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Postwar Music in Vietnam and the Diaspora

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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BOLERO
Remaking Pre-1975 Music in Post-Socialist Vietnam

ABSTRACT
This article studies the music of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, as well as the music of the Republic of Vietnam, and of the diaspora. It shows that in the twenty-first century, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has permitted many songs from the fallen Republic of Vietnam to be produced in the reunified country. More commonly known as pre-1975 songs in the diaspora, many musicians in Vietnam have dubbed the repertoire as bolero instead, highlighting the elements of Western progeny over the cultural memories of war and exodus. Using a postcolonial reading, this essay calls into question these selective revisions and recontextualizations, arguing that the musicians in Vietnam have been deploying a tactic of "self-orientalization," or self-criticism and cultural reformation, in order to respond to the postwar politics of state censorship. In doing so, the musicians have been able to

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portray themselves and the pre-1975 repertoire as being politically innocuous, which in turn offers them the leverage to work with the censors and cover politically taboo songs legitimately.

Keywords: *Nhạc vàng,* postwar Vietnam, Vietnamese bolero, Vietnamese diaspora, Vietnamese music

> Today, you two are far more fortunate than me: you both have a stage to sing. In the previous era when I fell in love with singing, I begged them [sobbing sounds] permit it (Quang Lê, VIVA Network 2017).[1]

As shown in episode 14 of the TV show *Bolero Idol* (*Thần Tượng Bolero*), broadcast in 2017, co-host and co-judge Quang Lê is faced with the challenge of eliminating one of two finalists in the song contest, both of whom he has mentored throughout the season. Before the verdict is unveiled, Quang Lê begins to share a story about his personal experience as an aspiring vocalist. The anecdote seems to be unplanned, or at least parts of it were, since midway into the story his speech trembles, and then his tears choke him as he speaks the words above. Some words are expressed as sobs and others are muffled in silence. The anecdote ends abruptly, and he is consigned to sobbing, his hand covering his face. The camera cuts to the audience clapping. A retroactive edit occurs at 00:57:56 where the sobbing was removed, and then the show resumes.

Multiple internet news sources in Vietnam attribute the emotional display to the co-host's personal attachment for the

[1] The VIVA Network channel has removed the Bolero series from YouTube. Original: *Hôm nay, các em may mắn hơn anh rất là nhiều. Các em có cái sân khấu để các em hát. Cái thời mà anh mê hát, anh xin người ta [sobbing] cho anh hát nữa.* The sobs resemble the words *cùng lúc.*

contestants (Thảo 2017; To 2017). Upon reviewing the Đài Tuyền Hình Việt Nam 3 (VTV3) recording, an element that seems to be overlooked is how Quang Lê used trauma-like gestures when he recalled and re-experienced his own struggles in the industry. Even though his amateur career took place largely in the United States, seemingly far afield from Vietnam's postwar reforms, the self-made comparison between the co-host and the contestants posits a theme about collective struggle globally among the different generations of Vietnamese musicians of bolero (known hitherto as *tân nhạc*).

The suggestion that a lack of opportunities in Vietnam affected musicians in the diaspora calls for a reflection on the transnational politics of music during the postwar era. As the censorship policies of the socialist government of Vietnam were pushing the repertoire of songs popular in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) underground, the music companies in the diaspora were mass producing them. The emergence of refugee communities abroad contributed to a global market for different forms of Vietnamese music, primarily popular songs which were often appropriated to convey themes more sympathetic towards anti-communism. In the diaspora, there was a lively spectrum of Vietnamese music at local venues. However, there were only a handful of companies that dominated the industry. Their representation of a pan-Vietnamese identity and culture was selective because it denoted the company's brand and investment. While companies like Thúy Nga (and its video series *Paris by Night*) did not have the support of state power, they had market share globally which enabled them to exercise great influence in the shaping of Vietnamese music identity and history.[2] For amateur

[2] Thúy Nga was founded in Saigon in 1972 and "relocated" to Paris in 1978. Its headquarters moved again in 1989, this time to Orange County, California, where it is today. The years 1972 and 1978 vary depending on different sources and

vocalists in the United States, Vietnam's censorship of bolero (referred to as pre-1975 songs) meant that the gatekeepers in the diaspora were difficult to avoid.

Making Bolero Music in Vietnam

Regardless, a new era arrived in 2017, according to the co-host: "the stage" now exists in Vietnam for the music and musicians identified as being bolero—suggesting a new legitimacy. A native from the imperial city of Huế, Quang Lê migrated abroad in the 1990s, overcame adversity, and has been returning. The co-host's presence on the show is the very product of Vietnam's post-socialist policies, attesting to Vietnam's overall progress since the postwar era—a fact that has been attested in numerous reports by Vietnam and the World Bank. On the one hand, the stage represents a surplus of economic opportunities for musicians in Vietnam and the diaspora, evident in many of them returning, even the older generation. On the other hand, it also represents the appropriation of distinguished musicians used to legitimize the reunified nation state of Vietnam whereby the repertoire of pre-1975 songs from the fallen republic and the diaspora are being reframed as a cultural lineage within Vietnam's state history. This discourse about bolero, articulated through post-socialism, both complicates and competes with the historical point of view where pre-1975 music has largely been associated with the former RVN and the Vietnamese refugees, and less sympathetic to the socialist republic's version of Vietnamese history.

While the term bolero emphasizes the lineage of Latin-like sounds traceable to Vietnam's colonial contact with France, the emergence of this newer terminology to refer to popular songs which

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scholars. The dates provided are derived from the consensus expressed via email by Marie Tô (CEO of Thúy Nga) and Phạm Phú Thiện Giao (Chief Editor of *Người Việt Daily)* in 2015.

were circulating widely throughout the period of the Vietnam War,[3] and globally afterwards, further begs the question of why Latin-like features in Vietnamese popular music were promoted and given an identifying label more recently and not earlier—especially when these elements are heavy with the cultural baggage of postcolonialism.[4] There are a multitude of terms such as *tân nhạc* (modern music), *nhạc trước 1975* (pre-1975 music), *nhạc vàng* (yellow music), *nhạc sến* (cheesy, clichéd, or maudlin music), and, more recently, bolero, that refer generally to the same or similar repertoire. However, these terms often convey different, incompatible, and even conflicting discourses about popular music due to the niggling cultural politics of war and postwar migration.

Questions about the development of Vietnamese bolero in Vietnam, like what songs are classed as being bolero and why were they politically taboo to the state in the past and not so much now, touch on the topic of Vietnam's postwar cultural reform and censorship. In their works, Nhu-Ngoc Thuy Ong (2009, 33) and Jason Gibbs (2017) remind us that the apparatus of music censorship in Vietnam is not controlled by a singular person, department, or ministry—even though it is under one party. It would not be unexpected to see fluid-like consistency in policy-creation and enforcement at the different levels of government, considering the many agendas pushing and pulling from within the censors. Since the official adoption of private enterprise and corporate governance in 1986, laxer restrictions have ensued throughout the sectors of commercial industry, including music production.

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[3] To accommodate a more general readership, the term "Vietnamese War" has been changed to "Vietnam War," and Hà Nội and Sài Gòn appear as Hanoi and Saigon.

[4] Not all songs dubbed as being bolero have Latin-like rhythms. For example, the show *Bolero Idol* also features songs conveying elements resembling American rock and Motown.

Regarding the decades following the Vietnam War, the anthropologist Philip Taylor has discussed the state campaign against bolero music, referred to as neo-colonial music, where Vietnam denounced it as Western and bourgeois (2000, 40-4). While this may have been the case, John Schafer points out that certain musicians like Trịnh Công Sơn had supporters with political clout within the party (2007, 624). Likewise, in written scholarship, Trần Văn Khê was one of the most expressive critics of bolero music (referred to as *nhạc cải cách,* reformed music, or Westernized music). While working at UNESCO, he dismissed it as a form of Western music derived from Vietnam's "[colonial] inferiority complex" (1973, 205). Yet, he also befriended and supported the musicians. At the funeral of the musician Phạm Duy in the southern city of Bình Dương, Trần Văn Khê was the elderly person in the crowd, wearing a black ceremonial *áo dài* and weeping in a wheelchair (Phố Bolsa TV, 2013). So even though bolero music had been highly unpopular with the socialist government of Vietnam and the earlier writings of ethnomusicologists—the sentiments had not been consistent; thus a paradox exists in the discourses about Vietnamese popular music, where reproval and support have not been mutually exclusive.

