand-on.

#### IV. Socialist Vietnam and Vietnamese Music Studies

Until the late 1990s, Vietnamese popular music was rarely a respected topic of scholarly discussion, exceptions include the early publications by Reyes and Lê Thương writings in Vietnam. During his military tour in South Vietnam in the early 1970s, the height of popular music in Vietnam, the younger Terry Miller describes South Vietnam as overflowing with music resembling American jazz, blues, and rock 'n' roll. Miller emphasizes that the capital city of Sài Gòn was overwhelmed by western influences. As such, he concludes that less urban locations like the imperial city Huể has more authentic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> Translated and anthologized by Thanh Nguyen and Bruce Weigl, *Poems from Captured Documents* compiles many poems which have been declassified by the United States.

Vietnamese culture rather than the capital, Sài Gòn (23). Miller's reaction was part of a larger disinterest shared among foreigners.

The question of authenticity from a foreigner's perspective is a topic that many researchers of Vietnamese music would eventually address again and again, regardless of the author's own position. For instance, in noting that many refugees prefer to fashion their own collective identity by using popular music songs with "Western harmonic and Latin rhythmic features," Adelaida Reyes explains further that to "the trained ear" these songs are recognized as Vietnamese (67-8). Since it was not obvious already, experts have to prove or at least explain the hidden attributes of authenticity. As Gibbs notes in a Reyes' review (121), cultural authenticity is not inherent when performers do not sing and dance according to foreign expectations.

The need to assure readers that Vietnamese songs are genuinely Vietnamese points in the direction of discursive prejudice. The cultural discrimination against Vietnamese popular music and its consumers do not have a single origin, but some of it can be traced to the late Trần Vân Khê (1921-2015). Trần Vân Khê was born in the southern city Mỹ Tho in the province of Tiền Gian. He earned his doctorate in musicology at the University of Paris, Sorbonne in 1958. He taught at Sorbonne and the University of California, Los Angeles. Later on, Trần Vân Khê became the director of research at French National Center for Scientific Research, a board director in UNESCO, and held other highly regarded positions. Overall, his passion and dedication for Vietnamese music, ethnomusicology, and multi-culturalism left a great legacy with big shoes to fill.

Trần Vân Khê came from a lineage of Vietnamese musicians, and he was the first Vietnamese scholar to envision and implement his style of music as a topic of global research. During a time when ethnomusicology was not yet a word, Trần Vân Khê treated Vietnamese folk music with similar respect to classical music. Trần Vân Khê did not construct "traditional music" out of thin air. The existing concepts of new music (tân nhac, nhac mới, or nhac trẻ) and old music (cổ nhac, nhac củ) were already analogous with popular music and traditional music in Vietnam. In addition, Trần Vân Khê was also aware of the rise folk/national music in other Southeast Asian countries due to his post at UNESCO and correspondences with composers like Jose Masada.<sup>68</sup>

Nevertheless, Trần Vân Khê was the first to be in a position with authority that could put all these perspectives together, whereby constructing "Vietnamese traditional music" and elevating it to the realm of high-art. Even today, the agenda of Vietnamese Music Studies is still grounded primarily in his vision of "traditional folk music" and the founding virtues of intellectual sophistication and cultural enrichment.

Trần Vân Khê expressed his disliked Vietnamese popular music openly, dismissing it as an inferior craft. In 1973, Trần Vân Khê explains that Vietnamese popular songs are a quick-and-easy way to make money, describing them as "easy-towrite, easy-to-play, [and] easy-to-remember music." (205). Thus, one just needed to learn to play a few chords to become a musician. Many of his points about western music not mixing "fruitfully" with music from other Asian cultures appear throughout many of his publications.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Evidence of Trần Vân Khê's correspondence with Jose Masada was divulged to me by Neal Matherne.

While his critiques of popular music were not aimed at any one person, Trần Vân Khê's description echoes the song composer Trịnh Công Sơn. A Vietnamese popular song composer from the imperial city of Huể, Trịnh Công Sơn became the most well-known song composer of Vietnam due to his spotlight in foreign journalism. He was dubbed the Vietnamese Bob Dylan for playing "protest songs," contributing to Trịnh Công Sơn almost overnight success (Schafer 611). On the surface, Trịnh Công Sơn pieced together a few chords and performed in the company of a beautiful singer. Suddenly, he became more famous than any music master in Vietnam. Understandably, Trần Vân Khê saw Vietnamese popular music as more of a hype than craft.

While he may have not cared much for Vietnamese popular music, Trần Vân Khê recognized that popular music was still the dominate soundscape in Vietnam, and arguably, he even predicted that popular music would become the apex predator of Vietnamese music culture. In the *Grove Music*, Oxford's encyclopedia and database, he notes that the rise of mass consumption and mass culture would overtake "traditional" music and "folk dancing" by either changing them extensively or making them obsolete.<sup>69</sup> Popular music is described as a cultural plague that will slowly kill-off Vietnam's musical lineage.

Moreover, other ethnomusicologist of Vietnamese music like Phong T. Nguyen have been echoing Trần Vân Khê's criticisms of popular music. In 2003, Nguyen explains to Việt Báo (Viet News) that cultural preservation is an important effort because

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> "Traditional Vietnamese music, in spite of its originality and diversity of styles, no longer corresponds to the needs of the media or urban Vietnamese people. Many original folkdances have become obsolete or have changed extensively." Trân Văn Khê and Nguyen Thuyet Phong. "Vietnam." *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press. Web. 21 Jul. 2015

it offers a more plural perspective of Vietnamese communities both in and outside of Vietnam.<sup>70</sup> Similar to his mentor, Nguyen expresses the concern that Vietnamese popular music is hegemonic by suggesting that people (possibly Vietnamese) need to depart from it to gain more insight in Vietnamese culture.

Vietnamese popular music is rarely mentioned in the study of Vietnamese music. When it is addressed, Vietnamese popular music is often a topic brought up in passing. In 1989, Trần Quang Hải notes that popular music (westernized music) accounted for 80% of the music heard in Vietnam, but still he believed that it could not "be judged at this time" (45).<sup>71</sup> While it has been too culturally dominating to ignore, the lack of attention dedicated to exploring Vietnamese popular music shows that it was a taboo topic.

The lack of academic interest in Vietnamese popular music is understandable. The Vietnam in Trần Vân Khê's writings is very different from the Vietnam in many contemporary ethnomusicologists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century like Barley Norton and Lauren Meeker. Unlike today, there were not many major programs in place to promote the survival of non-popular music styles, such as a strong tourist industry or state programs for folklorization and music preservation. Trần Vân Khê observed the rise of popular music and technology as mutual forces of mechanical reproduction monopolizing Vietnamese culture.

<sup>70 &</sup>quot;Qua cố gắng của tôi, âm nhạc dân tộc Việt Nam ít ra cũng ở vào vị trí 'âm nhạc thế giới', được học tập và đào tạo trong học đường Mỹ. Chúng ta có thể hiểu nó là một đại biểu của cộng đồng người Việt và có một địa vị mang tính chủ điểm hơn nhạc mới (tân nhạc)."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Trần, Hai Q. "The Music of Vietnam." Journal of Vietnamese Studies. Vol. 1(2). Melbourne Victoria, Australia. 1989. 40-46.

As such, Trần Vân Khê may have felt the need to create the demand for Vietnamese traditional music. In doing so, he established standards for cultural purity and authenticity. For Trần Vân Khê, there was the ideal form of what authentic Vietnamese traditional music should be, which he distinguished from hybrids found in mass culture. The demand for "authentic" Vietnamese culture was created for mainly academics, where textbooks feature performers wearing traditional/folk garments and playing traditional musical instruments in photographs.

This is not say that Trần Vân Khê and other musicians of Vietnamese folk music did not perform outside of schools or conservatories in Vietnam and abroad. The demand for seeing and hearing "traditional instruments" performed in a "traditional style" can also be found in tourism or sites frequented by expats (Tuổi Trẻ News).<sup>72</sup> In Vietnam, local musicians, playing various traditional styles like *nhạc tài tử*, also perform at weddings, funerals, and other events. However, at the local level, Vietnamese folk music must compete more with Vietnamese popular music and karaoke, where it is the underdog usually.

That being said, the dichotomy between popular and non-popular music is not black and white. Popular music does incorporate folk/traditional musical features by using the sounds from zithers, moon lutes, *sáo* flutes and others traditional instruments. Companies like Thúy Nga (Paris By Night) in the diaspora have contributed to the demand for folk/traditional music, or least aspects of them.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> http://tuoitrenews.vn/lifestyle/28859/vietnam-legendary-musicologist-tran-van-khe-dies-at-94

Trần Vân Khê is partly correct in that Vietnamese popular music is the most dominate form of music in Vietnam and the diaspora. However, the relationships between popular music, people, and Vietnamese communities are not limited to the purview of money and commerce. During the mass exodus of the Vietnamese boat refugees, Reyes notes that groups of popular singers and musicians, like Duy Khánh and Hoàng Oanh, have been touring in the refugee camps (47-8). As demonstrated by these singers and musicians, Vietnamese popular music has shared in the struggles and sorrows of the Vietnamese in diaspora as well as in Vietnam. Hence, it will remain the apex of Vietnamese music for as long as people still need it.

Theoretical debates about Vietnamese popular music have failed to account for the gestures of compassion and the social bonds between the Vietnamese and popular music. When the Vietnamese refugees were being exiled and marked as traitors (phan  $b\hat{\rho}$ ) of their own country by the Socialist Republic, scholarly concerns over preservation and cultural enrichment seem rather cold and distant. Unfortunately, the belittling of Vietnamese popular music became further associated with the dismissing of the Vietnamese refugees and their cultural practices in the diaspora.

Trần Vân Khê's passed away on June 24, 2015. Unlike many Vietnamese popular music singers or composers like Anh Bằng or Việt Dũng, there seemed to be a lack of public recognition and commemoration in Vietnam and the diaspora. His death highlights a historic gap between Vietnamese music scholarship and Vietnamese communities around the world. However, Trần Vân Khê is one of the few Vietnamese musicians whom many Vietnamese of the older generation recognize for being a

musician. In general, Vietnamese people are more aware of singers, some may know composers, but most will overlook musicians.

Trần Vân Khê is he remembered fondly by many of the older generation. Some can even recall the songs he played before 1975, members of his ensemble, and the names of his family members. Ultimately, he is more than his curriculum vitae: the social life of Trần Vân Khê is mostly unwritten, but it is not forgotten.

### V. Colonial Mindset and Authenticity

After 1975, the criticisms of Vietnamese popular music from scholars abroad were blessings for the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Concurring with the notion that Vietnamese popular music is unauthentic culture of the "false" Vietnamese, many cultural reformists in Vietnam began incorporating the features of folk music into propaganda music. Unlike the scholars of Vietnamese music abroad who emphasized preservation, music conservatories in Vietnam pushed for cultural conservation and began implementing diatonicism to Vietnam's folk repertoires. Traditional instruments were revised, where the range of octaves were expanded, and tuned pentatonically (Arana 57).

In 1977, Đào Trọng Từ, a scholar visiting from Vietnam, attended the conferences held in the Lille Conservatory (June 14) and the Southeast Asia House of the Paris University Campus (June 22). His presentation discussed the various revisions and adaptations of Vietnamese folk music after 1975, called neotraditional music (*nhạc dân tọc hiện đại*). Most notable was the topic of adapting folk music to state music, including

the revisions to revolutionary songs (red music). Similar to how Trần Vân Khê transcended the practice of Vietnamese music into a respected discourse of study, Đào Trọng Từ explored a similar path for Vietnamese propaganda music.

Drawing on the historical coincidence, where Vietnamese popular songs and revolutionary songs both stemmed from the era of French colonialism, Đào claims that the two genres of Vietnamese revolutionary music and popular music came from one branch of Vietnamese humanism music (97). However, Đào Trọng Từ argues that revolutionary music songs were composed from a pure Vietnamese consciousness/emotion unlike popular music. Similar to Vietnamese folk music, revolutionary music has supposedly kept its virginity from colonial forces.

Based on Đào description, Vietnamese humanism music is most likely what Lê Thương and Jason Gibbs refer to as Vietnamese pre-war (against the French) music (*nhạc tiền chiến*) or what many ethnomusicologists refer to modern/reformed music (*nhạc cải cách*).<sup>73</sup> According to Lê Thương's estimation, the rise of pre-war music is from the years 1938 to 1946.<sup>74</sup>

According to Đào Trọng Từ, Vietnamese humanism songs were romantic songs which conveyed the angst of living under colonial rule. These sorrowful songs supposedly revealed the moment when the Vietnamese became aware of their colonial

<sup>73</sup> According to the *Garland Handbook*: "A kind of popular music called modernized (*nhạc cải cách*) formed in Hanoi in 1937 and 1938 with the creation of two groups of amateur musician-composers: Myosotis and Ticéa. A campaign to modernize music was triggered by Nguyễn Văn Tuyên, a famous singer in Saigon, whose 1938 nationwide lecturing tour was sponsored by the French Governor of Cochin

China, southern Vietnam" (Nguyễn 285-6).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Lê, Thương. "Thời Tiền Chiến Trong Tân Nhạc (1938-1946)" *Nhạc Tiền Chiến*. vol. 2. Hương Xưa: San Francisco. No date of publication. According to Jason Gibbs' blog (TayBui.BlogSpot.com), the original print may have been in 1970 by Kẻ Sĩ press in Vietnam.

oppression, "awakening the Vietnamese soul." In doing so, this gave birth to revolutionary songs and emotions (97).

Đào Trọng Từ's historical accounts conflicts with Jason Gibbs' account. According to Gibbs, prewar romantic songs and patriotic songs (revolutionary) as having two different sources of musical inspiration. Referring to Pham Duy's observation, Gibbs notes that in the 1940s, patriotic songs were composed using French marching and military music and not romantic songs. Furthermore, the positing of the birth of Vietnamese national consciousness during the era of French colonialism is also very controversial. According to Mariam Lam, the outcome of Nguyễn Du's *Tale of Kiều* being written in the *nôm* script instead of the more dominate Chinese script was a deliberate strategy of disseminating an earlier form Vietnamese nationalism (45-53). Previous dynasties, like the Tây Son in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and various peasant rebellions have expressed an awareness of collective identities alternative to the Chinese.

Regardless of these different historical perspectives, Đào Trọng Từ claims that romantic pre-war songs served the purpose for initiating the sense a Vietnamese collective. According to Đào's argument, romantic pre-war songs have a degree of sentimentality, which was appropriate at the time, because it allowed for the songs to reflexively critique colonial society.

Using the lyrics of two pre-war songs, Đào argues the angst expressed by the songs are symbolic of "the saddened soul of an enslaved nation" (105-6). Looking at the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> Gibbs, Jason. "Nhac Tien Chien: The origins of Vietnamese Popular Song." *Things Asian*, Internet Magazine. 1998. received 15 Dec. 2012.

opening lines of Đặng Thế Phong's "Autumn Rain ("Giọt, Mưa Thu") and Doãn Mẫn's "Farewell" ("Biệt Ly"), Đào suggests that there are elements of "sentimentalism or melancholy," which suggest that the songs were consciously critiquing colonial oppression (105-8).

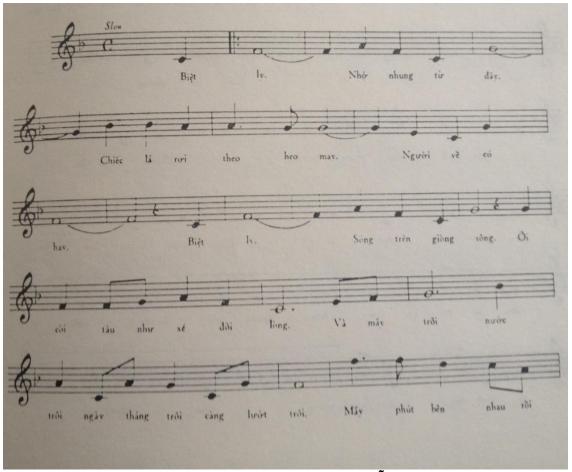


Figure 2.9: "Farewell" by Doãn Mẫn part 1



Figure 2.9: "Farewell" by Doãn Mẫn part 2

Đào Trọng Từ claims that pre-war songs reveal a shared consciousness among Vietnamese subjects during colonial era are based on his literary interpretation of the songs' imagery of nature and the narrators' stream-of-consciousness. In "Autumn Rain" lines like, "winds from afar must return" (*Gió xa xôi vẫn về*) constructs a generalized mode of observation, allowing the narrator's voice to shift between planes of personal

thought and general commentary. Consequently, elements of personal affairs can be blended with the worldly elements of nature to exaggerate a shared struggle of life.

Still, these fictional songs do not offer enough textural information to claim that the cause of suffering experienced by the characters is attributed to the social conditions of colonialism. While there are sorrowful themes in the songs, such poetic elements have been common in Vietnamese poetry and music prior to French colonialism. By not accounting for the discursive lineages of Vietnamese literature and Vietnamese music like *hát å đào (ca trù)* in the north or Huể court music in central Vietnam, Đào Trọng Từ presents these song lyrics within a narrow social, cultural, and historical field.

Furthermore, Đào Trọng Từ's analyses are based on incomplete readings of each song. He selects only the first few opening lines of each song and then generalizes about the song's entire narrative as well its socio-cultural context. Songs like "Autumn Rain" and "Farewell" share a conflict/resolution structure that emphasizes the theme of character development. Hence, the lengthy reflections of various poetic landscapes and multiple observations in each song convey a trajectory of character growth.

For example, in the song "Farewell," the phrase "farewell" (*biệt ly*) is expressed multiple times. Similar to an Italian villanelle, each iteration is nuanced with a different perspective. At the beginning of the song, the phrase "farewell" is expressed to another character. However, by the end of the song, there is so much temporal and spatial distortion that the expression of "farewell" has a much wider implication, becoming more inclusive of the narrator's memories and hopes. Consequently, the poetic voice in each song overcomes grief and moves on with a stronger resolve.

Instead of re-contextualizing the conflict back to the overall development of each song, Đào Trọng Từ limits his discussion to only the plot conflict. As a result, Đào presents the poetic personas within a static narrative, rather than accounting for the narratives' trajectory of change. He omits the many aspects of intimacy, sensuality, and self-mastery (emotion regulation) between the characters' interior thoughts and emotions as well as their attunements to the external world. Instead of highlighting the empowerment of mental, moral, and even spiritual resolve, Đào presents these poetic expressions as signs of an emotional affliction.

Ultimately, Đào's main objective is not to showcase how Vietnamese popular music or how various forms and genres of Vietnamese music have changed since the colonial era. His chief interest lies with presenting his claim that revolutionary music was good music, and by incorporating the features of traditional music, it is even better. Therefore, scholars of Vietnamese music need to acknowledge Vietnam's neotraditional music, because it is culturally enriching and sophisticated without the bourgeois connotation.

Similar to Trần Vân Khê who considers popular music songs to be overly simple, Đào Trọng Từ frames popular music as the childish form of music that people should outgrow. In Đào's view, Vietnamese music has two paths from its pre-war origins in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: Vietnamese music either became revolutionary music and eventually evolved into a hybrid of folk-revolutionary-propaganda music, or it went down the "aloof" track (i.e. becoming Vietnamese popular music).

While these scholars are individuals entitled to their own opinions, they are also extensions of larger institutions like UNESCO, Vietnamese Music Studies, and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Their impartial research and claims have been contributing to discursive erasures of many Vietnamese in the diaspora. Not only were many refugees forced physically into exile, but they continue to be forced out their own history and discourse. Hence, for decades after the war, many Vietnamese in the diaspora have been hyper-suspicious of post-1975 music produced in Vietnam and the various alliances Vietnam made with institutions.

Although there are many theoretical differences between Trần Vân Khê's notion of traditional music and Đào Trọng Từ's neotraditional music, both these scholars have been indirectly criticizing the Vietnamese refugees as being cultural traitors by belittling Vietnamese popular music. In doing so, the presence and history of the South Vietnamese has been undermined under the guise of cultural authenticity.

#### VI. Vietnamese Public Intellectuals

In terms of Vietnamese music production and consumption, it is not exactly clear why the Vietnamese public intellectuals are critiqued by Đào Trọng Từ and Trần Vân Khê. In their criticisms, the public intellectuals are presumed to be promoting westernized music. However, the connection between the public intellectuals and popular music is historically faint.

According to Đào Trọng Từ, the public intellectuals were delusional due to their colonial education (101). Likewise, Trần Vân Khê suggests that they had an inferiority

complex, "confusing progress and modernization with westernization" (205). Even though he received his education in Sorbonne in France, Trần Vân Khê denounces the Vietnamese public intellectuals for their French education, chiding them as the "native civil servants" and "former men of letters" who upon receiving a western education began imitating western decadence by "[drinking] milk in the morning and champagne in the evening" (199). Consequently, the promotion of state neotraditional music in Vietnam and traditional music in Vietnamese Music Studies have been built on the myth of the early 20th century, where the Vietnamese public intellectuals were "confused" by colonialism and responsible for corrupting Vietnamese culture.

Granted, there are some connections between pre-war song lyrics and Vietnamese prose poetry, but many public intellectuals did not have the skills for adapting poetry to scales, nor were they interested in thinking about music as literature. Although the scholar poet Hoài Thanh dubbed the New Poets as "bards" in 1942, there does not seem to be many discussions where literary authors and song composers are considered to be within the same canon. At best, many of the public intellectuals promoted different genres of writing and participated in debates about the new role of Vietnamese literature.<sup>77</sup> Although love poems have inspired many Vietnamese songs, these two mediums have not been treated with the level of respect.

Consequently, the relationship between the Vietnamese public intellectuals and popular music remain a mystery. Trần Vân Khê only states that Vietnamese popular

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Thi Nhân Việt Nam (Bards of Vietnam); it was first published in 1942

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> For example, a group of public intellectuals in the 1930s known as the Self-Strengthener Literary Group (Từ Lực Văn Đoàn) advocated westernization (theo Mới [follow the New]) as means of social and cultural progress. Some of the members were taking part in the new poetry movement and were actively writing and promoting prose poetry, which was seen as westernized Vietnamese poetry.

music songs are easy to compose and easy to play, but his analysis never laid out how popular music songs were composed nor how members of band worked together to perform popular songs.

In the early  $20^{th}$  century, many aspects of Vietnamese culture seemed to be experimental. The new writing system  $(qu\acute{o}c\ ng\~{w})$  had been recently adopted. Even though the newer writing system  $(qu\acute{o}c\ ng\~{w})$  is far easier to learn since it is more phonetical, it was nevertheless a new system of writing and reading at the time. Indeed, literary tropes, themes, and other literary aspects carried over, but the new Vietnamese script changed their form of expression. People had concepts of literature, music, and language, but they were also making them up as they went along.

