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Love is Yellow in Vietnamese Popular Music

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in

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by

Minh Nguyen

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Figure 1: An album cover of a compact disc which contains *nhạc vàng* songs.

Figure 2: A screenshot of the music video “Người Mang Tâm Sự.”

For over a decade after 1975, popular music in southern Vietnam, known as yellow music (*nhạc vàng*),¹ was prohibited by the new socialist government due to the belief that it promoted moral values that were inappropriate for Vietnamese society at the time (Taylor, 2000, 104-5). However, after the renovation (*đổi mới*) of 1986 when Vietnam's economy began adopting structural-adjustment policies from the International Monetary Fund, many of the yellow music songs gradually resurfaced again. Songs that once unlawfully corrupted the moral fabric of Vietnamese society are now forms of cultural pedagogy used to teach the consumer of mass media about the values of being honest hardworking citizens. Contrary to previous academic discussions that have argued that yellow music contained and/or expressed ideologies that threaten the state (post-1975 Vietnam), this paper will illustrate how the ideologies and emotions of sadness in yellow music work with the ideologies of the state to allow Vietnamese subjects to imagine themselves as citizens in both the national and global contexts. Although these songs may not be sponsored by the state directly, they seek to reshape notions of citizenship by romanticizing the role of the unskilled Vietnamese working class (*cu li*). In doing so, yellow music is a cultural venue that promotes the unskilled workforce for the global economy.

Defining yellow music.

¹ Often times, yellow music songs are also referred to as new music (*tân nhạc*), and/or sugary music (*nhạc sến*). These terms are reserved for songs that could be considered popular music, as opposed to ritual (like *cầu vãn*), classical, or folk music. Their differences will be discussed.

Many Vietnamese in Vietnam and the diaspora use the term yellow music (*nhạc vàng*) to refer to the popular songs of South Vietnam,² which were supposedly composed during “the pre-1975 era.” However, due to the historical events of mass migration of the 1950’s and 1970’s, it would be dangerous to assume that the production and circulation of yellow music were limited to only South Vietnam. During the Vietnam War, there were musicians playing yellow music in the North, even though it had been outlawed by the state. That being said, the flourishing of yellow music occurred mainly in the South even before the 1950s, primarily in the urban city of Sài Gòn. Many of the yellow music songs that were composed during the pre-1975 era still exist today. Although the term “yellow music” is becoming less popular in the Vietnamese vernacular, the songs of the pre-1975 era continue to be re-performed, reproduced, and remade for the contemporary consumers of Vietnamese popular music in Vietnam and in the diaspóra. The term *nhạc vàng* is typically recognized by generation of Vietnamese in Vietnam and the diaspora who were alive during the Vietnam War, even though they may not be able articulate its meaning. As for those who are of the age 40 and younger (roughly), the term *nhạc sến* (sugary music) is more commonly used to refer to these popular songs. However, term sugary music refers specifically to a narrow repertoire of sad popular love songs, which may or may not have composed from the pre-1975 era.

² The Geneva Accords of 1954 divided Vietnam into two zones of government. The capitalization of the words North or South refers the name of the specific area in Vietnam with regards their government. After 1975, north and south are longer capitalized in this essay, since there is only one official government.

Yellow music is difficult to define as a category. It has many characteristics that are broad, fluid, and problematic. When asked, many people in southern Vietnam and the United States would answer that yellow music includes a variety of popular Vietnamese music genres, ranging from “action music” (rock music) to the romantic love songs before 1975. As a general consensus, yellow music is a genre that is not restricted to only the repertoire of love songs that focus on the theme of personal relationships. However, they also include songs with themes about communal love: the family, region (*quê*), and nation/country (*quê hương*). Aside from its highly inclusive borders, the term yellow music has multiple meanings, depending on its context. On the one hand, it is a term coined by the Vietnamese Communist party to undermine the cultural practices that were seen to be of the South. It has the rhetoric and ideological baggage of being western and inauthentic Vietnamese culture. Supposedly, yellow music is derived from the tradition of mimicking French and American cultures, and as a result, it has the potential of disseminating ill cultural values that are harmful to the morality of Vietnamese citizens. On the other hand, the term *nhạc vàng* is also referred to as “golden music.” In the Vietnamese language, the word *vàng* means both yellow and gold, and it is only distinguishable through its context. While the term may have originated as a pejorative word, in the diaspora, *nhạc vàng* is used without the negative connotations. Moreover, for the Vietnamese in diaspora, the term may also imply a sense of pride and celebration for the imagined heritage and cultural traditions of South Vietnam. To complicate matters further, the term *tân nhạc* (new music) is also commonly used to refer to popular

music instead of *nhạc vàng*, which can be seen in the scholarship of Gibbs, Nguyễn, Reyes, and others. The ethical concerns of privileging the term *nhạc vàng* over *tân nhạc* and its translation as “yellow music” over “golden music” are discussed in the theory and methods section of this essay. Here, the task is to define term in a manner that does not restrict a history of false cultural practice. To do this, the essay will draw on the ethnographies and historical discourse of term new music (*tân nhạc*) to further complicate the history of pre-1975 Vietnamese popular music told by the rhetoric of yellow music. Lastly, yellow music is contemporary popular music. Although many of the songs have origins in the past and can be interpreted as historical artifacts, these songs are continuously remade in Vietnam and in the diaspora. Yellow music was popular before 1975, and it is popular now for different reasons that will be discussed.

After the war in 1975, Vietnam faced the challenge of integrating southerners into a shared national consciousness that predominately historicized in the state of North Vietnam pre-1975. Under a socialist government, the cultural phenomenon of yellow music was banned in south. At the time, musicians were encouraged by the state to composed nationalistic music in its place. In 1977, Đào Trọng Từ, a scholar and musician of Vietnamese music, presented an essay at a conference in France where he argued against yellow music in Vietnam. In the essay, yellow music expresses a type sadness that is supposedly a continuation of the French colonial legacy.³ Đào’s essay draws on the binary model of good and bad culture, which he uses to categorize

³ The essay is titled “The Renaissance of Vietnamese Music.”

Vietnamese music. Good Vietnamese music is described as music that expresses the nationalistic sentiments of patriotism and progress (1984, 97). For Đào, Vietnamese government sponsored music is good for society. Propaganda in the essay has a positive connotation. Thus, Vietnamese music that praises the state, party, and its revolutionary figures like Hồ Chí Minh are encouraged. Historically, the only narrow repertoire of Vietnamese songs that satisfies Đào's specific definition of optimism and standards for good culture is the repertoire of Vietnamese revolutionary songs (a.k.a. red music). In the background of his discussion are two major issues that confront Vietnamese revolutionary music post-1975. First is the crisis of being forgotten: subsequently, the end of the Vietnam War also marks the end of revolution. Thus, Vietnam is faced with the challenge of putting forth a model of Vietnamese music that would further extend the significance of red music and the sentiments of revolution post-1975. Second is issue of yellow music being banned in Vietnam: even though yellow music was still practiced in Vietnam behind closed-doors and discreet public spaces, the mass censoring of popular music left a cultural void that needed to be addressed. Thus, there had to be a new form of mass culture that could replace yellow music.

According to Đào, yellow music has inherent flaws due to its colonial characteristics. Vietnamese popular music is supposedly derived from French cultural influences in the 1930s. At that time, popular music was referred to as modern music

(*cải cách*).⁴ Eventually, it became known as yellow music (a term borrowed from the Chinese Communist Party) (Arana, 1999, 32-3).⁵ Due to its contact with colonial music and literature, Đào argues that yellow music did not develop from Vietnamese culture as it is an imitation of western culture. Therefore, yellow music lacks the “Vietnamese musical soul” that expresses a combination of “patriotism and progress” (97). Since patriotism and progress are musical reflections and expressions of the Vietnamese soul, the sadness of yellow music is a characteristic of the colonial technology. As Đào explains, the sentiments of pre-1975 popular music are products of colonial innovation that were designed to subjugate the Vietnamese people; the sweet nostalgic elements in popular music benefited the colonizers in that it was measure of preventing the Vietnamese from having their revolution (107-8). In short, Đào sees yellow music as a fake musical genre and a false culture that has imprisoned the minds of the people. Thus, there is a need for the Vietnamese Communist Party and state propaganda. They are a necessary force of intervention that rescues the Vietnamese people from their own culture, especially those in the south. The state project of revising popular culture through music is one of many revisionist projects carried out in Vietnam after 1975.

⁴ “A kind of popular music called modernized music (*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).

⁵ Yellow music in China has the connotation of pornography.

These acts of cultural and historical erasures are marketed to the public in Vietnam and abroad under the aegis of nationalism and self-righteousness.

However, Đào saw some aspects of yellow music that still retains use for Vietnam post-1975. Although he points to the rise of revolutionary music in 1930s as the authentic site of Vietnamese culture and identity (102), Đào also argues that there are certain aspects of yellow music that should be conserved. Acknowledging that popular music is *popular*, he argues that nationalistic music should express audio aesthetics that is similar to yellow music. Đào recognizes that western musical instruments had a wider range of notes than the instruments used to play traditional music in Vietnam. Thus, in order to convey the Vietnamese musical soul more effectively, traditional musical instruments needed to be modernized by integrating certain characteristics of western instruments (Đào, 133). The bamboo transverse flute (*sáo trúc*) was refashioned from five, six, or seven holes to having ten, and the sixteen string zither (*đàn tranh*) enlarged to twenty-four strings (Arana, 1999, 57).⁶ Thus, the western instruments used in Vietnamese yellow music are combined with the traditional and revolutionary tunes to fashion a new genre of popular/nationalist music called neo-traditional Vietnamese music (*nhạc dân tộc hiện đại*). In addition to these musical revisions, song lyrics were also susceptible to change. During and after the revolution, Barley Norton notes similar revisions to ritual music and practices (2009, 80-3). These reforms were designed to

⁶ Hung Tuan Le notes that the twenty-four string zither grew popular in Vietnam after 1975 because it was able to convey a sense of happiness and optimism in the adaptations of folk and political songs (81).

revise Vietnamese culture by attempting to replace yellow music with government sponsored national music.

