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## 9 **Actually existing hybridity**

### Vietnamese diasporic music video

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Being originally refugees and only lately immigrants makes the Vietnamese peoples in the Western world very aware of the pull between maintaining their original cultures and adapting to their new host cultures. For most, 'home' is an officially denied category while the communist regime continues in power, and so media networks, especially music video, operate to connect the dispersed Vietnamese communities. Small business entrepreneurs produce low-budget music video, mostly out of southern California, which is taken up within the fan circuits of America, Australia, Canada, France and elsewhere. The internal cultural conflicts within the communities centre on the felt need to maintain pre-revolutionary Vietnamese heritage and traditions, find a negotiated place within a more mainstreamed culture or engage in the formation of distinct hybrid identities around the appropriation of dominant Western popular cultural forms. These three cultural positions or stances are dynamic and mutable, but the main cultural and social debates are constructed around them – they are therefore a useful heuristic which can be used to organise analysis.

The Vietnamese have had a long history of migration within their immediate region but a very limited history of migration outside of Vietnam. By 1975 only about a hundred thousand Vietnamese were living outside Vietnam. However, from 1965 to 1975, during the height of the Vietnam (or 'American') War, over half of Vietnam's population were displaced internally, and now the Vietnamese diaspora numbers something over two million Vietnam-born throughout the world. (The current population in Vietnam is 76 million.) To this of course should be added a substantial second (and emergent third generation), those born to Vietnamese parents in the host countries, whose numbers are notoriously unreliable because census data collection in several countries follow widely variant protocols, but is estimated at more than half a million. About a half of the total diaspora is domiciled in the United States, with significant population centres in Orange County, San Jose, Texas, Minneapolis, Washington and Houston. Other major host countries include France, Canada, Australia, Germany and the Netherlands. Given the fraught history of the treatment of refugees in the immediate East Asian and South-East Asian region, it is not surprising that there are very few Vietnamese resettled in the

country's immediate region. Overall, there are about 70 population centres across the world with some Vietnamese presence outside the homeland.

### **Vietnamese diasporic music video**

The live variety shows, and music video productions based on and arising from them, produced by Vietnamese-owned and operated companies based in southern California and exported to all overseas communities, are the only media form unique to the diaspora as audio-visual media made by and for the diaspora. This media form bears many similarities to the commercial and variety-based cultural production of Iranian television in Los Angeles studied by Naficy (1993), not least because Vietnamese variety show and music video production is also centred in the Los Angeles conurbation. The Vietnamese grouped there are not as numerous or rich as Naficy's Iranians and so have not developed the extent of the business infrastructure to support the range and depth of media activity recounted in Naficy's *The Making of Exile Cultures*. The business infrastructure of Vietnamese audio-visual production is structured around a small number of small businesses operating on low margins. It is, as Kolar-Panov dubs ethnic minority video circuits as they are perceived from outside, a 'shadow system' (1997: 31) operating in parallel to the majoritarian system, with few industry linkages and very little cross-over of performer or audience.

To be exilic means not, or at least not 'officially', being able to draw on the contemporary cultural production of the home country. Indeed it means 'officially' denying its existence in a dialectical process of mutual disauthentication (Carruthers 2001). The Vietnam government asserts that the *Viet Kieu* (the appellation for Vietnamese overseas which carries a pejorative connotation) may be fatally Westernised, whereas the diasporic population proposes that the homeland population has been de-ethnicised through, ironically, the wholesale adoption of an alien (Western) ideology of Marxism-Leninism. The widely dispersed geography and the demography of a small series of communities frame the conditions for 'global narrowcasting', that is, ethnically specific cultural production for widely dispersed population fragments centripetally organised around an officially excluded homeland. This makes the media, and the media use, of the Vietnamese diaspora significantly different from the media consumption of large diasporas, such the Chinese or Indian diasporas, which focus on large production centres in the 'home' countries.

These conditions also determine the nature of the production companies (Thuy Nga, Asia/Dem Saigon, Mey/Hollywood Nights, Khanh Ha, Diem Xua and others). These are small businesses running at low margins and constantly undercut by copying of their video product outside the United States (particularly in Vietnam itself) where their ability to police copyright is restricted by not having the time or resources to follow up breaches. They have clustered around the only Vietnamese population base which offers critical mass and is geographically adjacent to the world-leading entertainment-communications-

information (ECI) complex in southern California. There is evidence of internal migration within the diaspora from the rest of the US, Canada and France to southern California to take advantage of the largest overseas Vietnamese population concentration and the world's major ECI complex.

