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JASON GIBBS
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“HE STILL LIVES” Vietnamese Songs of Reeducation

ABSTRACT

Shortly after the Fall of Saigon in 1975, the victors from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) imprisoned over one million former military officers, government workers and supporters of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) in Reeducation Camps. While these camps were supposed to rehabilitate their former foes for life in a communist society, re-education became a euphemism for incarceration under conditions of extreme hardship and deprivation. Many prisoners were musicians, amateur and professional, some of whom composed songs in the camps. These works reflect the indignities the prisoners suffered, as well as longing for loved ones, and an aspiration toward a higher humanity. In the face of the doctrinal regimentation imposed on the society outside the camp walls, these songs resulted in a range and depth of expression absent from the Vietnamese society of that time.

Keywords: Incarceration, postwar Vietnam, reeducation camps, Vietnamese music

The era of reeducation camps, *thời cải tạo*, was a difficult time within the collective Vietnamese diasporic experience. Many overseas Vietnamese were caught up in the reeducation system and had family members who were imprisoned in these camps. While some survivors have written memoirs documenting their suffering, it remains a difficult, traumatic subject for many to discuss. These narratives were written after a time of reflection outside the camps, often after their authors left Vietnam. Prisoners also composed in the camps where they recorded their thoughts and feelings in real time. These songs reflect the pain and hardship experienced inside the camps and also express the struggle to endure both physically and mentally by holding onto the hopes and ideals of their loved ones, their compatriots and their homeland.

Although the era of the reeducation camps took place after the Vietnam War, it was also an extension of the war. The armed conflict in Vietnam concluded on April 30, 1975, after more than 30 years with the triumph of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) armed forces over those of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). The war's end brought a wave of relief and jubilation to the reunited nation.¹ Despite intensive foreign involvement, however, the conflict had also been a civil war that pitted friends, families, and neighbors against each other. Even as peace came

¹ An elaboration on this point is Trinh M. Luu and Tuong Vu, "War, the Second Republic and the Diaspora," in *Republican Vietnam 1963-1975: War, Society, Diaspora*, eds., Trinh M. Luu and Tuong Vu (Honolulu, Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023), 2.

there were scores to be settled. Fearing this eventuality, 132,000 Vietnamese fled the RVN in its final days.²

By 1975, the two Vietnams had developed very different societies and worldviews after two decades of civil war and separation and were only reunited by force of arms. The victorious DRV took over the control of a functioning nation of nearly 20 million people with an extensive military and governmental infrastructure. Southern society had a robust marketplace and allowed diversity of opinion and a relatively free range of creative expression with only limited censorship.³ Music was a lucrative business in the RVN. Musicians performed on radio and television as well as in ballrooms and teahouses. While there was some censorship, creative artists enjoyed great freedom and created works that both formed and reflected popular taste. Thousands of songs were published as sheet music and recorded to disc and tape, sometimes selling hundreds of thousands of copies. Some songwriters were also involved in rural propaganda campaigns or for the Psychological Warfare Bureau (Cục Tâm Lý Chiến).⁴

The northern regime looked askance at these activities and this popular creative output. They, in contrast, had created a state where the government asserted leadership in many aspects of its peoples' lives. State censors carefully regulated the publication and broadcast of every

² Paul Rutledge, *Vietnamese Experience in America* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992), 3.

³ Hoàng Phong Tuấn and Nguyễn Thị Minh, "Striving for the Quintessence: Building a New Identity of National Literature Based on Creative Freedom," in *Building a Republican Nation in Vietnam, 1920-1963*, eds., Nu-Anh Tran and Tuong Vu (Honolulu, Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023), 187-188.

⁴ Jason Gibbs, "Songs of Sentiment in Time of War: Commercial Songs in the Republic of Vietnam." In *Republican Vietnam 1963-1975: War, Society, Diaspora*, 168-188.

creative artwork. In order to bring the RVN under centralized control, the victors spoke of “leveling the differences” between the North and South.⁵ In the cultural realm this meant ordering the destruction, banning, or confiscation of nearly all printed and recorded material produced in the RVN.⁶

For individual citizens, this meant “ideological reeducation”: *cải tạo tư tưởng* or *học tập cải tạo*. Hoang Minh Vu has described the underpinnings of the reeducation system where the state infallibly identified those with a “deficiency in their character” and selected them for a form of intensive treatment in order to rehabilitate them for society.⁷ Scholar and translator Huỳnh Sanh Thông noted that the word *cải tạo*, usually translated with the euphemism “reeducation,” has “quasi-mystical” overtones and describes it as the effort to “make over ... sinful or incomplete individuals.”⁸ Hu Ping states that the objective of reeducation in Maoist China was for those being “made over” to admit “that [their] thought is wrong, and that only the thought of the [communist] Party [is] correct.”⁹ For most Vietnamese, reeducation took

⁵ Neil Jamieson quotes a speech by Trường Chinh, the DRV leading political theoretician. *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1993), 360.

⁶ Ho Truong An, “Vietnam’s Cultural Purge,” *Index on Censorship* 7, no. 4 (July 1978): 3–7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03064227808532804>

⁷ Hoang Minh Vu, “Recycling Violence: The Theory and Practice of Reeducation Camps in Postwar Vietnam,” in *Experiments with Marxism-Leninism in Cold War Southeast Asia*, eds. Matthew Galway and Marc H. Opper (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2022), 222.

⁸ Huỳnh Sanh Thông, “Introduction,” in *To Be Made Over: Tales of Socialist Reeducation in Vietnam*, ed. and trans., Huỳnh Sanh Thông (New Haven, Connecticut: Council on Southeast Asian Studies; Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1988), x.