Although yellow music is referred to as the music of South Vietnam (Taylor, 2000, 104) or the Vietnamese diaspora (Olsen, 2008, 266), when asked to define yellow music (*nhạc vàng*), some southerners from the older generation admitted that they were unsure of its meaning. Those who have lived in the *miền tây* region of southern Vietnam before, during, and after the Vietnam War are very familiar with songwriters like Lê Minh Bằng,⁷ Trúc Phương, Phạm Duy, Trịnh Công Sơn, and singers like Duy Khánh, Hoàng Oanh, Hương Lan, many of whom they identified as composers and singers of pre-1975 popular music. However, they called this genre new music (*tân nhạc*) and not yellow music. The older generation explained that new music is a very broad category that consists of many musical styles, including Vietnamese rock music (*nhạc kích động*, aka action-music).⁸ When asked to differentiate between yellow music and new music, the responses were usually that yellow music is a sub-genre of new music. Similar to how Vietnamese rock music is a genre within the new music genre, yellow music is like that but it emphasized more on the sentimental love songs. A few of the responses even suggested that *nhạc vàng* signifies music from the “golden era” of music, which is supposed to be from the 1950s to 1975 in South Vietnam, and not yellow. While these

⁷ One of the known pseudonyms used by a group of composers: Anh Bằng, Minh Kỳ, and Lê Dinh.

⁸ For more historical information on Vietnamese rock music, refer to Jason Gibbs’ “How Does Hanoi Rock? The Way to Rock and Roll in Vietnam.”

opinions about the relationship between yellow music and new music varied, the majority seem to agree that yellow music songs are also new music songs.

Yellow music and new music are very similar since they both refer to the same repertoire of songs. For the most part, their difference is a matter of diction. To get a better grasp of the cultural and political significance of yellow music outside the paradigm that is concerned with its inauthentic Vietnamese-ness, this essay will survey the discussions of new music as well. In western academia, the term new music is used by scholars to refer to popular music in South Vietnam and the diaspora. It offers a way of referring to popular music without importing the negative connotations of yellow music. Even though the term new music also implies western-like music, it does not imply a strong sense of cultural scolding. For example: in Adelaida Reyes' ethnography on the musical practices in the daily life of the Vietnamese refugee, she suggests that the genre new music is a form of "Westernized popular music" (1999, 63). In a review of her book, Jason Gibbs elaborates on Reyes' use of the term new music, noting that it is a term used by "Westerners" in Vietnam to refer to Vietnamese music that was not traditional music ("*nhạc cổ*")⁹ (121). Aside from French cultural influences, pre-1975 Vietnamese popular music is also influenced by American culture. Since the early 1960s, songwriters in South Vietnam have been incorporating American dance rhythms into Vietnamese music like "mashed potato, watusi, a-go-go, and especially the twist, all then

⁹ Gibbs' book review does not include diacritics.

current dance rhythms of rock 'n' roll” (Gibbs, 2008, 6).¹⁰ The cultural flexibility of new music leads Reyes to be curious of its Vietnamese qualities, especially when it sounded “western.” In her example, Reyes notes that many refugees prefer to fashion their own collective identity by using popular music that have “[strong] Western harmonic and Latin rhythmic features” (67-8). Although Vietnamese popular music may sound western, she notes that to the “trained ear,” it is recognized as being Vietnamese. In her discussion, the western characteristics, displayed by the performances of new music in the refugee camps, were understood to be a crucial part of Vietnamese identity and culture.

The identity politics of the Vietnamese in diaspora, observed by Reyes, is a contrast to the national identity being constructed in Vietnam post-1975. Reyes describes the atmosphere of these refugee camps as having a communal sense of anti-communism. This is noted by her in the apparent absence of nationalist and revolutionary music in the camps, and also in attitudes of many southerners who were suspicious of northerners as being communist sympathizers. To dispel such misconception, refugees who spoke with a northern dialect often participated in the events and practices of popular music to show that they were not communist or sympathizers of the party (Reyes, 1999, 65-7). Thus, in the camps, Vietnamese popular music is a form of cultural capital

¹⁰ In addition to Gibbs’ observation, a young Terry E. Miller, who was stationed in South Vietnam during the 1970s, noted in his diary that South Vietnam was overflowing with Vietnamese popular music that resembled American jazz, blues, and rock ‘n’ roll. Sài Gòn was supposedly being overrun by Western influences. Miller concludes that less urban locations like Hue is where authentic Vietnamese culture still exists as opposed to Sài Gòn (23).

that allows the Vietnamese refugees from various regional backgrounds to collectively imagine a common heritage based on their personal sense of common struggle and rejection of socialism in Vietnam. Unlike Đào, who presents pre-1975 popular Vietnamese music as a musical form that betrays its culture by imitating “western music,” Reyes’ research presents a different perspective where Vietnamese music re-appropriated western musical features and readapted the culture. The difference between these perspectives is that the former precludes certain groups of people from being Vietnamese, denoting them as traitors, whereas the latter renders them as Vietnamese subjects who are adapting to social, political, and economic change. In terms of authenticity, the term new music contrasts yellow music in a binary model of good and bad culture. With both these terms, Vietnamese popular music is rendered as a form of culture that exists outside the realm of the post-1975 nationalist discourse. In Đào’s essay, popular Vietnamese music is rejected by the state: it is not Vietnamese culture, because it is not nationalistic in the manner is deemed appropriate by the state. However, with Reyes’ presentation, popular music is authentic Vietnamese culture because it seen by the diaspora as being free from post-1975 state of Vietnam ability to censor. Under the social political conditions of these times, the dichotomy of the state and popular culture makes sense. However, this essay will show that in the contemporary circumstances of Vietnam’s economy and social political situation, this dichotomy is no longer an effective model for approaching Vietnamese popular music.

Even though the term new music (*nhạc tân*) and yellow music (*nhạc vàng*) refer to the same repertoire of songs, they have different histories and exist in separate systems of knowledge. The conscious use of either term by scholars highlights their differences. However, the people whom I have surveyed from the Little Saigon community did not use these with same tentative regard. Unexpectedly, their usage of the term yellow music did not index the privileged perspectives of Vietnam's history and culture that is told by the Vietnamese Communist Party. In the following section, this essay will use a news article from BBC Hanoi and album cover from compact disc purchased in Little Saigon to refer reflect the semantic shift in term yellow music. Nowadays, at the local level in the diaspora, the term yellow music references an attitude of popular music that is more similar to that found in the discourse of new music. In certain instances, the term new music is even used to contest the authority of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Ironically, this semantic shift of the term is partly due to the cultural revisionist projects that occurred in Vietnam post-1975.

The normalization of the term yellow music is partly due to the stereotype of the northern Vietnamese dialect as being the "correct" standard of the Vietnamese language. The hiring of northern instructors and other cultural revisionist causes post-1975 have been reproducing the hegemony of the northern dialect, linguistically and ideologically throughout southern Vietnam and abroad (Lam, 2006, 9). Outside of the classroom, the privileging of the northern dialect is evident in the media. Phillip Taylors's examination of yellow music criticisms that were circulating in southern Vietnam during the late

1970s and early 1980s confirms the claims of the northern dialect were being disseminated within the public sphere. In many of the articles that Taylor surveys, the writers caution their readers about the sad affects of the romantic Vietnamese love songs, which are described as a type of self-pitying melancholy that causes people to internalize the unproductive values of idleness, leisure, and over consumption. In one of the examples, Taylor points to a political cartoon from a 1976 article in the *Văn Hoá Nghệ Thuật* (*Culture [and] Art*). The cartoon illustrates a Vietnamese father returning home and finding his children in tears; they are unable study their lessons due to the musical affect of yellow music songs:

--My [heavens]¹¹ what's wrong, are you kids sick or what?
[—*Troi! ... Các con ốm cả hay sao thế?*]

--Our 'lives have been crumbling' since listening to this yellow
[--*Chung con "đời tàn" từ lúc nghe băng*]

Music tape of yours, Dad.
[*nhạc vàng của bố đấy!*] (2000, 44)

The critique is obvious. Yellow music is a profane practice that makes children cry; it destroys the youths' innocence, vigor, and leaves society in ruin. The children are too occupied by their tears that they cannot study.

