

The Emergence of Chinese Popular Music in Vietnamese Lyrics (nhạc Hoa lời Việt), 1979-1995

Nicholas Chik^{1,a,*}

¹Department of History, Columbia University, New York, 10027, USA

a. nc3070@columbia.edu

*corresponding author

Abstract: This paper studies the cultural phenomenon of *nhạc Hoa lời Việt*, a (sub)genre of *nhạc Vàng* music that blends Chinese melodies with Vietnamese lyrics which first gained prominence among the Vietnamese diaspora in the 1980s. The paper traces the historical and cultural origins of *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* in translations and adaptations of Chinese popular music, outlining three major historical periods. The first period spanning from 1979-1986, encompasses the genre's emergence in Vietnamese refugee communities following the Sino-Vietnamese War, influenced by the popularity of Cantonese “wuxia” TV dramas. The second period from 1986-1995 marks the genre's commercial flourishing due to the “*Đổi mới*” policy. The final period after 1995 marks the fundamental transformation of the genre following the “normalization” of relations between the United States and Vietnam, when, energized by the possibility of returning to Vietnam, *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* shed the final vestiges of the melancholic and sentimental style it inherited from wartime *nhạc Vàng* and became its own genre. This paper examines the importance of *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* in shaping the Vietnamese exiled identity and analyzes how the practice of translation allowed the diasporic community to give expression to its refugee experience. The paper helps uncover a new kind of musical fusion that developed from an exiled culture in a transpacific context.

Keywords: Nhạc Vàng, Nhạc Hoa lời Việt, Diaspora, Vietnamese refugees, Vietnam War.

1. Introduction

If one were a *Việt-Hoa*, that is, a Vietnamese refugee with Chinese roots, walking the streets of Little Saigon in Orange County, California, in 1994, catching a trace line from Như Quỳnh's “Người tình mùa đông” from the Asia Entertainment show Asia 6 performance would have been quite evocative [1]. The gentle bop of her melodies appeals broadly across generations, with her signature charm woven into both her semi-spoken performance and the gentle sway of her hips. Yet, for listeners familiar with the more widely known Cantopop genre, Như Quỳnh's performance would likely invoke the memory of mainland-born Hong Kong singer Faye Wang's Cantonese classic “Vulnerable Woman” [2]. Như Quỳnh's performance is a classic example of *nhạc Hoa lời Việt*, or “Chinese music, with Vietnamese words,” a genre of music that has deep roots in the Mekong Delta but only began to emerge as a distinct style in the context of the Republic of Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. The pro-American and staunchly anti-communist alignment of the Saigon government in this era increased the availability of music from British Hong Kong and White Terror Taiwan. Many songs that came through the airwaves in Vietnam from Mandarinized Taiwan were quickly re-adopted and performed

with Vietnamese lyrics for local audiences in this period. Still, Cantonese remained a lingua franca among Southeast Asia's Nanhai (South Seas) Chinese communities, including in Chợ Lớn – formerly an almost entirely Chinese-independent city in French Cochinchina, and now part of Saigon. Cantonese popular music, including many predecessors of the later Cantopop genre, had a deeper influence on *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* than its Mandarin-language counterpart. With the emergence of Cantopop as a trans-Pacific genre by the 1980s, the influence of Cantonese music within the genre of *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* became even more hegemonic within diaspora communities.