⁹ Hu Ping, *The Thought Remolding Campaign of the Chinese Communist Party-State*, trans., Philip F. Williams and Yenna Wu (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 23.



place at mandatory neighborhood meetings, in the workplace, or at school. But the DRV government also selected up to a million Southerners to report for reeducation classes. A sizable number of them were soon incarcerated in prisons and at reeducation camps—more than 70 camps in 29 provinces spanning the length of Vietnam.¹⁰ It is impossible to get accurate numbers of the people, mostly men, who were then sent to prisons or camps for extended periods of time, but the total must lie between 200,000 and 350,000, perhaps two percent to four percent of the adult male population of the South.¹¹ The majority were officers, national security personnel, and police. Additionally, many political officeholders, writers, journalists, students, Buddhist monks, and Catholic priests were also sent to prison or reeducation camps.¹² Others sent for reeducation included businesspeople, sex workers, drug addicts, criminals, dissidents, and people who failed in their attempts to escape Vietnam.¹³ The Vietnamese government did not acknowledge that the surrendered combatants were prisoners of war (who would have

¹⁰ See the map that accompanies the *Report on the Violations of Human Rights in The Socialist Republic of Vietnam: April 1975–December 1988* (Atherton, California: Aurora Foundation, 1989).

¹¹ Neil Sheehan, “Ex-Saigon Official Tells of ‘Re-education’ by Hanoi,” *New York Times*, January 14, 1980, *New York Times Historical* (Pro Quest). Also see, Gareth Porter and James Roberts, “Creating a Bloodbath by Statistical Manipulation,” review of *A Methodology of Political Executions in Vietnam: 1975–1983* by Jacqueline Desbarats, Karl D. Jackson, *Pacific Affairs* 61, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 303, and Tiziano Terzani, “Wir sterben und haben keinen Sarg,” *Der Spiegel*, August 24, 1981.

¹² Huy Đức quotes a detailed breakdown of numbers of people detained from the Bảo Tàng Việt Nam in San Jose. See Huy Đức, *Bên Thắng Cuộc, I: Giải Phóng* [The Winning Side, Volume 1: Liberation] (Saigon: Osinbook, 2012), 65.

¹³ Philip Taylor, *Fragments of the Present: Searching for Modernity in Vietnam’s South* (Honolulu, Hawai’i: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001), 81; and Duyệt Anh, *Trại Tập Trung: Hồi Ký* [Collection Center: Memoir] (Los Alamitos, California: Xuân Thu, 1988), 10.

rights under the Geneva Convention). They operated in the belief that forced reeducation was an act of leniency towards enemies of the state and constituted a path to rehabilitation to become fit citizens of a united Vietnam.

Inmates of these camps, however, reported experiencing hard labor, extreme hunger, disease, unhygienic conditions, isolation from loved ones, and reeducation sessions where they had to express contrition for actions they may or may not have taken during the war.¹⁴ Tuan Hoang notes that the sudden fall of the RVN “left many South Vietnamese in various states of disbelief and sorrow.” Their loss of personal freedom was a shock that was amplified by the psychological blow that came from the erasure of the nation that they had served and fought for. Humiliated by their defeat, they were subject to cruel and dehumanizing behavior by their captors.¹⁵ Perhaps the greatest hardship was the constant anxiety from not being told when or how their captivity would end in an environment where misinformation and rumors were used as tools to control them.¹⁶ At its most benign, reeducation amounted to watching films or singing revolutionary songs. In most cases, however, it meant lecturing the prisoners on the wrongs they had

¹⁴ Nghia M. Vo, *The Bamboo Gulag: Political Imprisonment in Communist Vietnam* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland Publishing, 2004), 102, 178. Hà Thúc Sinh, *Đại Học Máu* [Blood University] (San Jose: Nhân Văn, 1985).

¹⁵ Tuan Hoang, “From Reeducation Camps to Little Saigons: Historicizing Vietnamese Diasporic Anticommunism,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, no. 2 (2016): 60–69.

¹⁶ Trần Anh Tuấn, “Cộng cuộc nghiên cứu Việt sử tại Bắc Mỹ (1975–2000), Bài 12: Nhóm viết hồi ký,” *Thế Kỷ 21* [The 21st Century] 155 (March 2002): 86.

committed in their previous lives, and the absolute truth of communist dogma.¹⁷

Most of the men who were selected for reeducation were well-educated, including a large number of college graduates. In the pre-1975 RVN society at war, almost all men were compelled to participate in the war effort in some capacity. Highly recognized journalists, authors, artists, and songwriters had been recruited as military officers to perform creative work for the government and security forces and also ended up in camps. While nobody was ever sent to reeducation because of their music, many significant songwriters were caught up in this carceral system. Others took up songwriting as a means of self-expression during their confinement.¹⁸ The thousands of prisoners scattered in camps across the country created a sizeable amount of poetry and music among themselves. The RVN officer class shared similar education and training and it was commonplace for many to be able to pick out some tunes on the guitar. This was sometimes noticed with surprise by their jailors.¹⁹ I have come across at least sixty

¹⁷ Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 364, writes that, above all, “‘reeducation’ meant manual labor on starvation rations and emphasizes the physical and psychological toll it took. Ha Quan Manh observes that some of the mistreatment suffered in the camps constituted torture. See Ha Quan Manh, “Vietnamese American Survival Literature and Human Rights Discourse,” *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 14, no. 2 (December 2012): 17–37.

¹⁸ Tri Vu Tran noted that at the Xuân Lộc camp there were a number of trained musicians who had formerly worked in the Psy-War Department of the former regime. See Tri Vu Tran, *Lost Years: My 1,632 Days in Vietnamese Reeducation Camps* (Berkeley, California: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1988), 106.

¹⁹ Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn. “My Communist Warden and I,” in *To Be Made Over: Tales of Socialist Reeducation in Vietnam*, ed. and trans. Huỳnh Sanh Thông (New Haven, Connecticut: Council on Southeast Asian Studies; Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1988), 138. In this short story, Ngạn notes that men on the communist side did not have the luxury or free time to take up an instrument,

songwriters who were incarcerated and know of more than a hundred songs created in the prisons and camps. These musicians are listed in the appendix.

Upon arrival in the camps, prisoners learned that music of the “old regime” (the RVN), the nation they previously served, was strictly forbidden.²⁰ Similarly, their own creative work was prohibited and had to be created and shared clandestinely. Prisoners were frequently searched for contraband of any sort and prison writings were expressly forbidden. Their creation and existence constituted resistance to reeducation. Anyone possessing or performing these counter-revolutionary works could be disciplined. Thus, the survival of the words and music depended on the memories of the creators and their fellow prisoners.²¹

Music-Making at The Camps

Music did have a place as a sanctioned activity within the camps where there was mandatory singing of communist songs, as well as organized

while he guessed that 70 percent of his comrades had learned some guitar. Tri Vu Tran also notes how impressed the jailers were at the musical aptitude of their wards; see Tran, *Lost Years*, 81.