Thuy Nga Productions is by far the largest and most successful company. It organises major live shows in the US and franchises an appearance schedule for the high-profile performers at shows around the global diaspora, and has produced over 60, two-hour videotapes since the early 1980s as well as a constant flow of CDs, audiocassettes and karaoke discs. President and owner of Thuy Nga, To Van Lai, was a university psychology professor before establishing Thuy Nga in 1969. Named after his wife, Thuy Nga was set up as a recording and production label which actuated To's stance as a cultural intellectual bringing traditional folk and contemporary Vietnamese music traditions into contact with popular American and French music. Thuy Nga Productions' *Paris by Night* series, at start-up in the early 1980s, evoked pre-1975 Saigon through its revival of cabaret music and entertainment from previously well-established Vietnamese performers, such as Elvis Phuong, Jo Marcel and Khanh Ly. Due to the rising costs of production, more public demand for live concert performances in the US and Canada, the demand for regularisation of music video production protocols and the fact that the majority of Vietnamese performers were living in the US, To moved Thuy Nga production to Orange County in the late 1980s. The first *Paris by Night* video produced in 1983 was recorded in Paris and cost about US\$19,000. It consisted of 11 performances with local Vietnamese in Paris. In comparison, in the late 1990s, Thuy Nga releases at least four videos a year, consisting usually of 24 performances from a range of international Vietnamese performers, a stage and technical crew of approximately three hundred people, often recording in front of packed audiences. Production costs per video have moved to US\$500,000.

*Paris by Night* had the challenging task of breaking into the well-established demand for Chinese-language video in the US, which 'monopolised' the overseas Vietnamese market through the 1980s. According to To, the Vietnamese audience's 'addiction' to Hong Kong multi-tape television series had a deleterious effect on their working lives and their lifestyles.<sup>1</sup> Within the wider issues of dealing with the new country, the contribution of 'addiction' to Chinese videos worsened the community's social dilemmas. To Van Lai's attempt to provide an alternative to the Chinese-language material began to work after 1986 when the release of its first special documentary edition *Gia Biệt Saigon* (*Farewell Saigon*), which is discussed below. The revenue and profit generated from the live performances and shows help to fund the production of music videos, CDs and karaoke discs. To claims sales figures per video of approximately forty thousand and up to eighty thousand for 'specials' in the US, but also states that overseas sales are not a significant or stable revenue source due to illegal dubbing of tapes.

The other most popular company committed to high production values is

ASIA Productions (Dem Saigon/Saigon Nights). It was established in the US in the early 1980s and, in contrast to Thuy Nga, ASIA is not a family business but is owned by shareholders and run by a manager. ASIA reaches out beyond the established community performers, focusing more than Thuy Nga on promoting new talent in the US and Canada. Through an annual 'star search' competition, Truc Ho, ASIA's music director, scouts for talent, offering contracts to perform live shows, video-taping and CD recordings for the company. It also encourages its audience to take part in the 'quest for stardom' by testing talent using its karaoke recordings, and then sending in tapes of the performances. Shortlisted singers are given the opportunity to perform in front of a live audience to get feedback on their performance. Like all other production companies, the main revenue and profit derives from the ticket sales of live shows and the domestic sale of CDs, videos and karaoke discs.

### **The videoscape: texts and consumption**

From data supplied by the production companies and distributors, the rates of sale and rental derived from samples of video store retailers, and the scale of attendances at regular live variety performances, it can be surmised that most overseas Vietnamese households may own or rent some of this music video material.<sup>2</sup> A significant proportion have developed comprehensive home libraries. This material's popularity is exemplary, cutting across differences of ethnicity, age, gender, recency of arrival, refugee or immigrant status, and home region. It is also widely available in pirated form in Vietnam itself, as the economic and cultural 'thaw' that has proceeded since Doi Moi policies of greater openness have resulted in extensive penetration of the homeland by this most international form of Vietnamese expression.<sup>3</sup> As the only popular culture produced by and specifically for the Vietnamese diaspora, there is a deep investment in these texts by and within the overseas communities; an investment by no means homogeneous but uniformly strong. The social text which surrounds, indeed engulfs, these productions is intense, multi-layered and makes its address across differences of generation, gender, ethnicity, class and education levels and recency of arrival. 'Audiovisual images become so important for young Vietnamese as a point of reference, as a tool for validation and as a vehicle towards self identity'.<sup>4</sup>