While it is still a politically sensitive topic, the re-emergence of Vietnamese bolero music points to the music shifting away from a popular form of quasi-legal cultural practice to the state sanctioned mainstream. By 2017, musicians were seen on national television singing songs dubbed proudly as bolero—displaying them as ostensible examples of the cultural heritage of Vietnam. The ability to present oneself innocuously as a musician of bolero music within the nation, as well as the capacity for many musicians like Quang Lê to travel between Vietnam and the diaspora with a stage and a show awaiting them, point

to the broader movements of economic, financial, and political policies prioritizing global capitalism. While the sounds attributable to Vietnamese bolero songs are discernible throughout the twentieth century, the concept of bolero music as an authentic tradition of Vietnamese culture—a national identity and treasure fashioned for the inhabitants of Vietnam and sanctioned by the socialist republic—is a more recent gesture of Vietnam's post-socialism.

The mass production of bolero music in Vietnam recently has been mostly remakes and covers of songs popularized in Saigon and produced in the former RVN. While they were once politically taboo in postwar Vietnam, the repertoire of songs considered to be pre-1975 music now necessitates the use of strategic erasures to accommodate state sanctioned history in late global capitalism. To an extent, one is free to publicly record and perform bolero in Vietnam as long as the music refrains from discoursing about the problematic histories of the Vietnam War. In the past, citizens were discouraged from doing either. While changes to state censorship have been attributed to shifts of economic policies and reforms over time, I stress that they are further attributable to the musicians and cultural producers in Vietnam (and the diaspora) who have been taking risks with censors to fashion a bolero music identity that is less politically threatening to the state, but not intended for the use of propaganda.

Censorship and Collusion in the RVN and the DRV

During the Vietnam War, music was censored in both North Vietnam and South Vietnam. According to Gibbs, both systems were based on the colonial administrative structure of obtaining permission. In the RVN, however, Gibbs notes the musician Trịnh Công Sơn was an exception, producing music unlawfully (2017). At the time, the political themes

expressed by Trịnh Công Sơn were considered to be anti-war, which was highly problematic for the southern government where a military draft was in place. The thematic connection of being anti-war and draft dodging is conveyed more explicitly in the film *Đất Khổ* (*Land of Sorrow*, 1974) directed by Hà Thúc Cần, where the musician plays a semi-autobiographical role: the protagonist is a musician of modern music from Huế who evades the draft and befriends a white American deserter. It is worth noting that the structure of censorship was porous because it was a multi-step process involving the collective work of different persons. Hence, there was room within the apparatus to resist; in the case of Trịnh Công Sơn, the lack of enforcement points to the possibility of officials resisting the censors from within the system.

Even within the process of obtaining permission, there was space for officials and musicians to work together to achieve similar goals. According to the composer Nhật Ngân in *Paris By Night: Người Tình Và Quê Hương* (*PBN 66*) filmed in Paris, France in 2002, the draft of the song "Tôi Đưa Em Sang Sông" ("I Ferry You across the River," published in 1960) was denounced as being "*ủy mị*" (overly sentimental or too sad) by Saigon officials. The musician recalls being asked to add more lyrics with references to the military. The musician complied, and the song was permitted (*PBN 66*, 2002).

To clarify, I am not suggesting that musicians were under pressure of state censors all the time to include references to the war in their work. Nhật Ngân continued to reference war and the soldier throughout his work, even in the diaspora. Before he passed in 2012, I asked him about the song "Người Lính Già Xa Quê Hương" ("The Old Soldier Far from the Homeland"). Nhật Ngân explained over the phone from his residence in Fullerton, California that he wanted to report what he was observing in the Vietnamese American community (author's

interview, 2007). With regards to popular music during the Vietnam War, songs composed in the RVN were often ballads that conveyed social realist narratives, embodying a complex spectrum of cultural politics inclusive of the artist's choice to incorporate elements from the social and cultural environment.

In the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the practice of capturing and reeducating "all obstinate counter-revolutionary elements who threaten public security" became more common by 1961, and it was codified officially as Resolution 49 in 1969 (Sagan and Denney 1982). According to the BBC, a three-person band was arrested in Hanoi in 1968. After a three-day trial, the musicians (who were performing at small venues such as wedding parties) were found guilty for "spreading of imperialistic depraved culture and anti-revolutionary propaganda" (Pham 2010). Two of the musicians were sentenced to ten years of reeducation plus four years of probation. The band leader was sentenced to fifteen years (Pham 2010). While only a few cases were reported, censorship was codified as law enabling musicians and consumers to be targeted en masse. Today, Vietnam's penal code 88 clause 2 (*điều 88 sự khoản* 2) is similar to Resolution 49 of 1969. Penal code 88 addresses the crime of propaganda or acts of propagating against the state (*tuyên truyền chống nhà nước*); clause 2 prescribes the prison sentence ranging from 10 to 20 years (Thanh and Trọng 2012).

After the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the forbidding political climate in Vietnam pushed the songs from the fallen republic underground and abroad to the diaspora. Song composers remaining in the country like Hàn Châu and Trúc Phương went quiet until the 1990s. Gibbs explains that music censorship began to relax after the economic reforms in 1986 (2008, 6-8). During the earlier period of transitioning to post-socialism, a handful of taboo songs from the previous era was

permitted again (Gibbs 2017). By the 1990s, many composers of the fallen republic were debuting newer compositions once more, such as "Tội Tình" ("The Sin of Loving") and "Người Thương Kẻ Nhớ"("One Person Loves, Another Longs") by Hàn Châu. Unsurprisingly many of the newer popular songs resembled the ballads of the prior decades. Moreover, these newer songs were also recorded abroad in the diaspora by artists like Hương Lan and Trường Vũ, and then they were imported informally through the black market into Vietnam again.

The mixing and overlapping of musical features from different decades and generations were highlighted at the Gala 90 music festival in Hanoi in 1990, performed on the municipal stage of the Vietnam-Soviet Cultural Friendship Convention Center (*Cung Văn Hóa Hữu Nghị Việt–Xô*). At the state sanctioned event, held on municipal grounds within the capital city of the socialist republic, the post-1975 vocalist Ngọc Sơn performed his own 1987 composition, "Lòng Mẹ" ("Mother's Affection"). Since then, the song has been renamed as "Lòng Mẹ 2," distinguishing it from the pre-1975 version composed by Trúc Phương during the taboo era of Saigon. These younger musicians would embrace the term *nhạc sến* to refer to ballad songs resembling the taboo repertoire of the pre-1975 era. The Gala 90 event was the state sanctioned public venue that signaled to musicians, composers, and producers that the volatile conditions of state censorship were bullishly in their favor.

Within two years, Ngọc Sơn was arrested in 1992 for performing censored songs (*những ca khúc bị cấm*) at a controversial private birthday party (Thanh 2014). According to *Zing News*, the singer said he was coaxed by peer pressure and money. While it does seem reflexively clear that there was a divide between legal and illegal music on paper, the division was more ambiguous on the ground due to the lack of consistent enforcement by officials. On the one hand, Phillip Taylor reports that

pre-1975 songs were being confiscated in Hồ Chí Minh City during the 1990s, on the other hand, he also observed the politically questionable songs from the diaspora flowing rampantly in Vietnam (2001, 39). This is consistent with Gibbs' anecdote about his inaugural ethnography, where the people in Hanoi showed him VHS recordings of *Paris by Night* concerts from overseas (2003, 57). Due to the lack of enforcement, underground music was socially normative in Vietnam. Hence, in the 1990s, the low-risk and quasi-legal status of bolero songs covered from the Vietnam War era meant that they were still "legal" mostly in settings that were informal and non-state-sanctioned such as birthday parties, weddings, karaoke bars, and even home entertainment.