The negative attitude towards popular music expressed through the public sphere of mass-media points to the Vietnamese Communist Party's campaign to regulate the discourse of popular music in Vietnam. While Taylor's analysis of the cartoon's political

¹¹ Tylor uses the word "god."

dimension focuses mainly on the topic of ideology, the politics of language in this case is also worth noting. This cartoon is supposed to reflect the southern Vietnamese demographic where it was in mass circulation, but instead of using the dialect of the southern Vietnamese vernacular, the cartoon uses the diction found in the northern dialect. For example, the informal phrase “or what” (“*sao thế*”) and word “father” (“*bố*”) on the first and second line, in the southern vernacular these words and phrases would most likely be *sao vậy* or *ba/cha/tía* (depending on the province). Although the region of southern Vietnam has a history of migration due to political and economic conditions, the cartoon’s preference of diction to represent the daily life of the citizens in southern Vietnam is biased and has political consequences. It imagines the norm of southern life through a perspective that is unsympathetic to the south. While the cartoon draws on the ideologies shared by the Vietnamese Communist Party to critique southern musical traditions, it also privileges the northern dialect to undermine the authority of the southern dialect. The cultural erasure occurs on both the levels of ideology and linguistic performance. The decisive presentation of the term yellow music and not new music (lines 2-3) is as deliberate and political as the ideology and language deployed by the cartoon: not only is the southerners’ taste in music bad for their morality, but their knowledge and use of the Vietnamese language is incorrect. In the end, Taylor concludes that the residents of the south were nonresponsive to the state ideologies in news press, and eventually faded out from the public-sphere (55). Taylor’s conclusion refers to the state’s attempt to persuade the people of the south to reject yellow music as authentic

Vietnamese music. While these revisionist projects may have failed in the attempts to abolish the practice of yellow music, the popularization of the northern dialect has been more successful.

For over three decades since the end of the war, the term yellow music has continued to be used in mass-media to refer to pre-1975 Vietnamese popular music. However, it has very different connotations now than before, whether it is used by BBC news in Hanoi or on a cover of a music album in Little Saigon. For example, the article “Risking life for pop music in war time Vietnam” by BBC News Hanoi (June 16, 2010) offers a narrative of Nguyen Van Loc’s life during the 1960s and 1970s in North Vietnam. Nguyen is a musician who was imprisoned for playing yellow music. When reflecting back on that era, Nguyen still feels that he is owed an apology by the socialist government of Vietnam: “I only want to hear [the government] say sorry” (Pham, 2010). In this article, the word yellow music is associated with the theme of wrongful censorship and used to construct a narrative about North Vietnam overreacting to popular music. Ironically, the term that was once derived from the Vietnamese Communist Party to criticize popular music is now used to contest the party in defense of popular culture. In the past, yellow music was associated with social and moral decay, which justified the need for a socialist government to intervene and deliver top-down policies, restoring society to its path of progress. But in the post-renovation context, where yellow music has continued to be popular in Vietnam, Nguyen’s reflection uses the term to gesture

towards less government regulation. As Nguyen puts it: “we were not doing politics[;] we were only two guitarists and a singer” (Pham). The use of the term yellow music in this context reflects the attitudes similar to that of new music found Reyes’ ethnography. Thus, the term yellow music is not limited to the echoes of the past. However, one could argue that this is a misuse of the term, since it lacks the pejorative connotations typically found in its historical usage. But if this is the case, then a lot of people are misusing the term. Linguistically speaking, language is susceptible to change as people and their circumstances change.



Figure 1.

In the transnational and diasporic contexts, many yellow music songs provide historical narratives about South Vietnam that are overlooked by other historical

narratives like the ones told in Vietnam¹² and Hollywood.¹³ The picture in figure 1 is a cover of a music album which was purchased in Little Saigon, CA. The front cover is decorated with pictures collected from the covers of earlier vinyl album.¹⁴ The singers' faces (Hoàng Oanh, Duy Khánh, Thanh Tuyền, and Giáng Thu) are meshed together and rendered using flat colors, which gives it an old Technicolor feel. Moreover, the songs are digital re-recordings of the vinyl records that still sound distorted and warm. The combination of visual and audible characteristics of the compact disc signifies a connection to the past by resembling something old, even though it is a product marketed for the contemporary consumer. The aesthetics of old age adds an authentic feel to the object's form and its content. In addition, the text reads, "Yellow music from before 1975." The usage of the term "yellow music" as opposed to new music, in this context is not meant to devalue these songs, but instead, it draws on the authority of the northern Vietnamese dialect to validate itself. In doing so, the term yellow music acts as the official seal that legitimates the product and its contents. The collectivization of different singers and separate songs from various vinyl records is synthesized together in a larger pattern, expressing a shared narrative about the cultural practices in South Vietnam. Through yellow music, its melody and lyrics, the act of remembering and imagining histories becomes an act of writing and adapting them to the contemporary context. Here, the irony is that the term yellow music was once created to lead people away from

¹² Refer to Christina Schwenkel's *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam* (2009).

¹³ Refer to Katherine Kinney's *Friendly Fire* (2000).

¹⁴ You can purchase these recording in HCMC where war reminiscences are sold. They are often overpriced and non-functional.

popular culture and turn to official institutions of knowledge in Vietnam. Now, however, it is used to decentralize the authority of that knowledge in order to empower the narratives of these songs and also the personal narratives told by many of the Vietnamese in diaspora.

Ultimately, the term yellow music refers to the imagined tradition of popular music in South Vietnam rather than an adjective that describes the content of the individual songs. It does not inform us that the song may be about personal relationships or about a soldier who wishes he was holding his family at home during *Tết* season¹⁵ instead of a rifle. It does not inform us if that song is going to be played in a style similar to modern jazz, a-go-go, or rock music. But it does tell us that these songs are “sad” in a manner that is mixed with cultural baggage from Vietnamese Communist Party and the Vietnamese in diaspora. Ideally, a yellow music song is a popular song composed in the pre-1975 era of South Vietnam (usually from around the 1950s to 1975). However, in practice, songs that are composed post-1975 are also referred to as yellow music songs, because of the shared resemblances that they may have. For example, Lam Phương’s song “Afternoon Tây Đô” (“Chiều Tây Đô”)¹⁶ is considered by many to be a yellow music song, even though it is composed post-1975. In the song, the lyrics explicitly cite to the fall of Sài Gòn¹⁷ and the mass exodus of Vietnamese refugees.¹⁸ Thus, the problem

¹⁵ The Vietnamese Lunar holiday that celebrates the New Year. It lasts for over a week.

¹⁶ Tây Đô is a southern province in Vietnam that also known as Cần Thơ.

¹⁷ Line 11: *mất quê hương*.

¹⁸ Line 19: *Tàu đưa ta đi tàu sẽ đón ta hồi hương*

is then how much does a song need to resemble pre-1975 music in order to pass as yellow music.

The ideological construction of yellow music as a genre or category invites the misconception that there is a complete list of all the songs composed from roughly around the 1950s to 1975 in Vietnam, and that Vietnamese people have been exposed to all these songs and have internalized this canon through cultural routines. A more practical approach to understanding yellow music is that it is a form of the cultural knowledge that exists through performance. Its practices exercise the notion of yellow music as it reappears, recirculates, and re-solidifies as shared cultural knowledge. Therefore, we should not conceptualize yellow music as a tradition that is overly whole but rather more fragmented. We only have access to this sense of tradition through the performances of pre-1975 popular Vietnamese songs that have continued to be circulated, which is limited to the few songs in the repertoire that are still profitable. The yellow music songs, which are reproduced and re-circulated, exist as a source of inspiration and resource for contemporary music composers. Even contemporary Vietnamese popular songs that are not recognized as yellow music often express characteristics of songs that are composed pre-1975; they struggle with similar themes of love, use common terminology, style of narration, melody, instrumentation, and some contemporary pop songs even quote the lyrics and melodic references from pre-1975 songs. Therefore, yellow music is not a complete set of musical traditions that stop existing post-1975. Thus, the tradition continues to exist in fragments and has meanings that vary in different

temporal and geographical sites. Yellow music is contemporary music. However, contemporary music is not necessarily yellow music.

Theory and methods.

There are many instances where the term yellow music is used and do not evoke any negative connotations. However, the social political origin of the term yellow music does present the risk of being offensive, to say the least. There is a variety of other terms that are potentially less problematic: new music, gold music, or just popular music. For instance, the term new music would allow this essay the option of discussing contemporary Vietnamese music in Vietnam and avoid the cultural politics of yellow music. However, this is essay does not want avoid the politics of yellow music. In one aspect, the essay's choice of terminology locates itself in a position of burden, where it must react and defend charges against popular culture that are pre-loaded in the term itself. In another aspect, the advantage is that it allows this essay to map a continuous trajectory of popular music in a path that engages with the multiply discussions of popular music and post-colonialism in Vietnam and the diaspora. Another advantage is that the term embodies ambivalently the caution of popular culture while celebrating it. While yellow music is embraced throughout Vietnam and the diaspora for good reasons, but there are also good reasons why it should not be. Even as this essay challenges the charges that the sadness in yellow music is dangerous, it cannot dismiss them entirely. While this essay seeks out sites of agency in the structure and discourse of yellow music, it does not make claims on how people consume these songs in contemporary Vietnam.

Nor does it even suggest these cultural practices are necessarily good for people in Vietnam. What it does do is re-present the ambivalent question of what is yellow music doing in the country today. Đào and the refugees in Reyes's ethnography answer this question within paradigm where popular music is separate from the nationalist discourse in Vietnam post-1975. This essay argues that in the late/post-renovation era, the discourses of the two overlap and co-exist mutually. In doing so, the question is re-presented again in a much different context, where the state and popular music operate in ways that regulate the population in a bio-power fashion. In Vietnam, many yellow music and contemporary songs champion the lower-working class. In a country where the economy is configured within the global economy, these songs romantically valorize the labor of the unskilled worker and consequently, they also promote the types of labor that sweatshop demand. If this is a problem, it cannot and should not be resolved from outside the country. Thus, this essay will conclude without resolution, because I cannot speak for the Vietnamese people in Vietnam. The term "yellow music" embodies this messiness of being good or bad culture better than "new music," and "gold music."