Although many ascribe liberalization in Vietnam to the period of the Đổi mới (renovation) economic reforms beginning in 1986, in effect, many artists remained banned. The economic reforms would increase the size of the potential consumer market in Vietnam, but true liberalization of performances did not occur until after the passage of the US-Vietnam Normalization Act by the U.S. Congress in 1995, allowing the diaspora to reconnect with family in Vietnam. Until normalization, *nhạc Hoa lời Việt*, considered taboo music in Vietnam, circulated privately among vendors who had connections to VHS and record markets in Hong Kong and America. The music itself, produced by Vietnamese refugee artists who were painfully aware of the separation between their diasporic community and their homeland, reflected this continued censorship. The rising market for *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* in the diaspora and underground fueled the development of a vibrant group of artists and producers of the genre in Orange County's Little Saigon. After the Normalization Act in 1995, *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* was seized upon with a new optimism, transforming not only its lyrics but its musical style and impelling it to leave behind the last vestiges of its melancholic nhạc Vàng past. Through a study of musical artists, record labels, local diasporic performance, and lyrical translations, this paper traces the evolution of *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* and its relationship to nhạc Vàng in the 1980s and 90s to better understand how the diasporic Vietnamese community of Little Saigon created a new artistic identity for itself in the context of exile and war.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on popular music in Vietnam has focused heavily on the post-war period. The first wave of this scholarship in the 2000s linked the development of Vietnamese music to censorship, mass exodus and migration, and political ideology. Caroline Valverde's study of *Việt kiều* music and the political obstacles to its dissemination on the mainland is an important work on the political censorship Vietnamese artists faced from this period [3]. A second wave of scholarship produced from the 2010s and onwards has increasingly explored the cross-cultural and transpacific dimensions of Vietnamese music. For instance, Đinh Duy investigates the resurgence of *nhạc Vàng/boléro* music and highlights how this genre, symbolic of the South's culture, has transcended its political past to become a widely embraced aspect of Vietnamese music heritage, even outshining the revolutionary "red music" of the North [4]. Jason Gibbs explores the origins of popular songs in Vietnam during the late 19th and early 20th centuries that resulted from increased French influence [5]. Gibbs argues that the 1920s are central to understanding the opening of Vietnamese culture to foreign influence, with the younger Vietnamese professionals and intellectuals embracing Western ideologies. Other scholars of diasporic music and culture, like William Noseworthy and Minh Nguyen, have also focused on Asian hip-hop and the influence of Vietnamese popular music on literature [6,7]. However, few scholars have considered the transpacific dimensions of *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* and *nhạc Vàng*, and there are no dedicated studies of *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* in English or Vietnamese. This paper aims to fill that gap, providing the first detailed study of this unique genre of translated diasporic music.

3. Historical Background

Nhạc Vàng, or “yellow music,” was the dominant popular music genre of South Vietnam in the pre-1975 era [8]. It was often composed on a pentatonic scale with 4/4 minor keys, taking a slow, melancholic tempo. Songs were performed expressively with simple compositions to allow the audience to focus on the poetic lyrics and the singer's voice. Composed during the Vietnam War, its themes were sentimental, romantic, folksy, anti-war, and hippie in character [9]. The ban leveled against yellow music by the Northern Vietnamese government reflects its popular dissemination amongst citizens in the North. The flourishing of yellow music could be traced back to the origins of Vietnamese popular music in the pre-war era, but in the aftermath of 1975, *nhạc Vàng* was accused of being “neo-colonial poison” by the Vietnamese Communist government [10]. Ly Quyet Tien claimed that “yellow music” sounded pessimistic, melancholy, and hostile [11]. In contrast, *nhạc Đỏ* (“red music”) was revolutionary, stirring up “the people's spirit both during the times of war and peace” [12]. These ideological differences were reflected in the musical content – *nhạc Vàng* was dominated by a balladic style with themes of love and war, while *nhạc Đỏ* employed martial musical motives and patriotic themes.

Propaganda campaigns in Vietnam discouraged audiences from listening to “yellow music.” Those caught violating the 1975 music ban would have their cassettes, discs, and music sheets confiscated and would be punished. In the 1980s, Vietnam went through a series of land reforms aimed at collectivization, like policies seen in other communist countries like Russia, China, and Cambodia. *Nhạc Đỏ* was broadcast to support these efforts by popularizing themes of patriotism and collectivism. However, *nhạc Đỏ* could not replace the deep-rooted connection the South Vietnamese people continued to feel for *nhạc Vàng*. Despite the ban on the genre in Vietnam, it continued to be performed by Vietnamese refugees overseas, primarily in America and France. *Nhạc Hoa lời Việt*, being a part of the “yellow music” family, was also suppressed in Vietnam and was forced out of the country, traveling with the exiled population across the Pacific to America.