The central point linking business operations, the textual dynamics of the music videos and media use within the communities is that what we have called the three cultural positions or stances in the communities, and the musical styles which give expression to them, have to be accommodated somehow within the same productions because of the marginal size of the audience base. From the point of view of business logic, each style cannot exist without the others. Thus the organisational structure of the shows and the videos, both at the level of the individual show/video and at the level of whole company outputs, particularly those of Thuy Nga and ASIA, reflect the heterogeneity required to maximise audience within a strictly narrowcast range. This

is a programming philosophy congruent with broadcasting to a globally spread, narrowcast demographic. This also underscores why 'the variety show form has been a mainstay of overseas Vietnamese anti-communist culture from the mid-1970s onwards' (Carruthers 2001). In any given live show or video production, the musical styles might range from pre-colonial traditionalism, to French colonial-era high modernist classicism, to crooners adapting Vietnamese folksongs to the Sinatra era, through to bilingual cover versions of Grease or Madonna. Stringing this concatenation of taste cultures together are the compères, typically well-known political and cultural figures in their own right, who perform a rhetorical unifying function:

Audience members are constantly recouped via the show's diegesis, and the anchoring role of the comperes and their commentaries, into an overarching conception of shared overseas Vietnamese identity. This is centred on the appeal to core cultural values, common tradition, linguistic unity and an anti-communist homeland politics.

(Carruthers 2001: 124)

Within this overall political trajectory, however, there are major differences to be managed. The stances evidenced in the video and live material range on a continuum from 'pure' heritage maintenance and ideological monitoring, to mainstream cultural negotiation, through to assertive hybridity. Most performers and productions seek to situate themselves within the mainstream of cultural negotiation between Vietnamese and Western traditions. However, at one end of the continuum there are strong attempts to keep both the original folkloric music traditions alive and also the integrity of the originary anti-communist stance foundational to the diaspora through very public criticism of any lapse from that stance. At the other end, Vietnamese-American youth culture is exploring the limits of hybrid identities through 'New Wave', radical intermixing of musical styles. We shall consider some textual examples of each style and audience/readership responses to them.

### **Heritage maintenance**

Heritage maintenance embraces a range of cultural and informational production and is closely connected to the ideological monitoring role of maintaining the salience of the anti-communist stance foundational to the diaspora. Diasporic video is one of the prime sites monitored. This is borne out spectacularly in the 'Mother' issue of *Paris by Night*. *Paris by Night* issue 40 was released in 1997 to coincide with *Vu Lan*, the Season of Filial Piety, a time for special veneration of parents. The video was particularly popular, but popularity turned to condemnation in the diaspora when it was discovered that a small segment of documentary war footage showing planes strafing and killing South Vietnamese civilians was actually of the Republic of South Vietnam (RSA) air forces. Thuy Nga asserted it was the innocent mistake of a young and inexperienced editor;

both To Van Lai and compère Nguyen Ngoc Ngan were forced to publish apologies in the main newspapers and calm very angry responses on websites, in letters to the editor, on radio and in demonstrations outside Thuy Nga's offices. Some even alleged that it was a cynical ploy by the company to establish its good name in Vietnam in advance of a greater entrepreneurial effort in the homeland.

The Mother imbroglio has been extensively analysed by Carruthers (2001). Carruthers stresses the porosity of communications flows between the diaspora and the homeland, noting that the degree of ideological border-drawing on which the identity and integrity of both the homeland regime and the diasporic community depend is increasingly difficult to sustain under the pressures of globalisation. However, it is appropriate for our themes that we stress that the Mother episode illustrates the degree of psychic and ideological investment in the music video corpus and the degree to which it, like all public cultural manifestations, is monitored for deviations from the ideological foundations of the diaspora. The social text of the corpus is subtended by strong community expectations of a proper education for the young in the reasons for cultural maintenance. While much of the dissolution of boundaries between homeland and diaspora proceeds around cultural product, entrepreneurship and travel (it was estimated that about twenty thousand Australian Vietnamese visited Vietnam annually in the mid-1990s), there continues to be organised resistance to such dissolution among the overseas populations. Examples include boycotts of restaurants run by government-aligned owners; a new shopping complex known as the 'cultural court' in the heart of Westminster on Balsa Avenue, that was part-financed by homeland sources, has been conspicuously under-patronised and for a good time virtually boycotted in the months following its opening in 1996. And international attention was drawn in 1999 to the community attacks on a shop-owner in the precinct who insisted on flying the official country flag and displaying pictures of Ho Chi Minh.