Before sadness can be analyzed in yellow music songs, it needs to be located. Aside from academic literature, many of the people whom I have surveyed in Little Saigon, CA have also reported that there is a sense of sadness in the song itself. For Đào, this sadness is located at the site of the melody and lyrics, where it lacks the ability to articulated the sense of patriotism and progress. While many of the interviews seem to

agree with notion that sadness is somewhere in the melody and lyrics, some would also emphasize that sadness is located in the sound quality (timbre) of the instruments, mainly in the vocalist's voice.

A typical example of a Vietnamese romantic love song is “The Soul of a Statue” (“Linh Hồn Tượng Đá”), composed by Mai Bích Dung in the early 1970s.¹⁹ There are many remixed versions of the song by various artists, which includes the late Duy Khánh of whom the older generation recognize as being of the pre-1975 era. One of the earliest recordings of the song that can be found online is that of Chế Linh. It is a “warm” distorted recording possibly using analog technology. There is a beating drum in the background, providing a slow and constant pulse that is overlaid by the melodies of an electric guitar. The meter is a compound quadruple (12/8), common in 20th century American blues. The vocalist sings in a narrow range, similar to an American crooner. In a rather sharp contrast to Chế Linh's version, Dan Nguyễn's 2009 remake is faster and more of a shuffle. The wider and higher audio range with the loss of analog warmth points to a digital recording. The instrumentation of Nguyễn's recording is a blending of modern American Blues and R&B: electric bass guitar, synth horn (possibly Roland), electric guitar weaving a call-and-respond dialogue with the singer and other instruments, blues piano, and various inserts of a seven note motive.

¹⁹ Mai Bích Dung is also known as Lê Minh Bằng; both of these aliases were supposedly used by a group of popular song composers in South Vietnam from the 1960s and 1970s: Anh Bằng, Minh Kỳ, and Lê Dinh.

When asked to compare the two versions, one informant in Little Saigon felt that the Chế Linh recording was sadder and more intimate, whereas the latter was more upbeat and light-hearted. Although he felt that there was still a sense of sadness in the version performed by Dan Nguyễn, the informant described the remake as being more similar to youth music (*nhạc trẻ*), suggesting that the trend of contemporary Vietnamese pop songs are supposedly less sad. However, another informant (73 years old, ex-military) did not believe that Dan Nguyễn's version sounded less sad than Chế Linh's version. He elaborated that although the music sounded more upbeat, Dan Nguyễn's voice was more emotional (*mùi*),²⁰ which he felt was partly due to the better sound quality of the recording. In addition, the informant felt that Nguyễn's singing style is better suited for the song, because Chế Linh's singing gave the song more of a conversational feeling. "Listen to it closely. You can hear the angst in the voice," the informant explained. The sonic vibrations from the analog speakers exhibited characteristics that could be recognized as something similar to the Vietnamese experience of sadness. Perhaps, it is no surprise that both responses varied on where and what this sadness is. While these two informants expressed different notions of sadness (since they did not agree on which version of song was the saddest), they both believed that somewhere in the song there was something sad. Although their individual interpretations and experiences of the two songs were different and unique, in their relationship to the songs, there is something recognizably sad in the songs. This sadness

²⁰ The southern Vietnamese term for *mùi*, as in *mùi long*.

is not meant to be understood fully and clearly. From those whom I have surveyed, it is something universal enough to where some people can sense when they listen to the songs. Rather than conflating the emotion experienced by the interpreter with the signs of emotions in the song, the two should remain separate. The relationship between the emotion and “object of emotion” is explained by Sara Ahmed: affect is the effect within the relationship between the subject and object. The object of emotion is that which the subject comes in contact with and is impressed by. Thus, affect does not reside in the subject, object, or signs but is an effect of the circulation between them (2004, 8, 45). While the individual’s interpretation of sadness from a yellow music song may be unique, it does not necessarily mean that the conditions of that sadness (“object of emotion”) in the song cannot be reproduced and circulated. As a theoretical model, the object of emotion allows this essay to locate and examine the characteristics of sadness in the yellow music song without undermining the interpreter’s agency. To be clear, when this essay refers to the sadness in or expressed by the song, it is referring to only the object of sadness. This essay does not seek explain the relative nature of consumption: how that object is interpreted or used by the consumer. In different contexts, these songs have different meanings. For instance: in 2009, I observed yellow music love songs being played unexpectedly at a funeral (*dám ma*). Not to get into too much detail, but the sad romantic love songs were used to entertain the crowd of attendees, as a way of preventing people from leaving. In this case, the object of sadness in the songs as used to entertain

the crowd or even to cheer them up, which enabled the funeral to proceed with its lengthy rituals.

If sadness is located in the song, then the following question is, how is it embedded in the song. The next section of the essay will be dedicated to the examining the arrangement of lyrics and other audio parts of the song; how song constructs the object of sadness. Using Wolfgang Iser's notion of gaps, this essay suggests that sadness is located/constructed through sites of interplay between the lyrics, instruments, and even affect (object of emotions used to construct other objects of emotions). When we get to it in the next section, the essay will modify and elaborate on Iser's theory to better accommodate these demands. Here, it is best to provide an overview of Iser's theory in order to establish a basic site of departure. In the realm of German aesthetics and reception theory, Wolfgang Iser's theory of "implicit reader" seeks to understand how people interpret the text. For Iser, the story is not something that the individual just dreams up from sheer will power, nor is it something in the text that is automatic before it is read. The story ("object of aesthetics") arises from the relationship of negotiation between the interpreter and the text.

Iser argues that when one reads a book, the narrative emerges from the relationship between the reader (aesthetic pole) and the text (artistic pole). While the text itself is important, it still requires the reader to set it into "motion" (1674). The text is only an extension of the author's intentions, which guides the reader by providing

narrative fragments for the reader to reconstruct (1675). The gaps that are left by the text allows for the reader to exercise agency (1976-7). As Iser puts it, “Although exercised by the text, it is not the text” (1676). The physical arrangements of the text are only signs that can come to life and flourish as meaningful narratives (i.e. aesthetic object) when “the images hang together in sequence” in the reader’s imagination (1682). For Iser, the text is like a telescopic lens that the reader must peer through to see the image. It sets the boundaries and metaphorical gaps for the reader to exist. Although readers have some degree of agency in producing multiple interpretations, they are not free to do whatever they want during the exercise. They must exist and work within a pre-configured space and fragments of the text. Thus, the reader is both guided by the author’s intentions and is also reconstructing it. While his essay “Interaction between Text and Reader” focuses on the act of reading the text, it is applicable to the medium of music when one redefines the text to include forms of language that expresses meaning through a non-visual-linguistic medium.

For Iser, the gaps are formed in the relationship between the text and the reader. For this essay, the gaps are not only shaped by the text, but also by the arrangement of musical notes, lyrics, tempo, volume, and instrumentation that offer the framework for interpretation. During the simultaneous actions of the instruments, the listener hears something that is recognizably musical and not a bombardment of noise. The space of the implicit melody, or the aesthetic realm of the implicit reader for Iser, is where the

musical signs interact with the listener to communicate meaning by “not a given code but a process of mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment” (1676). Since this essay will be examining a music video, the gaps that Iser speaks of should be understood as sites of interplay formed through the various mediums of text, sound, and visual aesthetics.

By drawing on the notions of gaps and the object of emotion, this essay will explore one particular Vietnamese pre-1975 popular love song, “Người Mang Tâm Sự” (“The Carrier of Sadness”) composed by Như Phý. This one song does not represent the entire corpus of yellow music songs, where themes can include romantic love, familial love, love for the countryside, the nation, heterosexual love, queer/abnormal love, love during a context of war, and etc. However, this one song was chosen because it has a set of characteristics (narrative structure, plot development, and notion of sadness in relation to romantic love, social inequality, and Buddhism) that is typical of many pre-1975 love songs. It is a lens used to understand sadness in yellow music.

Locating sadness in yellow music.

“Người Mang Tâm Sự” (“The Carrier of Sadness”) composed by Như Phý, like many other pre-1975 popular love songs, continue to exist in southern Vietnam. The narrative of yellow music love songs are usually told in the first person. Even though it begins from a very personal and individualized perspective of the subject, it ends with the subject in a post-reflexive state where a few lines of worldly advice is offered to the

listener. There are usually three stages that occur in yellow music love songs. In the first stage, the subject introduces the conflict and invites the audience to sympathize and empathize with his/her situation. The narrative is very intimate, rendering the subject in a local setting. In contrast, the second stage seeks to dismantle and challenge the boundaries of that intimacy and locality. The subject's overwhelming sense of sadness distorts his/her perceptions of time, space, and even the self. The state of seeming disorder enables the subject to then reflect on his/her own situation in ways that are supposedly more profound and worldly. Finally in the third stage, the subject realizes that his/her personal conflict is connected a larger system of forces. The subject becomes more aware world and becomes in common with it. In the end, personal sadness is transcended to be worldly, and the subject's actions are backed by authority of wisdom (which has religious connotations). Usually, these stages occur in sequential order, but they also overlap in varying degrees. Although the stages can be imagines as processes because their conditions and behaviors are evident throughout the song, there are moments in the song where certain processes are more active than others.

In the 2008 remake of "The Carrier of Sadness" ("Người Mang Tâm Sự"), sung by Vũ Duy, the subject immediately tells the listener that someone has seduced him into a state of being in love (1). The singer's voice is both the loudest and clearest instrument in the song. Dynamically, the zither, monochord, and percussion parts are more subdued. They surround the vocal line, creating an intimate space for the subject and the listener.