Under these quasi-legal conditions, the demi-culture of bolero music developed momentum where musicians and private entrepreneurs became more bullish in testing the limits of the state's capability to regulate them. By the 2000s, many pre-1975 cover songs from the old republic were being produced in Vietnam. According to *Việt Báo News*, the vocalist Đàm Vĩnh Hưng was reprimanded in 2006 for his album *Tình Ca 50* (*Love Songs vol. 50*), released in November of 2005 by Lạc Hồng Audio Video. After the album was recalled, the singer was fined and had to issue a public apology (*Việt Báo* 2006). The recall mainly affected the official distribution of the album which meant the recall was only effective on paper. In Vietnam cultural goods are often distributed through the "blackmarket," and although websites like Zing MP3 removed the links from their page, their servers were still distributing the recalled songs since the URL address remained active.

The album *Tình Ca 50* (*Love Songs vol. 50*) was a licensed product. Since all official songs are screened, the retroactive correction reveals another window of insight into the procedures of censoring music in Vietnam. According to *Việt Báo News*, in the report from the Department

of Culture and Sports in Ho Chi Minh City (*Sở Văn Hóa và Thể Thao TP.HCM*), Đàm Vĩnh Hưng stated that he was unaware of the song composer of "Phố Đêm" ("Night Street") and that the song had references to the soldiers of the old southern republic. The musician and his affiliates submitted 21 songs for approval, but the censor denied clearance to three songs: "Tango Dĩ Vãng" ("Tango of the Past," composed by Anh Bằng), "Tình Yêu Như Bóng Mây" ("Love is like a Cloud's Shadow," composed by Song Ngọc), and "Nếu Đời Không Có Anh" ("If You Are Not in My Life, "composed by Hoàng Tang)."[5] According to *Việt Báo*, the report states that the lyrics of "Phố Đêm," submitted to the censors evaded their gaze because they were modified from the original. The retroactive correction was triggered when the album was released with the original lyrics.

According to *Tuổi Trẻ News*, there is another layer of confusion because two entirely different songs share the title "Phố Đêm." One song was composed by Tâm Anh in 1968 in Saigon, which was still banned in 2005. The other song was composed by the post-1975 musician Nguyễn Tuấn Kiệt in 1998 but was not banned. *Tuổi Trẻ News* reports that Đàm Vĩnh Hưng's 2005 album *Tình Ca 50* cited the latter composer. However, the song he covered was a modified version of the illegal version composed by Tâm Anh in Saigon in 1968 (V.T., the author's pen name in the article, 2005). The album was circulated in Vietnam until its composer Tâm Anh began to publicly denounce the singer for not crediting him.

Musically, the 2005 cover of "Phố Đêm" was deemed to be politically appropriate: it has a Latin jazz rhythm conveyed by a rhumba beat, Cuban sounds, and tremolos from an acoustic string instrument.

[5] The article spells the musician's name as Hoàng Cang.

The lyrics conveyed by the cover song was not an issue initially. The revisions included the following verses: "*tuy lính chiến xa nhà*" ("though the soldier far from home") was changed to "*năm tháng cách xa nhà*" ("five months far from home"), and "*chinh chiến từ lâu rồi*" ("this war from long ago") was changed to "*vai áo bạc phai màu*" ("shirts fade to gray"). Ultimately, the song became a problem when the composer Tâm Anh called attention to the song and its lyrical revisions. Since it was a blacklisted song, these lyrical revisions point to the motive and strategy of subverting the censor; someone knew what they were doing, and they also knew where and how to do it.

The report did not mention any plea deal between Đàm Vĩnh Hưng and the prosecution. There is a likelihood that the musician was found guilty and convicted outside of court. In addition, the musician's claim of ignorance was debunked since he or his affiliates knew what and where to revise. The lack of cooperation points to an intentional act of misleading the officials and their investigation. For such a serious conviction, the application of penal code 88 clause 2 would not be unexpected. Yet, the musician was only fined 10 million VND (less than US$460); for a high-profile singer, the fine amounted to peanuts. Neither the musician nor Lạc Hồng Audio Video could be contacted for additional comments.

Since the 2006 incident with the song "Phố Đêm,"Đàm Vĩnh Hưng has continued to release albums with pre-1975 song covers bereft of explicit textual references to the Vietnam War and the old republic. The Hanoi authorities consider the Vietnam a "sacred" struggle, a "righteous" war to rid the country of American imperialists, and the RVN a client state. Therefore, any song that diminishes those values or perceptions is deemed heretical and censored.

More importantly, many other musicians have followed in producing similar covers or remakes of songs from the former RVN. Some of the songs were revised to strategically remove the war references. In 2015, Mai Trần Lâm, a contestant on Solo Cùng Bolero, performed the song "I Ferry You Across the River" ("Tôi Đưa Em Sang Sông") composed by Nhật Ngân and Y Vũ in 1960 on national television; the verse "My life is *a soldier marching* across the earth" was changed to "My life is a *bird's wing, flying* across the earth" (THVL 2016). In light of the cases after 2006, I do not believe that Đàm Vĩnh Hưng was as ignorant as he claimed in the report, nor do I believe that the officials working in the Department of Culture and Sports in Ho Chi Minh City had been too incompetent to notice for over a decade that Đàm Vĩnh Hưng and other musicians have been covering taboo songs from the repertoire of the old republic and the diaspora—with the offending lyrics revised. Looking back at the 2006 incident over the song "Phố Đêm," there was a formal procedure that convicted Đàm Vĩnh Hưng administratively; on paper, he was punished, and he even learned his lesson. Informally, nothing happened.

A more plausible explanation is that many musicians in Vietnam already knew what to look for and how to fix the taboo songs for the censors because they had been working with the censors to integrate the songs—from the pre-1975 era of the fallen southern republic and the diaspora—into Vietnam's state sanctioned history, whereby bolero music becomes the cultural heritage of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The incident over the song "Phố Đêm" was not a case about how the sneaky musician was caught by the state. Instead, it was about how the musician and some officials inside the state were colluding. Ultimately, the matter was forgotten because the censor that reproved him was, I suspect, also supporting him.

By 2017, more cover songs with original pre-1975 lyrics were emerging in Vietnam. Streaming online, Phương Anh's cover of "Cám Ơn" ("Thank You") composed by Ngân Khánh or Ý Phương's covers of songs composed by Trúc Phương are riddled with references to the Vietnam War and soldiers. At the same time, however, many local karaoke businesses in southern Vietnam were also reporting that similar songs performed by certain singers from the diaspora were being banned. When I was in Vietnam in 2017, the police were going from business to business in the town of Bình Đại within the province of Bến Tre, screening for pre-1975 cover songs performed by the singer Đan Nguyên, who often performed in southern military fatigues when he was under contract with Asia Entertainment in the diaspora. Other musicians associated with the diasporic music company have reported issues about political harassment, including having their visa revoked by Vietnam (*Tiên Phong* 2013).

In post-socialist Vietnam, the ongoing censorship of bolero music has shifted from targeting selective lyrics to their mode of narration, including the narrator (the persona portrayed often by the vocalist) especially in recordings with video. Hence, not all pre-1975 references to the Vietnam War were being prohibited, but at the same time not all musicians from the diaspora were being permitted. This selectiveness points to a strategy that attempts to regulate the cultural memories inside and outside of state sanctioned history. The act of proclaiming and performing bolero as a form of cultural heritage in post-socialist Vietnam is well within the gatekeeping strategy of nation building.

French Colonial Influence

More recently, the term spoken as *bô-la-rô* and written as bolero has become a popular terminology to refer to pre-1975 songs that were

either composed or remade in the old Republic of Vietnam. In the past, the term was mainly a written cue referring to the rhythmic features of a song as opposed to a broad genre of popular songs. For example, the song sheet for "Phố Đêm" composed by Tâm Anh and published by Tiếng K. Thời Đại in 1968 in Saigon, has the word "BOLÉRO" printed above the staff (Figure 1). The term was used as jargon by musicians to differentiate rhythm, such as *habanera*, *ballade,* or *slow rock.* It was not a commonly used term to refer to modern songs at the time. Instead, the term *tân nhạc* (a Sino-Vietnamese word combo meaning modern music) was used to refer to songs incorporating newer sounds, commonly translated as Westernized music.