4. Foreign Influence on Vietnamese Popular Music

There is a long tradition in Vietnamese popular music of translating foreign songs and incorporating foreign musical styles. During the colonial period, French influence was predominant, introducing Western musical forms, instruments, theories, and education to Vietnam. This phenomenon could be traced back to *Cải lương*, the reformed Southern Vietnamese opera of the late 1910s and 1920s [5]. *Cải lương* originated in Southern Vietnam in the early 20th century and blossomed in the 1930s as a theatre of the middle class during the country's French colonial period [13]. It blends southern Vietnamese folk songs, classical music, *hát tuồng* (a classical theatre form based on Chinese opera), and modern spoken drama. It was heavily influenced by Cantonese opera, and many Cantonese opera singers performed in Saigon during wartime. *Cải lương* performances featured two music ensembles, fusing traditional and Western instruments, and incorporated Chinese musical signs and tunes as humorous interludes [14].

In the mid-1930s, *Tân nhạc*, or “modern music,” gained popularity through a movement known as “Bài Tây theo điệu ta” (or “our words following Western melodies”) [15]. Translations of French popular songs became increasingly popular and were disseminated in pamphlets, newspapers, and books. *Tân nhạc* blended Western and classical Vietnamese elements to appeal to both the elite and the growing middle class. As the anti-French nationalist movement gained ground in the 1940s, Vietnamese artists like Phạm Duy called for “renovated music” (*nhạc cải cách*) – that is, “songs with Vietnamese words and Vietnamese melodies” [16]. These new songs commented directly on the Vietnamese experience of the Second Indochina War in songs such as “Remembering the wounded soldier” (“Nhớ Người Thương Binh”) (1947) and “Mother of Gio Linh” (“Bà mẹ Gio Linh”) (1948)

[17]. Phạm Duy's nationalist, anti-French, and anti-war ballads signaled the beginning of what would later be known as *nhạc Vàng*.

The Vietnam War marked a shift towards American influence on Vietnamese popular genres. American troops brought their own music styles, including rock and roll, blues, jazz, and anti-war music. Radio stations established by the Americans played a significant role in propagating American music genres among Vietnamese civilians and artists. *nhạc Vàng* flourished in this new music scene. Vietnamese *nhạc Vàng* songwriters like Phạm Duy and Trịnh Công Sơn incorporated these Western genres, cementing the popularity of these American cultures while nevertheless developing their own style of popular music during the Vietnam War. When American troops began to withdraw from South Vietnam in the early 1970s, *nhạc Vàng* songwriters were among the exiles forced to flee Vietnam with the victory of the communist North. Trịnh Công Sơn, one of the few *nhạc Vàng* songwriters left in Vietnam, appeared on the radio just hours before the fall of Saigon to sing the song "Joining Hands/Circle of Unity" ("Nối vòng tay lớn") about the dream of national reconciliation between the North and the South [18]. Not long after, he was sent to a labor camp.

5. The Rise of Chinese Influence on Vietnamese Popular Music (1979-1986)

After the Fall of Saigon in 1975, more than 40% of Vietnamese refugee families settled in California, particularly in San Jose and "Little Saigon of Westminster" in Orange County [19]. Many of the "boat people" were ethnic Chinese or came from mixed Sino-Vietnamese families (also known as *Viet-Hoa*). Cantonese would have been the first or second language in many refugee households. With the rising popularity of Hong Kong dramas in the 80s, Chinese-speaking serial dramas, and especially Hong Kong TV serial "wuxia" dramas primarily based on the literary works of Kim Dung, "wuxia" fiction became a staple of Vietnamese diaspora households.