In some instances, these surrounding lines pause completely, allowing the vocalist to segue into the music with full emphasis. For example, at the beginning of the first verse “Người ta dỗ ngọt tôi vào tình yêu” (“That person has seduced me into love”) and the beginning of the last verse “Người ta đã bỏ tôi rồi bạn ơi” (“That person has left me, my friend”), the zither, monochord and percussion stop completely for two beats. The momentary absence of the other instrumental parts creates the opportunity for the listener to have direct contact with the vocalist. Although the narrative is still structured within the melody, there is a sense that the listener is getting a glimpse at the bareness of the subject’s story and soul. It is a subtle reminder that the song is also a story about the subject’s life. The combination of pauses and the subdued instrumentals create the personal space, granting the listener a very local perspective of the subject’s situation. The sense of intimacy reifies the subject’s experience of sadness, validating his subjective feelings as something that is “real.” Throughout the song, the zither and monochord alternate sharing the melody with the vocalist. Invariably, the monochord and zither extend and elaborate the melody. Each time this happens, when the vocalist sings and the zither completes the phrase or the monochord elaborates on the melody long after the singer has stopped singing, it reinforces and validates the subject’s affect. The interplay between the instruments and vocalist blends a sense of melancholy into the narrative, giving it the concreteness of a local and personal perspective.

However, in the love song, the personal and local perspective has disadvantages, because they supposedly limit the subject’s scope and ability to reflect in ways that are

less worldly. Ironically, the sadness that colors the narrative with a sense of intimacy and validity will eventually contest them as well. While the origin of the sadness is located in the subject's interiority, it moves and circulates in and throughout the song. It destabilizes borders without subverting and undermining the subject's personal experience. Although destabilization occurs throughout most of the song, it is most active in sites where the narrative emphasizes on the sense loss. In the second stage, structures are torn apart in order to be reconfigured in a perspective that is worldlier.

The song uses at least three techniques to effect disorder: diction, sentence structure, and music. The combination of these techniques conveys sadness as a disrupting force on time, space, and subject's individuality. Before examining the specific dictions used in the song, the reader needs to be familiar with the characteristics of compound words commonly found in Vietnamese in literature. The compounding process of diction joins words together in at least two ways: first, words with different meanings are synthesized together to fashion new meaning, and second, one meaningful word is joined with a meaningless word in order to affect new meaning. Oftentimes, these words are intentionally ambiguous in order to abstract meaning and inscribe emotional qualities in the text. For instance, the word *xinh xinh* is an adjective that is used to describe both aspects of physical features of a person and their personality. Its base form is the word *xinh*, which refers to the physical description of being pretty. Although the word *xinh xinh* has positive connotation, it does not mean pretty. If someone were to be described as such, it would suggest that the person has both physical

and personal features that share an analogous relation to being pretty. In English, a very rough translation would be to describe the person as being kind hearted and cute. The act of combining words, to go from *xinh* to *xinh xinh*, abstracts the meaning of its base form to suggest a quality that feels like prettiness. The process of compounding word in this manner is a common linguistic practice in both the modern vernacular and Vietnamese poetic language. This linguistic process is derived from the system of Sino-Vietnamese (*chữ nôm*), which is a script that dominated the discourse of Vietnamese language in the public sphere until the early 20th century (McHale, 2004, 16). The effect of a compound word does not rely solely on the semantic features of the words, but it also takes into account their phonetic attributes. Phonetics is a crucial component that enables compound words to signify meaning aesthetically. Again with the example of *xinh xinh*: the second word, *xinh*, does not contribute semantic value that is non-auditory to the compounding process. Visually, it represents the audio duplication of the base word. And through its phonetic repetition, it offers an aesthetic impression of meaning. Semantically, it signifies a value that is inconclusive: it does not mean pretty (*xinh*) but an approximation to something that is nearing the feeling of pretty. In Vietnamese music as well as other cultural venues, the compound word embodies the ambivalence of trying to signify meaning that is beyond the scope of its representation. It can only convey an ambiguity that impresses an analogous relationship to meaning. In yellow music songs, the phonetic feature of diction is further complicated by the melodic line that it engages.

Its ambiguousness puts the listenership in a dialogue between the lyrics, music, and aesthetics

In the song “The Carrier of Sadness” (“Người Mang Tâm Sự”), the subject’s lamenting is described as *nức nở*, which roughly means to sob one’s heart out. The manner in which this sobbing takes place has the qualities of something that is pervasive, blooming, and struggling. Its meaning is the synthesis of a triadic relationship between both the words “*nức*” and “*nở*,” and it’s the phonetic effect of the joining them. By itself, the word *nức* means to pervade, and the word *nở* refers to an action that opens or separates similar to the action of blossoming. Aside from these words that describe movement, motion is also expressed phonetically: the tone patterns are rising, falling, and rising again. While the variation between high and low tones impresses a sense of struggle through its unevenness, the word still maintains a softness to the ears, which adds the sense exhaustion to the sense of sadness. Furthermore, the word is located in the verse that reads: [the subject] laments day and night (*nức nở đêm ngày*). Although the description is bereft, it is enough to resonate a foggy impression of someone exhausting himself in the overflow of his tears. Affect stirs inside the subject as well as the external soundscape. Here, the ambivalence of word *nức nở* implies an exchange or merging between the subject and his environment. The act of lamenting is not simply the action where the subject maps his internal affect onto the external landscape, but there is a sense them joining together in a dialogue of sadness. On the one hand, the elements of day and night gauge the length of the subject’s lament and, therefore, the

magnitude of his sadness. On the other hand, they also have spatial characters: day and night spaces. As the subject suffers, the day and night suffer alongside him, which is an ironic paradox: the verse conveys the sense of a companionship without the actual presence of that company. The line offers the impression of a shadow, which reveals the subject's desperation for social interaction. Thus, through an indirect manner, compound words like *nức nở* fashions a foggy layer of ambiguity and ambivalence to further abstract the boundaries of the the subject, environment, and sadness. In a sense, diction performs a stigmatism-like effect by privileging the imprecision of language and the fluidity of meaning. The blurry silhouette of verses emphasizes access on a mode of feeling. In this case, diction does not solidify the authority of the text but destabilizes it.

Apart from diction, the sense disorder in the song is further contributed by the seemingly incoherent sentence structures. Spatial-temporal relationships are fractured and dis-configured by the text, suggesting the unstable nature of the subject's emotion. Nearing the middle of the song, the vocalist begins to list questions:

Who brings the flute into the river,

allowing it to free the heart?

It flies with nowhere to return to.

Who divides grace to the north, love to the south?

People at the head of the winds, others by the feet of clouds. (11-15)²¹

²¹ Ai đem con sáo sang sông
Để cho nó sổ lồng nó bay
Nó bay nó chẳng về đâu

From this passage, it is unclear who the vocalist is addressing and whether it is uttered in a type dialogue or monologue. In the beginning, there is a sense that the vocalist is addressing the listener when he calls out “my friend” (*bạn ơi*). Here, the subject’s stream of consciousness has changed, and the questions are presented so openly that he could very well be talking to himself. Perhaps these questions are unspoken thoughts, and we as the listeners are intruding into the subject private interiority. The shift of the narrative perspective has blurred the relationship between the listener and the subject. Moreover, the lack of pronouns in the song is also confusing. Typically in yellow love songs, pronouns like *anh*, and *em* are used to establish social relationships between the actors in the story.²² Due to cultural norms, when the male subject refers to someone as *em* (or the female subject referring to an *anh*), then that usually implies a romantic element to the relationship. However, in this song, such pronouns are replaced by words like “who” (*ai*) or “that person” (*người ta*), which causes the ordering of social relationships to not be as transparent. The lyrics of the song are creatively withholding information. Lastly, the element of time in this passage is suspect. Although it is narrated in the present tense, the situation of the subject’s lament suggests that there elements of the past. Because Vietnamese is an isolating language that does not rely on inflecting morphemes to signal

Ai chia duyên bắc tình nam
Người nơi đầu gió kẻ ngoài chân mây.

²² In this context and of other yellow music love songs, these pronouns refer the intimacy in the social bonds. Although they do imply a sense hierarchy, it should not be model through western notions of hegemony or the master/slave dialectic. Even the emphasis of Confucius ordering here would inappropriately deemphasize relativeness of power in this social dynamic. It is social-political in terms of unity and similarities, not difference.

past, present, or future tense, the temporal context is constructed through words that references time. Without them, time is assumed the present. Thus, the text withholds information that is necessary to order and structure temporal and social relationships in the song. At the very least, the text is unreliable if not misleading.

Gaps in the text are not necessarily unproductive, as Iser points out. Rather, gaps are sites of interplay where the reader's agency is important (ibid). Likewise, the gaps of textual/lyrical narrative in the song are sites of dialogue between it and the reader/listener. For Iser, gaps are sites of ambiguity that pertains to the text, since he is theorizing about process of textual interpretation. For the purpose of examining this song, this notion of the gap needs to account for the dimension of music. In this case, gaps refer to the site between the patterns of text and music as well as the audience. Since text turns into music when it is narrated by the vocalist, its relationship is then set in relation to other instruments and the melodic line as well. Therefore, the device which narrates story in the song is not just the text or the vocalist, but it is also the other instruments that accompany them.