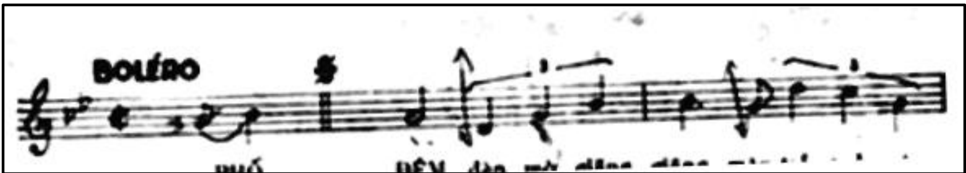

Figure 1."Phố Đêm" composed by Tâm Anhin Saigon in 1968. From the website Hợp Âm. https://hopamviet.vn/sheet/song/pho-dem/W8IU0FBI.html

Originating as ballroom dance music, Gibbs explains that since the late nineteenth century the younger generation of Vietnamese studying in France were exposed to the dance form, and upon returning to Vietnam they brought back these rhythms that were consistent with those derived from Mexico and Latin America as opposed to the earlier 4/3 variant found in eighteenth century Spain (Gibbs 2007, 127).[6] Through the route of colonial contact, various cultural elements from abroad, referred generically as being from the West, were shaping the dance music culture among the social elites in Vietnam.

[6] I wish to thank Jason Gibbs for making this point in his unpublished manuscript "Songs of Night's Intimacy: The Bolero of Vietnam."

Later during the era of the Vietnam War, on the one hand, dance music songs became more inclusive of American rock/pop sounds, known as *tân nhạc kích động* (modern action music, often translated as rock music).[7] On the other hand, the slower-tempo ballad songs became more inclusive of the Latin-like rhythms.[8] Ultimately, Latin-like sounds were not exclusive to dance music. They were integrated into the audible layers of language and literature embodied by the soundscape of modern music throughout Vietnam and concentrated in southern Saigon. In a 1961 recording of the song "Đôi Ngả Chia Ly" ("Two Paths of Separation"), Gibbs identifies the presence of a Cuban clave rhythm, mambo sounds from a saxophone, and Latin sounds from a guitar. Furthermore, he notes a spectrum of other cultural elements including rock music sounds and southern Vietnamese *vọng cổ* singing (2007, 139-40). This mixing of cultures and genres was not unexpected. Especially in popular music, musicians often come from diverse cultural backgrounds, including theater. Many pre-1975 vocalists such as Mỹ Châu, Hương Lan, Giao Linh, and Hùng Cường, have a background in *cải lương* musical theater—which draws heavily on the folk/traditional music of southern *vọng cổ* singing and *nhạc tài tử* instrumentals. Hence, it would not have been unexpected for musicians to draw from their diverse repertoire of skills when performing at venues. Through commercialism, the choice of incorporating elements of *cải lương* with bolero is done often with artistic intent and pride inseparable from collective consciousness.

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[7] In "How Does Hanoi Rock," Gibbs explains that Vietnamese language rock songs began emerging in Saigon during the 1960s (2008, 6).

[8] This is another point made in Gibbs' unpublished manuscript "Songs of Night's Intimacy."

The differing categorical features associated with non-popular music, often dubbed as being more traditional or folk, have been overlapping within a nexus of practice, consumption, and preference which is further comprised of Latin-like, American-like, and other-cultural sounds. Since each of these aspects embodies a rich spectrum of histories and discourses of contact, the general trajectory of sounds for Vietnamese bolero songs *were* consistently nonlinear and nonsingular.

Indeed, the presence of Latin harmonies throughout French colonialism and postcolonial commercialism should be acknowledged. However, the supposed colonial elements were neither expressed in isolation nor were they unaffected by the sounds and soundscapes of the Vietnamese. Moreover, the songs are complicated by other cultural matrices involving language and literature. While the Latin-like elements are inseparable from the cultural politics of nation formation and a pan-Vietnamese identity since the twentieth century, elements considered to be Western were circulating in Vietnam fluidly as features within the spectrum of "modern" Vietnamese music, *tân nhạc*, which included the sounds classed as being more traditional like *vọng cổ* singing. Hence, the progeny of Vietnamese bolero music as being mapped entirely within one source of culture or historical period is overly simplistic.

Regional Dialects and Musical Identities of Vietnam

In addition to the harmonies, there are other elements of bolero music including the audible features of the Vietnamese language and literature that would be erased if its representation is imagined within the taxonomy consisting solely of Latin-like sounds. While I am not able to locate the specific recording that Gibbs uses, the pre-1975 singers whom he names, such as Thanh Phong, Thanh Tuyền, Chế Linh, and Mỹ Châu,

were well-known vocalists in Vietnamese popular music. Moreover, the four musicians are iconic representatives of southern culture and diversity: Chế Linh also identifies as being ethnically Chăm. While they have unique styles and timbres, the musicians often utilize modes of shared expression associated with regional identity (*quê*).

Regional association can be expressed through the lyrics similar to spoken dialect. Resembling the southern dialects near Saigon, a vocalist may articulate the lyrics more towards the upper-front part of the oral cavity, dilating the nasal passages to partially direct air through. This conveys sounds which are often perceived as being narrower and lighter. There are also varying degrees of softness and sharpness, depending on how much sound is being regulated through the front nasal passage. In the case of Chế Linh, there is often a noticeably softer quality where the lyrics resemble intimate conversations. Sometimes the vibratos can be heard coming through the nostrils from the larynx, as if the nose were vibrating the lyrics. Whereas with singing styles more similar to Thái Thanh, the lyrics are expressed often with a taller nasal head-voice, which can often be heard in Hanoi's opera singing[9] as well as in Saigon. Unlike with the front nasal sounds which exit the nose, these sounds can be articulated with the upper-back areas of the mouth. While the nasal cavity does give it shape, the sound does not exit the nose necessarily. The consistent frequency of the head-voice sounds would evoke a style of singing associated more with classical-high culture rather than the sensibilities of conversational parlance. Additionally, in the lower ranges, the lyrics conveyed by Thái Thanh may have a warmer bass quality, which shares a crooner-like resemblance to

[9] Often called *bel canto* singing, according to Gibbs, this was the preferred style taught in Hanoi at the time. It allowed for the voice to be projected loudly, even without a microphone.

the smooth vernacular vowels and tones of the northern dialects near Hanoi.

In contrast, the lower sounds from singers like Duy Khánh or Giang Tử are often very bold and glottal-like as if the air were being compressed and supercharged in the larynx. These singers would often modulate their volumes by directing sound through the nose, softening and lowering the dynamics of the lyrics. Even when they express vibratos with their mouths closed, funneling the sound through the nose, the lyrics are still being pumped by the larynx with such power that the nasal sounds are still deep and glottal-like. The central dialects near Huế are notoriously known for being acoustically heavy and throaty.

Vietnamese vocalists used these linguistic features as tools before and after 1975. Similar to how the Latin-like sounds in the RVN point to the transnational transmission of music shaped by the on-going legacy of colonial contact, the sounds articulated by the Vietnamese lyrics reveal variations of Vietnamese identities and legacies which point away from the West as being the center. Thus, the voices of the Vietnamese have been just as dominant within the soundscape of Vietnam as the sounds deemed to be Western, if not more so.

Music's Literary Tradition

In addition to the social features of the lyrics, regional aesthetics are also expressible by the narrative's point-of-view. Song composers like Anh Bằng, whose family was forced into exile in 1954 and 1975, drew upon their autobiographical experiences and observations. For example, the song titled "Nỗi Lòng Người Ra Đi" ("The Heart in Exodus") conveys the theme of longing for the northern city of Hanoi where the composer resided for several years prior to the impromptu exodus. During the Vietnam War, the song debuted in Saigon in 1967 (Gibbs 2014). In the

case of the composer Trần Thiện Thanh, the songs about the romance of the two poets Hàn Mặc Tử and Mộng Cầm were derived from the local lore of his hometown in Phan Thiết, approximately 170 km east of Saigon.[10]

In 2012, the poet Mộng Cầm (Huỳnh Thị Nghệ) alleged that their relationship existed only in the realm of poetic fiction (Lê 2012). Nevertheless, the reputation of Hàn Mặc Tử as the national laureate of Quy Nhơn in Central Vietnam, has been shaped largely by inhabitants from 450 km southward, including the poet Mông Câm and her iconic references to the southern landscape of Phan Thiết—e.g. "[nhà] Lầu Ông Hoàng," a colonial structure erected in 1911 by Ferdinand François Philippe Marie d'Orléans Montpensier. Ultimately, these local and personal details from different artists throughout Vietnam were shaped by geo-memory and war, and in turn they produced music that would reciprocate the country's diverse and colorful identities—albeit the conditioning was geographically concentrated in urban Saigon and spearheaded by highly literate men.