²⁰ Le Huu Tri, *Prisoner of the Word: A Memoir of the Vietnamese Reeducation Camps* (Seattle, Washington: Black Heron Press, 2001), 28. This was also true in Vietnamese society at large. Nguyen Long and Harry H. Kendall, *After Saigon Fell: Daily Life Under the Vietnamese Communists* (Berkeley, California: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1981), 77-78

²¹ In an interview, Xuân Diễm related that he wrote his songs in his head to avoid detection by “antennas” (fellow prisoners who were informants to the camp administration). Thanh Phong, “Phỏng vấn nhạc sĩ Xuân Diễm” [Interviewing the Musician Xuan Diem], *Viễn Đông Daily News*, December 13, 2014, <http://www.viendongdaily.com/phong-van-nhac-si-xuan-diem-CM2yM8uc.html>. In an online interview, Dương Văn Dung tells of writing a melody down, memorizing and then after there were words tearing up the paper because of continuous searches by the guards. Dung Duong, “Dung Van Duong on Hon Viet TV,” YouTube Video, 35:42 (November 12, 2012): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FNLzhTGItQ>

programs for holidays like the New Year (Tết), and Independence Day, performed both for prison staff and inmates alike.²² Prisoners constructed guitars, mandolins, string basses, and drum sets out of wood, bamboo and scrap metal.²³ Prisoners also engaged in clandestine music activity—singing pre-1975 romantic songs, denigrated by the communists as *nhạc vàng* or yellow music, as well as Western songs and the songs created in the camps.²⁴ They also composed doggerel lyrics to revolutionary and other songs that used humor to ridicule the dogma of the new socialist society and the lessons of reeducation.²⁵

The experience of prisoners in the reeducation system varied quite widely. The duration of confinement could range from around a year to over ten years. Oversight during the early years was strict. Prisoners could be abruptly released or sent from camp to camp for many years. The organization, work routine, and degree of hardship also varied. Within the uniqueness of each prisoner's experience there are common factors that unite the songs they wrote. They were largely

²² Nguyễn Đức Quang led a group that sang nationalist songs from the communist world that encouraged unity and struggle. See Cao Hoàng, “Cây Đàn trong Tù” [The Guitar in Prison], in *Việt Nam Quê Hương Ngạo Nghê: Tưởng Niệm Người Du Ca Muôn Thuở* (Kent, Washington: Nhóm Thân Hữu Thực Hiện, 2011), 180. Tri VuTran, writes that the prison troupe performed first for the soldiers and later for their fellow inmates. The performances consisted of traditional music and revolutionary songs. Tran, *Lost Years*, 80–81.

²³ Nguyen Ngoc Ngan and E. E. Richey, *The Will of Heaven: The Story of One Vietnamese and the End of His World* (New York: Dutton, 1982), 146–147. Le Huu Tri, *Prisoner of the Word*, p. 28.

²⁴ Jason Gibbs, *Rock Hà Nội và Rumba Cửu Long* [Hanoi Rock and Mekong Rumba] (Hanoi: Tri Thức, 2008), 114–126.

²⁵ A number of these replacement lyrics are found scattered throughout Duyên Anh's two memoirs about his captivity: Duyên Anh, *Nhà Tù: Hồi Ký* [Prison: Memoir] (Los Alamitos, California: Xuân Thu, 1987) about his time in Saigon prisons; and Duyên Anh, *Trại Tập Trung* about his experience in reeducation camps.

written in the style of pre-1975 songs in strophic form, usually employing slow tempos and gentle, diatonic melodies. This matched the style of music of so-called pre-war (*tiền chiến*) music and songs popular among RVN university students in the style of Trịnh Công Sơn, Ngô Thụy Miên and Vũ Thành An (the latter was imprisoned and wrote many songs in the camps). Some songs were also written to march rhythms.

Example 1 – “Anh Ở Đây” (“I Am Here”)-Thục Vũ (1975) written at Tân Hiệp camp, Biên Hòa.

I am here, my friends are here as well
 Shirts frayed and worn, gaunt shoulders, a shared fate of exile
 I am here, day after day rice not filling my bowl
 Every evening, afar seeing swallows looking for their prey coming
 and going in rapid flight.

...

I am here, my friends are here as well, there's still a deep well by
 the bridge
 Looking for the moon, the moon's tangled in the scoop's rope
 I am here, day after day inside an iron enclosure
 Hatred of the enemy, afflictions pile up in the heart of old
 mountains and ancient rivers
 I am here, I am here, why still here?²⁶

“I Am Here” by Thục Vũ (Example 1) expresses the hardships of prison camp life—the tattered clothes and emaciation. In stark contrast to the hungry caged prisoners, swallows fly freely to feed themselves. Even the

²⁶ All song lyrics translated by the author: Vũ Đức Nghiêm, *Tình Ca & Ngục Tù Ca* [Love Songs and Prison Songs] (San Jose, California: Vu Duc Nghiem, 1991). Vũ Trung Hiền, *Vũ Đức Nghiêm Anh Tôi* [My Brother Vu Duc Nghiem] (n.p.: Vũ Trung Hiền, 2005), 203.

moon reflected in the well is constrained by a rope. The songwriter's invocation of "old mountains and ancient rivers" appeals to the sacral, righteous nation that favorably judges his life and actions. Isolation and indignity are countered with a "hatred of the enemy."