According to his close friend, colleague, and editor, Huỳnh Thúc Kháng discloses that even the famous Phạn Bội Châu struggled in expressing himself gracefully in the writing system (34).<sup>78</sup> Phạn Bội Châu was a trained literato who passed the imperial exam of *tiến sĩ*, but his training was under the previous *nôm* writing system.

Arguably, Trần Vân Khê and Đào Trọng Từ's did not have access to much of the research Vietnamese popular music and literature in relation to colonialism, nor were they particularly invested in exploring the topic further. Consequently, they often conflated westernization with colonization, which is inconsistent with the writings of

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footnote and bibliography.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> According to the translators' footnote by Sinh and Wickenden, this information is cited in the "Preface" of *Tw-Phán* on page X. Unfortunately, my copy of *Tw-Phán* has a different "Preface." Sinh and Wickenden do not offer any further information, like the version, publisher, or year of publication in the

many Vietnamese public intellectuals who were expressing their agendas for westernization as a pathway of decolonization.

While neither Trần nor Đào specified which Vietnamese public intellectual(s) was at fault, writings attributed to the Self-Strengthening Literary Group have been criticized frequently for being colonially brainwashed and out-of-touch with social conditions of the people. In 1936, Vũ Trọng Phụng mocks the Self-Strengtheners and their followers for mindlessly following western culture in *Dumb Luck* (Số Đỏ). In his book *In Search of Moral Authority* (2000), Van Nguyễn-Marshall claims that the Self-Strengtheners failed to understand the "reality" of poverty. Instead, they only pretended to be "like" the common people and wrote romantically about poverty (102). Nguyễn-Marshall does not consider the group to be writers of social realism, deeming their works as being too romantic mostly (110). Hence, the Self-Strengthening Literary Group seems to fit well with the criticisms expressed by Trần Vân Khê and Đào Trọng Từ.

Although the group has been frequently chided for their slogan of following the West, not much is known about the Self-Strengthener's theoretical framework. Many of their writings, which re-thinks westernization as a post-colonial method of decolonialization, are often overlooked as being post-colonially problematic. Although they use the West as a direction to follow, the Self-Strengtheners were pushing for Vietnam to be a sovereign and autonomous nation like how the neo-Confucianist thinkers in China were advocating for westernization. While post-colonial thinking during the era of colonialization may seem unexpected, one should consider that the French were not the first to colonize the Vietnamese.

Furthermore, mass literacy was rather new in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Self-Strengthener Literary Group had to simplify their ideas and theories in order to convey them to new readers, who were mainly the younger generation of Vietnamese (*thanh niên*). Thus, statements like "follow the French" should not be interpreted literally and out of context.

The Self-Strengthening Literary Group formed between 1930 and 1935, which was partly motivated by the failed Vietnamese nationalist revolt against the French administration (Nguyễn Đình Hòa 135, 145). The group's name is derived from a social movement in China, where a group of officials in 1860 led a movement to promote western learning (洋務運動). Although the Chinese group researched western culture and education, their objective was to defend the Qing dynasty from both domestic and foreign dangers, i.e. European imperialism. Hence, military intentions were central to western learning (Zarrow 17-8). The study of western cultures and society were acts of war preparation, knowing thy enemy.

Although many of the members of the Self-Strengthening Literary group were French educated, the group modeled their westernization after Chinese neo-Confucianism. In *Ten Points to Bear in Mind (Muròi Điều Tâm Niệm)*, Hoàng Đạo references Yen Yan Chu (晏阳初) (38), who returned from Princeton University to China and organized a mass literacy movement in the 1920s. The event inspired the Self-Strengthener discuss the need for mass literacy in Vietnam. Hence, westernization in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Vietnam was imagined alongside the Chinese who were privileging western culture and education to defend against foreign threat.

Many of the group's writings prioritized the welfare of society over the family. In *Ten Points to Bear in Mind (Muròi Điều Tâm Niệm)*, Hoàng Đạo discusses the social importance of giving back to the community (37-42). In the novel *Beauty (Đep)*, Khái Hung describes beauty as the process of creating and not in the object that is created (7). In general, social service is a common theme in many of their writings, where notions of value are tied to acts of serving society. For the group, westernization was a way of conveying a model of society and national consciousness.

Similar to the mantra "Chinese learning for the essence and Western learning for its utility" stated by Zhang Zhidong (張之洞), a leading official of the movement during the 1880s and 1890s who advocated for Westernized learning in the area math, science, and the humanities (Zarrow 21-2), the Self-Strengthening Literary group challenged many traditional beliefs in Vietnam by advocating for western science, medicine, and hygiene as well as women's access to education and non-domestic roles in Vietnamese society. However, the Self-Strengthening Literary Group had a different notion of essence than their Chinese inspiration. Unlike the Chinese who were quoting the Taoist philosopher Laozi (老子) and lamenting the myth of Han purity, the Vietnamese literary group's conceptualization of the Vietnamese "soul" or national awareness was more post-colonial.

Gesturing at the opposition, Hoàng Đạo argues that the Vietnamese people have remain Vietnamese after being rule by Chinese culture for over a thousand years, the

<sup>79</sup> 中学为体,西学为用

80 "He who steals a hook is sentenced to death, whereas he who steals the state becomes emperor."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> Including Liang Qichao, a state official who would later be exiled to Japan and the self-proclaimed sage Kang Youwei who failed the imperial exams.

same will happen with the French (20).<sup>82</sup> Hoàng Đạo explains that there would always be inherent differences (physical, mental, and spiritual) between the Vietnamese and the French, regardless of how much French culture or western technology the Vietnamese chose to adopt.

Rather than constructing a myth about Vietnam's pure origins, Hoàng Đạo fashions national conscious using a model of comparative difference. Drawing on Vietnam's colonial contact with China, he suggests that Vietnamese-ness is a form of shared differences between the Vietnamese and others. Hence, the Vietnamese should appropriate western culture without fearing the loss of their Vietnamese soul or becoming traitors to their countrymen.

Overall, the notion that colonial enslavement has been plaguing westernization is flawed, because it attributes colonial resistance to only the Vietnamese Communist Party. The Việt Minh (who later became the Vietnamese communist) were not the only ones fighting the French. There were many Vietnamese nationalist groups and individuals resisting the colonial systems in different ways. For the Self-Strengtheners, westernization would help bring about cultural and ideology reforms, which would in turn stimulate more social services for the underprivileged, mobilizing laborers, and rural peasants.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> "Không nên lo ta sẽ hóa ra người Pháp nửa mùa, nói tiếng Pháp lai căng. Dan tộc ta bị hàng ngàng năm văn hóa Tầu đần áp mà vẫn giữ được tư cách riêng, không đến hóa ra người Tầu cả. Vậy bây giờ ta đem văn hóa Thái Tây áp dụng vào cuộc đời, mũi ta không đến nỗi hóa lõ, và ta không đến nỗi mất tinh thần riêng của ta" (20).

<sup>[</sup>Worry not that we may be French for half the season, speaking with mixed dialects. Our people were ruled by a thousand years of Chinese culture, but still we kept our differences, not turning into the Chinese. Therefore, now, we bring Western culture for its utility, our noses will not become like theirs, and we will not lose our distinctive mind and soul.]

The concept of mass literacy and providing mass social services to amass and mobilize the Vietnamese was exactly what Hồ Chí Minh did when he return to Vietnam in 1941. Under his earlier pseudonym of Nguyễn Ái Quốc (the patriot), Hồ Chí Minh organized literacy classes to disseminate the "revolutionary spirit" (Marrs 183). After taking control of the North, the Vietnamese Communist hunted and executed many of the Vietnamese intellectuals.

### VII. Early notions of sentimentality

Through many cultural reforms in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, criticisms against sentimentality emerged. In a book of essays, *Theo Giòng (Harmony)*,<sup>83</sup> Thạch Lam, argues for a definition and standard of evaluating literary works. Lam suggests that literature is a work that would withstand the test of time. He explains that writings with political attributes would enable the work to be reusable in the future. Hence, literature must be something more than flowery words and esoteric allusions; its chief significance must be its social practicality (12-7).

Thạch Lam insists that literature was not that in itself, but it must also have a social function. The notion of literature as being a mode social utility distinguishes popular works (e.g. Hoàng Ngọc Phách's novel  $T\acute{o}$   $T\^{a}m$ ) from literary works (13). Popular writings may appeal to the masses emotionally, but Thạch Lam argues that works considered to be literature must offer some form of contribution to society ( $x\~{a}$   $h\^{o}i$ ). In

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>83</sup> *Giồng* is likely referring to *dòng* as in *dòng sông*, which is a pathway like a river. The intended meaning is to be synchronized with the patterns of life, i.e. to be in harmony. The book surveys a selection of essays and articles from the *Ngày Ngay* (Now) and *Chủ Nhật* (Sunday) newspapers from 1939 to 1940.

this light, sentimentality is framed as the emotions of personal entertainment rather than emotions with social contribution (i.e. cultural progress).

The early 20th century was an era where Vietnamese culture and Vietnamese politics pivoted on notions of "the people" (quốc dân, national persons). Classically trained scholars, like Huỳnh Thúc Kháng and Phan Bội Châu, help construct the Vietnamese notion of "the people" by writing and publishing as well as choosing to be public intellectuals. <sup>84</sup> For these Vietnamese thinkers, it may have been difficult to conceptualize how romantic poems and stories, oozing with sorrowful themes, could have any military value.

In literature, sentimentality never had to deal with music and sounds. Even though theories of yellow music were imported from China in order to reflect the musical flavors of dance, blues, and rock-and-roll in Vietnamese popular culture, the differences between Vietnamese yellow sorrow and Chinese yellow pornography were never reconciled. Instead, their differences were covered up by accusations of Vietnamese popular music as being inauthentic and the Vietnamese public intellectuals as being brainwashed.

With the institutionalization of the sentimentality as a colonial disorder after 1975, stories about Vietnamese origins and authenticity became more important for the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Unlike with the Self-Strengtheners who constructed

the world, would emerge out from the shadows of kings (12-5).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> Huỳnh Thúc Kháng declined a position at the imperial court, stating: "I have lived among the people, whose problems I know very well. But, I must tell you the truth, the function of a mandarin does not suit me" (Phan 220). He continues to run his newspaper in service of the people. Phan Bội Châu was writing about the rise of the Vietnamese citizens as national persons (*quốc dân*), who were like the proletariats of

notions of sentimentality to bid farewell to tradition, the sentimentality emerging after 1975 era was used to construct myths about the birth of the Vietnamese consciousness from communist's perspective. Unfortunately, alternative historical and cultural developments were dismissed and erased.

#### VIII. Conclusion

Throughout 20th century Vietnam, the military presence and legacy of western nations like France and the United States motivated discussions about racial and cultural progress as well as devolution. Various criticisms on Vietnamese literature and music by a few Vietnamese have argued that certain cultural practices and objects were making people weak. The symptoms are described vaguely as being overly sentimental and unproductive, priming the Vietnamese colonial governance and psychological enslavement.

To a degree, many of the critiques of sentimentality reveal a complex view of social emotions, where the transmissions between subject and culture are usually modeled in a matrix of behavioral, emotional, and linguistic development. As a form of the colonial behavioral disorder, sentimentality may sound like a medical or scientific theory, but it is ultimately a derivation of cultural criticisms (*phê bình*) where Vietnamese culture was dichotomized into good versus bad juxtapositions. Hence, these criticisms are not psychological assessments or evaluations based on any one person or group of persons.

On the contrary, research on emotion regulation in psychology and neuroscience have been suggesting the opposite. In 2007, Matthew Lieberman et al. have argued that having the words to communicate feelings is also a form of expression that can diminish emotional reactivity (e.g. affect labeling). In 2015, Kristen A. Lindquist et al. further argue that language offer categories for emotional activities, which in turn, may impact emotional experiences.

While these researchers are focused more on the relationship of word and meaning with respect to affect formation and expression, expressive language include many performative gestures beyond the capacity of syntax or single units of meaning. Sounds and themes in Vietnamese popular music also perform emotional significance, which people can appropriate as expressions. So even though one cannot find the right word, it does not mean one cannot find the right song to frame or rearticulate emotional sensations. Consequently, "sad" songs do not necessarily produce or conjure sad emotions, but rather they may alleviate the intensity of negative experiences.

With the potential to alleviate anxiety, the flourishing of sorrowful themes in poems and songs composed during the Vietnam War point to Vietnamese culture responding to people's needs for managing mass violence and suffering. Contrary to the idea that sad songs hailed people into a colonial mindset by making them sad, culture is more of a resource of emotion regulation. Similar affect theories have been explored by

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>85</sup> Lieberman, Matthew, Naomi I. Eisenberger, Molly J. Crockett, Sabrina M. Tom, Jennifer H. Pfeifer, and Baldwin M. May. "Putting Feelings into Words: Affect labeling Disrupts Amygdala Activity in Response to Affective Stimuli." *Psychological Science*. vol. 18 no. 6 May 2007. 421-8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> Lindquist, Kristen A. Ajay B. Satpute, and Maria Gendron. "Does Language Do More Than Communicate Emotion?" *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. vol. 24. April 2015. 99-108.

Jonathan Shay who examine stories told by American war veterans or Aristotle who has examined Greek theater in ancient times.

Furthermore, revolutionary songs or poems composed by foot soldiers, 87 as well as prose by famous postwar authors like Lê Minh Khuê, Dương Thu Hương, and Bảo Ninh often use themes sorrow to reflect on the Vietnam War and fallen. Likewise, many Vietnamese popular songs from South Vietnam use sorrowful themes to convey human connections and love in response to the meaningless cycle of war violence. Therefore, the reason why the latter is dubbed as being colonial and inauthentic is because the South Vietnamese lost the war, and many scholars of Vietnamese music did not consider Vietnamese popular music to be worthy of their effort.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> Translated and anthologized by Thanh Nguyen and Bruce Weigl, *Poems from Captured Documents* compiles many poems which have been declassified by the United States.

# Chapter 3 -- Cu Ly Sorrow: Cheap Labor<sup>88</sup>

In contrast to the postwar decade after 1975, where the Vietnamese Communist Party distanced itself from Vietnamese popular music, the relationship between the state and popular music has become much closer in the 21st century. It used to be the case that popular music needed to be banned for the state to push its reforms and politics, like neotraditional music (*nhạc dân tọc hiện đại*) and other propaganda. However, since the turn of the 21st century, Vietnamese popular music has become only sort-of censored, where it has since operated in conjunction with the state in stimulating the national surplus of cheap labor for the global economy.

The overall decline of cultural censorship in the industry of Vietnamese popular music is often attributed to the economic reform of 1986, where Vietnam's economy shifted towards a more market-oriented direction. However, the economic renovation of 1986 (đỏi mới) did not put an end to the censorship of Vietnamese popular music. Even two decades into the new economic, singers like Đam Vĩnh Hưng faced legal and political obstacles when releasing albums with pre-1975 songs. Even though it may have been common for a few pre-1975 songs to be snuck into song albums, dedicating an entire album to the pre-1975 repertoire was still dangerous in Vietnam before 2008. Due to the ambiguity of Vietnamese laws on music, the industry of popular music in Vietnam has been flourishing through a process of trial-and-error.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>88</sup> The term cu ly is derived from the French word for coolie. It is used by many Vietnamese subjects who self-identify with service of physical labor (lao động) as oppose mental stress (lao tâm). The vocational life of the *cu ly* is associated with the lifestyle known as *bui đời* (street life).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Vietnam experienced a boom in home entertainment consumerism, where Vietnamese popular music crossed over from platforms of audio to video.<sup>89</sup> Music videos offered could convey stories visually on top of the song's audible landscape. As such, Vietnamese popular music could promote state agendas visually to appease the censors while still maintaining its sorrowful themes.

Oftentimes, the music videos of popular music portrayed personas of migrant workers, known as *cu ly* or *ôsin* (unskilled laborers). These characters would often display a high degree of morality through their selfless acts of hard work and sacrifice. In Vietnamese popular songs, cheap labor was conflated with moral deeds. Consequently, Vietnamese popular music was singing the rhetoric of good-citizenship in harmony with state propaganda.

Music video made Vietnamese popular songs, including pre-1975 songs, more contemporary and relevant. Themes of wartime sorrow and suffering were adjusted to suit the post-socialist conditions of everyday life. War was replaced by globalization; soldiers marching in red mud and writing letters were replaced by migrant workers; and the cycle of meaningless violence was replaced by the system of low-wages and repetitious work. The sorrowful undertone of Vietnamese popular music, which once yielded its insights into the struggles of war, now casts a light on the unskilled laborers of Vietnam, giving their sweat a radiant glow of economic progress and global citizenship.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>89</sup> Due to the culture of piracy and bootlegging in Vietnam, it is even questionable if singers and producers receive profits from sells of cultural objects like CDs or DVDs.

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the figure of the hardworking laborer is a cultural icon, embodying Vietnam's economic interest of stimulating cheap labor for the assembly line of the global economy. Moreover, romantic portrayals of cheap labor and migrant workers are not exclusive to only Vietnamese popular music, as similar representations have also been looming throughout Vietnam's system of public education and re-education. Hence, Vietnamese popular music offers a window for engaging with the issues of Vietnam's economic and global relationships.

## I. Historical Background

While Vietnam's Ministry of Culture has not issued yet a statement endorsing Vietnamese popular music, reneging its criticisms of sentimentality (*uy mi*), or apologizing for those whom the state has imprisoned for engaging in Vietnamese popular songs, <sup>90</sup> it is rare nowadays for the state to prosecute citizens openly for engaging with popular music songs. While there are still reported incidences with a handful of musicians, <sup>91</sup> the state seems to have been micromanaging popular music less in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, deferring the matter more to local law-enforcement (*công an*).

Consequently, the Vietnamese popular music industry has emerged again in Vietnam, taking part in the country's economic growth. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Vietnam has been producing popular music and music themed gameshows, whereas in the previous decades, most Vietnamese popular songs were produced in the diaspora exclusively. Vietnamese singers, who perform and produce songs in Vietnam, have also been touring

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<sup>90</sup> http://www.bbc.com/news/10312758

<sup>91</sup> http://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam/2015/12/151214\_vietkhang\_man\_han\_tu

the world circuit throughout the diaspora, working with and competing against the Vietnamese singers abroad.

In the 1990s, Phillip Taylor notes that Vietnamese popular music songs have resurfaced in Vietnam (23-4). Despite its history of strict censorship, Vietnamese popular songs, new and old (pre-1975), were now the lawless activities out in the open. Cafes were playing popular songs continuously as opposed to sneaking them into their playlist occasionally. Still, many of the songs circulating in Vietnam at the time were being smuggled from the diaspora. Even the Scott-Irish American singer Dalena was being heard in Vietnam (Taylor 24). Ultimately, the same songs oozing with sentimentality (uy mi) in the diaspora were also the songs of Vietnam.

Jason Gibbs notes that the censorship of Vietnam popular music has been more "relaxed" since the late 1980s, when Vietnam's economy switched to a more market-oriented economy (14).<sup>92</sup> Due to the renovation (đỏi mới) in 1986, private business and trade were allowed to resume in Vietnam. While it is generally speculated that this shift in Vietnam's economy has impacted its production of Vietnamese popular music, how it does so is unclear still.

Part of the ambiguity is due to the "relaxed" nature of Vietnam's cultural censorship. During the postwar era, censorship was as visible as the green police uniforms confiscating music and making arrest. By 2008-10, the censorship of Vietnamese popular music seemed to have vanished entirely as singers like Lệ Quyên were releasing albums of pre-1975 songs (*Khúc Tình Xua*) without any reported legal

<sup>92 &</sup>quot;How Does Hanoi Rock?"

blow-back. In 2015, the show Solo with Bolero appeared on national television, where contestants perform mostly pre-1975 songs. While people can still be imprisoned for composing or performing songs in Vietnam, cases like Việt Khang in 2012 are particular in that the songs were criticizing the government too explicitly and openly.

For business owners in Vietnam today, the censorship of Vietnamese of popular music is a procedure of attaining eligibility. Oftentimes, businesses renting audio equipment or providing karaoke services are required to submit a list of songs to the local police for approval. Once a year or so, the local authorities inspect businesses like karaoke bars to ensure that cultural standards are being maintained. However, in era of mass internet Wi-Fi and streaming content, these methods of quality control are performed for the sake of protocol.

For cultural producers and performers in Vietnam, censorship is more of an internalized caution, where political gestures are best avoided. In 2005, the production of pre-1975 songs was still dangerous, despite their overwhelming presence in Vietnam; Dam Vĩnh Hưng's album of pre-1975 love songs, *Tình Ca 50 (Love Songs vol. 50)*, released on November of 2005 by Lac Hong Audio Video, were confiscated in less than a year. While the singer and his affiliates were not imprisoned, they had to pay a fine, and the singer had to issue apology (Việt Báo). 93 Due to its historic association with the fallen southern Republic of Vietnam and the postwar campaign against "yellow music," it was not always possible to avoid politics, especially with songs from the pre-1975 repertoire.

<sup>93 &</sup>quot;http://vietbao.vn/Van-hoa/Ve-vu-bai-hat-Pho-dem-Dam-Vinh-Hung-se-bi-xu-ly-theo-phapluat/65042089/181/>

Even by 2017, only selected pre-1975 songs are being produced in Vietnam. Pre-1975 songs like Trúc Phương's "Kẻ Ở Miền Xa" (Soldier Living Afar) or Lê Minh Bằng's "Thương Vùng Hỏa Tuyến" (Compassion for the Front), focusing on the life of the grunt in war, have been remade in the diaspora with success. However, the same cannot be said in Vietnam, where pre-1975 songs with war themes are best to avoid.

In many cases, pre-1975 songs are salvaged with revisions, where historical references are omitted, lest they portray a sympathetic perspective of South Vietnamese and their history. When pre-1975 songs like "I Will Ferry You" (Tôi Đưa Em Sang Sông), composed by Nhật Ngân and Y Vũ's in 1960-1963 approximately, are performed or recorded in Vietnam, the line "My life is a soldier marching across the earth" is usually replaced by "My life is a bird's wing, flying across the earth" instead. One recent case occurred in 2015, when a contestant on Solo Cùng Bolero, Mai Trần Lâm, performed the song on national television.

Previously in 2005, the singer Đam Vĩnh Hưng recorded the song "Phố Đem" (Night City). The song was originally composed by Tâm Anh in the 1960s, possibly 1968. In the remake, references to the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese grunts of South Vietnam were revised: the line "tuy lính chiến xa nhà" (though the soldier far from home) was changed to "năm tháng cách xa nhà" (five months far from home), and "chinh chiến từ lâu rồi" (this war from long ago) was changed to "vai áo bạc phai màu" (shirts fade with gray).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>94</sup> Đời tôi là chiến binh, đi khắp phương trời.