As the sense of disorder manifests the lyrics in the block quote above, the instruments' behaviors change in at least three noticeable ways. The first is that the range of the vocalist increases in volume, which also suggests that subject's lament has gotten louder. Here, sadness becoming more pertinent and uncontrollable. It is no longer a feeling that is conveyed by the subject and his lament, but it is the other way around: sadness performs the subject. It causes the subject and the vocalist to react by becoming

louder. The subject's lack of emotional restraint explains partly the incoherence of the text. The change of volume, the fragmentation of the text, and the shifting stream of consciousness, highlights the subject's loss of control. The subject wants to withhold certain details, like the identity of "that person" (*người ta*), but his emotions will reveal them. This battle between the subject and affect is a battle between the text and music.

The second noteworthy change in the behavior of the music is the instrumental patterns of the zither and monochord. They are silent in this verse. Throughout most of the song, these instruments actively take part in the melody, and as discussed earlier, they help reinforce the affect in the narration. Here, although these instruments are silent, they are not absent. Their quiet presence continues to express the affect that the text cannot convey. In this case, these instrumental parts emphasize the feeling of loss, whereas earlier, they confirm the subject's personal narrative. In this verse, as the subject pours his heart out, his loneliness is rendered without the accompaniment of the zither and monochord. The apparent absence of these instruments signifies change: what was there once before is now gone. Their silence evokes the feeling of loss, indicating that the subject is now lacking something which he once had. Thus, the zither and monochord in this verse impresses the feeling of past tense, which contests the present tense of the text. The ambiguity time points to a temporal structure that is overlapping and struggling with itself. Musically, sadness has not only broken the agency of the subject, the structures of language, but the linear path of time as well.

The significance of time overlapping in the verse makes the past and present indistinguishable. Memory and reality blend together in the paradox of disorder. The sound of the *sáo* flute symbolizes this organic disordering that is beyond the subject's control. The melody from the *sáo* flute is unique to only the duration of the verse quoted above. It is a diegetic sound that is associated with the subject's memory, and is noted in the text as a sound that flies aimlessly. When the song is transitioning into the verse, the flute begins to play when the vocalist pauses momentarily in silence with the zither and monochord. The flute plays a faint melody that weaves in and out on the melodic line, alternating between the high and low notes. This occurs at the beginning of the verse "*Ai đem con sáo sang sông*" (Who brings the *sáo* into the river), at the end of "*Nó bay nó chẳng về đâu*" (It flies with nowhere to return to), and finally, at the conclusion of the verse, "*Người nơi đầu gió kẻ ngoài chân mây*" (People at the head of the winds, others by the feet of clouds). As the text suggests, the flute sounds like it is flying passionately and recklessly. It has a lively quality, which may seem to contrast the quiet refrain from the zither and monochord, but in actuality, its melody further reinforces the sense of loss and melancholy. Unlike the loud and clear quality of vocalist's singing, the flute is much quieter, and at times, it becomes muffled by the percussion. Its faintness implies a sense of spatial distance, being far away, as well as temporal distance, being of the distant past. While it is experienced by the subject in the present, it is also a ghostly memory that is projected by the subject's imagination. While the melody of the *sáo* flute is to some degree lively, it has the shadow-like presence of an echo without origin. Thus, it cannot

be traced, because it has “[no place] to return to” and nowhere to go. Its liveliness lacks a history and future and is without purpose. The ambivalence of the *sáo* flute is a metaphor for both happiness and the death of happiness. In just a glimpse, a slight moment of indulgence, the subject is overwhelmed by the paradox of beauty and the pain of its loss. This trace of happiness makes the subject’s pain all the more heart wrenching. It is a sadness that distorts the subject’s sense of time and ability of speech. Through the melodic form of the *sáo*, sadness is destructively awesome in its characteristics of beauty and pleasure. Despite the suffering of hell, sadness has some ambivalent worth to the subject that is undefined. But definitely, it is felt. Ultimately, sadness is not entirely sad, but it is also pleasurable. While it punishes the body and mind, it indulges the heart.

Similar to the vocalist who expresses the narration through linguistic techniques, the *sáo* flute and other musical instruments are also narrative devices that reveal contextual information that is withheld by text. They construct affect and content in relation to the lyrics. With the diction and syntax being vague and disorderly, the vocalist becomes more unreliable as a liaison between the subject and the audience. Moreover, the singer’s ability to provide descriptions and insights are bounded by the restrictions of the lyrical text. Although this is not meant to suggest that the singer does not have creative agency in the song, it does assert that other musical instruments do perform narrative functions similar to the vocalist, without relying on linguistic grammar in same manner. Thus, the narrator is in neither the text nor vocalist, but through the effect of what is spoken and unspoken in the song. This is evident when the various

musical instruments, accompanying the vocalist, render the subject's feelings of loss, loneliness, and nostalgia without requiring his explicit statement. While this dialogue of interplay between the text and music gives the song a poetic quality, it also highlights the significance of the inter-relationship between the many parts that narrate the story. Thus, it is not through the language of the text or music alone that conveys meaning, but a language that is *in between* crafted by their interplay and negotiation.

Up until this point, this essay has primarily suggested that sadness in the song is an object that is revealed through the interplay of the text and music. On the level of content, it is the afflicted cries of the subject and the mood of the environment, but on another level, sadness also operates as a narrative device which fashions the song's contents with implications of morality and judgment. In between the level of text and music, sadness asserts itself in the moral center. It differentiates between what is right and wrong, who deserves pity and sympathy, and who should be criticized. Not only is the object of sadness in the song the site of affect and social-politics, but similar to the text and music, it is also through it that the song is narrated. Drawing on the models of the "aesthetic object" in Iser's reception theory and the "object of emotion" in Ahmed's approach to affect, this essay has been able to discuss the emotions preconfigured in a yellow music love song at length without conflating it with the relative emotions experienced by its consumption. While these models illuminate the board strokes that connect the object and its interpreter, this essay is primarily invested in the relationship between the object and situation that renders it. Sadness as an object of the song refers to

the strategic ordering of language (via text and music), and its arrangement of plot and theme in the narrative. As discussed in the song, at times sadness is more personal and intimate, and other times, it is sweet and fragmented. This is not due to chance, but patterns that are revealed through the arrangement of text and music. The aesthetics of sadness are patterns that are setup to reveal other patterns. In other words, as the text and music reveal the sadness, they are also illuminated by the sadness as a way of disclosing further information and content. Thus when it is narrated, the sadness narrates back. Under these terms, sadness should be conceptualized as either a language in between the text and music, or an object that speaks. Hypothetically, if this sadness were to be disintegrated and dis-ingrained from the narration, the connection between time, space, images, sounds, and plot would not be as coherent. Without sadness, disorder is bereft of purpose, which would lend it to be more existentialist. The lament and suffering would lack the labor that is necessary to setup the undertones of progress and enlightenment, both personally and spiritually.

In the end, the song is more focused on the conceptualization of sadness rather than the act of telling an anecdote. Even though the song may begin from the personal perspective of the subject, by the second stage, the song pushes sadness away from the intimacy of personal affairs and into context of the worldly. The subject, his individuality and local experiences, is only a lens to see the world and experience the enlightenment.

So far, we have examined the criminal actions of sadness in breaking the law and disturbing order. In the third stage, we will examine how it reorders these sites in a way that is morally suggestive. It occurs in the moment when the subject reflects on his life and learns from his sadness. For the subject, the act of remembering and reflecting is both an internal and external process. In the song, where there is sadness there is memory, and thus, sadness is the temporal relationship between the subject and his environment. When the subject reflects on his situation, he draws on his own personal experience as well as from that of the world around him. Despite its grandness, sadness is located in the most trivial aspects of the subject's surroundings. For instance, as he walks home, sadness is noted in the conditions of the road. The homeward path of his return is described as being unbearably dull (1-5),²³ whereas before it felt like silk and the overflowing sensation of music (8).²⁴ Sadness is an unavoidable confrontation of the subject daily routine. It is the road that triggers the experience; it imposes undesired feelings and memories, and it forces itself in a relationship with the subject. It is the emotions that choose the subject, and not the other way around. Thus, the act of remembering is not so much a mental action as it is a reaction of the subject's visual, audio, tactile, and visceral perception. Ultimately, sadness and memory are shared experiences of time that is lived by the subject and the world of his relationships.

²³ Bây giờ chề chán nèo đi đường về

²⁴ Cung đàn lẽ nhịp đường tơ

Sadness seems to be embodied in all things seen, heard, and felt by the subject, except in “that person” (*người ta*).²⁵ Unlike the road, the day and night, which accompanies the subject and shares in his lament, “that person” does not. Her presence is only a ghost in the bittersweet melody of the flute and silky road of the past. The subject is here, and she has gone off to be her many other lovers whom are scattered throughout Vietnam: in the north with her grace, in the south with her love, in the winds, and under the clouds (11-5). She treats love as a game of lust and fun, and her careless adventures has injured the subject without remorse. Marked by sadness, the subject is the victim and deserves sympathy, whereas she is presented as being immoral. Implicit in the song is the cry for justice, and it is answered through the judgment of the sadness. Sadness marks the subject as being morally right. His angst is celebrated and praised, whereas her lustful tour of Vietnam is rebuked. Even when the subject tries to mask her identity by replacing the *em* pronoun with “that person,” her anonymity is dispelled when sadness deconstructs the jargon of the text. By doing so, the subject is praised even further in the song for his gallantry. Thus, sadness in the last stage has become the defender of love and justice, and a moral virtue.