In Saigon, recordings of Vietnamese bolero music often incorporated music from genres considered reflexively to be traditional or folk. Musicians frequently drew inspiration from literary-musical performances like *vọng cổ*, *hát hò* or *ngâm thơ*. In an early recording of the eponymous song "Hàn Mặc Tử" featuring the vocalist Phương Dung, the song opens with a poem recitation that resembles the opening verses of the poem "Lang Thang" ("Wandering"). Keys from the piano can be heard in the beginning, and as the music becomes more metered, flute sounds are added; then the line "*ai mua trăng tôi bán trăng cho*" ("Who is

[10] Around this time, the *cải lương* musical (often translated as reformed musical theatre) titled *Chuyện Tình Hàn Mặc Tử* attributed to the composer Viễn Châu is reported as being also popular in southern Vietnam.

Buying the Moon, I’ll Sell”) is sung, an exact excerpt from the poem “Trăng Ngọc” (“Jade Moon”). In this segment, the lyrics are performed in a manner that resembles *ngâm thơ* (commonly incorporated as segments by *vọng cổ* singing), a mode of poem recitation, where the rhythm and melody flows together within the cadence of language. Moreover, the diction is comprised of Sino-Vietnamese and arranged as poetic verse—alluding to a parlance associated with the Confucian literati, *nhà nho*. The particular combination of traditional and literary elements points more towards the spectrum of elite high-art culture, albeit these elements have been incorporated en masse throughout the twentieth century.

Figure 2. “Hàn Mặc Tử composed by Trần Thiện Thanh. From the website Hợp Âm. https://hopamviet.vn/sheet/song/han-mac-tu/W8IUII67.html

The elements reminiscent of poem recitation and “traditional music” are also conveyed in the song sheet. In the 1964 anthology titled *1001 Bài Ca Hay* (*1001 Great Hits*), published and distributed by Diên Hồng, the stanza is printed in the upper left corner of the sheet. It stands out from the rest of the lyrics because it is excluded from the compartmentalizati-on of Western scales. While the notations of traditional music are not expressed explicitly, musicians have been drawing on a body of

specialized knowledge to interpret and perform the stanza. The cues for *ngâm thơ* and *vọng cổ* are expressed spatially within the song sheet.

There have been variations to the way the song has been covered or remade in subsequent recordings. In the diaspora, the recording by Mai Thiên Vân (2010) replaces the piano with the zither; her vocal timbre emphasizes the sharper front nasal sounds consistent with a very pronounced southern dialect. In the version recorded by Lệ Quyên (2010) in Vietnam, the zither is also noticeable at the start, but the opening is shortened; it starts with the more metered recitation of the poem "Trăng Ngọc" ("Jade Moon"), and it omits the initial allusion to the poem "Lang Thang" ("Wandering"). Her singing consistently conveys the wide bass-like features associated with a more northern Vietnamese opera-like ballad style. Similar to the pre-1975 recording, these later remakes retain the elements of *ngâm thơ.*

Under the RVN regime, the layers of musical harmony, literature, and even language in the songs from this era reveal a diverse matrix of voices and memories informed by subjects of different backgrounds who identify as being cultural citizens of Vietnam. The government's broadcasting of popular culture via public loudspeakers frequently shaped peoples' interaction with bolero songs (known as *tân nhạc*) as socially normative. In the evening, the radio station Đài Phát Thanh broadcast the program *Dạ Lan* (Night Orchid), which featured popular songs and excerpts from *cải lương* musicals. These excerpts, derived from lengthier *cải lương* often referred to as *tân cổ* or modern *vổng cổ* singing, played a crucial role in shaping the southern Vietnamese modern soundscape with elements resembling pre-colonial heritage. Even though the birth of the genre is attributed to the early-twentieth century, *cải lương* performances are often comprised of many cultural elements reminiscent of art forms like *hát bội* and *chèo* musical theater

as well as the musical instruments, sound structures, and narratives existing prior to French colonialism.

The modernizing soundscape in southern Vietnam as being more culturally plural, inclusive of music dubbed as traditional, was noted by Trần Văn Khê, who in 1972 reported that while the performances of "traditional music" were more common at smaller venues than at larger public concerts in the southern Republic of Vietnam, traditional music was still regularly broadcast on government radio. Noting that live-performances were not as frequent as in the northern areas, Trần Văn Khê explains that popular song composers like Phạm Duy had both a group for performing popular music and a group for performing folk/traditional songs in Saigon (Trần 1972, 43).

Even after the war, many songs of the diaspora often incorporated the sounds of (revised) traditional instruments, especially with songs that expressed themes about regional identity (*quê*). Companies like Thúy Nga continued to produce *cải lương* music alongside bolero music (*tân nhạc* or pre-1975 songs). For example, the performances in *Paris by Night 106* include the *cải lương* musical *Quán Gấm Đầu Làng* (The Neighborhood Embroidery), a musical adaptation of an excerpt from the *Tale of Lưu Bình Dương Lệ*.[11] Similar to the radio program *Dạ Lan* (Night Orchid) during the war Vietnamese popular music culture continued to mass produce and disseminate bolero songs alongside *cải lương* music, often embedding their elements and features into one another. Hence, the repertoire of songs referred to as bolero, *tân nhạc*, pre-1975 music, or by any other name—refers typically to songs rich with diverse sounds and narratives, which can be described as being folk-like, Sino-like, Latin-like, Euro-like, and American-like, all the

[11] The 1970 composition has been attributed to the composers Giao Tiên and Thanh Tòng.

while embodying the histories and memories about war, migration, and exodus.

The Postcolonial Struggle to Reshape Vietnamese Identity

The Western elements embodied by *tân nhạc* popular music have often been portrayed by critics as being the spillover culture left behind by French and American contact. In addition to various musical elements like ballroom dance or European opera pointing to inspiration from French colonial contact, *tân nhạc* songs have been further inclusive of rock elements pointing to the era of the Vietnam War, where major cities like Saigon had clubs with Filipino dance bands and foreign patrons (Gibbs 2008, 6). During times of war and nation building, these very selective aspects about cultural contact with the West have been used to problematize popular music as being a Western dilution of Vietnamese subjectivity and sentience. The foisting of *tân nhạc* into the realm of Western music faced little resistance until the mass exodus of war refugees fleeing Southeast Asia sparked academic interest about Vietnamese culture. Drawing from her observations in the Philippines during the 1980s, Reyes reports the "strongly Western harmonic and Latin rhythmic features" were noticeable with the repertoire of songs of the Vietnamese refugees (Reyes 1999, 67-8). While the audible resemblances to Western music are undeniable, Reyes insists that the songs should not be approached as Westernized songs because they are not derived from the West—"when we label the music Westernized we might be merely taking the easy way out" (1991, 101). Her claim that these Latin-like songs should be recognized formally as being Vietnamese songs, based on evidence gathered using ethnography, would have been controversial to many scholars. In addition to the earlier sentiments towards using ethnography-based methods in fields

outside of anthropology, Reyes' evidence reflects the cultural politics and musical preferences among the refugees of the second wave. The majority of migrants from the second wave include persons of lower socio-economics, often labeled as being "unskilled." While music classified as traditional and religious were included, her book portrays popular music to be the center of Vietnamese life and memory. Indirectly, her position was less than conforming with the postwar policies of Vietnam and the earlier discourses of Vietnamese music studies.