"I Am Here" circulated widely within the camp system and was even recalled by those still imprisoned in the 1980s who found themselves reunited with old friends as the camp system wound down.²⁷ The songwriter had a pre-existing liver condition when he entered captivity. Those who witnessed him in the camp described him as sallow and withdrawn. He was among the earliest prisoners sent to a camp in the North where the winter cold was too much for him. He died in November 1975.²⁸



Figure 1. Camp songwriter Thục Vũ. Vann Phan, "'Tình Mùa Chinh Chiến,' nhạc lính đáng yêu của Thục Vũ và Vũ Hoài" ['Love in the Season of War,' beloved soldiers' music by Thục Vũ and Vũ Hoài], *Người Việt* (November 26, 2022). <https://www.nguoi-viet.com/cuu-chien-binh/tinh-mua-chinh-chien-nhac-linh-dang-yeu-cua-thuc-vu-va-vu-hoai>

²⁷ Phạm Gia Đại, *Hồi ký: Nhhng Ngươi Tù Cuối Cùng* [Memoir: The Last Prisoners] (n.p.: Phạm Gia Đại, 2011), 410.

²⁸ Tạ Ty, *Đáy Địa Ngục* [The Pit of Hell] (San Jose, California: Thăng Mỗ, 1985), 75–6. Also see, Phan Lạc Phúc, *Bè Bạn gần xa: Bút Ký* [Friends Near and Far: Essays] (Westminster, California: Văn Nghệ, 2000), 67.

Example 2– “Còn yêu em mãi” (“Yet I’ll Love You Forever”)- Nguyễn Trung Cang (1977-8) written at Fatima treatment center, Bình Triệu and Phú Văn camp, Bình Phước.

My dear! Here’s the sound of my guitar, my singing weaves love of
the months and years

Lyrics or musical piece, love’s still full of longing

Though I’m far away, wasting, yet love forever remains

Warming a dried out, emaciated skeleton

Love like wind bringing clouds

Call the rain to spread over the heavens.²⁹

Example 2 was written by Nguyễn Trung Cang, a promising performer and songwriter before 1975. He was a member of the Phượng Hoàng rock band who were known as the Vietnamese Beatles. His music and lyrics expressed the hopes and uncertainties of young people growing up in a society at war. The circumstances of his imprisonment were different from the other songwriters that I discuss who could be described as political prisoners. Cang was sent to the camps because of his heroin use.³⁰ After 1975 he could not kick his drug habit and ended up at a treatment center and then a reeducation camp in a very remote, malarial mountain jungle.

Cang’s “Yet I’ll Love You Forever” (Example 2), a conventional

²⁹ Nguyễn Trung Cang, “Kể từ Lúc ấy: Tâm Ca Tình Khuê” [Starting Then: Songs of Love], photocopy of unpublished manuscript, n.d.

³⁰ Jason Gibbs, “Phượng Hoàng Và Thời Phôi Thai của Nền Nhạc Rock Việt” [Phoenix and the Early Era of Vietnamese Rock Music] in *Ban Nhạc Phượng Hoàng: The Beatles của Sài Gòn* [The Band Phoenix: The Beatles of Saigon] (Ho Chi Minh City: Domino Books, 2020), 17–32. He started using heroin in 1967 when he played at American clubs in Đà Nẵng. Also, interview of Lê Huy, San Jose, January 17, 2016.



song of love and yearning, speaks of actual hardships that the songwriter experienced. Longing expressed as a “dried out, emaciated skeleton” was not a metaphor but reflected actual hard work and hunger. The love he awaits is the metaphorical rain that should arrive to revive him.

Example 3–“Nước mắt cho Saigon” (“Tears for Saigon”)-
Nguyễn Đình Toàn (1976) Chí Hoà prison, Hồ Chí Minh City.

Oh Saigon

Where have those days in the rainy season taking a coat to go
Hand in hand we speak quietly of things
Flower stands, cabarets at night coming home
Still echoing with Khánh Ly’s voice.

Oh Saigon

I lost you like you lost your name
Lost the roadways, changed the streets names
Meeting at the appointed place, we lose our way finding it.³¹

During the years of war, Saigon was the relatively peaceful and prosperous RVN capital that offered a lively cultural scene, commercial districts and nightlife.³² Before 1975 Nguyễn Đình Toàn had contributed to this milieu as a writer, journalist and broadcaster. “Tears for Saigon” (Example 3) describes the post-1975 city that became alien, even as he held on to the memory of its sights and sounds. The songwriter reveals secretly inscribing the lyrics at the foot of wall in Saigon’s notorious Chí Hoà prison.³³ His words invoke Khánh Ly, a popular woman vocalist

³¹ Nguyễn Đình Toàn, *Quê hương thu nhỏ: 23 Ca Khúc* [Shrunk Homeland: Twenty-Three Songs] (Westminster, California: Văn Khóa, 2000).

³² Gibbs, “Songs of Sympathy.”

³³ Interview of Nguyễn Đình Toàn, Westminster, California, June 15, 2019.

known for singing songs of love, peace, and reconciliation. Living in exile in America from 1975 she promoted many songs of the defeated soldiers in Vietnam's camps and jails.³⁴



Figure 2. Chí Hòa Jail in Hồ Chí Minh City (“Khám Chí Hòa”), Wikipedia [accessed August 18, 2024].
https://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kh%C3%A1m_Ch%C3%AD_H%C3%B2a

“Tears for Saigon” was secretly sung among prisoners in Chí Hoà jail and as they were released into society, it became known in Saigon itself. The song was shared by a Vietnamese who emigrated to France in 1978, quickly reaching the United States where it was recorded and released on a cassette in 1980 by the aforementioned Khánh Ly.³⁵ It has been rerecor-

³⁴ Some of Nguyễn Đình Toàn's later prison songs were printed in *Tắm mát ngọn Sông Đào: Thơ văn nhạc sáng tác từ quốc nội* [Bathing Cool in the Peach River: Poetry, Prose, and Music from the Homeland] (Los Angeles, California: Khai Phóng, 1982), which anthologizes songs, poetry and stories smuggled out of Vietnam.

³⁵ “Nước mắt cho Saigon” (with the title “Saigon, Niềm Nhớ Không Tên,”) first appeared on the cassette Khánh Ly, *Bông Hồng cho Người Ngã Ngựa* [Roses for the Fallen] (Downey, California: Khanh Ly Music Center, 1980).



ded many times and continues to be performed because the imprisoned Nguyễn Đình Toàn's pain and longing for Saigon mirrored the memories of the refugees of the Vietnamese diaspora.³⁶

Example 4 – “Sài Gòn chỉ vui khi các anh về” (“Saigon Will Only Be Happy When You Brothers Are Back”) – Bảo Chương [Khuất Duy Trác] (ca. 1980) written at Xuân Phước camp, Phú Yên province.