In Vietnam, the removal of war references in Vietnamese popular music songs from the pre-1975 repertoire is motivated by the ongoing cultural censorship of Vietnamese popular music. By omitting the songs' historical context and references, pre-1975 songs are decontextualized and become more like generic love songs bereft of their significance to the old southern Republic of Vietnam. The seemly depoliticalized version of pre-1975 music is more advantageous economically for the Vietnamese in Vietnam, because the singer can sing the song on tours in Vietnam and the diaspora.

Unfortunately, song narratives are cultural mediums of storytelling in the diaspora, which offers alternative perspectives of the Vietnam War and Vietnamese life. These narratives become loss when pre-1975 songs are remade again in Vietnam. In the global market, different versions of pre-1975 songs compete against each other, and thus, the cultural memories of the Vietnamese in diaspora are under contestation.

These political acts of depoliticizing Vietnamese popular music are methods of maneuvering Vietnamese popular music in Vietnam. Since 1975, Vietnamese popular music have existed as censored songs being performed with a high degree of caution. Gibbs explains that many youth groups continued to play Vietnamese rock even after 1975, but they referred to it as "youth music" (*nhac trê*) as a way of disassociating the music with its pre-1975 heritage and cultural memory of South Vietnam (9-10). The act of renaming Vietnamese rock from its pre-1975 term of "action music" to "youth music" was a deliberate way of adapting Vietnamese popular music to its geopolitical landscaping, enabling its cultural survival.

Likewise, since 2015, many pre-1975 love songs are being referred to as bolero songs by the younger generation. Instead of using the terminology of "pre-1975 songs" (nhạc trước 75) by the older generation, taboo songs can be played and discussed openly while bypassing the politic of the Vietnamese War.

In addition, video technology has played a major role in making Vietnamese popular music more compliant with Vietnam's cultural expectations. In the past, many technological factors made it impractical to host music within a visual platform. While the technology for making music videos has been around since the Vietnam War, 95 homes with television sets have been scarce in Vietnam even in the early 1990s. In the urban neighborhoods of Mỹ Tho City, it was common for people watched evening shows like the cartoons of *Tom and Jerry* by squatting and peering through a neighbor's window. Multimedia systems like the VCR player were so rare that neighbors would rent them to others locally.

The rarest of them all was perhaps the Arirang karaoke player from Korea, the Rolls-Royce of Vietnamese entertainment. With this machine, owners could convert their parlor into a low-budget karaoke business, or what Taylor refers to as "karaoke hell" (24). Overtime, economic growth and remittances from the diaspora stimulated the material conditions for Vietnam's music video culture. Soon, the trend of communal viewing through a neighbor's window would fade away in urban areas. Multimedia and karaoke systems became common household appliances.

<sup>95</sup> In Hà Thúc Can's 1973 film Land of Sorrow (Đất Khổ), there are scenes where the composer Trịnh Công Son performs his songs. Reform theater (cåi luong) was also screened in movie theaters during era of the war.

The rise of music video culture in Vietnam is attributed partly to the growth of music piracy. Before the public had mass access to internet and smart phones, many Vietnamese acquired their music and film through local bootlegging businesses. Video CD (VCD) was the medium of choice, because it was both affordable for small businesses while still being stable across various platforms of home entertainment. Music piracy and bootlegging made Vietnamese popular music a shared culture between the rich and poor.

Since it used CD discs, VCDs were cheaper than DVDs, and at the same time, VCDs were still compatible with most DVD players and computers/laptops in Vietnam. Moreover, digital media offered new advantages when compared to the older analog format. Digital data could be retrieved, edited, exported, and produced faster. Unlike the VHS tapes or audio cassettes, digital media did not require much additional hardware for capturing or exporting. Technical issues like video and audio becoming unsynchronized due to frame-drop became less of an issue. As a result, many of local businesses could make and sell a better product easier with less overhead cost. In addition, businesses could produce their own music videos with digital media by cutting-and-pasting various scenes from previous music videos with a new song.

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, VCD was the best multi-media medium in Vietnam and many countries in Southeast Asia. Even though DVD technology was widely available the time, offering more storage space per disc size and MP4 codecs like DIVX and XVID yield better compression ratios than the VCD, they did not fit the technological profile and budget of most consumers and local businesses. In the south,

local businesses, which sold and distributed pirated copies of music videos, were concentrated in HCMC. <sup>96</sup> By 2010, these local businesses can be found in less urban provinces, such as Bến Tre.

In addition to these technological changes in Vietnam, notions of good and bad culture were also changing due to the economy. During the postwar era after 1975, good and bad culture were evaluated in terms of Vietnam's liberation (*giái phóng*) against America and the West. Headlines then were heralding that cultural reform was working and making progress in the south (Taylor 31). The rhetoric of progress was focused more on reforming the south Vietnamese and their culture.

By the end of the 1980's, the rhetoric of national progress in Vietnam became associated more with economic progress of the renovation, <sup>97</sup> emphasizing less on reforming the south. This would be an important theme for Vietnamese popular music in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, because themes of economic progress made bad songs good. Sad love songs, which were once deemed as sentimental and colonial, would incorporate the rhetoric of economic progress as a way of gaining sympathy from the censors.

## **II.** Images of Economic Progress

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>96</sup> HCMC is still referred to by its former name of Sài Gòn.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>97</sup> The new economy of 1986 often referred to as the renovation (đổi mới) should not to be confused with the new economy of 1975 (kinh tế mới).



Figure 3.1: Spacious Sidewalks

With Vietnamese popular music video, economic progress was visualized by either omitting or romanticizing the signs of economic scarcity. Music videos often rendered exaggerated urban spaces to suggest a narrative of modernity. The landscape was often spacious, and as a result, it highlighted the modern aspects of Vietnam's architecture and infrastructure. In Figure 3.1, the singer Đàm Vĩnh Hưng plays a student who falls in love with a classmate. The combination of abundant trees, shade, spacious sidewalks, and wall fences suggests that the scene is located just outside the elite facilities of an international private school.



Figure 3.2: Wide streets and tall buildings

In Figure 3.2, the singer Lâm Hùng plays a criminal who eventually turns good. In the scene, the characters are small in relation to the wide streets, tall lamppost, and multi-story houses in the background. This area of mass transit resembles areas in or around the district of Tân Bình where the international airport is located, or district 12 where major/global cities like HCMC and Binh Durong are connected.

Both these visual narratives take place in urban sites where they shy away from the blow-back of modernization in Vietnam, such as the heavy traffic, trash, pollution, and poverty of urban life. By doing so, the music videos of Vietnamese popular music echo the rhetoric of Vietnam's ongoing modernization and progress with awing architecture and infrastructure. The spatial dimensions of these scenes are exaggerated to suggest that the urban infrastructure meets and exceeds the demands of urbanization and commerce.

While these scenes may render aspects of urban reality, they are selective. In both Figures 3.1 and 3.2, traffic is sparse. The street merchants loitering on the sidewalk are removed. By omitting crowds, these music video erase Vietnam's issues of spatial scarcity. In reality, the traffic of HCMC is well-known for being overcrowded and dangerous. 98 In the district of Tân Bình, HCMC, motorbikes often overwhelm the wide streets of Công Hòa, where they would spill onto the sidewalk during rush hour. In Vietnam, pedestrians and motorists are continuously dodging each other. Furthermore, the roundabouts at intersections are often used as playgrounds for children due to the lack

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>98</sup>In 2008, the British television show *Top Gear UK* described the traffic conditions in Vietnam as: "The cities in Vietnam are a seething cauldron of barely organized chaos. They are a death trap for the inexperienced. And in the countryside, there's even more peril. Four times more people [in Vietnam] die on the roads than in Britain." Season 12, Episode 08.

of recreational spaces, like neighborhood parks. When it rains in Vietnam, which it does often, many districts in HCMC suffer flooding issues.

Migrant workers, who are peddling various goods along the sidewalk, are invisible in the music videos of Vietnamese popular music. In doing so, the songs suggest an exaggerated layout of Vietnam's landscape, where the city are rural are more divided than mixed. The absence of poor merchants peddling kem bảy màu (seven-color ice cream), 99 tàu hủ (tofu jelly dessert), and hủ tiếu gõ (noodle soup) erases the poverty that connects the city and the rural. By editing out certain aspects of Vietnam's urban landscape, like the poor, urbanization is rendered more modern and progressive.



Figure 3.3: Macau<sup>100</sup>

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Vietnamese popular music videos also revealed the cosmopolitan world beyond Vietnam. In Figure 3.3 and 3.4, Vietnamese

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>99</sup>"Seven color ice cream" usually has three colors.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>100</sup> Figure 3.3 is scene located in Macau, which is a neighbor of Hong Kong. The city or territory is a former Portuguese colony. Even though it is located in Asia, Macau still conserves many aspects of its colonial past in the form of spatial and architectural aesthetics. Special thanks to Wen-ling Tung for helping me identify these sites.

singers are touring the world. The ability of being a tourist is culturally significant, because it is imbued with the privilege of gazing and evaluating other cultures and persons as being noteworthy. In these videos, Vietnam is no longer just a destination for backpackers to wander waywardly. Instead, Vietnam is also sending its citizens abroad like other powerful nations. The adventure and excitement of young people traveling the world point to the underlying theme of Vietnam's economic progress.



Figure 3.4: Hong Kong

Many viewers in Vietnam may not recognize the image in figure 3.3 and 3.4 as sites of Macau and Hong Kong specifically. Nevertheless, these contemporary and foreign landscapes are important, since they posit Vietnam in the discussion about being global and performing global rituals. For many of the Vietnamese youth viewing these images from cafes during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Vietnamese popular music was a window into luxury and mobility. Popular music suggested that it was best time to be young and Vietnamese to the youth.

Progress may have been a fictional construct in these music videos, but it was not a lie entirely. Signs of new-ness were popping up everywhere in Vietnam. The economy was growing, streets were getting wider, motorbikes were coming out with automatic gearboxes, tin roofs and coconut leaf walls were being remodeled with rebar and concrete, and people were wearing skinny jeans.

In addition, there was a cultural explosion of new Vietnamese singers and popular music songs. The singers were actual Vietnamese persons living and working in Vietnam, not the *Việt kiềus* who lived and performed abroad. These native celebrities enabled new dreams of overcoming poverty. Instead of the paradigm of years-and-years of expensive schooling and vocational training, popular music offered the impression that one just needed to be young, good looking, and sing well. Similar to Figure 3.3, one does not need to have advanced certifications to travel the world in nice clothes.

For the youth, singing was a set of skills that could be developed with karaoke. While the lifestyle and opportunities portrayed in popular culture were impractical for most in Vietnam, these imaginaries were still welcomed. Unfortunately, for many Vietnamese who migrated to the city for work, the majority of their income went towards bills and family in the rural areas. The closest that most Vietnamese have ever gotten to Macau or Hong Kong was the cafe around the block.

The daily experiences and encounters of scarcity, where resources are being over-stretched to under-support the growth of urbanization and commercialization, were just about everywhere in Vietnam but in these videos. If there is scarcity in these scenes somewhere, then it is as benign as the news stories about young children riding their

bicycles in HCMC in an effort to conserve electricity (Anh). These narratives exaggerate aspects of urban life to suggest an overall sense of progress, economically and socially.

# **III.** Unskilled Morality

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many Vietnamese popular music videos featured the poor working class by portraying their hardships as modes of heroism. The protagonist was usually a male figure who was unskilled and had little to no education. While they were mostly love songs, Vietnamese popular music videos frequently touched on many of the relevant social issues of class difference and economic inequality. However, these social issues were addressed only superficially.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, music videos tended to render Vietnamese laborers romantically. Hardships and obstacles caused by economic conditions were often presented as challenges for the protagonist to overcome. In doing so, the music videos of Vietnamese popular music often highlighted morality while burying the other aspects concerning economic exploitation.



## Figure 3.5: Protagonist

In Figure 3.5, the protagonist of the song "Tọi Tình" (Love's Mistakes), played by the singer Quang Trường, sleeps on the floor in the storage room. Employers in Vietnam sometimes provide certain arrangements for migrant workers, such as a housing and food, but these accommodations are usually deducted from their wages. In the music video, the protagonist works all day in a room crammed with sewing machines, and at night, he retires to another space crammed by piles of fabric. In these scenes, the protagonist is a hard worker in poor circumstances.



Figure 3.6: Antagonist

In contrast, the antagonist (Figure 3.6) is more white-collar. Instead of toiling in a factory, he only visits factories and then attend meetings with important people over dinner and wine. His labors do not seem like hard work, and the music video suggests that the antagonist is more of a rich-playboy. When the antagonist is introduced to the storyline, the protagonist has been developing his relationship with a beautiful young woman. Conflict arises when the antagonist also pursues the same woman in a love triangle. Between her two prospects, the young woman chooses the antagonist.

Although her reasons are unclear, viewers are led to assume that her motives involved money.

In the music video, love and heartbreak overshadows the other narrative about the economic scarcity and poverty of the working class ( $lao\ d\hat{o}ng$ ) in Vietnam. Instead of being critical of the system of cheap labor that depends on conditions of poverty to maintain its low wages, the music video over-emphasizes the romantic strife where the rich are cock-blocking the poor.

While there are depictions of poverty, the music video does not examine the structural causes of poverty in relation to Vietnam's economic practice. Instead, they avoid confronting the underappreciative relationship between Vietnam and its laborers. Pity for the victim of love erases the significance of economic discrimination. The music video only shows that there is poverty in Vietnam while withholding the narrative that Vietnam's economy relies on poverty to generate its surplus of cheap labor. Thus, romantic insights are expressed in lieu of political criticism.

Furthermore, the conflict between the protagonist *cu ly* and the rich resonates of the social phenomenon where Vietnamese women are leaving the country via marriage.

As Hung Cam Thai discovered during his research in the mid-1990s, *Việt kiều*(Vietnamese abroad) men are not always welcomed by many local Vietnamese men (xi).

Although the economic desire to leave the country is not limited only Vietnamese women, there is still the general perception that Vietnamese women are predominately selling themselves for visas. The music video plays-off of this social issue by casting the

antagonist in figure 3.6 as a *Việt kiều* international businessman.<sup>101</sup> Thus, the issues of *Việt kiều* men marrying Vietnamese women in Vietnam is an added layer of the video, scapegoating the negative effects of economic progress onto the Vietnamese in the diaspora.

The misfortune that befalls the protagonist is symbolic of the misfortunes which befall good people. In *Poetics*, this arrangement of plot structure is referred to as "reversal" or "reversal of fortune." By appealing to the audience's sense of humanity, Aristotle explains that particular plot formations can be used to strategically conjure pity from the audience (81).

Likewise, the music video's plotline generates pity to celebrate and give value to the protagonist's moral attributes in relation success. Although he has tasted the bitterness of social injustice, the protagonist does not complain, nor does he demand any form of reparations. He gives himself wholeheartedly to his employer, nation, and economy while expecting nothing in back. His self-sacrifice transcends his status as an unappreciated migrant worker to that of a role model figure for the Vietnamese in Vietnam.

Regardless, if one approves of these depictions of Vietnam and the Vietnamese *cu ly*, Vietnamese popular music showed what it needed to show to avoid being banned. In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Vietnamese popular music was coming out of the dark decades of strict censorship. According to the song composer Tuấn Khanh, <sup>102</sup> love

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>101</sup> While there is no verbal dialogue in the music video, the exchange of body gestures suggests that the man in figure 6 is familiar with the Vietnamese to the extent that he can flirt, and lengthy conversations without any visible signs of awkwardness.

<sup>102</sup> Interview

songs were safer in the 1990s while rock songs were still very risky. Around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many Vietnamese popular songs being produced in Vietnam sounded similar to the songs of Cantonese popular songs. However, many of the Vietnamese popular songs at the time were still fashioned as song ballads, composed using literary techniques, and had themes of sorrow. These narrative features reveal that many song composers still drawing from the pre-1975 song repertoire in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Through trial and error, these music video songs contributed to the establishment of producing and performing of Vietnamese popular music in Vietnam again. While pre-1975 songs were still risky at the time, a few years later, singers like Lệ Quyên (Figure 3.7) from Hanoi will release a series of albums of pre-1975 songs without any reported legal issues.



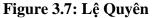




Figure 3.8: Đan Nguyên

The cultural censorship of Vietnamese popular music in Vietnam can still be found at the local level. In January of 2017, a week or so before the Tết Holiday (Lunar New Year), the local police visited many local karaoke bars in the coast town of Bình

Đại, Bến Tre, looking for Vietnamese popular songs and music videos with war references from overseas pre-1975 songs.

According to many business owners, the police were interested particularly in the singer Dan Nguyên and his recordings with a military theme (Figure 3.8). The singer does not perform songs with a military theme as frequently anymore with his newer contract with Thúy Nga, but many of his previous covers of pre-1975 songs with the company Asia Entertainment, where he dresses in the regalia of the South Vietnamese military, are still in mass circulation.

## IV. Popular Music, Prison, and Public Education

In Vietnam, Vietnamese popular music is only one social avenue of public discourse that romanticizes and promotes the imagining of cheap labor for Vietnam's economy. The moral image of unskilled labor within the assembly line of the world economy are also located in the curriculum of Vietnam's public education and prison reducation system.

Unskilled labor is promoted romantically in Vietnam's public education system. Textbooks like *Tiếng Việt 1: Bộ Giáo Dục và Đào Tạo* are written and published by the state (Nhà Xuất Bản Giáo Dục) and taught in public schools nationwide. Figure 3.9 is an example how language arts is taught to Vietnamese children during the first grade. <sup>103</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>103</sup> L2 Vietnamese pedagogy in the United States rarely introduces examples of poetry, fiction, and sentences with features of literary language at the beginner level of language accusation. However, these features are more common in materials used for teaching Vietnamese to either L1 learners in Vietnam or bilingual leaners in the diaspora.

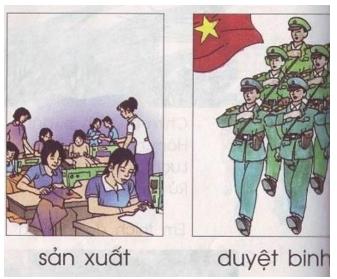


Figure 3.9: First grade textbook

The lesson introduces new vocabulary, where pictures assign meaning to words,  $s ilde{a} n x u ilde{a} t$  (to produce or production) and  $duy ilde{e} n b inh$  (parade). However, most six-year-old children attending school regularly in Vietnam are unlikely to have the a posteriori knowledge to be able to relate to the figures and lessons. Therefore, these pictures introduce new meaning by drawing on pre-existing associations of the family.

Hence, in Figure 3.9, the workers in textile factories are presented as a group similar to a happy family. The supervisors are the older sisters supporting to the younger sisters. Next to the them are the marching men, who are like their happy brothers. Sideby-side, the pictures convey modes of employment in relation to domestic relationships. Consequently, expressions of unskilled labor are presented as labors that constitute a healthy family.

In this light, work is presented as the exchange of labor and love as opposed to labor and money. Although it has similar characteristics to the *surplus common* 

(Casarino and Negri 268), this Vietnamese version of the common does not disrupt neoliberalism, but instead, it solidifies Vietnam's presence in the global economy. Aside from exporting material resources like rice and oil, Vietnam is also a sweatshop haven that exports cheap labor. Thus, as early as when they are taught to read in the first grade, Vietnamese children in public schools are conditioned to serve the interest of transnational corporations.

It should be noted, children in the rural areas are more affected by the public-school system. Unlike urban cities, rural areas are bereft of private or international schools. Rural children have fewer options of receiving an alternative education, even though their family may be able to afford the expensive tuition of a private school.

Another educational disadvantage affecting rural children is the inequality of education between the rural and urban areas of Vietnam, especially in the subject of English language acquisition. Since the 21<sup>st</sup> century, English has played a major role in Vietnam's education as well many other countries in Asia, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and other parts of the world. Many employers and universities in Vietnam and abroad require proof of English language proficiency. While public schools in Vietnam do provide English foreign language classes K-12, these classes alone are not enough for students to be able to pass their exams for certification. Consequently, parents enroll their children in additional English courses at language centers afterschool or on weekends.

Unfortunately, the majority of language centers are located in urban cities like HCMC. While it is generally difficult find an English language center that focuses on the

academic skills of reading and writing in Vietnam, it is almost impossible to find them in the rural areas. Ultimately, the overall quality and access of education in the rural areas are not as competitive as in the urban areas.

In the early 2000's, many employers in urban cities required only an ABC English certificate, demonstrating some level English proficiency in conversational settings.

However, as of late, expectations for adults are much higher. Many universities and employers in Vietnam and abroad require test scores and certifications from companies like Cambridge, International English Language Testing System (IELST), and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). As of 2015-6, some elementary schools in HCMC are requiring children as early as the first grade to begin the Cambridge exams series known as Starters, Movers, and Flyers.

The students from rural areas are already at a major disadvantage when they enter the city to find work or apply to universities. Unfortunately, they have to compete like everyone else for the same opportunities. The higher risk of vocational failure means that it is more difficult for people from rural to escape the transnational assembly line. The Vietnamese in rural areas are more susceptible to the roles of unskilled labor, because of the education they received and the education they did not receive.

For those with limited vocational opportunities, selling drugs and sex have been common alternatives. However, these are risky options of economic flight as they often lead to prison. Ironically, the re-education curriculum for reforming citizens is also designed to redirect them back to global assembly line.

According Vietnam's Resolution 53/CP of 1994 and Article 24 of Decrees for Administrative Transgressions, once a sex worker is arrested, she or he is enrolled in a process of STD testing and re-education. Prisoners are "taught" that prostitution is immoral, and therefore, they need to undergo re-training to acquire work skills. As part of their training, prisoners must work and meet quotas. Ultimately, the state's reeducation program teaches that practice of labor is the performance of good citizenship. In the case of women, cheap labor also signifies good femininity (Nguyễn-võ 115, 136-8).

While laborers are rarely exported abroad, their labor is transferred globally in the form of gross domestic product (GDP). Hence, when Vietnam's economy became more neoliberal, Vietnamese culture also reacted in that direction. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Vietnamese popular music culture, Vietnam's public education, and its prison system are also operating under the strategy of the global economy.