The main musical expression of heritage maintenance lies in the restoration and preservation of traditional Vietnamese music style (and the instruments on which they are played). Major cultural figures such as Pham Duy, often titled in American media coverage as the 'Woody Guthrie' of Vietnam, have devoted long careers to the maintenance of the received Vietnamese heritage in folk culture.<sup>5</sup> The purity is maintained through a scholarly attention to the traditions and their transmission to a younger, dispersed generation; the artisanal attention to the playing of traditional Vietnamese musical instruments; and also a preparedness to transmit this heritage by contemporary technologies such as CD and the Internet. Into this category should also be placed a considerable amount of traditional folk balladry and a residual element of traditional Vietnamese opera on the tapes. This form of 'pure' heritage maintenance is clearly mainly consumed by the older generation of the educated elite.

A small fraction of the music video corpus is given over to heritage maintenance across the entire tape. These six to eight tapes are constructed quite

differently to the rest and are at the other end of the stylistic continuum from the live show formats. They are compilation documentary-style video, and have been produced typically to commemorate historical anniversaries in the overseas communities' lives. An early example of the historical compilation video is Thuy Nga 10, *Gia Biet Saigon (Farewell Saigon)*. Made in 1986, this Thuy Nga production has none of the sophisticated production values and choreography of later productions; in fact it is organised on quite different principles to the variety show format of most of the corpus. The organisational principle is one of popular memory, bearing all the hallmarks of a very specific address to the military, educational, business and government elites of the South Vietnam regime in the period leading to the fall of Saigon.

This principle of organisation makes it a virtually unwatchable tape for all but this specific audience. The great majority of second-generation and recent arrivals who participated in our focus groups and interviews asserted that historical compilation material was 'for [their] parents' or for those who 'had been through the events' being recounted. *Farewell Saigon* is a tape of approximately 90 minutes duration, comprising historical footage of pre-1975 Saigon (together with some post-1975 footage) with studio-based musical interludes sung by profiled performers of the same or similar generation to the target audience – those performers who successfully transitioned from pre- to post-1975 as part of the diaspora. The great majority of the elapsed time on the tape is a video essay extolling the strength, social balance and harmony, and dynamism of a well-governed and stable Republic of Vietnam during the Diem and Thieu years. So much can be readily deduced from the contents and organisation of the tape. What can be *adduced* from its reception and use within the specific target audience – the original diasporic elites – is both the depth of loss and longing which the tape engenders and, on the other hand, a still-strong politics of disavowal of the regime's complicity in its own downfall and the continued placing of blame on America as a 'great and powerful friend' which withdrew its support unilaterally, rendering the defence of the republic impossible. The vertiginous shifts from triumphalism to abjection, from very long static camera angles on impeccably suited parades of military to the hand-held chaos of the end-time of 1975 has strong parallels with the abrupt changes of tempo and testamental nature of the Croatian video analysed by Kolar-Panov (1997: 153). The footage combines travelogue-style panoramas of market scenes, major downtown buildings, the Presidential Palace, main girls' and boys' schools, and a compendium of religious buildings. The second set of visual materials include a highly structured, syncopated visual hymn to the women of the republic, cut to complement the ballad 'Co gai Viet' (The Vietnamese Lady) in a studio setting by three women performers wearing signifiers of north, centre and south regions of a pre-communist unified country. The third type is very extensive footage of a military parade on the National Day that was held on 26 October each year. Voice-over commentary details the different regiments in careful detail and occupies almost half an hour of the tape.