While *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* was originally dominated by Mandarin-Taiwanese sources, the rising importance of "wuxia" novels and dramas, as well as the economic prosperity and cultural openness of Hong Kong in the 1980s facilitated a shift towards Cantonese sources. Taiwan was still under martial law, and Taiwanese singers like Teresa Teng were suppressed by the country's strict music censorship laws. As a result, singers (including Teresa Teng) moved to Hong Kong, where they could make a livelihood singing Cantonese songs. Teng's Cantonese song "Strolling Through the Road of Life" (1983) was translated and performed on a *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* record "Mỗi cánh phong mỗi cánh tình" (translated as "Each wind, each love") sung by Kiều Nga in 1985 [20]. Meanwhile, Hong Kong Cantopop music and films made by the Shaw Brothers Productions gained global popularity and became an important source for *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* artists. Although Cantonese popular culture had long been successful in Vietnam, the strict censorship by the regime of Communist Vietnam in the post-war period meant that the principal place where Vietnamese artists and listeners could encounter Cantopop was in diaspora communities. Like the "wuxia" dramas for which they were written, Cantopop songs began to take off, becoming staples of Little Saigon's sonic landscape.

With the increasing popularity of Hong Kong television serial dramas, Vietnamese refugees were inspired to compose *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* music based on popular dramas like "The Bund" (1980), "Legend of the Condor Heroes" (1983), "Return of the Condor Heroes" (1983), and "Heavenly Sword and Dragon Sabre" (1984). Vietnamese families in Little Saigon would rent VHS tapes of these serial dramas from stores and then watch them at home or watch TV broadcasts in restaurants, laundromats, and malls. The blend of Chinese "wuxia" literature with modern production techniques created a compelling visual and narrative experience that resonated with Vietnamese viewers, many of whom shared cultural and linguistic ties with Southern China while feeling nostalgic for their South Vietnamese identity.

6. The Emerging Market for nhạc Hoa lời Việt (1986-1995)

In 1986, the Dạ Lan Productions, based in Santa Ana, California, released an album called *Nhạc Phim bộ chọn lọc (Dạ Lan Tape 022)*, which consisted of 12 *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* songs from top Chinese TV serial dramas (1979-1985) [21]. Seven out of twelve songs came from "wuxia" dramas based on the works of Kim Dung's fiction literature, and other songs were from other classic Hong Kong TV dramas like “Máu Nhuộm Bãi Thượng Hải” (1980) and “Tửu quyền Tô Khất” (1982). This record was the first of many *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* albums to be recorded, produced, and distributed by companies in Southern California. Around these companies, a group of artists and singers gathered who would define the *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* genre. This flourishing of *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* was enabled by the growth of the Vietnamese diasporic communities, the economic boom of the 1980s, and the *Đổi mới* (renovation) policy, an economic reform aimed to create a market force between private enterprise and the government which loosened restrictions on citizens. The convergence of historical transformations allowed for *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* to merge into its own popular genre with a defined style and commonly used themes.

Nhạc Hoa lời Việt music in this period still borrowed heavily from its *nhạc Vàng* and Cantopop origins, usually featuring a solo female singer accompanied by strings and some traditional instruments in slow yet dramatic ballads. Neither Pham Duy's “renovated music” nor a reversion to earlier “our words with Western melodies,” *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* found expression for distinctly Vietnamese experiences through borrowing from Cantonese music. To meet the needs and desires of its new Vietnamese audience, translators took creative liberties when writing new Vietnamese lyrics for these Cantonese songs. Through a study of the *Dạ Lan Productions* album, this paper looks at two thematic groups common to Vietnamese translations and analyzes how and why Vietnamese translators transformed the meaning of songs. Additionally, it examines the development of a bilingual singing practice, wherein *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* singers blended new Vietnamese lyrics with the Cantonese originals.

6.1. Songs of Displacement and Exile

The first major theme group in *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* after 1986 is displacement and exile; in particular, lyrics focus on the plight of the Vietnamese refugees fleeing from Vietnam to Western countries. This theme is illustrated well by the song “Duyên tình nổi trôi” on the album *Dạ Lan Tape 022*, originally inspired by the TV serial drama “Legend of the Condor Heroes” (1983) and performed by Mai Hương and Thanh Phong. The lyrics begin with a person looking up at the skies and questioning why life seems “indifferent and hopeless.” That line, as well as the lyric “dreams long-awaited/submerged in darkness”, conveys a sense of deferred hope and a feeling of being trapped in a state of uncertainty in the same way that the exiled Vietnamese existed in a state of perpetual limbo between their home country and their adopted nation. The singer continues: “Life [is drifting] like water ferns and clouds”. The natural images evoke a place far away from the city of Los Angeles where these songs were recorded, suggesting a shared memory with the listeners – this shared lost experience is both the natural landscape of Vietnam and the experience of the “boat people,” who drift on water underneath a sky of clouds.