## V. Vietnam's Corporate Development.

Vietnam is classified as a socialist republic by the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Unlike the socialisms practiced by many European countries, Vietnam's socialism is more market oriented like its neighbor China. Consequently, it lacks a strong infrastructure of social programs and services in the areas of public education (K-12), healthcare, and welfare. <sup>104</sup> In Vietnam, bank loans usually require the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>104</sup> The government does provide services for certain "diseases" like tuberculosis or homosexuality. In most case, hospitals do not treat patients unless they provide payment in advance. One man in Bến Tre said that his wife needed a caesarean section due to complications with giving birth. The hospital could not

ownership of land or other forms of non-moveable assets. Since the majority of Vietnamese citizens do not own property, people usually seek-out loans through networks of friends, acquaintances, or "the black market" at higher interest rates. 105

At the same time, banks in Vietnam are usually more willing to provide low interest loans to foreign investors. In 2013, banks in Hồ Chí Minh City alone reported \$45.14 billion USD in loans (Xinhua). In addition to low tax rates for businesses and an abundance of cheap labor and natural resources, Vietnam is a place of interest for many transnational corporations abroad.

The birth of Vietnam's corporate development is often attributed to the Renovation of 1986 (Đối Mới), which started a series of ongoing reforms designed to liberate Vietnam's economy. One major effect of the renovation is to allow private business and trade to resume. This meant that people could operate and own local businesses like before 1975 in the South.

Under pressure from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) to abolish state own enterprises (SOE), laws were created in 1999 to enable SOE to be privatized. This enabled state ownership to be divested into joint-stock companies. As a result, the number of registered SOEs dropped from 6,000 in the mid-1990s to 4,800 by 2003 (Freeman and Nguyen 19). In 2004, more enterprise laws were passed to strengthen corporate governance, addressing the issues of transparency between corporations and investors.

perform the surgery. However, the doctor would not issue transfer request to another hospital, until the patient proceed with further payment

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>105</sup> Sometimes people pool their money together in a system known as *hui*.

Despite the recommendations of the World Bank and IMF to dissolve all of its ownership, Vietnam continues to have many SOEs active. Moreover, many SOEs which were converted into joint-stock companies have not become privatized fully either, e.g. Vietnam Electricity (EVN). <sup>106</sup> The Vietnamese Communist Party still holds significant shares in many major corporations, maintaining its control of the company's interest overall.

Due to the lingering presence of state intervention, among other issues, Nguyen and Freeman consider Vietnam to be a developing capitalist country that is not as advanced as the U.S. or many countries in Europe (13). However, Bill Hayton interprets Vietnam's lack of reforms as modes of economic adaptation rather than failures of adjusting. Hayton explains that since 1981, the Soviet Union stopped sending aid to Vietnam, leaving a 40% gap in the budget (6). This has made it difficult for Vietnam to stay disengaged in the world economy. In 1998, Vietnam accepted \$2.7 billion USD from the World Bank and donors to dissolve its remaining SOE, but the Vietnamese Communist Party has yet to comply (8). Hayton argues that Vietnam is being strategic in modeling its economy after its neighbor China as opposed to the IMF.

Likewise, I would argue Vietnam's lack of social infrastructure for the poor is also strategic and methodological. Poverty can be beneficial for economies designed to capitalize on cheap labor. From its education system to its banking practices, Vietnam

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>106</sup> "Electricity of Vietnam (EVN), a state-owned enterprise that reports directly to the Prime Minister, is the largest buyer of electricity, and holds a monopoly on transmission and distribution. Electric power is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Industry and Trade (MOIT)." https://www.export.gov/article?id=Vietnam-Power-Generation

has structural measures to reduce the success rates of class mobility. At the same time, it offers incentives for transnational corporations looking for cheap labor and low tax rates.

Many transnational companies and state own enterprises (SOE) in Vietnam depend on poverty. The state lottery, in particular, generates profits from the labor of children and the elderly, who are peddling its merchandise up and down the streets every day. Hence, there are no laws in Vietnam that require children to go to school, nor are there significant programs to help poor families send their children to school. At the same time, there are many opportunities to exploit children in Vietnam. Even though it is technically illegal to employ anyone under the age of 17 years-old, the social reality is that the streets of Vietnam are full of children generating revenue for the state and other corporations. Without a legal contract, their labors are not considered to be "work."

This is not to say that Vietnam does not have any social programs. Similar to a social security pension in the United States, Vietnam pays around \$10 USD a month to its registered elderly (Figure 3.10). Elementary students who commute long distances from home are eligible for financial assistance. However, public schools in Vietnam are tuition based. In addition, students are oftentimes billed for the maintenance or remodeling of the school's facilities. Citizens who have a so nghèo 109 (government)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>107</sup> Vietnam provide a monthly stipend for students who live far away and must commute to school.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>108</sup> In 2014, the International Labor Organization estimated that 1.75 million Vietnamese children are workers (9.6% children). That's a very modest estimation too, because the concept of child labor does not cover all working children. <

http://www.ilo.org/hanoi/Informationresources/Publicinformation/newsitems/WCMS\_237788/lang-en/index.htm>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>109</sup> In the rural province of Binh Đại, a woman told me that the local hospital replaced her husband's stroke medication with herbal pills when she went to refill the prescription. She found out that the medication had

registration of poverty) can receive discounts in public schools and hospitals. However, hospitals often give lower priority and alternative treatments to such patients. These social programs are good starting points, but alone, they have not been enough to help adults or children to escape poverty.



Figure: 3.10: Registration for Elderly Benefits

## Conclusion

Due to the lacking presence of government subsidies in Vietnam, many unskilled laborers in Vietnam depend on compassion and pity of strangers for survival. This includes merchants peddling goods on the street like state lottery tickets, single stem roses, Happydent chewing gum, and other goods. While these merchants are not beggars, they are also beggar-like.

been switched when her husband began to suffer strokes repeatedly again. The family had to take her husband back to the hospital in HCMC. The doctors in HCMC told her that the medication that she was giving her husband were herbal pills.

For example, little girls wander the streets wearing school uniforms, calling-out "uncle" or "auntie" "please, help me." When one looks down, he or she sees a child holding a rose or pack of chewing gum. Sometimes, it is an elderly woman with a pack of lottery tickets or a blind guitarist led a child. It is common for these sellers to be children, the elderly, or a person with a physical disability.

In these cases, the goods being sold are not as relevant as the moral exchange. Such sale tactics elicit transactions based on the ideas and affects of social justice and compassion. Instead of supply-and-demand, these gestures are more like social intervention, where ordinary people help subsidize the poor due to the lack of Vietnam's infrastructure for social services. These exchanges occur in Vietnam frequently enough that there is a moral economy, a market based on pity and compassion. While common goods like chewing gum or state lottery tickets are also sold at stalls and stores in Vietnam, I suspect that the majority of them are sold by street peddlers.

This sense of moral justice among the people at the local level, I like to think is partly due to Vietnam's popular culture. Although Vietnamese popular music puts out a lot of romantic impressions about cheap labor and how glorious economic progress is, I want to believe its moral clichés are also contributing to a social good.

While I do not disagree with claims that there is economic progress occurring in Vietnam, I am still wary of the optimism that one day the economy will liberate the people when its GDP/GNP reaches a magical threshold. There is more evidence to suggest that Vietnam's economy is designed to thrive on poverty rather than overcoming it. This is illustrated metaphorically in 2009 when the World Bank reported on the

energy crisis in Vietnam, arguing that scarcity is an auspicious sign of economic growth. According to the World Bank: as Vietnam's economy grows, both business and household demand for energy will also increase. This would in effect cause a shortage of electricity. Likewise, Vietnam's businesses and factories also depend on cheap labor, and therefore, economic growth will in turn create more dependency on cheap labor. It seems unlikely that one day Vietnam will suddenly stop depending on cheap labor and electricity.

I understand that social programs and service cost money and resources. I understand that strategies for corporate development and measures of social austerity are needed to stabilize the economy to promote growth. However, I also understand that the erection of state monuments is very costly. Yet, monuments are popping up across the country instead of neighborhood soup kitchens. I am tired of reading about how great Vietnam's economic progress is and then become disappointed when I return.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>110</sup> According to a report issued by the World Bank in 2009, the root of energy issues in Vietnam is due to its growing GDP. Between 1995 and 2008, houses with access to electricity increased from 50% to nearly 94%, and thus increasing the annual per capita of consumption from 156 kWh (kilowatt hour) to about 800 kWh (1). According the online statistics, which only dates back to 1997, Vietnam's total production of electricity is 19.132 million mWh (megawatt hour) in 1997, which increased to 99.179 million mWh in 2011 (World Bank). Thus, the overall rise of GDP across these years parallels the rate of demand and consumption for electricity in Vietnam, which illustrates economic progress across the nation.

# Chapter 4. -- Pê Đê Sorrow: Queerness



Figure 4.1: "I Will Be Your Ferry"

While it is often said that romantic feelings are difficult to convey from one person to another in the Vietnamese culture, the heteronormative sentiments of affection, intimacy, and sensuality have long been the familiar gestures of Vietnamese literature and popular music. In the song "I Will Be Your Ferry" (Tôi Đưa Em Sang Sông), composed by Nhật Ngân and Y Vũ in the 1960s, a soldier returns from the war front and discovers that his or her lover has already married. The emotional angst of lover being apart has been an iconic theme of 20th century Vietnamese song ballads. Thus, it could be said that love and affection are oftentimes easier sung than spoken in Vietnamese culture.

Hôm nao em sang ngang, bằng xe hoa hay con thuyền. Giờ phút cuối đến tiễn em, nhìn xác pháo vướng gót chân

In a song like "I Will Be Your Ferry," a question worth asking is what is the gender of the soldier who returns home and the person who has recently married. The song is a ballad composed in the first-person where the pronouns  $t\hat{o}i$  (I) and em (you) are gendered neutral, similar to English. According to the syntax, gender assignment should be grammatically ambiguous. Yet, most Vietnamese listeners in Vietnam and the diaspora anticipate that the soldier to be male and lover to be female. Somehow  $t\hat{o}i$  'I' is inferred to be masculine and em "you" to be feminine. As such, the linguistic possibility of gender plural roles is of little consequence.

Interpreting otherwise, such as reversing the gender roles or homogenizing them, would be considered to be subversive. When the singer Đàm Vĩnh Hưng released a gay themed music video in 2009, such interpretations were so unexpected that it led to a backlash in Vietnam and the diaspora. The shock of imagining two gay men when listening to a Vietnamese popular love song revealed that homoeroticism was not only new and unconventional, but it was a taboo.

#### I. Thesis

The start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a turning point for the discourses of gender and sexuality in Vietnam and diaspora. Alongside similar movements in Vietnamese literature and social science, Vietnamese popular music became a social platform for queer subjects to mobilize. Despite the cultural shock caused by queer themed popular songs, many of the queer performers were attempting to express the sentiments of queer romance in a manner that was as sensual and intimate as its heteronormative imagining.

Such attempts point to a strategy of mobilizing queerness in the cultural mainstream instead of positing it in the niches of Vietnamese subculture.

Until the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Vietnamese popular music has been a heteronormative imaginary along with other discourses, such as Vietnamese literature, language, science, and medicine. When a love ballad is composed or expressed, the use of western harmony, poetic language, and sorrowful themes become associated with heteronormativity by default. This has made it difficult for many in Vietnam and the diaspora to express queer gestures of love and intimacy in the public domain mainstream culture. While every interpretation has its own agency, Vietnamese popular song narratives have been yielding romantic scenarios of man-woman historically in an unfair distribution. The question is then of how one conveys queerness culturally in Vietnamese when all of the discursive tools are coded for man-woman.

#### **II.** Discursive Obstacles

Prior to the 21st century, there was not a discourse for queerness in Vietnamese romantic narratives. Hence, the dominate cultural imagining of love (romantic, familial, communal, and national) has been a narrow purview of heterosexual relationships. While Vietnamese culture is comprised of gender plural subjects in Vietnam and the diaspora, the representation of queer subjects in Vietnamese culture has been invisible and silent mostly. It is not because queer subjects did not exist in Vietnam historically, but rather, their subjecthood has been erased discursively.

Despite being subaltern subjects of the Vietnamese language and culture, many queer performers like Đàm Vĩnh Hưng have found ways of introducing queerness into Vietnamese popular music and mainstream culture. This quasi-movement in Vietnamese popular music emerged in Vietnam around 2007 roughly. While these performers were not part of an organized movement or any particular school of thought, themes from their songs show similar inspirations and derivations of clichés and tropes from many Vietnamese popular love songs.

Without a discourse, queers in Vietnamese popular music had to rely on heteronormative clichés. By using well-known themes and tropes, queerness is produced with the intentions of being accessible for a general Vietnamese audience. While fate, sorrow, and human empathy are highly relatable themes in Vietnamese culture, they also have strong ties to heteronormativity. Consequently, the appropriation of heteronormative clichés invites many cultural misunderstandings, where queer sentiments may be perceived as mimicry.

Contrary to the options discussed by Spivak, where the subaltern must dismantle the hegemonic system and start anew (285-7), Vietnamese queer composers and performers have developed their own mode of queer expression in an unfair and imperfect culture. By selecting, rearranging, and re-appropriating tropes found in Vietnamese culture and language, artists have enriched Vietnamese popular music with more queer voices and gestures.

Queerness in Vietnamese popular music is often only recognizable when sexuality is visible. Until recently, not many were willing to come out in public due to the stigma

of being gay, lesbian, transgendered, or transsexual in Vietnam and the diaspora. Public expressions of queer behavior in the cultural mainstream has historically been limited to genres of comedy and satire.

#### III. Đàm Vĩnh Hưng

In the 2010 song "Destined Failure" (Số Phân Yếu Đuối), 112 the singer Đàm Vĩnh Hung describes the pain of loneliness. Near the end of the song, a question is raised: "Does anyone understand my lot?" The song is structured as a popular Vietnamese love ballad. The lyrics uses common pronouns, and the narrative does not disclose the protagonists gender or sexuality. Despite its generic setup, the song led to a wave of nonheteronormative interpretations. Many Vietnamese listeners in both Vietnam and the diaspora have suggested that the song is about the loneliness of being a closeted homosexual in a homophobic society. This outcome seems unexpected, considering that the song was rather generic: it did not have a hidden melody or special clues in lyrics striking a queer signature.

It was not so much the lyrics or melody that made the song queer, but rather, it was the performer. In 2008-9, Đàm Vĩnh Hưng came out as being a gay Vietnamese singer. He is not the first popular music singer in Vietnam to be open about his queer sexuality, but Đàm Vĩnh Hưng is Vietnam's first mainstream superstar whose queerness has been recognized and celebrated by many in Vietnam and the diaspora. Although he

112 "Số phận của tôi có ai hiểu được không?" Song composed by Duy Mạnh https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RoXKwhEzFDU

did not compose the song particularly, Đàm Vĩnh Hưng used his autobiography synergy strategically when he performed it. As such, his body plays an essential role to his music: without his gay flesh and timbre, the song "Destined Failure" would not be what it is.



Figure 4.2. Romantic Couple

Huỳnh Minh Hưng (1971) did not start his career as the famous queer singer of Vietnam, but like most, he was just a singer of popular music. This meant that in the beginning, he participated in the ritual of singing love songs to and with beautiful women, like the singer Mỹ Tâm (Figure 4.2). A heterosexual couple has long been the golden formula for success in Vietnam and abroad, before and after 1975. Soon, his sexy persona became famous. By the turn of the 21th century, he was known in Vietnam as a very talented singer of contemporary popular songs, *nhạc trẻ* songs (youth music) composed after 1975.

At the height of his popularity in 2004-5, Đàm Vĩnh Hưng took a risk and began producing more pre-1975 popular love songs like Tâm Anh's "Phố Đêm" (Night City). At the time, pre-1975 Vietnamese popular songs were produced mostly in the diaspora,

Hung Cường and Mai Lệ Quyền, Trường Vũ and Nhừ Quỳnh, Lynda Trang Đài and Michael Ngô, Quang Lê and Mai Thiên Văn, Lâm Chí Khanh and Hiền Thục, Đan Trường and Cấm Ly, and etc...

even though they had been circulating in Vietnam. War references were removed from the songs, but Vietnam's Ministry of Culture still censored the album within a year, obstructing *Tinh Ca 50 (Love Songs Vol. 50)* from further distribution.

According to the newspaper Việt Báo, Đàm Vĩnh Hưng paid a fine and apologized publicly. Eventually, Vietnamese based websites like Zing MP3<sup>114</sup> would remove explicit links to the album, but the contents remained on their servers. Since his apology, Đàm Vĩnh Hưng has continued to produce more pre-1975 popular songs. His remakes of pre-1975 classics continue to resonate with the various generations of Vietnamese in Vietnam and in the diaspora. Afterwards, other singers like Lệ Quyên from Hanoi will soon release albums of pre-1975 Vietnamese popular songs with great success.



Figure 4.3 Đàm Vĩnh Hưng telephone

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>114</sup> Zing MP3 is most visited Vietnamese website and search engine for popular music songs. Until recently, the web site operated freely from copyright and government regulations. This is not the case anymore.

By 2006, Đàm Vĩnh Hưng became a household name in Vietnam and diaspora. His smiling portrait was the front of many local businesses and merchandises (Figure 4.3). Đàm Vĩnh Hưng's face overtook the landscape of Vietnam.

His voice was the warm bass-like refrain of mornings when people took the bus in Hồ Chí Minh City. When his songs were played in the cafes, young men assumed his persona to serenade their female company. Even though he was rumored to be gay at the time, Đàm Vĩnh Hưng was still the face, voice, and overall embodiment of heteronormativity in contemporary Vietnam. Even in 2017, he is still the icon of Vietnam's urban landscape (Figure 4.4).



Figure 4.4 Shop sign in 2017

In 2009, rumors about Đàm Vĩnh Hưng's homosexuality were confirmed by a music video. The song titled "Hạnh Phúc Cuối" (Final Joy) showed gestures of homoeroticism, and the internet exploded with fan's opinions about his sexuality. The music video was taken as a public confirmation of queer sexuality, which Đàm Vĩnh

Hung never contested. In the previous year, the song was released only as an audio track. Back then, the feedback on web-forums like Zing MP3 were filled with unanimous praise. However, after the release of the music video, comments about the song became mixed.

One poster writes: "this song, the lyrics are good, but have you guys seen the music video? I regret ever being a fan of Đàm Vĩnh Hưng" Another poster explains that while he or she never liked Đàm Vĩnh Hưng's music before, he or she was now a fan of his work. <sup>116</sup> The singer's queer sexuality seemed to have turned many fans away, but it also recruited new fans. On YouTube, comments about the video were the most derogatory.

Unlike his previous stunts of singing politically censored pre-1975 songs, this time, Đàm Vĩnh Hưng was challenging his own fans as well as Vietnam's Ministry of Culture with themes of sexual taboo. 117 Due to his celebrity, the topic of queer sexuality in Vietnamese popular music could no longer be ignored and deferred to the niches of subculture. Unlike many singers in Vietnam who have been openly queer, Đàm Vĩnh Hưng is the first mainstream singer who came-out.

# IV. Introducing Queerness into Popular Music

 $<sup>^{115}</sup>$  "bài này lời thì hay nhưng mà clip các ban xem thử chưa  $\ref{thm:prop:main}$  hối hận khi yêu quý Đàm Vĩnh Hưng ...." (4/09/2009)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>116</sup> ... "Noi that luc truoc minh ghet anh Hung nhat do. Khi ma thuc su hieu va cam nhac nhung bai ma anh Hung hat thi minh thich anh ay vo" (23/11/2009) [Truth be told, I used to hate Hung the most. After understanding the meanings and emotions of the songs, which Hung had sung, then I liked him]
<sup>117</sup> Today, Đàm Vĩnh Hung is still a very successful and widely recognized in Vietnam and abroad. Even though he has been portrayed as sympathizer of Vietnamese communism by some in the diaspora, protested and physically assaulted with pepper spray in the United States (Denver City, CO and Orange County, CA), he still has fans in both Vietnam and the diaspora.

Even though the music video "Hạnh Phúc Cuối" (Final Joy) sparked some interest and mixed dialogue about sexuality in Vietnamese popular music, its debut in 2009 was not groundbreaking in terms of introducing a queer discourse to the general public. Bùi Anh Tấn's novel *A World Without Women (Một Thế Giới Không Có Đàn Bà)* had been circulating in Vietnam since 2000. After its release, the novel was eventually censored by Vietnam's Ministry of Culture. The author was forced to revise the ending of his novel. In 2007, the novel became a television series (Norton 183)

In the realm of Vietnamese traditional music and cultural preservation, the multigendered spirit mediums of *câu văn* rituals were already recognized as folk music and tradition. In the realm of language, the Vietnamese term *đồng tính* (short for the term *đồng tính luyến ái* [same love]) was already re-defined by many dictionaries as "homosexual" instead of its previous meaning of "homogeneity."

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the public attention and cultural recognition of queers in Vietnam were further influenced by cultural imports. Cultural momentum/synergy of films like *Lan Yu* (2001) from Hong Kong, were being bootlegged and sold throughout Vietnam. Moreover, the global expansion of the English language introduced words like "gay," "les" (short for lesbian) and "bi" (short for bisexual) into the Vietnamese lexicon. Queerness in the realm of Vietnamese popular music may have been a surprise for many Vietnamese in Vietnam and the diaspora, but there were already

Not only did the Vietnamese adopt the English spelling of these words (gay, les, bi), but they also adopted the phonetic system for pronouncing these words. If these words were to be spelled phonetic

adopted the phonetic system for pronouncing these words. If these words were to be spelled phonetically using the Vietnamese current script, it would be written as  $g\hat{e}$  (gay),  $l\acute{e}t$  (les-bian), and bai (bi-sexual).

various social and cultural structures, physical and virtual, facilitating the awareness and imagining of queers.



Figure 4.5: Homoerotic gestures

Not only was its timing conservative, but the music video's homoerotic contents were also very sensitive to a heteronormative audience. The most erotic scene in the music video is when the driver reaches for the protagonist's hand in the car. The camera goes into a close-up, where the driver's dark hand inches towards his passenger, they touch, and then there is an affectionate squeeze (Figure 4.5).

Arguably, the physical contact is slightly more than platonic. As a cultural reference to gauge the erotic magnitude of the scene, it is not uncommon for heterosexual men in Vietnam to caress and squeeze the inner thigh of one another. As some expats in Vietnam have reported, this particular mode of homosocial affection has motivated them to wear long pants when they go out drinking with their Vietnamese friends or in-laws. 119

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>119</sup> These stories are from expats teaching English in Vietnam. Unfortunately, the website and discussion board of Saigon ESL is no longer around.

Although many viewers of the song were jarred by its homoeroticism, the gestures of affection in the video was still conservative for its debut, suggesting that the song's director was anticipating the audience's limits with caution. Moreover, the plot of the music video is also conservative. It concludes with the protagonist questioning his moral identity as a human being; he runs off into the night not knowing what to do or what he is. It is not a surprise that the ending of the music video parallels the censored version to Bùi Anh Tấn's novel *A World Without Women*.