However, sadness is more than the morality of romantic love. As the song shifts from the personal affairs of the subject to a worldlier perspective, the criticism of “that person” is extended to include a society that is imagined through her. Her unspecific

²⁵ Based on the cultural norms presented through popular love song, “that person” is most likely a heterosexual female.

and mundane set of characteristics, which includes superficial relationships, the north, and south, is a template for the country of Vietnam. She represents the effects of modernization on “Vietnamese values.” Her opportunistic behavior of acquiring superficial surplus represents the social conditions that simulate capitalism, where the quantity of surplus is encouraged through the competitive nature of scarcity. She exploits the labor of the subject and benefits from his loss. Therefore, the surplus is valued over her “common” with others (Casarino, 2008, 17). Since the story is narrated from the subject perspective, it is told from the margins of this society, where it argues for a form of social relationship that is modeled after sadness instead of the one that is configured by the economy. Do not think of people as relationships of capital, pleasure as scarce surplus but as the relationships presented by the subject. Even though the relationship model consists of pain and suffering, there is also something sweet and beautiful that is identifiably worthwhile. It is an aspect of life where people like “that person” could never understand much less appreciate. But the subject, who is acquainted with the various aspects of sadness, understands his relationship to others is like his connection to conditions, roads and cycles of time. From this perspective, one is not necessarily stuck in the margins of society and imprisoned by scarcity when the “surplus common” (Casarino) is readily available in social relationships. There is no need to exploit others for pleasure when a similar sense of satisfaction (if not better) can be found in sadness. Thus, sadness is liberating. Somewhere in the struggle of life and suffering is the beauty of the *sáo* melody that flies and enables a sense of joy. It is a form of escape or

empowerment that occurs in a moment of time travel. Sadness enables a mode of reflection that grants temporal movement. So when one is in angst state, one is necessarily stuck.

Although there is a utility aspect to the value system that is personified by the subject, there is also an authoritative discourse that fashions these values. Aside from re-appropriating various cultural values that resembles fragments of Buddhist and Taoist philosophy, the song also constructs the sense of tradition that is portrayed as being timeless. In the conclusion of the song when the subject is done reflecting, he realizes that his heartbreak is symptom of the artificial conditions of scarcity produced by society. Enlightened by the epiphany, but also acknowledging that he must physically remain in the society, the subject offers a few words of advice:

O, look at life's affairs,
we must accept it,
and show our face for when the train returns. (18-20)²⁶

The train's route is a metaphor of life: the train comes and goes in circular path. It means that life is a cycle of joy and sorrow, and one cannot escape from either of the two.

Therefore, in moments of sorrow, be ready for when the train returns with its delivery of good fortune. Thus, in the state of angst, the subject prepares for the future and maintains

²⁶ Ôi nhìn thế sự nổi trôi
Cũng đành chấp nhận mà thôi
Đề mặt cho con tạo xoay tròn.

his virtuousness. Unlike “that person” who does not wait for her train to return and goes off exploiting others to maintain her means of fun, the subject takes a vow of poverty. He emphasizes the importance of life rather than the means of sustaining the conditions of living. He is content with not having fun all the time. Although poverty and marginalization are not celebrated as virtues in the song, the subject’s acceptance of these conditions is. As repetition of change continues to move in cycles, the conditions of sadness will continue to recycle, and values learned from sadness will forever be reused and meaningful. As demonstrated by this notion of circular time, the authority of “tradition” draws on authority religious institutions and traditions. Although it is difficult to conclude that the values expressed through the song are Taoist or Buddhist (Popular, Zen, or of the Pure Land), as if these schools of thought and their practices were homogenous to begin with, there are concepts in the songs that resembles popular notions of Taoist and Buddhist philosophy, such as non-linear time, circular motion, avoidance of materialist desires, the excess of language, worldliness, and etc. Albeit these concepts are derived from fragments and may be deployed superficially without much re-contextualization, nevertheless, they give the song a voice of authority in championing the subject’s suffering over the modern world.

Outside of general speculation, there has not yet been much published scholarship on discussion of Vietnamese Buddhism in Vietnamese popular music. The speculation of yellow music drawing on the authoritative discourse of Buddhism is worth noting, because it complicates the interpretation that grounds yellow music within the post-

colonial power structure. It presents an alternative explanation for why people consume yellow music, other than the reason that they are tools of the colonial mentality.

Historically, it takes into account that yellow music developed in Vietnam in relation to discourses of religion as well as literature. Shawn McHale suggests that Buddhism has impacted Vietnam's print media far more than Confucianism, especially before the rise of communism. This is because before the 20th century, aside from the courts, only Buddhist temples in Vietnam had printing presses. Furthermore, the Buddhist Revival Movement that started in the 1920s was a catalyst for producing and disseminating popular Buddhist literature in the public sphere. Aside from these aspects, the moral values expressed in the song resemble virtues expressed by the teaching of Taoism, which further points to its Buddhist characteristics. Although both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism can be found in Vietnam, the predominant tradition is the latter as it has been filtered through China (Nguyen and Barber, 1998, 130). Unlike Khmer and Thai Buddhism, Buddhism in Vietnam has never had the kind of *sangha*, institutions, hierarchy, or organization found in Sri Lankan Buddhism. However, what is worth noting in this discussion of yellow music is that Vietnamese Buddhism has lived in a symbolic relationship with Taoism, Chinese spirituality, and the indigenous Vietnamese religion (Nguyen and Barber, 132). The relationship between Taoist and Buddhist values can be seen in the practicality of its practices. Alexander Soucy observes that most people (in the north) exercise Buddhism in Vietnam for practical reasons. He elaborates: "such as having a successful career, a male child or a healthy family... Most people do

not give much serious thought, or speak about, attaining a Pure Land” (2007, 357).

Similarly, the values expressed in the song are more practical in the sense they seek ways of surviving as oppose to dominating or conquering. Although these values do seek to subvert structures of power, they should not be understood as values that promote submissiveness or passiveness. A brief discussion of Taoism would serve to help clarify how these songs promote the subject’s agency in a manner that is neither subversive nor resistant.

While it is difficult to offer a definition of Taoism, many of whom are classed as Taoist thinkers share the basic insight that the human is flawed due to various reasons, and in order to recover from this state, one must learn to reflect on one’s own situation. For Chuang-Tzŭ,²⁷ the exercise of reflection requires the development and utilization of one’s “spontaneous energies,” which is related to the *ch’i* force that drives everything in universe (Graham, 2001, 6-7). The “spontaneous energy” is the essence of the human and a fundamental characteristic that connects people to each other as well as everything else in the universe. It is something that is found in the individual, but its aspects are communal, worldly, and even spiritual. It enables the individual access to discourses beyond the constraints of one’s individuality. For Chuang-Tzŭ, individuality is an illusion (16), and when the individual has developed their “spontaneous energy” to that of a sage, one will realize that the patterns of disorder, difference, and disconnect are in actuality signs of change in the larger unifying force of motion: what is referred to as the

²⁷ An influential Taoist philosopher who lived during 4th century BCE China.

“Way.” Thus, everything, including meaning, is always in fluid motion and can never be truly represented by any person. In theorizing about language, Chuang-Tzū argues that fixed meaning is an artificial construct produced through the human’s inherently faulty and arrogant logic (26). Thus, when one thinks in terms of human language, one can never account for the “Way” and instead, only sees it as disorder because meaning is always in motion and cannot be expressed nor captured in human systems of logic. Ideally, one’s actions should be guided by the exercise of “spontaneous energy” as oppose other faculties. In terms that are more practical, Graham notes that in Chuang-Tzū’s case, the “Way” offers a philosophy of strategic action, “intervening only at strategic points where the minimum effort will achieve the maximum result” (35). Therefore, the individual should not be overly invested in immediacy of one circumstance but rather, one should step back and reflect on the bigger picture (“the Way”) before acting. The refrain from immediate action is sometimes misunderstood as passive behavior. As Graham points out, *Wu wei* should not be translated and oversimplified as “No Action” but rather to refrain from forcing action (35). To act in ways that are met with the least amount resistance suggests a flexibility that challenges notions of what it means to be passive or active. It suggests that agency can be located outside the site of subversive action. From the Taoist perspective, sometimes one has to go with the flow, take and negotiate, in order to find the worthwhile opportunities for meaningful action. In this case, the act of yielding is not necessarily passive. Likewise, in many of the yellow music love songs, where the subject is exposed to conditions of

economic and social oppression, they inevitably choose to lament about their woes and find resolutions that may be easily mistaken for being passive: they do not *explicitly* collectivize, make strong demands, nor protest; they do not seek revolution nor even remain angered and resentful of the injustice. Although their actions are never seemingly radical, to suggest that the subjects are passive and submissive to their circumstances would undermine their struggle, as well as the moral and cultural significance of the songs. Thus, one should not imagine consumers of yellow music as ignorant Vietnamese listeners who indiscriminately consume popular culture. “Where there is pleasure, there is agency” (Appadurai, 1996, 7). In the case of yellow music, when the act of yielding is understood as something that is not necessarily passive but as a form of action, then one can begin to explore farther the social-political dimension of these songs and the incentives people may have for still continuing to listen, reproduce, and re-circulate them.

Sadness in pre- and post-renovation

Through the lens of Nhu Phỳ’s “Người Mang Tâm Sự” (“The Carrier of Sadness”), the sadness in yellow music can be empowering. In many ways, its moral perspective is compatible with that of Vietnamese communism: it emphasizes the agency of those who live in the economic margins of Vietnamese society, similar to the proletariats. Moreover, yellow music critiques the dangers of the capitalistic conditions, and it advocates a lifestyle that is less dependent on the material condition. Through sadness, labor is stressed as an important quality of the human condition as well as the

enlightenment. Regardless of these similarities, Phillip Taylor notes that after 1975, yellow music was critiqued in the media (ibid). In the cartoon of the crying the children, the sad melody of the song forced the children to over-indulge in the sadness. Thus, the aspect of pleasure in yellow music was render outside of its context of individual and spiritual progress, and re-appropriated to suggest wasteful leisure. Furthermore, the cartoon also reinforces the assumption that yellow music forces the Vietnamese listener to submit to the post-colonial mentality (ibid). Thus, yellow music supposedly made people passive and non-revolutionary.