I met you quite by surprise
 A pair of innocent eyes from the city
 The dungeon dark speaks to life
 Is Saigon happy? Is Saigon happy?
 You looked up at me, bent your head, and said softly,
 “What’s left of the dreamy city
 The afflicted city continues to remind us
 Saigon will only be happy when you brothers are back.”³⁷

Example 4, “Saigon Will Only Be Happy When You Brothers Are Back,” extends the sentiment of “Tears for Saigon.” The songwriter was a lawyer who achieved fame as a singer in the pre-war style. A failing economy and armed conflict with Cambodia and China created hardship

³⁶ “Sài Gòn Niệm Nhớ Không Tên của Nguyễn Đình Toàn” [‘Saigon Memory without Name’ by Nguyen Dinh Doan], *Văn Học Nghệ Thuật* [Literature and Arts] 1, no.3 (June 1978): 90. Supplementing Khánh Ly’s recording, recordings by 7 other singers were listed in a 1994 CD directory *Tổng Danh mục Nhạc Việt 1994: Comprehensive Vietnamese Music Catalog* (Westminster, California: VN Communication & Distribution, 1994), 284.

³⁷ Đỗ Văn Phúc, *Cuối Tầng Địa Ngục: Hồi Ký Trại Tù* [Bottom of Hell: Prison Memoir], 2nd edition (Pflugerville, Texas: Vietland, 2008), 84: https://hoiquanphidung.com/upload_hqpd5/mp3_pdf_21/1622074949-cuoi%20tang.pdf84

and, in some places, near starvation for people living both inside and outside of the camps. A short time after establishing the camps, the government realized that they were not self-sufficient and allowed family members to visit, bring supplies, and welcome contact with news of the world outside.

“Saigon Will Only Be Happy When You Brothers Are Back,” was inspired by an actual encounter—an exchange between a woman visiting from Saigon and a prisoner. She confided that Saigon would only be happy again once the prisoners were released. Many families in Saigon were living without husbands and fathers. Women became the breadwinners who also had to find the means to support their loved ones in the camps. A broad economic stagnation in the country cast a dreary shadow over Saigon and many of its inhabitants. The songwriter mailed his song overseas in 1982 and they were soon recorded by Khánh Ly.³⁸

Example 5—“Hai hàng cây so đũa” (“Two Rows of Hummingbird Trees”) - Trọng Minh, words Nguyễn Huy (1981) written at Gia Ray camp, Xuân Lộc, Long Khánh Province.

Two rows of hummingbird trees
 Stand silently watching a bus pass
 Coming to visit me one last time
 Rows of colorless trees
 Come up to visit me a last time

³⁸ Hoàng Hải Thủy, "Sài Gòn Chỉ Vui Khi Các Anh Về" [Saigon Will Only Be Happy When You Brothers Are Back], *Hoàng Hải Thủy (backup)* blog (March 11, 2008): <https://hhtdev.wordpress.com/2008/03/11/sai-gon-ch%E1%BB%89-vui-khi-cac-anh-v%E1%BB%81/>. It was first recorded on the cassette Khánh Ly, *Tắm Mát Ngọn Sông Đào* [Bathing in the Peach River] (Westminster, California: Thanh Lan, 1981).



In your heart, hidden tears.

Taking our child to go look for a life
The ocean's quite wide
Freedom's shore beckons
Our reunion ends, then there's nothing
Life is then emptiness, emptiness.³⁹

Distress could also accompany family visits as some prisoners did not want their families to witness their miserable conditions. They knew that their families had their own hardships and did not want to unduly burden them. Their relationship to the prisoners had made their lives much more difficult, sometimes resulting in them losing jobs and educational opportunities.⁴⁰

In “Two Rows of Hummingbird Trees” (Example 5) the songwriter set to music a fellow prisoner’s poem describing a farewell visit by his wife and child. The prisoner is devastated by the news that she has decided to leave Vietnam by boat with their child. Although he hopes that they will have better lives, he is disconsolate at the prospect of being abandoned. The rows of trees frame their appearance and disappearance.⁴¹

Example 6 – “Hát từ chín tầng địa ngục” (“Sung From the Nine Rings of Hell”) – Vũ Đức Nghiệm (1981) written at Chí Hòa prison, Saigon.

³⁹ Trọng Minh, “Hai hàng cây so đũa” [Two Rows of Katurai], *Sáng Tạo*, June 28, 2015, <https://sangtao.org/2015/06/28/hai-hang-cay-so-dua/>

⁴⁰ Hoang, “From Reeducation Camps,” 76.

⁴¹ Vũ Hoàng, “Tù ca Việt Nam,” *Đài Á Châu Tự Do*, April 29, 2012, http://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in_depth/prisoners-songs-vhoang-04292012151412.html

From this hell, very far, nine deep circles
 So many people have refused to get on their knees and bow their
 heads
 From this hell, compassion of rivers and mountains when earth
 and oceans change places
 A stream of tears fall, heart bent in pain, hatred seethes in a heart
 overflowing with blood
 Listen at night to the resounding voice of peace
 When can we dream to break up the warmongers
 Listen at night, singing, praying for peace to return to the beloved
 homeland.⁴²

While imprisoned at Hàm Tân camp in Bình Thuận province, the author-
 ities believed Vũ Đức Nghiêm, the composer of “Sung from the Ninth
 Ring of Hell” (Example 7) was an organizer of a camp uprising.⁴³ In
 September 1981, they sent him to the Chí Hòa prison in Ho Chi Minh City
 (the former Saigon)—a far more miserable circumstance than
 imprisonment in a camp. Prisoners were packed into hot, dark cells or
 placed in solitary confinement, prompting the songwriter’s choice of the
 image of Dante’s rings of hell. The hardship made him more defiant in
 his will to survive—he would not bow his head to the enemy. A devout
 Catholic he also wrote religious songs and set biblical verses while
 incarcerated.