Fearing that the novel's hopeful ending would undermine Vietnam's campaign for promoting queerness as a behavior disorder, the Ministry of Culture requested the author to revise his novel. Originally, the ending was optimistic about the two gay lovers reuniting. However, after the ending was revised, the novel concludes with the protagonist struggling with an identity crisis. To avoid complications with the law, the music video follows the censored plotline.

To get a better sense of how conservative the ending of the music video is, one should compare it to Nguyễn Du's 19th century epic, *The Tale of Kiều*, which is often criticized as the cultural standard of being traditional. In the famous epic, the protagonist Kiều is given one last opportunity at the end to reintegrate back into a normal patriarchal family by marrying the young scholar, her first love. Having embarked on a series of failed heteronormative relationships, she rejects the offer and goes off to live as a monk in a monastery with a community of other like-minded women, instead of returning to cycle of social normativity.

From the perspective of plot formation and character development, the protagonist in "Final Joy" is more conservative than Kiều, Vietnam's literary icon of tradition. In the end, the protagonist of "Final Joy" does not embrace his queer urges and runs off to live in a community of tolerance. Instead, his reservation is still invested in a heteronormative society. <sup>120</sup>

Judging from the music video's sexual content, plot resolution, and debut, Đàm Vĩnh Hưng was expressing his sexuality in a style that was very sensitive to a homophobic audience. Nevertheless, the music video introduced some unexpected interpretations, where it guided the viewers to gaze upon another male body with sexual desire from another man's perspective. Through the technology of video, Vietnamese popular music observed and experienced its first sensation of mass-queerness.

While queer themed music videos were not uncommon in Vietnam at the time,

Dàm Vĩnh Hưng was the first big name superstar to do so. His songs are often sold in the
front of music stores whereas the many amateur transgendered and transsexuals
performers are discreetly in the back along with the pornography. Overall, Đàm Vĩnh
Hưng is the most visible non-heteronormative music performer in Vietnam, but he is not
the sole contributor of the queer discourse to Vietnamese popular music.

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<sup>120</sup> Similar to revised ending of Bùi's *A World Without Women*, the protagonist of "Final Joy" concludes with the understanding that he is a strange and unnatural organism of the world, an evaluation derived from a heteronormative framework. In the novel, the revised ending is the second of two endings from which to choose: Hoàng shakes his head and goes into a philosophical reflection. It starts off in a modernist tone like "O, all we have is each other" but ends with the epiphany that the two lovers are actually just lost souls wandering aimlessly in life: "Tà là ai, là ai... chúng ta về đâu, về đâu" [Who am I, what am I... to where can we return?] (451). The implication is that they should reform their queerness and return to a "normal" society, where they can finally be happy and live meaningful lives.

### V. New Discourses in Vietnam

Until the 21st century, queerness in Vietnamese popular music was mostly illegible and unimaginable in the public sphere of mass culture. Even though writings by queer poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been adapted to popular songs, the cultural expectation of heteronormativity have ultimately displaced queerness to such a degree that it has been unrecognizable and inexpressible through modes of mass consumption.

Until recently, poets and writers like Xuân Điều and Huy Cân were seen as only revolutionary poets of Vietnam. They were not recognized as queer poets nor were their writings ever regarded by most as queer writings until the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For almost a century, queer invisibility has been acting as an aegis for many queer composers and poets, enabling them to express their feelings to one another in public clandestinely without the blowback of social discrimination. Unfortunately, its discreetness has enabled the cultural erasure of queers to operate without contestation.

Due to the seeming absence of queer voices and subjectivities in Vietnamese culture prior to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a common belief among many Vietnamese is that queerness is a recent western influence. Norton Barley's book *Songs for the Spirit* has problematized this myth by revealing that in areas in northern Vietnam have a long history of gender-plural spirit mediums. In addition, the homosexual affairs of Vietnam's revolutionary poets Xuân Điều and Huy Cân have been made public as of late.

While the presence of queer subjects in Vietnam is historic, the queer discourse where cultural producers and scholars advocating for the public recognition, discussion, inquiry, and research on queer sexuality is recent. Even throughout the 1990s, the topic

of sexuality was avoided in the disciplines of social science and cultural studies (Khuất et al. 17). Until the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the topic of sexuality was a cultural taboo.

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, sexuality was still associated with the state's campaign against HIV/AIDS (*sida*) (Khuất et al. 19) and moral decay. As such, queer sexuality has been understood predominately as a behavioral pathology linked to immorality. This has been further perpetuated by the intervention of state rhetoric in the areas of science and medicine.

The queer taboo in Vietnamese culture runs deep, so far that even the Vietnamese language itself is deficient of expressing queerness without implying negative connotations. Even though the word  $d\hat{o}ng tinh$  (homosexual), a term derived from the scientific term  $d\hat{o}ng tinh luy\acute{e}n \acute{a}i$ , is often said to be "more proper" than words like  $p\hat{e}d\hat{e}$  or  $b\acute{o}ng$  because it is more scientific, the term is still based on the categorization of queerness as a disorder/disease. It may sound more proper, but it is still suggestive of an affliction.

In addition, these cultural prejudices manifest when the passive-voice is evoked. Similar to English, Vietnamese places an auxiliary before the main verb, the free morphemes bi or  $du\phi c$ . In contrast to English, these auxiliaries have either a negative (bi) or positive  $(du\phi c)$  connotation. When something is negative, like the misfortune of being bitten by a dog, bi is used to fashion to passive-voice. For more positive cases,  $du\phi c$  is used instead.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>121</sup> In Vietnamese, the passive-voice is sometimes used as "to be" or "to have."

With queerness, the negative form of bi is used always, regardless of one's opinion or perspective. If *dwoc* is used to give a more positive connotation, then the sentence would be considered to be grammatically awkward. Therefore, to express queerness positively or neutrally, a grammatical violation is inevitable.

At the turn of century, different areas of culture and academia in Vietnam were struggling to discuss queer sexuality in a light that was more unbiased. In doing so, many writers and researchers turned to western cultural discourse as a site of departure into Vietnamese sexuality. In Sexuality: Easy to Joke About Difficult to Discuss, a case study of queer subjects written in Vietnamese, the authors frame sexuality  $(tinh duc)^{122}$  by surveying the scholarship from United States and Europe, including Freud's concept of sexuality as a natural drive and Foucault's concept of sexuality as a discourse (29-34). Likewise, in the novel A World Without Women, the author Bùi Anh Tấn credits its creation to an intertextual dialogue with both Vietnamese thinker and "world thinkers" (các tác giả thế giới): "Badinter, Rousseau, Staffrd-Clark, 123 Aristote, Bernard Serrgenet, <sup>124</sup> Paul Veyne, Sinistrati Ameno, Gilert Dyfe, <sup>125</sup> Pierre Daco, Carl Gustav Jung... Especially Sigmund Freud" (5).

The barrage of citations and allusions to foreign figures offer new possibilities for engaging with the topic of sexuality. The foreign names and theories enable Vietnamese scholarship to approach queerness from a global perspective, freeing it from the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>122</sup> Tình dục literal meaning is sexual intercourse. In Vietnamese, the title is supposed to be cheeky: Sex: Easy to Joke About Difficult to Discuss.

<sup>123</sup> Either David Stafford-Clark (1916-1999) who was English psychiatrist and author or his son Maxwell Stafford-Clark, an English theatre director.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>124</sup> Bernard Sergent is a French ancient historian and mythologist.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>125</sup> The spelling looks like Gilbert Dyett (1891-1964).

derogatory paradigm of Vietnamese cultural history. 126 Both these books are written and printed in Vietnamese for Vietnamese readers. While the novel A World Without Women can be purchased in the United States, hardcopies of Sexuality: Easy to Joke About Difficult to Discuss have been circulating mostly in Vietnam. Nevertheless, the perspectives of queer sexuality in these works are invested in a discussion about global identity. Thus, the West is commonly referenced by queer thinkers in in the 21st century Vietnam. Unfortunately, it has generated as side-effect of misconceptions, where the public seems to believe queer subjects are recent cultural trends of western consumption.

While the presence of queer subjects in Vietnam is nothing new, the public discourse on queeerness in Vietnamese is new. According to Bùi Anh Tấn, Vietnam as of late has become more aware of the presence of queer subjects due to the rise of public debates over homosexuality in the country. 127

Homosexuality, a polemic topic somewhat new to Vietnam and is only a visible collective in our country within the recent years. How have we interpreted, evaluated these events?

Still engaged in debate are the perspectives from the institutions of morality, psychology, sociology, education, law, religion... only to arrive at a common point, to recognize or dismiss this phenomenon and to what degree will we have to accept it. (Bùi 6, my translation)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>126</sup> According to the Institute for Social Development Studies' website, one can purchase a copy of the book by contacting Ms. Hien via email. I did not find this to be true. Special thanks to Trần Thị Thảo at HCMC University of Social Sciences and Humanities for her help.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>127</sup> In the original text, Bùi uses the term *xuất hiên*, which I translated as "visible," even though it means "to appear" or "to become." Its literal meaning may be confusing, since it may result in the interpretation that being queer is a recent trend. Here, Bùi is reflecting on his years of journalism, noting that the recent news stories about homosexuality were appearing more frequently at the end of the 20th century. Still, the passage is unclear as to whether homosexuals were appearing more in public or the topic homosexuality was becoming more public. In either case, Bùi is referring to the greater visibility of homosexuals or queers as a collective group in the public sphere. Various social events in the mass media are being suggested indicators of the country becoming more aware and conscious of its sexual diverse population, socially and culturally.

Recent news stories in Vietnam have rendered homosexuals with more visibility in the public sphere. For Buì, the trending topic of homosexuality is an opportunity to discuss and revise more traditional concepts of sexuality in Vietnam.

According to Bùi, the topic of queerness should engage with multi-disciplinary thinking from "the institutions of morality, psychology, sociology, education, law, religion," where queerness can be explored with more diverse insights. Although this all would take place in Vietnam, Bùi suggests that western theories, "global thinkers," are needed, since queer sexuality is a global topic. Ultimately, the notion of being more global in thought and citizenship is important for the efforts of queer awareness in Vietnam.

## VI. Queer Global Citizens



Figure 4.6: VCD of transgendered performers

Similar to the researchers and authors, Vietnamese popular music composers, musicians, and performers have been developing alternative cultural imaginings of queer

subjects within the global context. Since they cannot use citations and bibliographies to leverage authority, Vietnamese popular music songs incorporate elements of cultural hybridity to express its transnational theories.

Figure 4.6 is a cover of a VCD album produced by an independent group of transgendered and transsexual amateurs in Vietnam. The album is titled  $P\hat{e}$   $D\hat{e}$   $Vi\hat{e}t$  Nam 4 (Queers of Vietnam, vol. 4). The term  $p\hat{e}d\hat{e}$  (often pronounced as  $b\hat{e}$ - $d\hat{e}$ )<sup>128</sup> is derived from the French language. The term is usually avoided in academic writings due to its derogatory history. The album could have used a more formal and scientific term like  $d\hat{o}ng$  tinh (homosexual or queer), but instead, the term  $p\hat{e}d\hat{e}$  is selected to convey a linguistic element of global-ness.

In terms of spelling,  $p\hat{e}d\hat{e}$  (or  $p\hat{e}$   $d\hat{e}$ ) looks different than most Vietnamese words because it has a 'p' in the initial position. Since /p/ sounds usually occur in the final position of Vietnamese words, where they are unleased like  $thi\hat{e}p$  (card) or  $th\acute{e}p$  (steel), the term  $p\hat{e}d\hat{e}$  introduces a foreign element via French syntax. To clarify, words beginning with 'ph' like  $ph\mathring{o}$  have a /f/ sound (voiceless labiodental fricative) and not /p/. The foreign characteristics displayed on the cover enable the album position Vietnamese queers and queer culture with a more western aesthetics and poetics. 129

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>128</sup> The Vietnamese language do not usually have /p/ sounds (voiceless bilabial approximant) in word initial position. In case of words like  $p\hat{e}d\hat{e}$  (queer) or pin (battery), which are words derived from the French language, the 'p' is usually pronounced as /b/ (voiced bilabial approx.) due to the phonological conditions of the language.

 $<sup>^{129}</sup>$  The album's appropriation of the term  $p\hat{e}d\hat{e}$  is not so much emphasizing the relevance of French culture or France's colonial involvement in the past, but rather, the album is emphasizing its foreign characteristics. More specifically, it is uncommon for Vietnamese words to have a 'p' letter (not 'ph') in the word initial position while preceding a vowel. Such cases like  $p\hat{e}d\hat{e}$ , pin (battery), and hinh pa ra  $b\hat{o}$  (parabola) are Vietnamese words forged from linguistic and colonial hybridity. This is not to say that these words are not real Vietnamese words or somehow less Vietnamese due to colonial influences: the dominant language today is comprised of varying regional dialects and variations of regional dialects, which have

In addition, the performers' postures on the cover reference styles of Spanish and Latin dancing. Their physical bodies have voluptuous proportions in the areas of the breasts, hips, and buttocks, which are culturally suggestive of the physique of western women. Overall, these visual cues reference global aesthetics and sexuality.



Figure 4.7: Vietnamese Khmer Dancing

Aside from the western connotations and references, the contents of the album of contain other visual elements of Asian cultures, including Chinese, Khmer, and Thai. In Figure 4.7 the scene is from the music video titled "Sóc Sờ Bai Sóc Trăng" (track 3) composed by Thanh Sơn, a pre-1975 song composer. The words in the title are not considered to be Vietnamese, even they spelled using the Vietnamese modern script ( $qu\acute{o}c\ ng\widetilde{w}$ ). Furthermore, the song makes references to the southern province/city of Sóc Trăng, which is inhabited by many Chinese and Khmer ethnic Vietnamese.

been shaped by mass migration, trade, supermodernity, colonization, and other forms of military occupation and activities.

In Figure 4.7, the dancing incorporates hand gestures and colorful clothing, and it is set beside a dragon temple, positing the transgendered dancers as vessels of multiculturalism. By appropriating the stereotypes of the happy ethnic minorities, these transgendered performers put forth an imagining of queerness in an organic lifestyle informed by migration, cultural sharing, and histories of "contact zones."



Figure 4.8: Sex change in Thailand

In addition, the album of music videos includes scenes of documented footage. The scene in Figure 4.8 is from a music video titled "Depths in a Butterfly Soul" ("Thâm Sâu Hồn Bướm"). The documented footage is recorded when the singer Ái Xuân underwent a sex-change operation in Thailand. While hormones and plastic surgery are available in Vietnam, sex assignment surgery is not yet available. As a result, those who can afford the expensive operation must travel abroad to countries like Thailand where the procedure can be done.

The camcorder quality renders the music video with elements of an autobiographical narrative. In Vietnam, the transsexual body is a transnational body,

because it embodies the technology and laws beyond Vietnam. While Vietnamese citizens can revise aspects of their identity by changing their photo, home address, place of origin, or other information on record, citizens are prohibited usually from changing their sex assignment. Therefore, transsexuals like Ái Xuân are still legally male. Since same-sex marriages are illegal in Vietnam, many transsexuals encounter legal issues when they want to marry. With such law in place, transsexuals returning home from Thailand cannot reintegrate back into Vietnam fully. As of 2015, Vietnam does permit the public performance of same-sex marriage ceremonies, but same-sex marriages are still not legally recognized.

In Vietnamese popular music, queerness is imagined as a transnational and global identity, which have all been tied to the display of a queer body. For many transgendered singers, it is difficult to hide their masculinity, due to their raspy voices. Hence, their queer body is expressed when they sing. The question of whether queerness can be expressed audibly in Vietnamese culture without gestures of a queer body has been explored previously.

In 2008, the song "Hạnh Phúc Cuối" (Final Joy) by Đàm Vĩnh Hưng incorporated the melody of Chinese popular love song from 1980s, "How Can You Bear Letting Me Feel Sorrow" (你怎麼捨得我難過).<sup>130</sup> Until the 21st century, the Chinese song composed by Huang Pinyuan was recognized mainly as a heterosexual love song. With the release of the Hong Kong film *Lan Yu* in 2001, directed by Stanley Kwan, the song has since been recognized widely as a gay themed song.

 $^{130}\ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oMDj9L44LZM$ 

In the 21st century, many Vietnamese who were familiar with the film Lan Yu became suspicious about Đàm Vĩnh Hưng's intentions. However, many reported that they were still unsure if the song had a queer agenda at the time, since it was rather common for Vietnamese popular songs to draw from Chinese songs. In hindsight, the singer was attempting to capitalize on the cultural synergy in Chinese popular culture and extending queer consciousness into the discourse of Vietnamese popular music. However, without a music video depicting two gay lovers, most Vietnamese were not able to detect any queer themes from the sound alone.

Overall, these songs highlight an overall effort of fashioning a collective queer consciousness in Vietnamese culture at the start of the 21st century. Granted, this movement is more scattered than united, but albums like *Queers of Vietnam* express concepts of mass identity and politics.

In Vietnam, the queer movement in Vietnamese popular music may be more minor than mainstream. While Đàm Vĩnh Hưng was and is a superstar in Vietnam and in the diaspora, the popularity of the song "Final Joy" during its release is questionable. In 2008-2010, it was competing of against many of the youth's favorites, upbeat songs like "Stronger" by the Danish singer Inez, 131 "Không Yêu Lần Nữa" ("Never Love Again"), <sup>132</sup> and "Mặc Kệ Người Ta Nói" ("Regardless of What People Say") <sup>133</sup> by various Vietnamese singers. To make matters worse, the songs performed by the transsexual and transgendered amateurs received even less attention.

<sup>131</sup> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wAPU0k0E9fw

<sup>132</sup> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJYLf1pmHuk

<sup>133</sup> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJvJ7ktCVAQ

Nevertheless, the significances of the queer movement in Vietnamese popular music should not be underestimated. In 2010, the song "Destined Failure" (Số Phận Yếu Đuối) inspired many Vietnamese in Vietnam and the diaspora to recognize it as a queer themed love song. The most interesting feature of the song "Destined Failure" is that it is generic. It does not have a special melody with a hidden meaning. Furthermore, fans did not need a music video showing two gay men holding hands to help them arrive at this conclusion. With the song "Destined Failure," there was a noticeable shift in the pattern of heteronormative interpretation.

### VII. Reappropriation of Clichés

Queer legibility in Vietnamese popular music so far has required an explicit queer body or voice. It is safe to conclude that queers have fewer discursive privileges in Vietnamese popular music. Not only that, queerness is also completing with heteronormativity for the legibility within popular songs. This is not to say that queers are completely helpless, but it does mean that there are many cultural obstacles restricting how queerness can be recognized and expressed.

Due to their limited access to discourse in Vietnamese popular music, many queer performers have been drawing on the authority of heteronormativity clichés as well as western discourses to fashion their subjectivity. This mode of appropriation is not perfect, because it makes queer themes susceptible to being misread as attempts of mimicking and passing as heteronormative.

In Figure 4.9, the scene is the song "Bà Năm" (Maternal Surrogate), the transgender/sexual singer Cát Tuyển plays the role of a peasant rural female who is in an arranged marriage. The protagonist is frequently abused by her spouse, and this causes her to remanence on the past.



Figure 4.9: Women's burden

By suffering the burden of a Vietnamese Confucian marriage, the transgendered performer renders her body as a shared body of suffering and sorrow with other women in Vietnam. The song uses the themes of women's sorrow to fashion its gestures of queer sorrow. Thus, the queer narrative in the song draws on the authority of heteronormativity to leverage its sentiments of sympathy and pity.

For many trans-performers, the act of using the master's tools also comes with many complications. By re-appropriating cultural clichés, transgendered and transsexual subjects risk being seen as copy-cats who are seeking to hide their queer identity to pass in Vietnamese society. Unfortunately, many of these trans-performers are amateurs who do not have support from a huge fan base or the music industry. Unlike Đàm Vĩnh Hưng

who can use his celebrity to be culturally polemic, the agendas presented by many Vietnamese trans-performers are frequently overlooked in Vietnam and the diaspora.

#### VIII. Conclusion

By 2016, queer themed love songs have become more common in Vietnam and the diaspora, circulating via YouTube and Facebook. Still these songs are not yet broadcasted on national television in Vietnam, or at least not as frequently. However, unlike before, Vietnamese queer themed music video are not igniting a storm of derogatory comments; nor are queer themes found only in the back of the store.

I wish the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century had a more significant effect on rethinking the repertoire of older Vietnamese popular songs, especially the pre-1975 songs. Even with the pre-1975 songs which were remade by Đàm Vĩnh Hưng, like the song "Night City" (Phố Đêm) in 2005, the elements of sexual and gender ambiguity are still limited to mainly heteronormative interpretations.

One of the more striking verses in the songs is the phrase, "the person who cannot love." In Vietnamese, to state that a person cannot love, suggests something odd about that person.

to be with the person I love,
to be with the person who cannot love
and the person who has yet to love. 134

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>134</sup> Để rồi dìu người tôi yêu / dìu người không yêu / và người chưa yêu.

Vietnamese language distinguishes between the terms "cannot" (*không*) or "yet" (*chua*), where the former can evoke a sense of something is abnormal. For example, it is expected for people to get married in the Vietnamese culture. When a person is not married and he or she is asked, then the response should be *chua*, meaning "not yet," suggesting that the person will marry in the future as it is expected. However, if *không* is used, then it suggests an issue, where the person chooses not to marry or cannot marry.

In the pre-1975 context of wartime, the song "Night City" (Phố Đêm) the line of "the person who cannot love" may suggest that the person is suffering from mental and emotional trauma caused by military violence. However, the remake displaces and erases the context of war due to political reasons. As a result, "the person who cannot love" stands out even stranger in the remake. In this case, it is not a stretch to consider the possibility of a queer theme, where lovers who cannot openly be together due to social taboo. Consequently, Đàm Vĩnh Hưng's queer celebrity alone has not been enough to highlight queerness in his remake of pre-1975 songs.

This would suggest that new songs with queer possibilities are easier to make, because older song narratives are grounded already in a history of interpretation. Even though the pre-1975 songs are remade every year, they are not necessarily new-new in the sense that much of what has been done continues to carry over.

To intervene on the hegemony of queer voice and subjects in Vietnamese culture, it is important for educators and producers to become more active. For instance, Vietnamese language curriculum in the diaspora need to engage more with the cultural politics of gender and sexuality. By taking the time to show that Vietnamese pronouns

are vague within the examples of songs, poems, or prose, language learners can be made more aware of the cultural and linguistic complexities of the Vietnamese language.