Yellow music is non-revolutionary but not passive, as demonstrated by the song “The Carrier of Sadness.” Yellow music promotes a minimalist approach to action, suggesting ways of benefiting from the system, as opposed to overthrowing or passively ignoring it. In the song, this is demonstrated in the climactic moment when the subject discloses the details of the numerous lovers whom “that person” has. As he is sad and heartbroken, she is enjoying the superficial company of others. The sense unfairness and injustice is introduced and renders the subject as the object of pity. However, this pity and injustice disappears when the subject emerges from his reflection to bestow his worldly wisdom on to the listener. In terms of plot, the subject changes, but nothing happens to “that person.” She does not get what she deserves. And so the sense of resolution occurs in the subject’s maturation, where he accepts her actions and his misfortune. Thus, he forgives her, and by doing so, the victim of love and social injustice becomes empowered by his own agency. Forgiveness is where the resolution in the song

comes about. It enables the cathartic moment where pity and sorrow is purged. While traces of sadness still remain in song, it has mostly been converted to praises. Thus, when the negative emotions are purged, there is no longer a need for the subject to rally all the Vietnamese men with broken hearts to rebel against the unfaithful women in Vietnam. The ambivalent message of yellow music as being neither resistant nor passive to hegemony is one that continues into the era of the late/post-renovation in Vietnam.

Vietnam's national identity in the post-renovation is imagined through multiculturalism and globalization. In examining the development of *lên đồng* practices in Vietnam (mediumship rituals), Norton Bailey argues that the process of making these ritual folklore is tied to the politics imagining nationalism through shared history and traditions, which is enabled by globalization. Despite the troubled history between Vietnam (the socialist state) and these rituals, the government has appropriated them as icons of national folklore, using them to as traditional practices to “bolster national identity, which many cultural nationalists consider to be threatened by the forces of globalization” (2009, 21). However, Norton points out that the irony of these revival projects: they are funded by globalization through international investors, organizations, and tourism (53). So even though the traditional values in these practices are represented as being countercultural, they are produced by globalization and tourism.

Aside from multiculturalism, Nguyễn-Võ Thu-Hương demonstrates that globalization also takes part in gendering the way traditional values are imagined on bodies of labor. By examining the methods deployed by the state in rehabilitating female

prostitute in southern Vietnam, she argues that Vietnamese womanhood is disseminated through the transnational labor practices setup by the state. The state version traditional women values and labor enable these women to imagine themselves within the “global production line.” The training programs in these prisons require women to perform labor that translates into fulfilling quotas, which the prisons subcontract with foreign transnational corporations. Thus, these “Women [learn] to do assembling, hems, buttons, and so on.” “The job skills taught in the camp, as shown, are those that require a high degree of patience for tedious work, dexterity, and docility. The Vietnamese feminine identity attached to such attributes is but a convenient label for a generic model of workers in today's pattern of global production” (2008, 115-138). Through the performance of labor, the women learn the values of being traditional Vietnamese women. Labor is gendered and so are values.

From these discussions, the trend of diversity is emphasized in the national discourse, whereas class solidarity is deemphasized. Post-renovation Vietnam is nation of globalization and modernization and the traditional. It is the sense of tradition that distinguishes Vietnam from other nations. Unique, Vietnam has traditions of exotic practices, like mediumship rituals, and virtuous women with unshakeable traditional values. The mark of difference and longing for the past is fashioned with a sense pride, whereas decades ago these aspects would have been deemphasized. The era of post-renovation seems to be the ideal time for yellow music: its sadness reflects the nation’s public desire to turn away from modernization and perverse the traditions and values of

the past. In 2008, I came across the remake of the “The Bearer of Sadness” while sitting in café somewhere in the southern rural province of BẾN TRE. The song is rendered as a music video, and the vocalist is VŨ DUY. The music video is a montage of images that help tell its story along with the music. Being able to see the identity of “that person” from the very start of the song takes away from mystery of poetic ambiguity of the lyrics. But the biggest change of all is that the song now emphasized class. The subject has been turned into an unskilled worker (*cu li*). He works at the train yard and in warehouses, where he unload boxes. In the music video, “that person” is still romantically committed to the subject, but she eventually leaves him for a very ugly and flashy cosmopolitan male. In ending scene, she hesitates before running off. It shows that she does not want go, but due financial reasons, she must pursue materialism over traditional values. In song lyrics, it is suggested that she leaves because she is unfaithful, but here she leaves out of poverty. The subject does not argue with her, nor does he beg her to stay. He accepts her decision as an unfortunate lot of life. The act forgiveness is the subject’s way of choosing is own path. He continues to be the hardworking and under-appreciated *cu li* despite the lack of social prestige and money. His labor, endurance of poverty, and imperviousness to materialism, makes him different and unique to other forms of masculinity. While there is a sense of sadness, because he deserves better, there is also contentment in the proud manner he conducts himself. At the end of the video, love becomes less relevant, and his masculinity becomes a symbol of the nation. Similar to Nguyễn-Võ observation of how the state’s ideology enables the construction of tradition

femininity to be imagined through the process of transnational labor, here, it is popular culture that enables the construction of masculinity through cheap global labor.



Figure 2. “Người Mang Tâm Sự.”

The music video champions *cu li* and romanticizes his hardships. The combination of sadness and pride becomes ambivalent when one begins to wonder what is it good for. On the one hand, the song offers a sense of agency to those who are marginalized and unappreciated in society due to social and economic differences. On the other hand, it promotes sweatshop labor, which is problematic when conditions of poverty are masked by the romantic undertones. In the non-video pre-renovation discussion of the song, the Buddhist and Taoist undertones offer a sense of intervention through divine forces that moves everything in the world, and thus, change and hope is always implied. In that context, the subject's acceptance of misfortune and his vow of poverty are within the context of strategic action. In video version, the sense of non-

human intervention is more uncertain, because of the lack of a progression video narrative. Although the lyrics narrate a story of progression where the subject journeys from heartbreak to enlightenment, the video leaves the viewer with the scene where the subject watches the love of leaving. His face is filled with the quiet subtlety of resentment and loneliness. Unlike the song, the video deemphasizes the sense of resolution. If there is no resolution for the subject, the praises showered by the video is no longer praising his vow of poverty to in order to transcend his situation. However, it praises the subject as a productive citizen that struggles with the afflictions of injustice. In the end, the sadness that is evoked by the conditions of inequality and sweatshop labor is reconfigured nationalistic pride that praises the subject as productive citizen of society. While the video acknowledges the condition of poverty and hardship are increasing for the unskilled working class, it does little to suggest alternative solutions.

Coincidentally, Vietnam experienced a huge inflation spike in 2008 when the music video was popular. The average CPI rose 23%, which is the highest since 1992. This is due to various causes, but two big contributors were the global crisis and the lack of oil revenues (IMF). Under these conditions, in 2008 and 2009, it seems unexpected that the video to champion globalization for the *cu li* when that class of citizen suffers the most from its effects.

For many people in Vietnam, the issue of globalization and the rhetoric of the *cu li* coexist together in a relationship without conflict. While fishing one afternoon in southern countryside of Bình Đại, Bến Tre, my 24 year old cousin Việt inquired about

my plans for continuing to teach English in Vietnam. I told him that I was unsure, because I was recently granted the opportunity to attend graduate school back in the states. To him, the idea of going back to school was not much of an opportunity. Why I would go back to school when I already had a decent job in Vietnam. “What you make in a day, people here make in a month.” In his opinion, people should live like the *cu li*: just work enough to pay the bills and afford such daily habits of cigarettes and coffee. He is more interested in living a modest life. And there is nothing wrong with that. Although I do not know where and how he has acquired this romantic notion the *cu li*; I do know of one site it is taught.

In 2008 and 2009, as I observed and listened to these songs throughout southern Vietnam, I felt uneasy, and I continue to do when I watch these videos again. But I do not know what do with these feelings. What I do know is that we cannot continue to approach Vietnamese popular music and culture using models that dichotomize it with the state. Popular music has to account for the reality that there are economic incentives for sweatshop, and when it presents a narrative that romanticizes poverty, it encourages this type labor for the global economy. Long ago, the musician who was imprisoned for playing yellow music in North Vietnam, the scholar who wrote about his experiences of being disillusioned by popular culture and turning to revolution for inspiration, the exiled in the refugees camps, and the Vietnamese Americans in Little Saigon who lived through the “re-education camps,” I understand why they see yellow music and popular culture in a realm separate from the state and its ideologies. However, having been back to

southern Vietnam since then, I have acquired different perspective. The state and popular culture operate together in a Foucauldian bio-power-like relationship: governing and producing productive citizen through popular culture. Although the state can never predetermine the nature of consumption, it has the ability of influencing the circulation and context in which cultural products and venues are presented. In Vietnam, popular culture and the economy overlap in various sites where people inhabit. Popular culture is the social routines of cafés and karaoke bars mixed with afternoon lessons of English grammar and percentages of GDP. It is the music in those green buses that drive people from the countryside to the city. Whether it is Romantic or tragic that a man can sit under the lengthy twilight of the street lamps mending a flat tire of 50cc Honda or woman who must return from a long day at the factory to a room shared with four others, it is a way of life.

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