Example 7– “Cháy bỏng tình cố hương” (“Burning Love of My
 Former Land”) – Vũ Thành An (1981) written at a camp in Thanh

⁴² Vũ Đức Nghiêm, *Tình ca & Ngục tù ca*.

⁴³ Vũ Trung Hiến, *Vũ Đức Nghiêm*, 195.



Hóa.

The sun descends, mountains high send their cold air down
A lantern's excited light wraps itself around the walls
My body rests here, its spirit released back to that place
My heart still burns in the love of my former land.

With great effort we get two rice harvests
Corn and manioc ward off winter hunger
A prayer for rain and shine, two seasons in harmony
For the poor and afflicted to rely on.⁴⁴

In 1981 Vũ Thành An was imprisoned at a camp in Thanh Hóa province in Vietnam's north. His song describes the cold westerly winds that blew through the camp. The lantern depicts the spare primitive conditions. He acknowledges the prisoner's and his nation's hunger, but hopes that with effort it can be overcome. Despite his personal hardship his song lyrics are a form of prayer for his country and its people. The song has a second title: "Nhân bản 40" —the fortieth of a series of "Human" songs, many written in camps. The lyrics do not single out the prisoners for their suffering and hardship and acknowledge the difficulty of the poor everywhere. He converted to Catholicism in the camps and also composed hymns while imprisoned.

Example 8–“Anh vẫn sống”(“He Still Lives”) - Xuân Diệu
(1981) written at the Z30D Hàm Tân camp, Bình Thuận province.

Yes, he still lives, he still lives

⁴⁴ Vũ Thành An, “Nhân Bản Ca” [Music of Humanity]:
www.vuthanhan.com/NhanBan.html (accessed March 25, 2016).

Though his friends have gone
 Though his body is worn out
 And hair has turned gray
 Yes, he still lives, he still lives
 Though disgraced, in continual agony
 Though the months and year pile on distress
 Though people of the world have forgotten him.

But he still has a brave, proud zeal
 A brilliant faith, a contemptuous smile on his lips
 He brings a devoted love to the homeland
 A little love offered to the Motherland
 Awaiting a day when the land is revived.⁴⁵



Figure 3. Songwriter Lê Xuân Diễm in the United States, demonstrating the sorts of instruments he created in re-education camps. Văn Lan, “Nhạc sĩ Lê Xuân Diễm chiến đấu bằng âm nhạc khi vào lính” [Musician Lê Xuân Diễm fought with Music when He Became a Soldier], *Người Việt* (October 31, 2020). <https://www.nguoi-viet.com/cuu-chien-binh/nhac-si-le-xuan-diem-chien-dau-bang-am-nhac-khi-vao-linh/>

⁴⁵ Xuân Diễm, *Những Ca Khúc Dấn Thân* [Songs of Commitment] (Garden Grove, California: Xuân Diễm, 2005).



Lê Xuân Diễm was inspired to write “He Still Lives” (Example 7) after seeing the brutal treatment of some of his fellow prisoners following an attempted escape. The “he” is a collective representation of all the prisoners who refused to submit to their captors, with their “faith” and “contemptuous smile.” Although imprisonment wore them down physically, they continued to hope and struggle for a better future of their country.⁴⁶ After the songwriter migrated to Orange County in the United States, he formed a prison song band (Ban Tù Ca Xiêm Diễm). “He Still Lives” became the theme song to an overseas radio program that provided support to survivors and family members of those jailed in Vietnam’s reeducation prisons.⁴⁷

Example 9–“*Đôi giày dũng sĩ*” (“A Pair of Shoes for Brave Spirits”) Nguyễn Văn Hồng (1977) written at trại Nam Hà, xã Ba Sao, Hà Nam Ninh province.

My love, your fathers, grandfathers, brothers die in jail

My love, your loved ones grieve painfully in mourning

My love, your future is still hazy.

My love, our homeland is still enslaved.

And though it’s not much, I ask to make a pair of shoes for brave spirits, to go back and smash the shackles.

Grant me this time to fall in battle, so you all your life you can keep

⁴⁶ Chu Ly and Hiếu Trung, “Xuân Diễm: Anh Vẫn Sống,” [Xuan Diem: Still Living], *T. Vấn & Bạn Hữu: Văn Học và Đời Sống*, July 12, 2012, <http://t-van.net/?p=6837>. Xuân Diễm, email message to author, February 27, 2016.

⁴⁷ Người Lính Cũ, “Vẫn tiếp tục chiến đấu sau hàng chục năm trong ngục tù cải tạo” [Still Fighting after Decades in Reeducation Prison], *Một Góc Phố* [City Corner] (December 12, 2008): <http://nguoivietnamchau.com/forums/showthread.php?p=84345>

your head high

Grant me this time to die, so the homeland can forever be glorious

Grant me this weary life, so you can have a happy life.⁴⁸

The writer of “A Pair of Shoes for Brave Spirits” (Example 9) was part of group of soldiers who evidently disobeyed the order to report for reeducation in 1975. Within a year, they were apprehended as members of the underground opposition, the *phục quốc* or national restoration movement, that fought a short-lived guerrilla war against the government. These younger men were grouped together in the camps as the 20 Team (Đội 20) where they protested mistreatment of their fellow prisoners. “A Pair of Shoes for Brave Spirits” is addressed to his girlfriend, reminding her “our homeland is still enslaved.” The shoes were to be made for the children of the future who would become the generation that will “smash the shackles.” He hoped that his own death could play a part in his homeland’s future glory. The 20 Team and this song assumed a mythical status within the reeducation system for their defiance and sacrifice.⁴⁹

Conclusion

A Vietnamese American journalist posited that there are three prevailing themes in what are now called *tù ca* or prison songs. First, they express a feeling of wretchedness and humiliation from their imprisonment. Some songs are more defiant, illustrating the indomitable spirit of the prisoners. Lastly, the “sentiment” (tình cảm) of some camp music

⁴⁸ Diệm Nghi, *Văn Thơ Nhạc Tù* [Prison Prose, Poetry, and Music] (n.l.: Thi Văn Cội Nguồn, 1996).