These images and metaphors did not come prepackaged in the Cantonese original but were developed by translators who interpreted the lyrics to better speak to the experience of the Vietnamese diaspora. For example, the song “Bến Thượng Hải/Máu Nhuộm Bãi Thượng Hải” (“Shanghai Bund/Bloodstained Shanghai Bund”) also appears on the *Nhạc Phim bộ chọn lọc (Dạ Lan Tape 022)* album, evokes the image of sea waves to represent life and its ups and downs. The translator of this song chose to use the word *biển lớn*, which means “great sea” or “ocean,” to translate the Cantonese word 江水, which is usually translated as “(nước) sông” or “river water,” often implying to Cantonese

speakers the Yangtze River. For the Vietnamese listener, *biển lớn* refers to the Eastern Sea or the Pacific Ocean. With this choice of translation, the song is taken out of its original context – the river Yangtze flowing across the Chinese countryside – and given a new one – the vast ocean into which exiles were cast, with no clear beginning or end and no safe shores to guide them. Through these translation choices, *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* songwriters transform the meaning of Cantonese songs to speak directly to the shared experience of exile among the diaspora and refugee community of Little Saigon.

6.2. Songs of Love

The other major category of *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* songs after 1986 is the love song. These love songs have lyrics that convey a sense of pain, sadness, melancholy, and loss, often serving as metaphors for the split of Vietnam, first into a Communist North and Capitalist South, and later into the homeland and the exiled diaspora. *Nhạc Hoa lời Việt* love songs use the theme of separated lovers to give expression to this experience not only for the refugee communities in America and France but for the population that remained in Vietnam and for whom censorship laws would ban any direct discussion of this national trauma. These love songs typify the *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* of 1986-1995 as a cultural form for expressing deep feelings of grief and loss in the context of exile and censorship.

The song “Tieu Long nu ca,” performed by Kieu Nha, is a typical example of these love songs. The song appeared in the *Nhạc Phim bộ chọn lọc (Dạ Lan Tape 022)* album but traces its origins to the TV serial drama “Return of the Condor Heroes (1983)”. In the song, one lover is said to be “eternal like the sun” while the other is “eternal like the rain.” This is intended to be a nostalgic metaphor for the two seasons of Vietnam – the rainy and the dry season – and suggests the personification of Vietnam in the form of lovers. The song also has political overtones with the theme of duality, symbolizing the division of Vietnam in the civil war. The separation and missed chance of love may also be a metaphor for missed opportunities for reconciliation and unity. The imagery of one love being “swept along with time” while the other is “forever longing in solitude” signifies the divergent paths and experiences of the North and the South. The reference to love being “carried away by the wild wind” creates a poetic language for expressing the experience of the exiles. The song ends with a rhetorical question that could be asked of the homeland by the diaspora: “Do you, in that distant place, still cherish the memories of the time we were together?” This double-entendre can be found in many of the love songs of *nhạc Hoa lời Việt*. On the surface, they are love songs about a couple tragically torn apart, but the strong imagery and symbolism of the lyrics suggest a national meaning which could not be openly expressed for fear of retaliation by Vietnam’s government.