In the case of the passive voice, the instructor can even suggest that students can go against the social norm by using the positive form of *được* instead of *bị*. Such usage is unorthodox and may get flagged as poor grammar by a second language learner (L2) or bilingual speaker. However, such grammatical rules are culturally constructed overtime, and likewise, they will take some time to undo.

Another issue is with Vietnamese popular culture is that queer subjectivity is often limited to the genre of light-hearted comedy. In the shows of Thúy Nga (Paris By Night), the performer Hoài Linh often cross-dresses and shouts angrily likes a hot-blooded Vietnamese woman. This representation of queer identity is also common in Vietnam at local venues, especially at festivals. Although performers are often permitted to act queer for comedy skits, alternative queer subjectivies are uncommon at both the local and mass-production levels.

It was not until 2010 when company finally allowed the singer Bảo Hân to execute the idea of a music drag-show performance, the song "I'll Go This Way." According to the singer Bảo Hân, the idea of doing a "drag queen number" was discussed about five to six years ago, but the production was worried about the Vietnamese American community's reaction to such themes. Even though drag shows (Bướm Lượn) have been taking place in the Vietnamese American community, Thúy Nga was still unsure "if the community was ready." While it is fine to have satires and parodies, other portrayals of queer subjects need to be made more available. Queer identity should not

be an object of laughter. The turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> is an auspicious start for new dialogues about gender and sexuality in Vietnamese culture and language, but these efforts need to continue to be effective.

## Chapter 5-- Diasporic Sorrow: Migration and Cultural Transgeneration

After 1975 when the Vietnam War was declared to have ended, pre-1975 Vietnamese popular songs became the shared memories of many Vietnamese refugees. At the time, popular music and musicians were criminalized in Vietnam by the new socialist government. By 1978, the repertoire of pre-1975 songs began to resurface commercially in the diaspora. Soon, pre-1975 songs, singers, and composers were symbolic of the Vietnamese refugees' resistance against Vietnamese Communism. Songs and their political association connected various subjects, who have been dispatched globally, in a shared cultural imaginary and subject-hood of the *Việt kiều*.

Unfortunately, Vietnamese popular music has not been as successful in transcending generational divides as it has with geographical boundaries. With more and more of the older generation passing away, performances where singers are dressed in military costumes have lessened in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The significance of pre-1975 music as being a platform for expressing the cultural memories and social agendas of the refugees has been dwindling.

To make matters worse for the older generation in the diaspora, the socialist government of Vietnam has permitted many pre-1975s songs to be remade again. The rising presence of revised pre-1975 songs, now referred to as *bolero songs*, have been displacing the memories and political concerns of the diasporic Vietnamese of the older generation. Eventually, the South Vietnamese may fall again as its cultural memories and practice are being further displaced from Vietnamese everyday life.

#### I. **Background**

Before Vietnamese American memoirs entered the mainstream of Amazon and bookstores like Barnes and Noble, narratives told in Vietnamese about the Vietnam War and its aftermath were already looming throughout many parts of the world. Soon the stories about re-education, refugee camps, and Thai pirates began appearing in the personal essays of English as secondary language (ESL) classrooms. For many Vietnamese refugees resettling in the United States, Canada, and Australia, English was a second, third, or fourth language. 135 As such, stories and histories of the Vietnamese refugees were often expressed in their mother-tongue, interwoven into their everyday life. In the pockets of ethnic communities, segments of cultural memory have been flourishing in cafes, barbershops, nail salons, and waiting rooms. Hence, Vietnamese diasporic history has been mostly stories told without a beginning or ending.

Since the late 1970s, music companies like Thúy Nga (Paris By Night), Asia Entertainment, and others have revealed that there has been a market for stories about the Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees. The industry of Vietnamese popular music has had great success in adapting war memories as themes to music, commercializing nostalgia. From garages to corporations, these companies thrived on the social demand for stories to be retold and heard again and again by the Vietnamese to other Vietnamese and in Vietnamese.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>135</sup> Vietnamese is not necessarily the only primarily language of Vietnamese refugees. Other languages include Cantonese, Hmong, Khmer, and others.

With Vietnamese refugees scattered around the world, there was a global market for Vietnamese popular music. Vietnamese popular music assured each individual that he or she was not alone, but instead, it suggested that he Vietnamese refugees were subjects who belonged to a diasporic network of Vietnamese communities. 136 Ultimately, Vietnamese popular music emerged as a cultural medium of shared memories and culture.

Since the mass exodus of Vietnamese refugees after 1975, various forms of Vietnamese music were displaced from Vietnam. The companies Thuy Nga and Asia Entertainment became two of the most recognized producers of Vietnamese music outside of Vietnam. Their headquarters are currently in southern California. These companies host concerts annually, integrating Vietnamese music with the performing arts, comedy skits, and fashion shows. Afterwards, the shows are reproduced for home entertainment and karaoke.



Figure 5.1: Early cassette cover of Thúy Nga

<sup>136</sup> Many of the Vietnamese music from the outside of Vietnam was smuggled back into Vietnam.

Before starting the Paris by Night program/division, the company Thúy Nga was a small studio in South Vietnam. It was setup to record and produce hybrid music, where aspects of Vietnamese folk music would be blended with popular music from Vietnam, France, and the United States. Named after his wife, the company Thúy Nga was founded by Tô Văn Lai in 1972. It was located on 13B Công Lý street of Thương Xá Tam Đa, Sài Gòn, South Vietnam, and its first product was the album *Tiếng Hát Thái Thanh* (*The Singing of Thái Thanh*).

Less than three years of operation, the southern Republic of Vietnam fell to the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and Tô Văn Lai and his family were forced to relocate to France in 1975. Since he still had the master copies, Tô Văn Lai was able to restart Thúy Nga again in 1978 by reproducing previous cassettes.<sup>140</sup>

In 1983, the company started the Paris By Night program/division. Unlike its music cassettes and discs, Paris By Night produced shows for people could go see and buy on VHS. Eventually, the company's headquarters relocated from Paris to Little

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>137</sup> Cunningham, Stuart and Tina Nguyen. "Actually existing hybridity: Vietnamese diasporic music video." *The Media of Diaspora and Mapping the Globe.* 120-1

<sup>138</sup> According to the current CEO, Tô Thủy, stated that Thúy Nga was founded in in 1972, which corresponds with the information featured in Paris By Night 94. Still, there is a bit confusion about when the Thúy Nga was founded. According to Cunningham and Nguyen, the company was founded in 1969 (120-1), and according to the company's Wikipedia entry, it premiered in 1963 (accessed on 20 Sep. 2015). In an interview with the Người Việt Daily News in 2011, Tô Văn Lai (the founder) recalls that the company was founded when the Americans had started entering Vietnam. I was not able to contact Tô Thủy or Tô Văn Lai, directly. Phạm Phú Thiện Giao and the staff of Người Việt Daily News help mediate our interation via email.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>139</sup> According to figure 4.1, Thúy Nga's address is 12B Công Lý. According to Tô Thủy, 13B was the actual address, but since 13 was considered to be unlucky, 12B was printed instead.

<sup>140</sup> http://www.nguoi-

viet.com/absolutenm2/templates/viewarticlesNVO.aspx?articleid=139854&zoneid=268.

Saigon (Westminster, CA) in the early 1990s. Tô Văn Lai would later hand the company over to his daughter Tô Ngọc Thủy, who also goes by name Maria (*Paris By Night 94*, *Người Việt Daily*, personal interviews, Cunningham and Nguyen 120-1).



Figure 5.2: The music company Lê Minh Bằng

Similar to Paris By Night, Asia Entertainment (trung tâm Asia) also hosts concerts and shows. The company was founded by the music composer Anh Bằng (Trần An Bường) in the United States in the year 1981. However, the name Asia Entertainment did not appear until 1985. After 1975, Anh Bằng and his family immigrated to the United States. In 1981, he founded the company Lê Minh Bằng (LMB), which produced and distributed Vietnamese music in Westminster, California (Figure 5.3).

<sup>141</sup>Contrary to the claims that Asia Entertainment was founded in Vietnam by Thuy Vo Dang, Linda Trinh Vo, and Tram Le (121), Anh Bằng stated that the company was *not* founded in Vietnam nor did own another music company before 1975. I did not direct contact with the composer Anh Bằng. Phạm Phú Thiện Giao and the staff at Người Việt Daily News forwarded my questions to Anh Bằng. Người Việt Daily News helped me to verify the years in my chronology as well as providing me with the information

about the number of albums produced.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>142</sup> Lê Minh Bằng was the pseudonym used by a group of pre-1975 music composers from the regions of Vietnam: Lê Dinh (south), Minh Kỳ (central), and Anh Bằng (north).

In 1983, the company was renamed as Da Lan (Night Orchid), <sup>143</sup> producing fiftysix albums. In 1985, the company then changed its name again to Asia Entertainment. Eventually, Anh Bằng handed the company down to his daughter Thy Vân, who appeared on the first album cover of Da Lan (Figure 5.3).



Figure 5.3: Picture of Thy Vân

#### II. **Shared Memories and Cultural Conservation**

While each company has a different approach to presenting their interpretation of Vietnamese music, companies like Thúy Nga (Paris by Night) and Asia Entertainment have been producing and selling cultural history, audibly and visually. Since the 1980s, the cassettes, CDs, and DVDs sold by these companies have been comprised of pre-1975 songs. However, they were not replicas of previous albums, but rather they were new recordings and interpretations of an existing repertoire.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>143</sup> During the Vietnam War, Da Lan was the name of an evening radio program that broadcasted in South Vietnam. Some of the Vietnamese of the older generation recall that the program played popular songs and cải lương.

Pre-1975 songs were objects of contemporary culture and mass consumption.

This is evident by the album's cover, where the address and phone information refer to sites in the United States or France. During the postwar decades, Vietnamese popular music was no longer a cultural product of Vietnam. Ironically, it was more an import.

Shows produced by Paris by Night and Asia Entertainment constructed new cultural memories. Oftentimes, they reposition familiar cultural elements of the past in acclimation to a more contemporary context.



Figure 5.4: Huong Lan singing on stage.

When Huong Lan, a pre-1975 singer, took the stage at Knott's Berry Farm in 2006 at *Paris By Night 83* to sing a song composed by a pre-1975 composer, it was clear that this was not a concert in or of pre-1975 Vietnam (Figure 5.4). The fiery curtains surround the musicians who are bathed in blue. On one side of the stage, the classical violinist and cello players are grouped together with the electric guitarist. While on the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>144</sup> Thanh Sơn's "Hoài Cổ" or "Bạc Liêu Hoài Cổ" was performed by Hương Lan in Paris By Night 83.

other side, the blues band strings, keyboard, and percussions are grouped together with the traditional moon lute (đàn nguyệt). 145

Standing tall in a black Vietnamese aó dài, the singer interweaves her southernstyle vocals  $(nam b\hat{\rho})$  into the soundscape. The spatial and audible shuffling of classical, folk, and popular instruments present a transnational interpretation of pre-1975 popular music life as being culturally sophisticated, enriching, and meaningful. The performance celebrates pre-1975 singers and song composers in the diaspora as well their legacy in Vietnam. 146

The decadence of glittering lights of Paris By Night and Asia Entertainment reiterate Nhi T. Lieu's argument that these shows render a new diasporic Vietnamese subjectivity that is a departure from the image of the impoverished refugee (81). This is not say that these shows overlook the struggles of the hardships of Vietnamese refugee and only render the positive aspects of immigration and assimilation.

Contrary to being ashamed of the impoverished refugee image or the Vietnam War, many of the performances present a proud and romantic imagining of the refugees and their histories. In the past, Paris By Night and Asia Entertainment have been active in the telling and retelling of stories about the Vietnam War, the reeducation camps (cåi tao), and boat people (vuot biên). These stories are often told through musical

<sup>145</sup> The moon lute is played by Pham Đức Thành.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>146</sup> Paris By Night still contracts many pre-1975 singers Khánh Ly, Hương Lan, and Elvis Phương to perform pre-1975 Vietnamese popular songs as well as newer songs. Likewise, singers like Mai Lê Huyền, Thanh Thùy, and Duy Khánh (1936-2003) have frequented the concerts of Asia Entertainment. In addition, these shows also feature newer songs by pre-1975 song composers like Thanh Son (1940-2012) and Nhật Ngân (1942-2012).

performance, where documented footage of events and interviews are used to supplement the show.

One of the most widely recognized songs attributed to the Vietnamese boat refugees is the song "Chiều Tây Đô" (Afternoon Cần Thơ). 147 Composed in 1984 by Lam Phương (a pre-1975 song composer), 148 the song "Chiều Tây Đô" was brought to the stage of Asia 32 in 2001 with the help of the singer Hoàng Oanh (a pre-1975 singer). Blending the nostalgic themes of home and loss, the song conveys the iconic theme of Vietnamese sorrow but nuanced as Vietnamese diasporic sorrow.



Figure 5.5: "Chiều Tây Đô" (Afternoon Cần Thơ)

Structured as a pre-1975 song ballad, "Afternoon Can Tho" recounts the Vietnamese's wayward journey of war and migration. The song opens with the speaker sharing a dream: "one day the boat that took me into exile turned around and welcomed me back home." The song lists various scenes of Vietnamese families in ruins after the

<sup>147</sup> The city of Cần Thơ is also known as the capital city of the Western region (miền Tây), located in southern Vietnam. It was supposedly dubbed this title since the city of Can Tho was seen as the most modernized in the region due to colonization.

<sup>148</sup> Lâm Đình Phùng was born in 1937 in the province of Kiên Giang, which is located about 250km west of Hồ Chí Minh (HCMC).

Vietnam War: a mother waiting with dry-mouth for a letter, children wandering in starvation, and wives without news of their husbands. In the song, these fleeting descriptions and poetic impressions echo of the personal memories told by many Vietnamese refugees throughout the diaspora every day.

While the narrative of Vietnamese popular songs often take place within a fictional social realist setting, Paris By Night or Asia Entertainment are not precluded from incorporating documentary footages and live interviews into their shows. As a prelude to the song Cái Cò" (Female Stork) in *Asia 51*, <sup>149</sup> viewers are shown an interview with Trần Thị Thanh Minh, a woman whose husband died in the re-education camps (cải tao) of Vietnam.

As she tells her story, images from Ham Tran's movie *Journey of the Fall* are shown. After the Vietnam War, her husband (Trương Kim Trung) was sentenced the reeducation camps. On her first visit to the camp, Trần found her husband to be malnourished, describing him as a dark skeleton with hollow eyes. She returned home to scavenge together money for food and medicine. After three to four visits later, her husband could walk again with the aid of crutches.

In 1977, her husband was relocated farther north, and Trần lost contact with him until 1979. With the financial help of her mother-in-law, Trần was able to journey northwards to visit her husband. When she arrived at the camp on a Monday, the guards would not permit her to enter the compound. On the following day, Trần tried to get a glimpse of the prisoners as they walked on the fields in the morning. It was then when

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>149</sup> Asia 51 was filmed in Dallas, Texas, 2006.

she heard a voice calling out to her, "Sister Minh, brother Trung is dead" (Minh is her first name). She then confronted the guards at the camp, but they denied that her husband had died. After two more visits, the guards finally brought a pair of dirty prison uniforms to her. At this point in her story, Trần's voice trembles, and her lashes are wet.

According to the song composer Nguyệt Ánh, the song "Cái Cò" ("Female Stork) was inspired by the postwar stories told by many Vietnamese women in the refugee camps. Over the phone, Nguyệt Ánh stated that she wanted to write the song since 1975 when she started hearing about the stories.<sup>150</sup> However, it was not until 1994 when she began the writing process from memory.

In 1999, the song "Cái Cò" appeared first in the album, *Bài Thơ Tình Viết Từ Ngục Tối (Letters Written in Darkness)*. While her song has not been as widely recognized as Lam Phương's "Chiều Tây Đô" (Afternoon Cần Thơ), the song can still be found in the mainstream of Vietnamese popular music in the diaspora, sold in the DVD of *Asia 51* and in the CD album of Băng Tâm's *Chuyện 3 Mùa Mưa* album (*Story: 3 Seasons of Rain*).

The song is fictional, but it is a fiction that is inspired by memories and oral histories. Consequently, such songs have made Vietnamese popular music the most dominate medium for recording and expressing Vietnamese diasporic history. They organize events and time as cultural history by selectively unifying fragments of memories into a chronology of past, present, and future. Vietnamese popular music and their performances explain what happened to whom and when.

<sup>150</sup> December 30, 2007

#### **III.** New Generation New Business

The shared cultural memories and emotions expressed by Vietnamese popular music songs are narrated in the Vietnamese language mostly. Furthermore, the industry of Vietnamese popular music in diaspora have been relying on native speakers, perhaps too much so. Consequently, Vietnamese popular music have struggled to reach the second and later generation of diasporic Vietnamese. While differences in the mainstream culture between generations are a factor, language discrepancies between the different generations have also impacted the dissemination of Vietnamese diasporic history.

The lack of cultural interest by the second or third generation have further impacted many Vietnamese businesses in the diaspora. According to The Orange County Register, the company Thúy Nga is struggling currently to survive, despite its sold-out concerts (Roosevelt). Even the biggest newspaper company outside of Vietnam, Người Việt Daily (Nhật Báo Người Việt), are forced to publishes articles in English now. According to the chief-editor, Phạm Phú Thiện Giao, the company has also expanded its distribution globally due to the drop in local sales. Out of necessity, the company has turned to the internet, where its website now produces 25% of the company's revenues. With the older generation passing away, the only other persons with a similar language profile are the Vietnamese in Vietnam or new immigrants.

<sup>151</sup> http://www.ocregister.com/articles/thuy-673956-nga-vietnamese.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>152</sup> Interview 23 Oct. 2015.

The music company Thúy Nga has also been reporting a significant loss in revenue over the years. While its concerts are still doing well, sales of DVDs have dropped from 85,000 in 2005 to 30,000 in 2015 (Roosevelt). Unlike the Người Việt Daily News, the company Thúy Nga blames the internet for its financial woes: the company believes that music piracy has impacted their sales significantly. This may sound unexpected since the illegal copying and distributing of Vietnamese popular music is nothing new. However, internet piracy is a recent phenomenon of the 21<sup>st</sup> century due to high-speed internet and streaming media.

Before programs like SlySoft CloneDVD and DVDFab did everything in a few clicks, the process of pirating a copyrighted DVD disc involved a series of procedures and programs. First, one had to decode the copyright encryption with a program like DVD Decrypter in order to extract the .VOB file. A fully decoded DVD would yield approximately 5-7gb of media. Since security encryption was always changing, it was not always possible to decode the most recent media.

Before the era of high-speed internet and bit-torrents, 5-7gb was a ridiculous size for file-sharing. Hence, further processing was needed: the video and audio streams had to be split and encoded separately with different codecs. This often took multiple passes with filters to get the final product to about 700mb, the size of many blank CDs. For internet sharing, users on a 56k modem had to divide the product into smaller compressed

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>153</sup> Not all DVD-ROM (read only memory) or DVD burner drives would work with the decrypting software, and so, there was a compatibility issue between the hardware and software that needed consideration. Typically, more expensive brands like Plextor were compatible with most software decryption programs.

segments (.rar), which were uploaded onto different servers across various internet sites like MegaUpload.

Overall, the entire process would take several days if not a week for computers with an Intel Pentium 3 processor on 128mb of ram. Due to slow dialup speed, which was common in most homes in the United States, high-speed media sharing or streaming was mostly an issue at the university, where students had access to T1 and T3 internet connections. Moreover, most undergraduates were not interested in pirating and sharing Vietnamese music shows. The lack of high-speed internet protected the Vietnamese popular music companies in the diaspora.

While piracy has been a popular theme looming in the news, Paris By Night and Asia Entertainment have long been aware that their main consumer based in the diaspora are the Vietnamese of the first generation. Age and language proficiency have been relevant factors. As such, these companies have been conscious about reaching the younger Vietnamese audience.

Historically, these shows have been incorporating American popular culture by adapting television shows like Dancing with the Stars or American Idol. In the past, Asia Entertainment featured singers like Trish, a 1.5 Vietnamese American singer to sing in English. Likewise, Thúy Nga is currently promoting Ánh Minh who is another 1.5 generation from southern California's Inland Empire. With many of the older generation passing away, these companies expect that the later generation will become more important to their market.

However, many Vietnamese singers of the diaspora have encountered several obstacles in reaching the second generation. In the United States, singers who emigrated from Vietnam often had accented English, marking them with the social stigma of being "fresh-off the boat." Moreover, many of their shows often cover American songs from the 1970s and 1980s, which further alienated them from the younger generation. Even though shows by Paris By Night and Asia Entertainment have incorporated more sex appeal and hip-hop dancing, Vietnamese popular music in diaspora has been restricted to the niches of the first generation. In short, Vietnamese popular music struggled to be "cool."

The younger generation of Vietnamese living in the diaspora usually avoid listening to Lynda Trang Đài and Michael Ngô; Instead, they listened to the music of Tupac, Boyz 2 Men, Metallica, or the Red Hot Chili Peppers. While many Vietnamese parents may have wanted their children to be more Vietnamese by encouraging them to be more active the Vietnamese language and culture, it was not necessarily the desire of their children.

Unless one grew up in a Vietnamese community or was involved with a Vietnamese church or temple, Vietnamese language, culture, and identity were rarely extended beyond the home. Even though many heritage learners (bilinguals) usually outpace the non-heritage students who enroll in Vietnamese language courses at the university, most heritage students still struggle with basic reading and writing. Unfortunately, the language profile of most Vietnamese popular songs is more similar to Vietnamese literature, which is drastically different than the vernacular.

Literary Vietnamese is not necessarily a more advanced language, since native speakers in Vietnam are taught it as soon as the first grade. Literary and vernacular Vietnamese can be considered as different dialects of the language. They have different words and phrases which correlate to similar meaning. Vietnamese literary language often express itself figuratively and favors Sino-based diction and word-order, which are both are elements usually lacking in the cultural contact and exchanges for the later generation.