⁴⁹ Tạ Tỵ, *Đáy địa ngục*, 637. Details of Nguyễn Văn Hồng’s life may be found in Việt Chính Nhân, “Mở lại hồ sơ ‘Vụ Nguyễn Chí Thiện’” [Reopening the File on Nguyen Chi Thien]: <http://www.chinhnghia.com/nctvtn.asp>

illustrates a longing for family and loved ones.⁵⁰ The first two qualities, the indignity of their treatment and the personal dignity they swear to uphold through this ordeal, end up eliding in the concept of *quê hương*—a word that translates variously as home, homeland, or native country. Their mistreatment was simultaneously the mistreatment of their country at large, often symbolized through their capital Saigon, renamed Ho Chi Minh City by their captors. They persevered through their suffering by remaining upright and not submitting to their enemy.

Sentiment is a more deeply grounded theme of the prison songs and was equally subversive and dangerous in communist dogma. Following the doctrine of Socialist Realism practiced throughout the communist world, North Vietnam had systematically suppressed all public expression of romantic, sentimental, and nostalgic feelings.⁵¹ They explicitly forbade the expression of sadness or pessimism in literature and the arts in their pursuit of a new society with new people. The expression of such emotions was considered reactionary acts that would become a contagion, hindering the progress of the socialist nation. Rather than presenting tears and crying, the sentiment of these songs is projected through the scenery and imagery.

The songs written in the prisons and camps during the decade following the fall of Saigon demonstrate the failure of reeducation. By the standards of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the new name for country when the two nations were merged in 1976, who dictated life inside and outside of the camps, these songs manifested a stubborn

⁵⁰ Tạ Quang Hoàng, “Góc Chiến Trường Xưa: Hãy Giữ Giữ ‘Tù Ca’” [Past Battlefield Corner: Protect Prison Music], *Người Việt* (March 29 2011): <http://www.nguoi-viet.com/absolutenm2/templates/viewarticlesNVO.aspx?articleid=128855&zoneid=36>

⁵¹ Gibbs, *Rock Hà Nội*, 113–126.

refusal to become new people in a new society. As the bloom of victory faded and material conditions deteriorated in post-reunification Vietnam, more and more people, even those among the communist faithful, questioned the government's attitude toward the people and culture of the South. Prison memoirs describe instances of guards wanting to study music and learn forbidden pre-1975 yellow music from the prisoners.⁵² By the 1980s, prison administrators allowed prisoners to form cultural troupes that performed for inmates at other jails and remote villages. In the last days of the camp system, they even allowed the prisoners to organize weekend tearooms in the camps, where they performed songs for each other and appreciative guards.⁵³

The growing acceptance of sentimental music in society at large, and a shrinking of the number of prisoners through the 1980s led to a decline in the quantity and reach of the prison songs. These songs nevertheless played an essential role in the lives of the prisoners. One prisoner regarded the act of writing songs as a form of deliverance.⁵⁴ These songs also evidenced a level of inner freedom and resistance unavailable to those who lived outside the reeducation camp walls. One songwriter confided that once he was imprisoned, he did not fear being imprisoned any more.⁵⁵ Camp music helped create a solidarity within the camps, as opposed to the isolation that freed prisoners felt after their release to the world outside.⁵⁶

⁵² Duyệt Anh, *Trại cải tạo*, 220.

⁵³ Phạm Gia Đại, *Hồi ký*, 350-1.

⁵⁴ Dung Duong, "Dung Van Duong."

⁵⁵ Interview of Nguyễn Đình Toàn.

⁵⁶ Nguyễn Đức Quang interviewed by Hoàng Khởi Phong, "Tâm Thức Dân Tộc và Phong Trào Du Ca 1966--1975 [National Consciousness and the Du Ca

The prison song movement continues, sustained through organizations of survivors and their families who are intent upon holding on to the hatred, the disgrace, the pain that the reeducation camps inflicted upon them to sustain their ongoing opposition to the communist government of Vietnam. By the early 1990s, many prisoners and their families had immigrated to the United States through the Orderly Departure Program's Humanitarian Operation (HO).⁵⁷ As they concentrated in Orange County, California, in the Little Saigon community, they organized cultural programs including "Tù ca" (Prison Song) performances in 1993 and 1994. Five hundred people attended an evening of these songs at a dancehall in Garden Grove on April 30, 1994 (the 19th anniversary of the Fall of the Republic of Vietnam). A review of the event noted the cathartic effect on the audience.⁵⁸

Most of the songs were, and are, very little known. Nevertheless, they exist as documents of a significant episode in Vietnamese history and for the Vietnamese diaspora.⁵⁹ They also point to a dilemma that Nguyen Viet Thanh addresses in *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. He reminds us that "there are so many places where terrible things have happened and have not been memorialized."⁶⁰ The

Movement, 1966–1975], in *Việt Nam Quê Hương Ngạo Nghê*: *Tưởng Niệm Người Du Ca Muôn Thuở* [Vietnam Proud Country: Remembering a Du Ca Member for All Ages] (Kent, Washington: Nhóm Thân Hữu Thực Hiện, 2011), 5.

⁵⁷ Hoang, "From Reeducation Camps": 81.

⁵⁸ "'Tù ca' và những tiếng hát 'thông tâm'" [Prison Music and Unbroken Voices] *Thế Kỷ 21* 67 (November 1994): 87; "Tù ca và quê hương ca" [Prison Music and Homeland Music] *Thế Kỷ 21* 62 (June 1994): 90.

⁵⁹ The website T. Ván & Bạn hữu (T. Ván and Friends) has an entire section devoted to "Prison Pieces" "Tù khúc." *T. Ván & Bạn Hữu: Văn Học và Đời Sống*: <http://t-van.net/?author=22>

former inmates may never be able to, or even want to, return to create a physical memorial for their suffering. Yet for the losers of a conflict “[n]othing is worse than being ignored, erased, or effaced.” Through their songs, the former prisoners continue a “memory war” where “a victory is had in simply being remembered and being able to remember.”⁶¹

Gilbert has written about music being a means by which difficult memories are transmitted. While she notes in her study of the music of Holocaust survivors that heroism and resistance were important themes for the survivors of these camps, songs created in isolation and captivity also present a narrative expressing the difficult reality of prisoners’ experiences.⁶² In an introduction to the study of survivors’ music, Pilzer likewise recognizes that songs are “both records of experience and adaptive resources for survival and selfhood.”⁶³ They are effective means of recording difficult events and expressing troubling emotions.