What is readable as flat 'propaganda' and inexcusably tedious editing by its non-intended audience is received very differently by its primary audience, the original diasporic elites. For them, *Farewell Saigon* is like a home movie. There are no specific time references to anchor the footage at a particular date apart from its ambience in the later 1960s or early 1970s; it inhabits a modality of popular memory, with very specific anchors of place but not of time. In one family with whom researchers were invited to watch the video, the father had been an RSA fighter pilot and had been interned in a re-education camp for 11 years before being allowed to come to Australia under the family reunion programme. *Farewell Saigon* has footage of his military unit which he finds impossible to watch. The mother can point out the school she went to as a girl – the images of a sea of white *ao dai* (traditional dress worn by Vietnamese women) spreading gaily from the gates of the school are images of Confucian educational rectitude and the innocence of youth that are almost equally impossible to watch.

There are also those for whom the politics of this tape are to be foregrounded: 'The video brings back emotional memories of how proud and honoured Vietnamese should be with their country and not believe false propaganda and damaging accusations by foreign political analysts and the Vietcong' and 'It was produced to remind the Vietnamese and the rest of the world that Vietnam was once an independent nation until it was betrayed in the war by its American allies' are representative of the public construction that can be placed on this material by its intended audience. It is important to note that there is nothing in the tape commentary or visuals that directly attacks the USA – but there is a studied absence of virtually any signifier of what was by the time of the footage an overwhelming American presence in Saigon. There is also a very direct political sense in which *Farewell Saigon* is like a home movie. Most of the documentary footage used in the video was smuggled out of the country just before the fall of Saigon by the Vietnamese Student Association in Paris. It was then handed over to a senior military figure who gave To Van Lai copyright clearance to use the footage in his assembly for *Gai Biet Saigon*. The footage is a virtual palimpsest of the violence of exile – such media, left behind after the fall of Saigon, would have had prime value in targeting elite members of the fallen regime.

### **Cultural negotiation**

The auspices of the inevitable and widespread negotiation between Vietnamese and Western cultural forms are predominantly the owners of the small business music video production houses and the principal well-established performers. Many of these figures were prominent in South Vietnamese cultural production before 1975 and have maintained that position in the ensuing decades. They are educated in the heritage and have maintained the popular memory as they simultaneously auspice the inevitable hybridisation of this heritage under the commercial imperative. But this is to continue a well-established historical

hybridisation. For the most established, there are direct links back to pre-1975 Saigon, and the continuities of such converged music forms being developed and practiced well before 1975 need to be accounted for. The hybridity of Vietnamese music culture has its roots both fundamentally in millennial Chinese–Vietnamese interchange and more latterly with French interchange during the colonial period. In the 1960s it was the massive influence of American rock and roll during the war, especially in Saigon, which provided the most recent pre-exile infusion of hybrid elements. Pham's historical treatise *Musics of Vietnam* (1973), even as it is committed to the identification and preservation of the country's folk traditions, shows that the south's major styles of theatrical romanticism in performance, while influenced by French and latterly American traditions, was originally a Chinese influence (*ibid.*: 118). Vietnamese area studies could benefit significantly from a greater sense of the mutability and adaptability of its object of study, and this is nowhere clearer than in the area of popular culture. Terry Rambo, arguing this case, shows that even such an exemplary symbol of Vietnamese authenticity, the *aodai*, is a borrowing from Chinese culture (Rambo 1987).

Of the cultural positions available to the communities, that which accepts the inevitability of cultural negotiation and adaptation and fashions musical styles around that position seeks to minimise the more liminal postures of heritage maintenance or assertive hybridity. The musical styles are mainstreamed and stable in style, based on established patterns of intermixing Chinese, French and US inputs from before 1975. A major figure, Elvis Phoung – an Elvis cover singer before it became a global industry! – was an established performer in Saigon before 1975 whose career has continued unabated throughout the exile. Other major performers include Luu Bich, Tuan Ngoc and Khanh Ha. Befitting its mainstream status, probably two-thirds of the corpus is of this type, as it is predominantly easy listening or middle-of-the-road 'crooner' presentational styles that are the least confronting and of potentially broadest address across audience interests. The style of music renews audience connections to the soft melodic music and sentimental ballads often performed in bars and cabarets of the pre-1975 period. Visually, this style of presentation rarely employs documentary footage characteristic of the first style, nor does it involve the elaborate postmodern-pastiche stage settings and 'excessive' costuming of the third style. All the companies aim for this type of predominant content, as it will maximise its target audience. The other two categories occupy together roughly the other third of output.