Prior to Gibbs and Reyes, scholarly discourse about popular music (referred to as *tân nhạc* or Westernized music) was largely limited to a handful of criticisms, discouraging scholastic inquiry more than encouraging it. In the late 1980s, Trần Quang Hải opined that Vietnamese popular music "[cannot] be judged at this time" (1989, 45). Earlier, however, his father had stated that *tân nhạc* is the impoverished music meant to dazzle tourists by incorporating "jazz, up-to-date rhythms and the pentatonic scale" (Trần 1973, 207). Here it is portrayed as a gimmick of Western music catering to foreigners in urban cities. When read alongside the criticisms of *tân nhạc* as being bourgeois and superfluous, Trần Quang Hải's conclusion may not have inspired a lot of confidence for scholars to inquire deeper. On the contrary, his statement implies refrain: scholars should keep the door closed on *tân nhạc* in the meantime. In the early 1990s, Jason Gibbs observed that the body of knowledge on Vietnamese music was made up "almost entirely [of] traditional music" (2003, 57). Ultimately, the early production of knowledge on "traditional music" further produced the criticisms about "modern music" and its discursive absence.

On the one hand, the collective criticism that Western-like music in Vietnam is inferior to "traditional/folk" music led by Vietnamese

scholars residing in France signals the colonized demanding postcolonial accountability: the occident needs to acknowledge the perspective of history where France did not bring enlightenment and civilization to Indochina but disarray. On the other hand, this reflexive discourse critical of colonialism, reinforces the expectation that Vietnamese-ness must be constantly different in order to be authentic. While the need to measure uniqueness (*đọc đáo*) for the purpose of identity is not uncommon, such expectations are further complicated in the postcolonial context where the histories and hierarchies of exoticism are ongoing.

The irony of reinforcing orientalism while attempting to decolonize is an issue discussed in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961, original publication), where Frantz Fanon questions the need to revive "customs" in order to fashion an oversimplified indigenous identity that does not best reflect the current socio-political culture of "one's people" (2004, 160). Fanon's critique provides another lens to explore the complex obstacles faced by earlier scholars who pioneered Vietnamese identity by shaping the categories of modern and traditional music. The revival of "customs" is problematic for Fanon because it is a neo-construct that romanticizes the past and suggests the colonized can return to a freer and purer state. However, there is an inherent contradiction: "at the very moment when he undertakes a work of art, fails to realize he is using techniques and language borrowed from the occupier" (2004, 160). While it may be backed by the rhetoric of decolonization, Fanon questions the effectiveness of folklorization when the methods and standards also call for the burdens of being unrealistically anti-modern and alien-like, which further reproduces the epistemology that it works to undermine.

To clarify, I am not suggesting that elements dubbed as traditional or modern music exist separately in lived culture. As discussed previously, music called modern (*tân nhạc)* in Vietnam and the diaspora have tended to incorporate elements that point to generations of cultural practice and memory. Although the word is often translated into English as "tradition" or "traditional," *truyền thống* (傳統) means the transmitting and transitioning of systems or structures. While the term does suggest a degree of fidelity, *nhạc truyền thống* (traditional music) emphasizes a body of music that is departing from the past as opposed to returning. *Truyền* implies the dynamics of ongoing cultural practice which calls for balance and adaptation. In this regard, traditional music is not necessarily music that is held in a separate time and place from lived cultures considered to be popular or contemporary. Hence, the idea of "traditional music" as a cultural site impervious to the ongoing postcolonial conditions of the present—is a product of postcolonial thinking that re-introduces the unrealistic expectation of Vietnamese identity based on the colonial standards of exoticism—in its efforts to reclaim validity within a hegemonic discourse that has erased the subjectivities and memories of the colonized.

Today, both Reyes and Trần Văn Khê are known as ethnomusicologists due to their areas of interest. However, their methods and approaches were vastly different. Trần Văn Khê and earlier scholars of Vietnamese music abroad (who referred to themselves as musicologists) relied more on the quantification of music through measurement. Similar to studies on European classical music, there is a science in their approach, or a semblance of science conveyed by procedures, demonstrating an understanding of Vietnamese culture and identity as being empirical. The dissemination of Western scales and

instruments under French colonialism also included the agenda of colonial science that was instrumental in justifying the occident's superiority as a truth.

While more traditional forms such as chamber music (*nhạc phòng*) were held in high regard in Vietnam, a more Eurocentric and Sinocentric audience would have been incredulous. Prior to French colonialism, Vietnamese culture and society embodied a high degree of Sinic elements due to the legacy of Han colonial contact. In the context of vying for legitimacy among a collective of non-Vietnamese experts knowledgeable about oriental cultures, the accepted practice of science-like methods enabled earlier Vietnamese musicologists to leverage authority in order to resist the Western hegemony that problematized Vietnamese traditions as being insufficiently distinguished from the Chinese. Similar to Reyes' incredulousness over the misunderstanding that Vietnamese refugee music was being perceived as inferior versions of Western music, Trần Văn Khê was also reacting to the dismissive Eurocentric and Sinocentric views that Vietnam's history was just a colonial shadow of China. During his time, Vietnam was still being dubbed commonly as *An Nam* (安南), a term derived from Han imperialism, meaning the southern territories that were civilized. While "traditional music" may appear to be more immune to French colonialism than "modern music," the more scientific approach preferred by earlier Vietnamese musicologists points to a history of orientalists working within the scholarly expectations and standards that reproduced orientalism, albeit the hierarchy is inverted to suggest the less exotic is the *other*. In fairness, it is unrealistic to expect postcolonial criticism to be in a position of absolute immunity.

Under the earlier direction of Trần Văn Khê at UNESCO, *tân nhạc* was treated as being inferior to traditional music. In 1973, Trần Văn Khê

explained that popular music in Vietnam is "easy-to-write, easy-to-play, [and] easy-to-remember music." Juxtaposed binarily with "traditional music," popular music is criticized for being a falsehood produced by the intellectuals and cultural producers doting on colonial hegemony, "[confusing] progress and modernization with westernization" (1973, 205). This differentiation between modern music and traditional music as binaries imposes unfair expectations of Vietnamese music. In particular, the chronology for *tân nhạc* and its elements are rendered restrictive to the twentieth century and severed from the more fluid temporalities and localities of Vietnam. In this discourse, the progeny of *tân nhạc* and its elements are traceable to the histories of countries in Europe and Latin America—while avoiding Vietnam where the flow of elements embodying memories of the Vietnamese inter-generationally have been claimed exclusively for "traditional music." While the soundscape of *tân nhạc* does intersect with the West, the unequal emphasis on Western elements and progenies has been used to erase the legitimacy of the Vietnamese from their own culture.

On paper, the concerns about treating *tân nhạc* as Western music expressed by Adelaida Reyes seem to conflict with the scholars of Vietnamese music discussed above, especially those from France and postwar Vietnam. There is a complication, however. Reyes also received support and guidance from the scholars of Vietnam Music Studies, and she duly acknowledged Phong T. Nguyễn in her book. He was a younger colleague of Trần Văn Khê and is a leading expert in Vietnamese music. In addition, Trần Văn Khê himself was extremely well connected and respected within the circle of popular music during his lifetime, a circle that included his relations with Lệ Thương and Phạm Duy. Furthermore, his brother was the *tân nhạc* musician, Trần Văn Trạch.

In 1994, Trần Văn Khê authored a eulogy for his brother, which was then posted on a blog by his son Trần Quang Hải (2018). He mentions that during the era of the Vietnamese-French War in 1945, people who were seen as being associated with Western culture (*ai có quần áo ba màu xanh trắng*) were susceptible to being labeled traitors, *Việt gian*—meaning disloyal Vietnamese (Trần 2018). In this case, the word "*ai*" means "whoever," suggesting that any person expressing preference for anything Western or French was a possible target for the Việt Minh national liberation group. Not only is the author expressing sympathy for the brother's plight, but he is further demonstrating the sentiment collectively for all Vietnamese. In contrast to the portrayal of the Westernized Vietnamese as being effete and problematic for society, the narrator portrays Trần Văn Trạch and other Vietnamese as victims of hyper-nationalist sentiments during wartime.

Moreover, the tone of the narrator in referencing matters of relevance to modern music is more gentle than critical. For instance, he reflects on their different paths of vocational endeavors in 1949, where Trần Văn Khê was researching *nhạc cổ* (pre-modern music) in France while his brother was performing *tân nhạc* at the Théophile restaurant in Vietnam: "My younger brother became famous with the help of modern music and his extraordinary talents became renowned within the circle of artists" (*Em tôi nối tiếng nhờ tân nhạc và được danh hiệu quái kiệt trong làng nghệ sĩ*). In this line, popular music is framed as being helpful (*nhờ*) and productive. Moreover, he describes his brother as being extraordinarily talented (*quái kiệt*) and greatly admired by the community of Vietnamese artists. The narrative frames Vietnamese *tân nhạc* music as containing Western elements which were Vietnamized by local artists who were aware of what they were doing. In other words, the musicians were talented, not doting on Western music and the music

produced was not Western. This point of view is reminiscent of Jason Gibbs' earlier writings about the development of popular music in Vietnam (referred to as [*tân*] *nhạc tiền chiến*) where colonial elements were adapted and transcended by the Vietnamese.