Native speakers in Vietnam are exposed to literary Vietnamese more frequently through their cultural context. While heritage learners have some exposure, the input/output and reinforcement of Vietnamese language in the diaspora have generally not been enough. Vietnamese language textbooks published by UC Riverside, UC Berkeley, or Harvard do include short stories and poetic narratives, but they are written in a style that is designed for L2 learners as pedagogical materials. 155

To clarify, a person's language proficiency does not determine if he or she will engage with Vietnamese music. The singer Delana started singing Vietnamese popular songs before translating them. Nevertheless, language and cultural reinforcement still contribute to how one engages with Vietnamese popular music. Thus, it is not unexpected for many Vietnamese heritage learners in the United States recognize the lyrics of "hey sexy lady" from the Korean song "Gangnam Style" rather than the verses of Trịnh Công Sờn (1939-2001), Phạm Duy (1921-2013), Lam Phương (1937), Thúc

<sup>154</sup> Đặng, Lanh T., Hoàng Hòa Bình, Hoàng Cao Cương, Trần Thị Minh Pương, and Nguyễn Trí. Tiếng Việt 1: Tập Hai. Nhà Xuất Bản Giáo Dục: Việt Nam. vol. 2. 2007. 7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>155</sup> Textbooks authored by Kim Duong Pham, Bac Hoai Tran, and Binh Nhu Ngo.

Phương (1933-1995), or Bắc Sơn (1931-2005), even if the student grew up in diaspora listening to pre-1975 Vietnamese popular music.



Figure 5.6: Asia's younger and sexier image

In addition to the language barriers and the seeming lack of cultural relevance, the social decline of Vietnamese popular music among the younger generation is also attributed to the history of corporate practice. Even though the image of Vietnamese popular music in the diaspora has gotten younger and sexier (Figure 5.6), the targeted audience has historically been the older generation and other L1 Vietnamese speakers. Thus, when the cameras at these shows turn to the audience, they often catch older adults (Figure 5.7).



Figure 5.7: Audience of Vietnamese popular music in the diaspora.

Indeed, many Vietnamese popular music songs have been re-appropriated and recontextualized for a diasporic audience, but these songs are objects of cultural translations to the eyes and ears of the next generation. Vietnamese popular music has predominately been the music of the refugees, produced and composed by the refugees, and performed for the refugees.

The generational gap of Vietnamese music in the diaspora is old news. Songs composers like Nhật Ngân (1942-2012) have been expressing the concerns about the social and cultural disconnect between the generations since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Composed in 2000, the song "Người Lính Già Xa Quê Hương" (The Soldier Far from Home) describes a Vietnamese veteran who has become alienated by contemporary society. When asked what was his motivation for composing the song, Nhật Ngân replied that he composed the song based on his social observations of the Vietnamese American community.<sup>156</sup> In 2002, the song was performed by the singer Duy Khánh in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>156</sup> Phone interview in 2007.

Asia 36. Duy Khánh passed away in the following year. A decade after Nhật Ngân's song aired, reports about revenue loss being at an all-time-low sweep Vietnamese diasporic companies.

Consequently, new business objectives were put into place. Many diasporic companies began utilizing the internet more aggressively, promoting themselves on YouTube and Facebook, as well as hosting web forums and blogs. Despite its complains about internet piracy, the company Thúy Nga has its own YouTube channel.

Furthermore, Thúy Nga has begun advocating for English songs more aggressive as well in an attempt produce a market with the younger generation of Vietnamese in diaspora. According the CEO of Thúy Nga, Marie Tô (Tô Ngoc Thủy), "We [want] to connect to the next generation, and English touches them better" (Roosevelt). 157

In 2011, the singer Anh Minh moved from Asia Entertainment to Thúy Nga to help the company achieve its goal of "reaching" a younger demographic of Vietnamese American who prefer English over Vietnamese. In 2015, Ánh Minh told the OC Register: "I want young people to understand that Vietnamese can be modern – and cool." With English songs, the singer and Thúy Nga are hoping to gain more ground with non-native Vietnamese speakers.

In the mist of all this change, what will become of the stories and the storytellers of the old country? The singer Giang Tử (1944-2014), who was judging Asia Entertainment's "Golden Voice Contest," points to the stage and replies, "the music always follows its stage. It was different before 1975, it is different now, and it will

<sup>157</sup> http://www.ocregister.com/articles/vietnamese-667601-doan-first.html

change in the future." Consequently, one should not expect Vietnamese popular music to remain still. After all, popular music was once dubbed "new music" (tân nhạc).

In the song "The Old Soldier Far from Home," Nhật Ngân offers one final resolution for the old soldier. As a farewell gesture, the soldier indulges in a ridiculous fantasy, where he sees himself returning to Vietnam with the mythical military general of the 18th century, Quang Trung. 158 The two would fight one last epic battle, not to reclaim Vietnam from the communist but for the soldier to die in his country. The bittersweet gesture of allowing the Vietnam War to end, regardless if one lets go or not, points to a possible prediction that the younger generation does not want to inherit the war. Although the composer stated that the song was inspired by his observation of other Vietnamese of the older generation, Nhật Ngân may have been inspired also by observations of his own children.

#### IV. Songs of the Old

To understand the significance of Vietnamese popular music and its cultural memories, one must address the power-struggle facing many Vietnamese refugees when they were resettling abroad. After the Vietnam War, many Vietnamese in the diaspora had to struggle for discursive legibility of politics, history, and culture. When South Vietnam was dismantled in 1975, the judicial distinction between different Vietnams vanished. From 1975 onwards, all Vietnamese would be represented by the communist

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>158</sup> Nguyễn Huệ of the Tây Sơn Brothers. According to legend, he was undefeated combat. His death was sudden and unexplained.

flag of North Vietnam (Figure 5.8) as well its iconic hero of Hồ Chí Minh. While the flag of South Vietnam (Figure 5.9) continues to fly in the diaspora, its existence is more cultural than political.





Figure 5.8: Flag of North Vietnam

Figure 5.9: Flag of South Vietnam

When the Vietnam War memorial was being built in the city of Westminster (Little Saigon) from 1997 to 2002, the Vietnamese community was not permitted to fly the South Vietnamese flag at the memorial site, because the flag was politically invalid. The memorial site had to be deemed to be a historical site to warrant a legal context for hanging the South Vietnamese flag on municipal grounds. <sup>159</sup> This public gesture was a power struggle, where the local Vietnamese Americans had to fight for permission. Moreover, the memorial was funded using the donations from the Vietnamese American community (Letran).

In addition, the lack of political identity contributed to cases where many of the Vietnamese abroad were often mistaken to be Vietnamese communist. In 1992, Luyen

memorial was unveiled in 2002. http://articles.latimes.com/2002/sep/21/local/me-memorial21

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>159</sup> In 1997, Westminster City Councilman Frank G. Fry initiated the Vietnam War Memorial Project. The committee selected Tuan Nguyen to sculpt and design the monument and the immediate surroundings. The

Phan Nguyen a 19-year-old student at the University of Miami was mistaken for a VC and beaten to death by a mob of white men. 160

In classrooms, historians generally approached the Vietnam War as a conflict of the Cold War where the Americans fought the Vietnamese, instead of a civil war between the North and South. 161 In the United States, narratives about the Vietnam War would often conflate all Vietnamese as "gooks" hiding in rice paddies. 162 Ironically, in Vietnam, the South Vietnamese are usually conflated with the Americans, rendering them as traitors. Furthermore, many Vietnamese language instructors from Vietnam, who teach language abroad, have been teaching students that the dialect of the South Vietnamese is incorrect and that the Northern Vietnamese dialect is the official standard (Lam).<sup>163</sup>.

Thus, there were many discursive obstacles facing the Vietnamese in the diaspora. Although they lacked political and institutional power, the Vietnamese in the diaspora had their own culture which they used to generate their own histories and perspectives. Vietnamese popular music provided a shared platform for their expressions.

In Vietnamese popular songs, characters are often rounded by conflicts and struggles. Popular music fashioned bits and pieces of the oral stories and memories into musical harmony, enabling a discourse for the Vietnamese refugees: a perspective where they were more human than rice paddies. The older generation in the diaspora needed

<sup>162</sup> Kinney, Katherine. Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.

<sup>160</sup> http://www.nytimes.com/1992/09/11/news/7-charged-in-death-of-student-who-objected-to-racialslur.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>161</sup> In Vietnam the Vietnam War is referred to as the American War.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>163</sup> Lam, Mariam B. "The Cultural Politics of Vietnamese Pedagogy" *Journal of Southeast Asian Language* Teaching. Volume 12, No. 2, Fall 2006.

Vietnamese popular music as much it needed them. Hence, the boom in the industry of Vietnamese music abroad was more than just clever adaptations of nostalgia mixed with flashiness.

For non-native speakers of Vietnamese, the discursive authority and privilege embodied in Vietnamese popular songs are of little consequence. When translated into English, the songs are mostly moot clichés. Therefore, the younger generation would often refer to Vietnamese popular music as "the sad songs my parents listen to." Ultimately, many Vietnamese popular music songs are stories of the pre-1975 generation for the pre-1975 generation.

# V. Lacking Cultural Nepotism

Although the older generation is dying off, Vietnamese popular music is still very much alive in the diaspora. Similar to how Deborah Wong was able to observe Vietnamese karaoke in southern California during the 1990s (72-88), <sup>164</sup> the same is true in 2017. Similar to the 1990s, the main demographic in the diaspora is still the first-generation Vietnamese immigrant. Arguably, the diasporic industry of Vietnamese of popular music is still targeting the first-generation the most. Although there has been some discussion about reaching the younger generation of Vietnamese Americans in the United States, recent shows by Thúy Nga and Asia Entertainment are similar to how they have always been. Shows like Thúy Nga's *Paris By Night 121* and *122* contracted comedians from Vietnam to performs their skits in the diaspora. These companies are

<sup>164</sup> Wong, Deborah. *Speaking it LOUDER: Asian Americans Making Music.* Routledge: New York. 2004.

not changing their content significantly to appeal to the younger generation of Vietnamese Americans. Rather, they are taking shows and talents in Vietnam and doing them in the diaspora.

Like how it was after 1975, Vietnamese music companies in the diaspora look for a surplus of demand and then tapped into it. Their lack of experience and expertise in creating new demand has continued to influence their decision making and creativity. Thus, they are still alienating themselves from the younger generation of Vietnamese in the diaspora. In general, Vietnamese popular music companies in the diaspora seem very astute about the consumerist habits of the younger generation in Vietnam, but at the same time, they seem clueless about the younger generation in the diaspora.

With the rise of the newer Vietnamese immigrants entering the diaspora, companies like Thúy Nga and Asia Entertainment no longer have a monopoly on Vietnamese popular music outside of Vietnam. New Vietnamese immigrants also consume the popular music produced in Vietnam. Songs from singers like Đạm Vĩnh Hưng, Lâm Hùng, and Lệ Quyên from Vietnam have become more competitive outside of Vietnam.

Due to cultural censorship in Vietnam, many Vietnamese popular songs performed by many singers living and working in Vietnam have to comply with political conditions of the country. Pre-1975 songs are often revised in accordance with Vietnam's censorship, where their references to the war and the South Vietnamese are mended. By omitting the context of war and the overall presence of the South Vietnamese, these revised pre-1975 songs are converted into more generic love songs

bereft of historical markers. The depoliticized pre-1975 songs are more marketable, because they can be played across both Vietnam and the diaspora more easily. The cultural histories of the Vietnamese refugees, which have been pending on the mass circulation of pre-1975 song narratives, are disappearing as the revised pre-1975 songs from Vietnam are becoming more dominate.

As Vietnamese popular music struggles to reach the next generation of Vietnamese in the diaspora, the social struggles of the older generation of the South Vietnamese are being erased. If the next generation continues to share in the struggles of the older generation, it is unlikely that Vietnamese popular music will be their champion. Vietnamese popular music in the diaspora has been keeping the younger generation at a distance mostly.

### VI. Conclusion

In the United State, the Vietnam War is imagined by various cultural industries of journalism, Hollywood, and fiction. Their stories about traumatic violence can be found in the images of children running in napalm. Fictional stories by American authors like Herr and O' Brien, often feature soldiers who have learned to be emotionally numb to violence, a technique of survival that also doubles as a gesture of war protest. In the United States, the cultural association of violence and trauma with the Vietnam War has been criticized by Katherine Kinney as being ethnocentric, where the Vietnam War has been commodified for American consumption by displacing the social presence of the Vietnamese (4).

It could be said that many of cultural narratives about the Vietnam War circulating throughout the Vietnamese diaspora also touch on the themes of traumatic violence and meaningless death. Songs like Anh Bằng's "Tale of the Sim Blossom" (Chuyện Hoa Sim) <sup>165</sup> expresses the irrationality of war, where sometimes the soldier survives the battle but the civilian dies at home. In Trịnh Công Sơn's "Ballads for the Corpses" (Bài Ca Dành Cho Những Xác Người), corpses are laying under the sun, floating in rivers, dangling from roofs, and demasking the walkways of schools. <sup>166</sup> Hence, Vietnamese popular music is also familiar with mass violence.

However, in the face of death and violence, characters in Vietnamese popular songs respond with a heighten sense emotion and moral resolve. Contrary to the psychological wall of numbness and apathy, Vietnamese song narratives often leave their characters to soak in the destruction and death. Trenched in the midst of ruins and gunfire, Vietnamese popular songs dwell and lament. Through gestures of sympathy and empathy, popular songs express a desire to bury the dead or to rebuild the ruins. As such, the Vietnam War is rendered at home rather than on foreign soil.

The Vietnam War is also a story about human struggle, where characters response and manage violence rather than being subdued by it. Unlike many American narratives where violence and humanity are separated, Vietnamese popular music binds the two together, where gunfire in Trúc Phương's "Kể ở Miền Xa" (Someone Far Way) has traces of human qualities: "Out there, explosions light the darkness and echoes from

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>165</sup> Nhưng không chết người trai khói lửa / Mà chết người em nhỏ hậu phương /Mà chết người em gái tôi thương. < <a href="https://hopamviet.vn/chord/song/chuyen-hoa-sim/W8IU0F6I.html">https://hopamviet.vn/chord/song/chuyen-hoa-sim/W8IU0F6I.html</a> >

<sup>166</sup> https://hopamviet.vn/chord/song/bai-ca-danh-cho-nhung-xac-nguoi/W8IUI7FB.html

bullets have replaced your voice" (my translation). Thus, pre-1975 songs often express a paradox where elements of loss and sorrow evoke living memories about family, home, friendship, and love. In doing so, they situate war in a context of Vietnamese social life, not just moments of fighting.

Oftentimes, the Vietnamese of older generation talk about the Vietnam War in relation to culture and social life. This may seem unexpected considering that most of the oral stories documented from the Vietnamese refugees usually recount cases violence and abuse. However, these narratives are produced through prompting. By no means should interviews be considered the only narratives ever told by the Vietnamese in the diaspora. For many Vietnamese of the older generation living the diaspora, the Vietnam War was more than just the jarring images they saw on television that interrupted their daily routines.

 $<sup>^{167}</sup>$ Ngoài kia súng nổ đốt lửa đêm đen tầm đạn thay tiếng em < <a href="https://hopamviet.vn/chord/song/ke-omien-xa/W8IU0FIE.html">https://hopamviet.vn/chord/song/ke-omien-xa/W8IU0FIE.html</a> >

# **Conclusion Chapter: The Cultural Politics of Trauma**

A decade after the Vietnam War, Vietnamese corpses were still found in the yards of schools. In 1985, a Cal State Fullerton student committed suicide by leaping from the balcony of the humanities building. Since then, iron railings were installed. According to the Los Angele Times, the cause of 20-year-old Luom Thi Pham's suicide remains a mystery to the school and her family (Murphy). "Nothing happened in the family," her brother explains. <sup>168</sup> Prior to the American Psychiatric Association (APA) recognizing post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) as a disorder, cases of trauma among the Vietnamese refugees were being documented widely around world.

While talking with a group of Vietnamese popular song composers at the local Gypsy Café in Little Saigon, Việt Dũng (Dzung) explained that Vietnamese popular music played a therapeutic role for many Vietnamese in the diaspora after the war. Hence, there was a high demand for them. In 1978, 500,000 copies of his albums were sold. Like the human-rights activist Nguyệt Ánh who began composing Vietnamese songs after the war, Việt Dũng felt that the Vietnamese refugees were suffering socially and emotionally, and he turned to song writing as a response. <sup>169</sup>

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, concerns about trauma plaguing the Vietnamese refugees and the diasporic community became more culturally pronounced, especially within discussions relating to Vietnamese American literature, film, and anti-communist protesting. While the association between traumatic behavior and the Vietnam War has

 $^{168}\ http://articles.latimes.com/1985-10-31/local/me-13433\_1\_humanities-building/2$ 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>169</sup> Several months after our contact, Việt Dũng passes away in December of 2013.

long been a part of America's cultural consciousness, mostly with war veterans,

Vietnamese Americans took the spotlight in a landmark event of anti-communist

protesting in Little Saigon in 1999. Many Vietnamese of the older generation supported
the protesters, interpreting the protest to be a form of civil engagement, but many of the
younger generation as well academics were against it, interpreting the conflict as war
wounds.

Since then, the Vietnamese Americans of the older generation have remained the spotlight of trauma related suspicions. Incidences involving them, which range from individual harassment to protest rallies, become narratives about the irrational Vietnamese American community censoring freedom of speech and education.

Ultimately, the culturalization of trauma in the United States is an added burden for many Vietnamese refugees. Trauma-labeling has become a way of discriminating against them by erasing their concerns in political and scholarly discourses.

Many Vietnamese Americans of the older generation are working-class citizens.

They are the first-generation of Vietnamese immigrants who attended beauty school so that their children may one day go to college. They are ones who stay at home, babysitting and managing various domestic responsibilities, so others can balance their middle-class careers and families. Using what they have, many of the Vietnamese Americans of the old generation have tried to speak-out in a world where Vietnamese is a foreign language and they are foreigners.

Unfortunately, many Vietnamese refugees do not have the theoretical and language skills to express their concerns as legible forms of political or critical discourse.

Their attempts at civil engagement have oftentimes been portrayed as gesture of irrational or traumatic war wounds. As scholars, artists, authors, film makers, and journalists join together to raise awareness about trauma within the Vietnamese American community, the political concerns of many Vietnamese Americans are being dismissed as symptoms of war trauma rather than topics worthy of further exploration.

## I. HiTek and F.O.B. II

In 1999, Truong Van Tran hung a portrait of Hồ Chí Minh and the Vietnamese communist flag in his video rental store, HiTek, in Westminster, California (Little Saigon). This landmark event attracted approximately 200,000 protesters. On the one hand, the incident ignited mass discussions about free-speech in the Vietnamese American community, but on the other hand, it led to the wild speculation about the overall mental health of the Vietnamese of the older generation.

The documentary The *Saigon, USA* (2003) offers a glimpse into how the HiTek incident affected Vietnamese American families. Bao Nguyen, a young undergraduate at UC Irvine at the time, confides to the camera that he tried explaining to his mother that the mob of protesters was violating Truong Van Tran's (the store owner) freedom of speech, but she just would not understand. His mother, on the other hand, explains to the camera that free-speech should be ethical or else it would be abusive. The documentary resolves the dispute with a simple theme of generational difference.

A decade later, a similar incident to the HiTek protesting occurred in the neighboring city of Santa Ana. In 2009, the Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association (VAALA) hosted an art exhibit, F.O.B II. Although it was internally controversial, the curators proceeded to hang a photograph of a young female wearing a t-shirt of the communist flag and sitting next to a statue of Hồ Chí Minh. On opening day, many Vietnamese of the older generation complained to the curators, requesting that the photograph be taken down. Free-speech was echoed, and again, the older generation struggled to justify their reasons by resorting to personal anecdotes.

I recall a woman in tears, asking the curators why they were doing this. She had been crying to the point where her upper lip was covered with slime. Freedom of speech was repeated over-and-over, no matter who pleaded or how much they pleaded. Since then, I have come to suspect that those Vietnamese American seniors were using their personal anecdotes and emotions to gesture at the thin line between free-speech and hatespeech.

By sharing their tearful experiences with the curators, the Vietnamese Americans were trying to demonstrate how they felt victimized by the photograph's artistic expression. It seems to me that in their eyes, free-speech was being used against them in a derogatory manner by the photographer and curators. The Vietnamese Americans were trying to illustrate their notion of freedom-of-speech, a version that was more located on the axis of unequal power and privilege, rather than a moral imperative, that which is

170 Brian Doan is the photographer.

211an 2 can is the photographer

good in itself. Their tears were not intended to suggest trauma, but they were gestures of how the transnational issue of cultural erasure and censorship of their memories and political beliefs in Vietnam were being extended into the diaspora.

Unfortunately, when the they tried to confront this issue of inequality, Vietnamese Americans of the older generation are often accused of trying to undermine the United States constitution. During the FOB II art exhibit, a professor from Cal State Fullerton lectured about free-speech to the protesters. Using the analogy of a Nazi parade in Jewish neighbor, the professor wanted to illustrate that offensive expressions are protected by law. Perhaps, after listening to some academic wisdom, the Vietnamese Americans would in turn realize that their protest was wrong, and they would mend their immigrant ways.

On the contrary, the crowd responded, "Protesting is free-speech too!"

Unfortunately, their response was overlooked, even though it was repeated. Similar to the way Bao Nguyen felt the need to re-educate his mother about the United States constitution in the documentary, the Vietnamese Americans of the older generation were being treated as though they were ignorant immigrants and refugees during the protest, regardless of their residency status. This is a problem, because one group of United States citizens get to claim a monopoly on free-speech and treat other citizens as aliens. In hindsight, lecturing at protesters about free-speech during a protest rally seems odd.

The prejudice against the older generation runs deep within many Vietnamese American communities and families. In the documentary *Saigon*, *USA*, the author

Andrew Lam distances himself from the HiTek protesters in 1999, stating that the news media only showed the actions of a small group and misrepresented the Vietnamese American community. On the contrary, the number of protesters present in 1999 is estimated to be around 200,000, not 20. Unlike the stories celebrating the triumphs of assimilation, featuring the successful entrepreneur, novelist, film director, or university professor, the news media showed the other Vietnamese American who appeared to be lacking the graces of sophistication. They were working-class Vietnamese Americans expressing themselves with their heavy immigrant accent.

However, Andrew Lam is not entirely wrong in claiming that the news media misrepresented Vietnamese Americans as being emotionally explosive. On television, the news focused on the climax, where protesters were yelling and burning effigies of Hô Chỉ Minh. This made the store owner, Truong Van Tran, look more like a helpless victim of a traumatized mob.

Contrary to the general perception that the protest was an eruption, the HiTek incident was a gradual escalation. According to the Los Angeles Times, Truong Van Tran had previously broadcasted his intentions on the Vietnamese radio, issuing a challenge to the community. Afterwards, the Westminster police contacted Tran, informing him that his plan would endanger himself and many in the community.<sup>171</sup> Tran proceeded to execute his plan, knowing that his actions were inflammatory and hurtful. Afterwards, customers complained to Tran, but he stood his ground.