'Hat Cho Ngay Hom Qua' ('Song of Yesterday') (in *Paris by Night* issue 20, 1993), a 'lien khuc' (medley) with performers Elvis Phuong, Duy Quang, Anh Khoa and Tuan Ngoc, is a good example. Performed bilingually, the medley comprises popular Western songs of Elvis Presley and John Lennon, and music from the era of the Vietnam War ('Yesterday', 'Stand by me', and so on). The performance draws upon the memories of the mature audience who lived in Saigon throughout the 1950s to 1970s; hence the title: 'Hat Cho Ngay Hom Qua'. That audience's memories of an era of continual war, struggle and

devastation are mapped gently onto the 'hardships' which are the thematic substance of the original Western songs (lost and unrequited love and so on) and the massive disjunction is managed in the ambience of nostalgia and tasteful dinner jackets on the set.

Innovation within this style is centred on harmonious both-ways adaptation; Vietnamese interpretation of foreign music or traditional Vietnamese lyrics with the influence of contemporary Western music. New songwriters like Nhat Ngan and Khuc Lan specialise in translating and interpreting Chinese and French songs into Vietnamese new wave music. Luu Bich is often linked with the latter, performing a wide range of Chinese ballads translated into Vietnamese with one of the most popular songs being 'Chiec La Mua Dong' (The Leaf of Winter). Composers like Van Phung and Ngo Thuy Mien, for example, are strongly influenced by jazz and rhythm and blues. In 'Noi Long' (Feelings) (*Paris by Night* issue 39, 1997), Bich Chieu's performance of lyrics which are purely Vietnamese is revamped with a Western influence of jazz and blues. The initial reaction from one focus group of young, recently arrived school students watching this was that it was 'weird' and 'un-Vietnamese'. However, after discussion and reflection they were able to appreciate the new version of the song.

The most productive means of grasping the cultural work audiences are performing with this music is to see it as positively modelling identity transition. The simple lyrics, well known to the point of cliché ('easy listening') in Vietnamese, English or French, provide a reassuring point of recognition for those (mostly the older, more recently arrived) who find themselves displaced in an overseas community where language is the main cultural barrier, while others (mostly the young) are provided an easier way into understanding their own family's cultural environment. ASIA Productions specialise in this approach. Thanh and Jasmine, a well-educated brother and sister who are dedicated fans of the music, reflected that they were initially attracted to their own heritage by their interest in the remixing of traditional folklore music through the music videos of ASIA Productions.

The cultural negotiation position can also be distinguished politically from heritage maintenance insofar as it is prepared to negotiate certain emergent relationships with the homeland, a stance unthinkable within the first category. As Carruthers (2001) points out, the revered composer Trinh Cong Son, who actually lives in Vietnam but enjoys equal popularity both at home and abroad, has had a long collaboration with popular diaspora singer Khanh Ly. Also, diaspora artists are now beginning to test the home market with some live performances, such as at the major Tet celebrations since 1996. Indeed, there is greater reciprocity to this emergent and problematic rapprochement than might at first appear:

The homeland pirate culture industry has been able to take advantage of lax copyright and censorship laws to enjoy the fruits of overseas Vietnamese media companies' labours without contributing to their revenues, while

overseas companies have been able to exploit the first world/third world divide by going to Vietnam to record the voices of local singers, mastering them in studios back in France and the US, and releasing the CDs at a significantly lower price than those produced entirely overseas.

(Carruthers 2001: 140–4)

### **'New wave' assertive hybridity**

While the hybrid retains its links to and identification with its origins, it is also shaped and transformed by (and in turn, shapes and transforms) its location in the present. Belonging at the same time to several 'homes', it cannot simply dissolve into a culturally unified form. The complex achievement of the hybrid is a product of [the] obligation to 'come to terms with and to make something new of the cultures they inhabit, without simply assimilating to them'. The result . . . is a celebration of cultural impurity, a 'love-song to our mongrel selves'.