As an expert of oriental music, Trần Văn Khê criticized popular music and its musicians. But as a musician, friend, and brother, he also expressed support for their work and he wept when they passed, and continued to mourn afterwards. Throughout his career, these tender relationships were there, albeit they may not be expressed explicitly in the French text or English translations. It is most likely that his support for *tân nhạc* and its communities was not so much absent as he kept it hidden when he worked. Hence, the criticisms about Vietnamese popular music should be treated as postcolonial narratives, embodying the paradoxical complexity where reproval and support are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Rise of Bolero

After the Vietnam War, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam implemented a series of cultural reforms. Adapting from, and overlapping with, the Vietnamese musicologists abroad, the Vietnamese Communist Party campaigned for more traditional and folk-like music (*nhạc dân tọc hiện đại*) (Đào Từ Trọng 1984; Miranda Arana 1999; Nhu-Ngoc Thuy Ong 2009). At the same time, popular music was heavily censored in Vietnam. Initially, the ban was indiscriminately imposed on songs produced by the old southern republic. Even the songs composed by Nguyễn Văn Cao or inspired by the poet Nguyễn Hữu Loan, affiliates of the Vietnamese Communist Party, were not immune.

As part of the state's overall efforts to delegitimize the fallen republic, various commentaries were published since 1976 about

Vietnamese popular music criticizing the Western elements for reproducing the colonial mindset (Taylor 2001, 23-55). As popular music was being banned, the new socialist state was promoting its version of traditional/folk-like music in order to propagate and legitimize the Vietnamese communists as being the authentic Vietnamese in the nation's history. While the terms used by the state such as "neo-colonial music" or "yellow music" (*nhạc vàng*) were reminiscent of China's Cultural Revolution, the repertoire of songs under the scanner, as well as the method of questioning, point to the state drawing inspiration and relying on the discourse of the postcolonial criticisms of *tân nhạc* expressed by Vietnamese musicologists.

Since the 1990s, there has been a discernible trend of musicians in Vietnam distancing popular music from its political associations with the Vietnam War and the diaspora. At the same time, the younger generation of musicians were experimenting with different styles of popular music, which included the use of melodies from Cantonese popular songs. Moreover, many of the younger musicians also grew up listening clandestinely to the taboo songs produced by the fallen republic and the diaspora. Hence, many newer, popular songs performed by singers resembled the previous generation of ballads from the taboo repertoire. These newer songs were referred to as *nhạc sến*: cheesy-cliché or maudlin music. The term can be traced anecdotally to Saigon during the war, where a handful of affluent Vietnamese citizens were differentiating *tân nhạc* songs: more sophisticated and classy songs versus less sophisticated and lower-class ones. *Nhạc sến* implies a derogatory connotation of behaving crassly and ignorantly, echoing the criticism of popular music as being decadent and bourgeois. However, the term's more contemporary usage is nuanced with a different power

relationship: pressured by state censorship, the musicians embraced the term in order to refashion popular music as being politically innocuous.

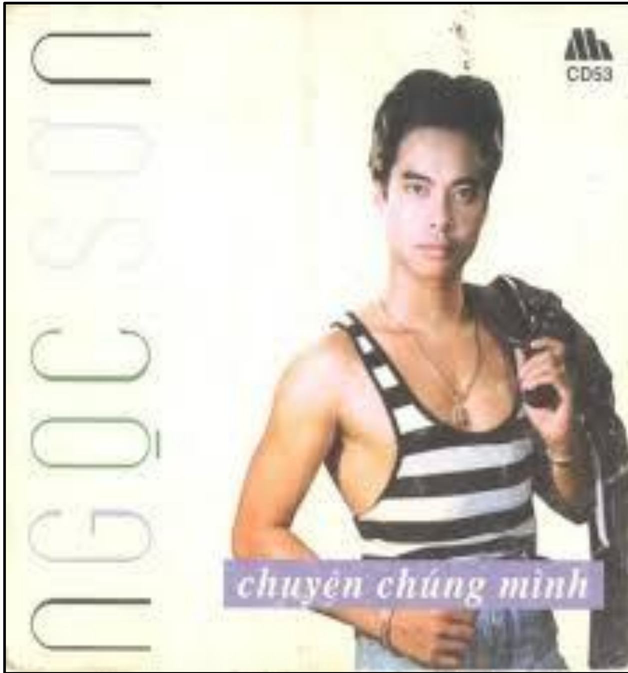

Figure 3. Ngọc Sơn’s album (1992). From the website Cover Nhạc Việt. https://cdnhacviet.blogspot.com/2014/09/mua-hong-cd-053-ngoc-son-chuyen-chung.html

Despite their musical and literary similarities to the songs from the pre-1975 repertoire, the incumbent generation of musicians often fashioned a more contemporary approach to popular music. Deviating from the more conventional aesthetics of being emotionally astute, some *nhạc sến* musicians were conveying masculinity more consistent with Western sensibilities as seen in the 1992 album titled *Chuyện Chúng Mình* (Figure 3). In the case of the musician Ngọc Sơn, the cultural aesthetics included louder southern chest-voice singing, bigger hair, and more revealing muscle shirts. These musicians often contrasted themselves and their music to the cultural aesthetics of Vietnamese popular music in the

diaspora, where songs were often marketed as being historically and romantically situated in war, American disco, or European opera, enabling diasporic producers like Thúy Nga (*Paris by Night*) to emphasize Vietnamese refugee identity as being socio-economically more affluent (Lieu 2011, 81). In Vietnam, however, musicians like Ngọc Sơn were more invested in conveying *nhạc sến* with machismo (*ngầu)* and youthful vigor by deemphasizing history and cultural memory—which Olsen notes as the economics of forgetting (2008, 17). While there are aesthetic similarities to pre-1975 rock music (*nhạc kích động*), the Saigon rock music personalities such as vocalists like Hùng Cường emphasized themes associated with the grunt in the military. In contrast, *nhạc sến* emphasized Vietnamese masculinity disinterested in the war due to the political liability of music censorship, especially elements which appeared to favor a Saigon-centric perspective of the fallen Republic of Vietnam. Instead of reflecting on the past, the aesthetics of music of *nhạc sến* were gesturing towards the direction of contemporary pop music, *nhạc trẻ* which at the time frequently incorporated melodies from Chinese pop music.

Eventually, the term *nhạc sến* would be phased out. By 2007, the term *bolero* was being used in the music industry to refer to the pre-1975 songs from the fallen southern republic, evident in Phương Thanh's album *Chanh Bolero*, *vol 1*. Its usage appeared to be more sparing than universal in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Instead, phrases like "songs for lovers," in Đàm Vĩnh Hưng's album *Hành Phúc Lang Than: Dạ Khúc Cho Tình Nhân*, 2007 (*The Joy of Wandering: Songs for Lovers,* 2007), or "past loves" in Lệ Quyên's album *Khúc Tình Xưa,* 2010 (*Fragments of Love in the Past*, 2010) still commonly referred to politically sensitive songs. These poetic phrases were very normative and extremely vague in meaning since most popular songs are love ballads. Thus,

official albums consisting of pre-1975 songs produced in Vietnam continued to avoid calling attention to their politically sensitive history.