171 http://articles.latimes.com/1999/feb/16/news/mn-8600

Likewise, the F.O.B. II incident, occurring a decade later, did not start with a picture being hung on the wall. Before the art exhibit opened, it was disclosed to the Los Angeles Times that the exhibit would feature a piece which the curators expect would be offensive and inflammatory. Although it is explained that the picture is not supposed to be "celebratory of communism," the artist and curators knew that picture was a shock piece.

Part of the intention of the exhibit was to manufacture a community protest by selectively provoking the Vietnamese Americans of the older generation. Such premeditation was expressed with statements published in the local newspaper: "This exhibit will test the Vietnamese American Community" or "None of us know if the community is ready for this now, or if it will take another 10 years." The curators and the artist had already predicted the likely interpretation of the photograph and its blowback.<sup>172</sup>

Thus, there was a strategy to take advantage of people's politics by engaging their emotional response, specifically anger and fear. On opening day, many Vietnamese Americans attended the art exhibit. As they tried to reason and explain their position to with autobiographical narratives, their actions were setup to provide the evidence that would justify the general speculation and academic theories about mass trauma in Vietnamese American communities.

### II. The Business of Hypersensitivity

172 http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jan/10/local/me-vietarts10

It is not uncommon for many Vietnamese Americans of the older generation to be sensitive towards signs of Vietnamese Communism in the community. Arguably, this is due to their ongoing marginalization, where their culture and history being contested and erasure by the Vietnamese Communist Party. Nevertheless, they are vulnerable to the agendas of others. For instance, during election seasons, political campaigns spam messages on TV, suggesting that their opponent is a communist sympathizer. In addition, Vietnamese newspapers have been known to use similar techniques to initiate boycotts with competitors.

There is a business aspect to Vietnamese anti-communism that is often overlooked. In general, protesters do not materialize from the air because a picture is hung on a wall somewhere. There is a lengthy process where certain news outlets, like a Vietnamese radio station or politician, filter information in a way that would spark a public outcry. After priming people with enough fear and rage, dates and times are announced to coordinate a rally.

Brigitte Huynh, the publisher of Little Saigon Daily, states proudly that her newspaper has an anti-communist agenda, "[The Vietnam War] is not over with us. When your country is in war, you have to choose sides" (Roosevelt). However, the targets are not always members of the Vietnamese Communist Party or those affiliated with the socialist government of Vietnam. In 2012, Little Saigon News accused their local competitor, The Người Việt Daily, of working for communist agents. The Người

7:

 $<sup>^{173}\</sup> http://www.ocregister.com/2015/04/25/death-threats-protests-and-lawsuits-little-saigon-newspaper-waris-about-ideology-not-just-circulation/$ 

Việt Daily retaliated with a civil lawsuit. Due to the lack of evidence, The Little Saigon News claimed freedom of speech. However, the jury awarded \$4.5 million in damages The Người Việt Daily, because such inflammatory speech injured the reputation of the newspaper company and caused financial loss (Puente). 174

Furthermore, the manipulation of people's concerns with bias news has benefited many Vietnamese American politicians. In 2015, a crowd of protesters gather at UC Riverside and the Riverside City Hall to protest the city's affiliation with the city of Cần Thơ. The Garden Grove Councilman, Phat Bui was present in the front of the group, getting his picture taken. From city hall, Bui led a march to Dr. Vien Doan's medical office to protest the doctor's support of the bill. In an overall effort to organize and mobilize protesters, the Federation of Vietnamese American Communities and Phat Bui bused protesters from Orange County to Riverside. This is not the first time when residents of another city were bused to another to protest: in 2014, 600 protesters were transported to Irvine from Little Saigon. Hence, Vietnamese Anti-Communist protesting is often a product of strategic planning, organizing, and trust building.

Without the business interest of politicians and biased news, the chances that Vietnamese Americans would gather organically to harmonize their concerns through modes of community protesting is unlikely. In fact, icons and symbols which resemble the Vietnamese communist flag exist in the Vietnamese American community as part of the everyday. For instance, the school district of Garden Grove issues awards to students

http://www.ocregister.com/articles/newspaper-646685-jury-vietnamese.html

which have a yellow star against a red background (Figure 6.1). These awards are given multiple times a year, and the parents, who are oftentimes veterans of the South Vietnamese government, hang them on their wall proudly.



Figure 6.1: Elementary school awards

Moreover, the department store Macy's oftentimes run commercial ads on television featuring symbols which resemble Vietnam's socialist flag (Figure 6.2). Although their company logo is a red star, Macy's sometimes invert the color scheme to be festive by using a red background and a white in the middle (6.3). During the Christmas season, Macy often use a yellow star. Yet, many Vietnamese Americans own a Macy's card and have been shopping at the department store without igniting protest.





6.3: Macy's commercial

6.4: Macy's card

For years, these various symbols which resemble Vietnamese Communism have existed in the Vietnamese American community without much blow-back. Unless a politician, interest group, or radio host call attention to these symbols, the day-to-day operations of schools in Garden Grove and Macy's department stores in southern California will continue to be mundane.

The business of weaponizing Vietnamese anti-communist rhetoric, using the concerns of Vietnamese Americans as means to an end, has a long history. Although the HiTek incident is the most well-known event, cases like when the magazine Nghệ Sĩ (Artist) was sued by the Người Việt Daily for slander date back to 1986. <sup>175</sup> At a time when Vietnamese refugees were being driven to suicide, their suffering and pain were being used for the self-profiting interest of creating boycotts.

To a degree, I concur with the scholars, artists, and writers that the hypersensitive of Vietnamese anti-communism in the local community can be extremely destructive, as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>175</sup> http://articles.latimes.com/keyword/nguoi-viet

it has ruined livelihood of many already. However, I would agree with them more if their criticisms were directed at better targets.

# **III.** PTSD and Epigenetics

Mental health is a serious ongoing issue for many Vietnamese American individuals and families. Despite numerous reports that Vietnamese Americans are plagued with the trauma of the Vietnam War, studies examining trauma of Vietnamese Americans as a collective are still in progress. Recently, assistant professor Yuying Tsong was awarded \$30,000 to research and assess the mental health of Vietnamese American seniors in Orange County in 2016. Tsong's project is supposed to be first-ever mental health assessment of Vietnamese American seniors collectively, despite the general believe that most Vietnamese of the older generation suffer from trauma already.

Since the 1980's (the second and third wave), stories about traumatic experiences have been expressed as the shared memories of the Vietnamese refugees. In the refugee camps, oral narratives were collected from the refugees to determine if the person was an "authentic" or "fake" refugee. The "fake" refugees were repatriated back to Vietnam, where they were imprisoned. In many cases, personal narratives were the only available form of justification people had with them, making personal stories one of the most valuable assets to the Vietnamese refugees.

Factors of personal history and memory are crucial to how physicians evaluate mental health. According to Celina Gonzales, a clinical psychologist in San Francisco

<sup>176</sup> http://hhd.fullerton.edu/Main/news/YuyingTsong.htm

who works with refugees coming from Latin American countries, it may be advantageous for the physician to detect signs of mental health concerns with refugees. Since such health services are often unavailable in the home country, physicians can recommend the refugee to countries like the United States for further treatment. 177

For many Vietnamese refugees, mental health concerns continued to be an issue even after their resettlement. While many follow-up surveys concluded that Vietnamese children were showing lower signs of anxiety, results were more mixed with adults. In a 1989 report from Japan, Ebata and Miyake conclude that adults who suffered life threating experiences in the "concentration camps" (re-education camps, cåi tạo) continued to have higher stress scores (164). Likewise, in 2002, a case study of Vietnamese refugees in Australia found that the risk for mental disorder and trauma among the older generation of Vietnamese refugees rose from 8% to 12% (Steel et al). In 2007, Vietnamese Americans who were tortured in re-education were still reporting symptoms of PTSD (Hinton et al.).

In known PTSD cases among the Vietnamese refugees, the theme of re-education is one of many. It has been reported that the mass exodus itself was also factor (Hussain 153). Paul Hoang, a social-workers, states that "post-traumatic stress is prevalent in the community. My dad has it, I had it, I was a refugee" (Depual), <sup>179</sup> In addition, many believe that trauma can transferred genetically as well as socially. Dr. Clayton Chau at

<sup>177</sup> interview

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>178</sup> The reported increase has not been consistent across all cases. A study in Japan reported a decrease (Ebata and Miyake, 1989), and in a 5 year follow-up of Vietnamese children in the United States found that most had adjusted to their new life (Sokoloff, Carlin, and Pham, 1984).

<sup>179</sup> https://voiceofoc.org/2013/02/trauma-at-root-of-mental-health-issues-among-vietnamese/

St. Joseph Hoag Health in Irvine claims that trauma is hereditary: "If parents don't resolve the trauma they experienced, their kids can inherit it" (Dembosky). <sup>180</sup> This phenomenon is known as "intergenerational transfer of trauma" or transgeneration transfer trauma (TTT).

Transgeneration transfer trauma (TTT) is a well-known theory, but it is still highly controversial. Since the 1960s, reported cases of nightmares and many other mental issues emerging from the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors have motived many health professionals to explore genetics as a protentional cause. However, TTT remains a theory without sufficient empirical evidence.

In 1994, Bacha et al. found that many Israeli children, whose parents are immigrants of Israel after World Word II, experienced mental health issues. The theory of TTT was argued to be the cause. However, many of the symptoms of the second and third generation were not specific: "such as problems in school, cannabis abuse, eating disorders, [and others]" (Fusion et al. 519). By 2013, over 500 studies have been published on TTT (Kellerman 33), but none of them had the evidence to persuade the American Psychological Association (APA).

Nevertheless, TTT is still embraced as a possibility, because of the research derived from studying mice behavior in epigenetics. While it is theoretically possible for stress to be passed on generationally, Robert McLay, a psychiatrist and research director with the Naval Medical Center in San Diego, elaborates:

 $^{180}\ https://ww2.kqed.org/news/2017/09/13/just-like-my-mother-how-we-inherit-our-parents-traits-and-tragedies/$ 

It is still true that stress or other external events (outside of something like ionizing radiation) doesn't alter the DNA that is passed along to your children. Thus, the potential options for how an organism can develop remains the same regardless of what the parents experienced during their lives. However, we now know that external events alter how those genes are expressed, and that the alternation in expression can be passed across generations. How exactly this happens in humans still isn't clear, but the animal models prove that it does exist, and be heritable across multiple generations far removed from the original stress. *In theory, it is an adaptive process and not just limited to stress.* <sup>181</sup>

In a 2008 review, Hiroyuki Sasaki and Yasuhisa Matsui explain that experiments perform on mice showed that offspring also inherent factors influencing their profile of germs cells which regulate the mode of expression and suppression of certain traits (129). This includes behavioral alterations, where "depressive-like behaviors" were inherited by the offspring of mice with "early stress" encounters (Franklin et al. 408).

However, it still not yet clear how depression is experienced by mice in a laboratory setting or how their gestures can be interpreted and diagnosed as a disorder. And also, to what degree are emotional profiles of mice which were selectively bred for research similar to humans who are of a diverse cultural background and inhabit a socially dynamic environment? Nevertheless, theories of transgenerational and transnational trauma have embraced the discoveries in the research of epigenetics as the chief model of explaining the mental health concerns documented in the offspring of many Holocaust survivors as well as many Vietnamese and Khmer refugees. <sup>182</sup> It may

181 interview

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>182</sup> Allen Young discusses a similar theory in "Suffering and the Origins of Traumatic Memory." *Social Suffering*. Ed. Kleinman, Arthur, Veena Das, and Margaret M. Lock. Berkeley: University of California, 1997.245-60.

seem crass to reserve a degree of skepticism towards claims of TTT, but the conflation of people and their experiences to lab animals is too premature.

Not knowing with how or why the epigenetic profile of germs cells are inherited among humans is part of mystery of the theory of TTT. Another issue is that PTSD itself remains a controversial theory, however, not as much as TTT. Since the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), procedures and standards for diagnosing PTSD have been adopted by the APA. However, the question of how or why PTSD manifests remains unclear. Contrary the concept of physical trauma, where the body is unable to repair and regenerate itself back to its previous state due to severity of the injury, mental trauma is not necessarily caused by an event or a source.

Freud's most famous case documents a patient who was molested as child by her father. In adulthood, after having married and becoming more socially aware of the accepted boundaries of sex, the patient begins to experience anxiety symptoms. While the memories were carried over from childhood, the emotional anxieties were a new manifestation from the re-experiencing of those memories.

Contrary to his 19<sup>th</sup> century model of trauma (e.g. male hysteria), where Freud used a timeline to explain trauma as having a breaking-point of accumulated stress/anxiety, Freud's later model of trauma is more similar to PTSD. According to his lectures, Freud explains, "traumatic moments, then, in which anxiety is not aroused as a signal but is generated anew from fresh reasons" (94). Unlike before where trauma was

invested in a notion of origin, in his later model, trauma is presented as a re-experience, where circumstances and ongoing circumstantial factors are actively contributing.

Hence, as equally important to a patient's personal history, Farrukh Hussain's evaluation of the Vietnamese refugees' mental health, at the Palawan camp in the Philippines, highlights many environmental conditions. In his assessment, Hussain notes the following: the prolonged stay in the cramped spaces, the sense of lacking security in their future, and the presence of racism and persecution (153). Likewise, Robert McLay notes that cases of PTSD being reported with U.S. serviceman touring in Iraq is much higher than in Vietnam. One contributing factor is that the U.S. soldiers in Iraq serve longer tours than in Vietnam, due to the lack of a national draft (26-30). Environmental conditions and their effects, including mental and physical exhaustion, have been noted by psychologists as being crucial factors.

Without a clear point origin, many PTSD cases are based on interpretations where empirical evidence is often unavailable. Ultimately, if a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan does not reveal signs of physical injury to the brain, then the physician must cross-reference the patient's symptoms with the DSM handbook. Diagnosis is based on the percentage of matches and error. While there are ways of treating PTSD, including virtual reality, the question of how or why it occurs remains a mystery mostly.

In his lecture, Freud suggests that anxieties are forms of inherited emotions. Prior to epigenetics and TTT, Freud observed that many children have inherent phobias which were not taught to them, such being alone or being with strangers (83). By suggesting

that anxiety is linked to instincts (drives), Freud theorizes that anxiety is part of the evolutionary mode of adaptation. Consequently, it is an "unshakable biological fact" that many living organisms have the capacity to experience fear (95). Previously, Charles Darwin had proposed a theory that linked emotion to evolutionary. By examining human body language, such as facial expression, Darwin suggests that emotional expressions are systematic and hereditary.<sup>183</sup> In this light, gestures which could be interpreted as depressive-like symptoms are not necessarily abnormal.

In thinking about Vietnamese Americans, trauma theory should not be a quest of locating origins, where a timeline of the refugees' memories is used to explain the entirety of their actions. While they may be emotional and passionate, many Vietnamese who protest are invested in the social and political significance of ongoing issues. One does not have to agree with their protest nor their interpretations, but it does not mean that their agendas and call to action are whimsical.

## IV. PTSD and Ethnocentrism

Out of a concern for the Vietnamese Americans of both the older and younger generation, the theme of trauma has emerged in Vietnamese American literature and film. In *The Unwanted* (2001), Kien Nguyen concludes that after completing the book in 2000, he no longer has nightmares (343). In Quang Pham's *A Sense of Duty* (2007), trauma is the gap of silence from his father's shame, which has loomed throughout their relationship (37-8). And in Le Thi Diem Thuy's fictional novel that reads like a semi-

 $^{183}$  Darwin, Charles. The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals. 1872.

memoir, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2004), trauma is the hidden cause of the father strange phone calls or laments (121). And, in Doan Hoang's documentary *Oh*, *Saigon* (2007), trauma is the father who needs to go back to Vietnam to be healed. Thus, in the perspectives of the younger generation, the older generation are rendered frequently as war wounds and objects who need to be saved.

According to Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, publishers in the United States usually expect Vietnamese American writers to conform to America's project "to heal and forget the Viet Nam syndrome" (58). Hence, Vietnamese Americans authors have inherited the pre-existing themes of trauma from authors like Michael Herr, Tim O'Brien, and Bobbie Ann Mason. The ethnocentrism "that we fought ourselves, literalized in the repetitious image of Americans killing Americans, is [virtually] the only story that has been told by Americans about the Vietnam War" (Kinney 4) continues to resonate in Vietnamese American literature and film, albeit it has become more multiculturally friendly.

Monique Thuy-Doung Truong observes that publishers in the United States have often motivated Vietnamese American to write memoirs rather than fiction (47). The pressuring of Vietnamese Americans to write autobiographically is arguably systematic of many ethnic authors in the United States. In particular, Elaine Kim notes that Asian American authors have been discouraged historically from writing works of fiction, because their works were often treated as sociological text (811). While there are Vietnamese American writers like Monique Truong who writes fiction, most Vietnamese American novels are memoirs. Even though Le Thi Diem Thuy's *The Gangster We Are* 

All Looking For is classified as fiction, the novel is commonly taught in a sociological context where it is often discussed in relation to the topics of mental health and trauma among Vietnamese Americans.

Consequently, Vietnamese Americans in the United States are regulated by America's legacy of racially pigeonholing Asians American writers to biographical narratives as well as interpreting their writings to social artifacts. Thus, publishers have been expecting Vietnamese American authors to be Asian American authors while following in the footsteps of Vietnam War authors who wrote about trauma. To clarify, Vietnamese Americans are not forced to produce memoirs against their will. But they are expected to operate in way that would be befitting of the United States' consumerism.

The emergence of Vietnamese American authors and film makers was supposed to provide a much needed multi-racial and multicultural perspective, helping to fill the gaps caused by the history of racial discrimination in the United States. However, when many Vietnamese American authors have been encouraged to write in a genre with themes pre-configured for them, I would argue that Vietnamese American literature and film inherited America's Vietnam War syndrome and its ethnocentrisms. The notion that Vietnamese Americans are generally traumatized is an effect of America's white-washed disinterest towards Vietnamese history, culture, language, and subjectivity. While mental health is serious issue for many Vietnamese Americans, topics of war and trauma in literature and sociology need to be more conscientious about the presence of United States imperialism.

Regardless of who is more wrong or right, the younger generation of Vietnamese Americans often enroll in the university, where they learn about the Vietnam War as being a Cold War conflict between the United States and the Northern Vietnamese, overlooking South Vietnamese presence. Furthermore, when the students are introduced to Vietnamese American issues, they read, watch, and discuss issues of trauma and nostalgia.

Conflicts and protesting within the Vietnamese American community should generate more questions about transnational cultural politics and less assumptions about mental health. Why is it a trend now for cities like Irvine or Riverside to become affiliated with cities in Vietnam? Why are many Vietnamese Americans concerned about which dialect are taught at the university? Why do many distinguish between pre- and post-1975 Vietnamese songs? While trauma and memories are an important issues, other questions and themes should be discussed as well.

# V. If There Was More Time



Figure 6.2: Vietnamese American Human Rights Group

I wish I had more time to explore the themes of human rights activism in Vietnamese popular music. In the United States, there is a group of Vietnamese popular song composers, musicians, and singers who have been advocating the mantra of more "human rights" in Vietnam (Figure 6.2). Some of the members whom I have met are recent immigrants from Vietnam. The founding members are Nguyệt Ánh and Việt Dũng (1958-2013). After 1975, these two song composers worked together promote "human rights" themes, using the venue of Vietnamese popular music.

The music group does not refer to themselves as an anti-communist group.

According to the late Việt Dũng, the group is a human's rights group that focuses on improving conditions in Vietnam. Anti-communism has historically been their dub by journalists and scholars in the United States.

Moreover, their perspectives regarding protesting are oftentimes overlooked.

According to Valverde<sup>184</sup> and Lieu, <sup>185</sup> Vietnamese singers in the diaspora who returned to Vietnam to tour, like Hurong Lan, were protested by the community. However, when I asked about the singers being protested, Việt Dũng contested this perspective. According to him: "We were not protesting Hurong Lan, the singer. We were protesting, the way she was treated by the socialist government of Vietnam." Việt Dũng explained that when

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>184</sup> Valverde, Caroline Kieu Linh. "Making Transnational Music." *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*. New York University Press. 2005. 44

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>185</sup> Lieu, Nhi Thi. "Performing Culture in Diaspora: Assimilation and Hybridity in Paris by Night Videos and Vietnamese American Niche Media." *Alien Encounters Popular Culture in Asian America*. Duke Press. 2007. 219

pre-1975 singers returned to Vietnam again to tour, the government did not allow the singers to freely perform songs composed before 1975.



Figure 6.3: In memory of Việt Dũng

In memory of the Vietnamese American composer and social activist, a segment of Beach Boulevard in southern California has been dedicated to Việt Dũng (Figure 6.3). At the age of 55, his passing was unexpected. There is much about the cultural and political aspects of Vietnamese American life and it communities that remains unknown.

Aside from human rights activism, I wished I had more time to address a more feminist perspective of Vietnamese popular music. Historically, the narratives of Vietnamese songs are written by men. Nguyệt Ánh and Julie Quang are two well-known exceptions. After 1975, Nguyệt Ánh started composing popular songs as a part of a movement advocating for human rights. She and the late Việt Dũng are generally credited for founding the human right movement in Vietnamese popular music.

Julie Quang is a pre-1975 singer, who sings in both French and Vietnamese (Figure 6.4). She was a member of Pham Duy's music group called Dreamers. She is a mixed race of both Indian and Vietnamese. Drawing from her familiarity with Pham

Duy's work, Julie Quang began writing her own songs. She was married for Pham Duy's son for a period. After 1975, she immigrated to France, and she helped sponsor the members of Pham Duy's family from Vietnam.



Figure 6.4: Julie Quang

It is difficult to conclude when there is still so much more to discuss. Vietnamese popular music offers a new transnational model of conceptualizing Vietnamese and Vietnamese American literature. The canonization of Vietnamese literature as only written narratives has privileged the cultural perspective of authors and poets mostly in northern Vietnam or the younger generation in the United States. As result, courses teaching Vietnamese literature or Southeast Asian literature often privilege the poems and prose of revolutionaries, such as Xuân Điều, Trần Tử Bình, Vũ Trọng Phụng, Lê Minh Khuê, and Bảo Ninh. This overlooks the literary expressions of songs and their

existence in the everyday life of southern Vietnam, including the theatre genre of *cåi* luong. Unfortunately, *cåi* luong is a whole other world of literary life and culture.

In the diaspora, Vietnamese American memoirs are often written by the younger generation, 1.5 and later. The insights about the older generation are filtered by a matrix of cultural differences. Hence, many Vietnamese Americans of the younger generation have been motivated to enroll in Vietnamese language courses to better connect with their family. Vietnamese popular songs offer a different frame of perspective that is outside of the ethnocentric discourse of the United States, Hollywood, and English.

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