(Turner 1994: 124–5, internal quotes Hall 1993: 362)

The reception for performers who assertively seek to fully appropriate Western rock and pop (in a style that is dubbed 'New Wave') can be as intense as the political controversies around incidents such as the Mother episode. This 'assertive hybridity' is exclusively a phenomenon of youth culture, and centres on its very specific formation at 'ground zero' in southern California. The 'excesses' of controversial performers such as Lynda Trang Dai, Nhu Mai, The Magic or Don Ho have some precedent within the context of Californian Vietnamese-American youth culture (as evidenced by the specialist lifestyle magazines for Vietnamese-American young people such as *Viet Now*). However, the economics of live performance and music video production necessitates a much broader audience and thus a context beyond its niche age and style demographic. New Wave, at its most basic, refers to bilingual – English and Vietnamese – song lyrics. But it is also about playful, political and increasingly ambitious appropriations or pastiches of mostly American rock and pop rendered into Vietnamese – with some examples being 'Black Magic Woman', 'Hotel California' and 'Fernando'. But innovative performers like Don Ho have ranged much wider – for example, in *Paris by Night: Las Vegas* (issue 29, 1995), Don Ho's 'Caravan of Life' performance was based on a well-known Chinese song, translated into Vietnamese and performed in the setting which highlighted the oppression of the Nepalese.

Lynda Trang Dai is prototypical of this stance, and is a well-established but very controversial figure in Vietnamese music performance. She has established a profile since the mid-1980s modelling herself on Madonna, reprising most of Madonna's personae from the fishnet stockings-crucifix-white trash-material girl to the toned gym junkie to the feminine-Vogue look. It is entirely possible to see Lynda's confrontational personae as doubly mapped onto the provocations Madonna posed to sexual/musical/religious representations over

this period, given that her career has been entirely played out within the Vietnamese community. Her influence can be measured by her pioneering 'assertive hybridity' and by the strength of audience response, which in its extremes is *sui generis* in the Vietnamese music industry. It is not only in sexual Westernisms that this occurs; there is much more stress in this style of music on the dramatic/excessive surfaces of performance, costume and reprising contemporary Western rock, pop and rap than on traditional Vietnamese music's emphasis on subtly coded variations of voice and face. Thanh, a young proprietor of a karaoke coffee shop who is extremely knowledgeable about all aspects of the Vietnamese music scene, offered this analysis:

Linda is the first Vietnamese to do that [fashion a form of extreme hybridity] when she came out. It was a clash of cultures especially with the older generation. They were giving her a bad name. But guys like her performances. Now everyone [that is, Vietnamese performers] just copies Linda while she continues to copy Madonna. Linda was daring to do that because Vietnamese performers at that time were more traditional and very influenced by the Vietnamese culture.

Over time, she has – and very importantly in the Vietnamese community – officially 'earned respect' in terms of her longevity and solid track record of performance, and a typical introduction to a Lynda performance by a compère might now be the respectful coding 'a Vietnamese woman with a Western style of performance', or this saying quoted by one of the MCs linking the performances on *Paris by Night* issue 36, 'khau za ma tam phat/although the mouth speaks badly, the heart speaks of goodness'. Nevertheless, at the level of gossip and rumour in the unofficial culture, a figure like Lynda is the occasion for much boundary-marking. On the one hand, it is very difficult for the young, particularly those without Vietnamese language skills and/or sufficient background in the formal poetic rhetoric of much of the music embodying the heritage maintenance and cultural negotiation positions, to be able to appreciate them – the Westernised/Americanised posture of a Lynda offers some purchase into Vietnamese culture. For Thanh and Jasmine (Thanh's sister, who runs the grocery store adjacent to Thanh's coffee shop), the single most crucial factor in excluding potential fans of this music video is high-enough levels of language competence. On the other hand, Lynda will often bring out an 'ultra-Vietnamese' reaction, with gossip about face lifts, corruption of the language through sloppy lyrics and 'inability to sing rather than just perform', and dismissal of her claims to feminist credentials on the basis that 'women's rights are a Western issue' – precisely why, for the New Wave youth following, it should be foregrounded! 'Cyber Queen' (*Paris by Night* issue 32, 1995) is Lynda's reprise of Madonna in her Gaultier cyborg phase. Lynda and her backing singers and dancers are costumed as steely cyborgs, the women sporting conical bras. The English lyrics are consistent with the choreography of the piece, but there is a complete disjunction with the Vietnamese lyrics, which speak in

traditional coding of 'winds and waterfalls'. There is also a disjunctive gesture midway through the song when Lynda unveils the Republic of Vietnam flag under one arm and the United States flag under the other. This nationalistic gesture would be characteristic of a heritage maintenance performance but is received with some bewilderment as part of this style.