By 2014, the term *bolero* became more common in Vietnamese parlance to further suggest the Vietnamese song narrative tradition derived from Spanish and Latin music in the early twentieth century. In the pilot episode of the show *Solo Cùng Bolero* in 2014, which was aired nationally on Đài Phát Thanh và Truyền Hình tỉnh Vĩnh Long (THVL 2014), the master of ceremonies explains that bolero songs are often comprised of stories or narrative verses (*những câu chuyện* at 00:26:52). Earlier in the show, the MC suggests that bolero songs are derived from rhythms inspired by Spanish (*Tây Ban Nha*) and Latin American harmonies (*Nam Mỹ*) around the "1940s, 1930s, 1920s." In the concluding segment, the show features the RVN composer Vinh Sử, describing his contributions to composing music for the poor laborers (*lao động*). Lastly, the composer is greeted with a surprise visit from a returning vocalist of the diaspora, Phi Nhung who is a mixed-race (*Mỹ lai*) singer with fair skin. In the episode, Vietnamese bolero music is defined explicitly and suggestively as being the shared music of laborers and the proletariat, as well as the diasporic communities of Vietnamese people and refugee descendants. While elements of the colonial past, the Vietnam War, and the postwar exodus are hinted by the repertoire of songs and the guest musicians, the show does not discuss these topics.

As such, the history of Vietnamese bolero is a friendship story that conjures a warm-fuzzy bond between Vietnam and the diasporic communities of the Vietnamese refugees. The pilot episode signals that Vietnam's cultural censorship had entered deeper into the later stages of post-socialism, where songs associated with the fallen republic had more visibility within the mode of state sanctioned consumerism, but in a way that did not conflict or challenge state history.

An important musician in the pilot episode is Thanh Thảo who played a role similar to a co-MC. She opens the show by performing the song "Hoàng Tử Trong Tơ" ('A Prince in Silk") which Gibbs recognizes as a rock song (*nhạc kích động*) recorded in 1972. As a vocalist, Thanh Thảo developed her reputation and brand by producing *nhạc trẻ* pop songs, which is often perceived as being less associated with *nhạc sến* and pre-1975 music. To the general public, *nhạc trẻ* is imagined as a contemporary form of Vietnamese pop, although Gibbs has traced the term to pre-1975 Saigon (2008). Likewise, other high-profile musicians like Phương Thanh, Đàm Vĩnh Hưng and Lệ Quyên—have earned a reputation as youthful pop singers before transitioning to the pre-1975 repertoire. These musicians built their fan base, reputation, and brand as being innocuous and apolitical. The synergies of *nhạc trẻ* and *nhạc sến* have contributed to the shape of Vietnamese bolero's postcolonial discourse.

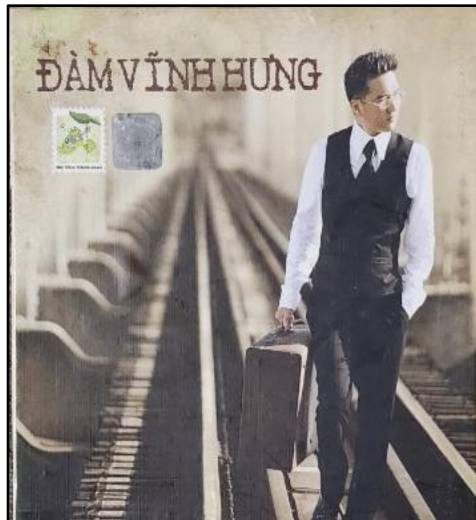

Figure 4. Đam Vĩnh Hưng's album (2007). From the website Băng Cassette. https://tiembangcassette.com/cd-dam-vinh-hung-hanh-phuc-lang-thang-2-cd

Starting from the mid-2000s, the movement from youth pop to the pre-1975 repertoire further solidifies bolero as being ostensibly less politically threatening. In contrast to the machismo image found in the previous decade, musicians began to depict images of bolero music with more formal aesthetics. Gone are the days of musky muscle shirts; Đàm Vĩnh Hưng's 2007 album *Hạnh Phúc Lang Thang* featured bolero music behind the cover of a Western collar shirt, vest, tie, slacks, and smart eyeglasses. Likewise, on the cover of her 2010 album *Khúc Tình Xưa*, Lệ Quyên is dressed in a white Vietnamese *áo dài* with her black hair brushed back. Thus, over the years, the terminology and branding of bolero music and its musicians has shifted from the cliche-romantic music dubbed as *nhạc sến* to the classy Euro-Latin-Vietnamese musical heritage.

Ultimately, the Vietnamese term bolero refers to the same repertoire of songs as other terms including pre-1975 music (*nhạc trước* 75), yellow music or golden music (*nhạc vàng*), and new music (*tân nhạc*). However, while these other terminologies bear the cultural memories of the fallen republic in the south, bolero focuses more on the foreign aspects of Latin sounds, both linguistically and musically. While it invites a more orientalist view of the music as being detached from its people, regions, and histories—more connected internationally with bolero music in Europe and Latin America—the term also reflects the collective efforts of many persons from different regions and backgrounds in Vietnam and the diaspora striving to keep the repertoire alive.

Indeed, the postcolonial baggage of imagining these popular songs as being overly western should be challenged. As Reyes puts it: "[it is] taking the easy way out" (1991, 101). However, for many postwar musicians living under the law of the land—the reproduction of the

orientalist discourse where music history is simplified into the binary of "more-modern is more neo-colonial vs. more-traditional/folk is more Vietnamese"—self-orientalization may have been *the only way out*. Ironically, it is from the perspective that bolero music is of Western progeny that musicians in Vietnam are able to defocus its cultural associations with the old republic and refocus them as being part of a pan-Vietnamese tradition. Bolero is more than a shallow term and trend since it points to a series of cultural tactics from below—where branded criminals and traitors of the postwar would eventually ascend the stage of Vietnam once again, baptized under the glory of post-socialism. While the adoption of economic policies liberating the market should not be without credit, the musicians, professionals and consumers in both Vietnam and the diaspora should be recognized as noteworthy contributors too.

Conclusion

In 2023, Hương Lan performed nationally in multiple episodes of the TV show *The Masked Singer Vietnam.* Although she did not win, the adoration of this pre-1975 singer with a large following among the younger generation gave cause to believe that bolero is not a bad deal. When she was first allowed back to tour in 1994, the state only allowed her to perform at small local venues, and officials had to accompany her wherever she went. On the one hand, she received numerous concessions from the various ministries and officials in the country, and on the other hand she faced a backlash from anticommunist groups in the diaspora for performing in Vietnam (Valverde 2003, 40-1). Even though she was reproved at both sides of the political spectrum, which included violent threats, Hương Lan continued to perform for the Vietnamese in Vietnam and the diaspora. Because of the earlier postwar struggles, many

musicians today are able to travel between Vietnam and the diaspora without facing as many barriers. As Quang Lê noted before he sobbed on national television, Vietnam now has a "stage" for bolero musicians to sing (Quang Lê, VIVA Network 2017). More importantly, bolero is a transnational stage, and it is not just for musicians. The greater accessibility to Vietnamese bolero songs throughout Vietnam and the diaspora, comprising largely of the repertoire of pre-1975 war songs, has fostered a greater appreciation and curiosity about "Vietnamese" music (popular and traditional), languages (songs are sung in Vietnamese, Khmer, English, French etc.) and histories of Vietnam and the diaspora for the younger generations.

The name bolero is derived from the Spanish language and its history entangled with colonial contact. Vietnamese bolero music, however, refers to a progeny of musical ballads practiced predominantly by people identified nationally or transnationally as Vietnamese. A characteristic of many bolero songs is that the verses are often heavy with Sino-Vietnamese lyrics and literary tropes. These features in music can be traced in broad strokes to the fifteenth century with *hát ả đào*, a form of high art popular among the literati and social elites (UNESCO, B1; Nguyen 2008, 206). While Phạm Duy maintains that *hát ả đào* was derived from the pre-existing lineages of folk songs and local rituals ("Ca Nhạc Phòng"), the Sino-centric elements of Vietnamese musical ballads trans-generationally also points to the ongoing legacy where the Kinh (Vietnamese ethnic majority) have maintained a monopoly of power, thereby foisting their Sino-inspired doctrines, language, literature, and music onto the territories and subjects of conquest. Thus, it is important to be reminded that Vietnam was not culturally barren in the early twentieth century when the Latin rhythms were introduced. On the contrary, its socio-political landscape was deeply preconfigured in

the epistemologies of high art and ethnic subjugation. As such, the arrival of Western harmonies and Latin rhythms did not give birth to the tradition of ballads nor to Vietnam's culture of dance music rituals, but rather they were novel elements used to express what was already being practiced artistically, collectively, and hegemonically.

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