Songs of the Vietnamese reeducation camps served as a record of emotions felt through their own pain and hardship as well as that of their fellow prisoners. One of the songwriters commented that every song “is a trace that the author recorded according to his emotions in a painful, harsh situation for himself or his teammates. Every poem has tears in it,

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Rosner, “Looking at War from All Sides,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (May 10, 2016).

⁶¹ Nguyen Viet Thanh, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 35.

⁶² Shirli Gilbert, *Music in The Holocaust: Confronting Life in The Nazi Ghettos and Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 196–199.

⁶³ Joshua D. Pilzer, “The Study of Survivors’ Music,” In *Theory, Method, Sustainability & Conflict: An Oxford Handbook of Applied Ethnomusicology, Volume 1*, ed. Svanibor Pettan and Jeff Todd Titan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 227–229.



every musical note stings the heart, each drop of blood and sweat of the prisoners and their wives and children seem[s] to be returning. But behind those sweat drops, blood drops and tears is endurance, a heroic will that rises up rather than bowing down in sadness and lamenting fate.”⁶⁴

The songs of Vietnam’s reeducation camps express a soft patriotism that sustains an ideal Vietnam that the prisoners believe was tarnished by the DRV victors. For them, these songs express “what is right, what is true” as well as a desire for freedom and the best future for Vietnam.⁶⁵ Prison songs escaped the camps to join the refugee community. They documented difficult memories that prisoners could take with them upon release and share with the world outside. Their creative work also bears witness to those who did not survive the camps and serve as a reminder of a painful episode of Vietnamese history.

Appendix

At least sixty-three composers from the RVN spent time in postwar reeducation camps and prisons. Thirty-three had published music before 1975. At least thirty-five wrote songs in confinement, and four died in reeducation camps.

The dates given below are the years of the songwriters’ years of confinement (when known).

Bold = Songwriters who published music before 1975.

***** = Songwriters who wrote songs in the prisons and camps.

⁶⁴ Xuân Diệu’s remarks are summarized in Anh Thành and Nguyễn Phương, “Chiều thơ nhạc với Xuân Diệu” [Poetry and Music with Xuan Diem] *Thế Kỷ 21* 109 (May 1998): 109.

⁶⁵ “‘Tù ca’ và những tiếng hát ‘thông tâm’”; Anh Thành and Nguyễn Phương, “Chiều thơ nhạc.”

! = Songwriters who died in camps.

? = The author's best guess based on available information.

Châu Đình An - 1975-1979

Vũ Thành An - 1975-1985 *

Huyền Anh - 1975-1982

Đỗ Kim Bảng - 1975-1978

Lê Mộng Bảo - 1975-1981

Khánh Bằng - 1980-1981

Nhật Bằng - 1975-1981

Mạnh Bích *

Nguyễn Duy Biên

Vũ Đức Sao Biển - 1975-1977 *

Chung Tử Bửu *

Nguyễn Trung Cang - 1977-1979 *

Cuồng Sĩ Thanh Cẩm *

Paul Văn Chi - 1984-1987 *

Chóe - (Nguyễn Hải Chí) - 1976-1985 *

Dương Văn Dung - 1975-1988 *

Tiến Dũng *

Lê Minh Đào - 1975-1992 *

Xuân Điềm - 1975-1983 *

Viễn Điện - 1975-1983 *

Hoàng Nhạc Đô *

Nguyễn Văn Đông - 1975-1985

Hoài Đức (priest) - 1977-1987

Vũ Trung Hiến *

Vũ Cao Hiến

Nguyễn Văn Hồng (Vũ Hồng?) - 1976?-1978 *†

Lê Như Khôi - 1975-1980

Minh Kỳ- 1975 †

Anh Linh - 1975-1983

Ngọc Linh - 1975-1988

Vĩnh Lợi

Việt Long - 1975-1983?

Trọng Minh *

Tô Kiều Ngân - 1975-1987

Vũ Đức Nghiêm - 1975-1988 *

Huỳnh Nhâm *

Minh Nhựt- 1975-1976 †

Nghiêm Phú Phát - 1975-1984

Trần Ngọc Phong - 1975-1983

Triệu Phong - 1975-1983 *

Nguyễn Đức Quang - 1975-1978

Trần Đình Quân - 1975-1981

Lưu D Quý *

Trường Sa - 1975-1984

Hà Thúc Sinh - 1975-1980

Thu Tâm - 1975-1978? *

Nguyễn Hữu Tân - 1975-1982 *

Phan Ni Tấn - 1975-1979 *

Đoàn Thi *

Võ Phú Thọ *

Ngô Mạnh Thu - 1975-1981

Nguyễn Đình Toàn (Hồng Ngọc) - 1975-1985 *

Bảo Tố - 1975-1980

* **Khuất Duy Trác (Bảo Chương)**- 1975-1988

Thanh Trang - 1975-1982

* Trần Dạ Từ - 1976-1988

* Dương Tử

* Phạm Thiên Tứ

Trần Lê Việt - 1975-1983

Điền Minh Vũ - 1975-1981

* Thục Vũ - 1975-6 †

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Note on the Author

Jason Gibbs holds a PhD in Music Theory and Composition from the University of Pittsburgh. He is the Music Librarian at the San Francisco Public Library and the author of the book, *Rock Hà Nội & Rumba Cửu Long* (2008, updated 2019). He wrote the entry for Vietnam in the *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World* and has published articles in *Asian Music*, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, *Southeast Asian Research* and *BBC Tiếng Việt*. He is also one of the co-authors of *Longing for the Past, the 78 RPM Era in Southeast Asia* (2013). He writes about Vietnamese music and popular culture on his *Tây Bụi* blog (taybui.blogspot.com).