Don Ho is one of the most popular performers for younger Vietnamese. His performances are noted for their elaborate choreography, set design, costuming and innovation, along with sophisticated cover versions of a wide range of exclusively Western songs. 'I Just Died in Your Arms' (*Paris by Night* issue 36, 1996) was a Western hit song in the late 1980s and, in this instance and compared to 'Cyber Queen', there is a close conjunction between the English and the Vietnamese 'translation' from the English. The Vietnamese lyrics, being a translation and not a lyrical sequence or song in its own right in the language, is, for some, a stronger provocation to Vietnamese lyrical traditions and to traditional models of romance and sexual relations. The song embraces without reservation the iconic degeneracy, the female sexual predation, the sex and death equivalences and the eviscerated manhood that are at the centre of the European vampire mythologies. And, by and large, the Vietnamese lyrical component is drawn directly into this field of meaning. There is nothing that compels identification as Vietnamese in either the staging or referencing in the lyrics. One focus group of young school-aged, recently arrived migrants were generally consensual about Don Ho being 'American' rather than 'Vietnamese' because the mannerisms in which he performs are 'foreign'. Such as his dress, the Western songs he sings, the way he dances, the fact that there are back-up dancers performing with him and particularly in this performance, the stage design being European Gothic (coffins, chandeliers, the crepuscular smoke, female vampires with extended canines, black capes and ghostly make-up). Others in the group commented that he is a 'lai', a 'half-breed', as a performer.

In 'going too far', the assertive hybridity position provokes criticism and risks losing at least part of its intended audience. A music store owner catering primarily to Vietnamese youth argues that the young listen primarily to Western techno and house music and may regard the more radical performers and styles as in fact assimilationist as they are 'cheap imitations' of dominant Western styles. If they want to 'be' Vietnamese in their music tastes, they will turn to the more middle-of-the-road material of cultural negotiation which engages identifiably distinct Vietnamese traditions.

## Conclusion

Each time I view these videos, the feeling I am left with afterwards is one of complete exhilaration or of absolute sadness. There is no in between. It is either one extreme or the other. Having left Vietnam as a child of 7 years of age in 1976, I do not have strong recollection of the physical landscape of Vietnam, of the traditions, the tastes, the smell, the sights, the sounds of this 'homeland'. Every image that comes on screen builds for me

the 'reality' of what Vietnam is and was. And it is these images that I collect and refer to when I speak of Vietnam. It is not the Vietnam that once existed or the country as it is now that swims in my head. Vietnam becomes for me a collection of images I have been immersed in through media.<sup>6</sup>

The rate of emigration from Vietnam slowed appreciably over the latter 1990s; the proportion of those who were originally refugees also diminished appreciably, while the numbers of those visiting Vietnam for business or family purposes rose. Whereas the official culture of the diaspora continues to remain strongly anti-communist and anti-homeland government, growing numbers of particularly the young are forging 'hyphenated' ('Asian-American', 'Asian-Australian') identities which owe less to the past and more to a globalising present. For such small communities, there is a remarkable diversity both of the population and their economic, social and cultural circumstances. It is arguable that diaspora communities provide examples of cultural formations at their most mutable, with political change both in the homelands and the host countries, inter-generational tension a key given the recency of departures from the homeland, and very sharp socio-economic differences between the successful and the struggling. The media consumed by overseas Vietnamese people, rather than resolving the conflicts thrown up by such mutability, as a functionalist model of media-social relations would have it, tend rather to 'stage' them, give them voice and manage them in a productive tension. Western claims to cultural pluralism would be more plausible if the 'shadow system' of diasporic video, music and popular culture was to come into a fuller light.

### Notes

- 1 To Van Lai, interview conducted by Tina Nguyen and Stuart Cunningham, Westminster, CA, May 1996.
- 2 The industry does not have resources for large-scale tracking surveys.
- 3 Carruthers (2001) points to data from 1996 which estimates that 85 to 90 per cent of stock in Saigon's unlicensed video stores was foreign.
- 4 Trang Nguyen, personal communications and research notes, June 1997.
- 5 He wrote a historical treatise, *Musics of Vietnam* (1973), has had several special issue videos dedicated to his corpus and has recreated *Truyen a Kieu/The Tale of Kieu* as a folk opera dubbed the 'Iliad of Vietnam'.
- 6 Trang Nguyen, June 1997.