6.3. Bilingual Songs

Nhạc Hoa lời Việt songs produced in Little Saigon often retained some of the Cantonese lyrics of the original tune, producing a unique bilingual musical practice. *Dạ Lan Tape 022* includes several examples of such bilingual music. Track 5 of the album, “Bến Thượng Hải/Máu Nhuộm Bãi Thượng Hải” (“Shanghai Bund/Bloodstained Shanghai Bund”), incorporates Cantonese in the second verse and chorus as a tribute to the original song. The rest of the song is sung in Vietnamese. Interestingly, the Vietnamese translation takes significant liberties even though the Cantonese lyrics are preserved in the performance. For instance, the Cantonese version has a stronger sense of determination and resilience, as the speaker “is willing to overcome challenges and continue to rise and fall,” invoking bootstrapping under the working conditions of the 1980s market economy and the relationship between Hong Kong and Britain and the PRC (mainland China). In contrast, the Vietnamese version implies a sense of endurance based on the refugee journey. Several other songs in the album, including “Quên hết tình xưa,” “Duyên tình nổi trôi,” and “Thần điêu đại hiệp” incorporated Cantonese lyrics. This bilingual performance practice reflects the mixed cultural heritage of the Vietnamese diaspora

and harkens back to Vietnam's long history of bilingual popular music, from fusion with French chansons to Cantonese opera.

7. Effect of the *Đổi mới* Policy

The same year the Dạ Lan Productions released its *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* album (*Dạ Lan Tape 022*), the Vietnamese government launched the *Đổi mới* policy, opening the economy for the first time to international a market force. As a result of liberalization processes that began to take place after the initial *Đổi mới* economic renovations of the early 1980s, Vietnamese refugees were increasingly allowed to return to Vietnam to visit their family members. As a result, informal performances of *nhạc Hoa lời Việt*, as well as the underground circulation of *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* recordings, became possible in Vietnam. The emerging global market for *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* songs created by the opening of Vietnam economically fueled the development of music TV programs like “Paris by Night” and record labels in Orange County like Thuy Nga Productions and Asia Entertainment Inc (known as Trung Tam Asia), who developed audiences in France, in America and, through informal commercial practices, in Vietnam.

Though the *Đổi mới* Policy did help to open the music industry, the Vietnamese Communist government urgently felt it needed to deal with the influx of foreign cultural influences that accompanied economic globalization [22]. Music censorship gradually loosened, but while *nhạc Vàng* was no longer officially banned, the genre and its offshoots were discouraged socially and politically. Famous *nhạc Vàng* songwriters like Phạm Duy began to write *nhạc tre* (“young music”) songs with an explicit foreign influence, and *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* became known in Vietnam as part of this movement towards Western and pan-Asian music. Although the Vietnamese diaspora was able to return to Vietnam, the Vietnamese communist government was wary of the importation of diasporic genres. It launched guidelines and restrictions toward their songs seen as related to the *nhạc Vàng* genre, such as *nhạc Hoa lời Việt*.

Nevertheless, *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* experienced commercial success as a result of the *Đổi mới* policy. This led to the development of robust recording, distribution, and performance practices by diasporic artists. Sales of music cassettes in Little Saigon flourished, and tapes circulated between families and friends in LA. Meanwhile, Little Saigon was developing economically with the opening of retail shops that catered specifically to Vietnamese Americans, like the “Asian Garden Mall” (locally called Phước Lộc Thọ) built by Frank Jao and Tony Lam in 1986 and opened in 1987 [23]. These new developments shared *nhạc Hoa lời Việt*'s unfulfilled desire to overcome the legacy of the Vietnam War, with developer Tony Lam telling the LA Times, “we want to call our community Asiantown – not “Little Saigon”, which is too negative and reminds people of the bad experiences from the [Vietnam] war” [24]. The new stores popping up along the Vietnamese-targeted Bolsa Corridor in Westminster, California, reflected the economic prosperity experienced by the diaspora during this period alongside the haunting memory of the war. This coincided with the *Đổi mới* and created business opportunities for *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* artists, allowing several significant new artists to emerge. However, the Vietnamese diasporic community still felt unwelcome in Vietnam, and themes of loss still permeated the music. *Nhạc Hoa lời Việt* continued to express nostalgia for the beloved *nhạc Vàng* genre and mimicked its themes of loss and melancholy, as well as its romantic balladic style.

8. Post-1995 US-Vietnam Normalization and Onwards

Following the normalization with the US in 1995, Vietnam experienced true commercial freedom for the first time since the Civil War. This opening of Vietnam had a massive effect on Vietnamese popular music and cemented the status of *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* music as an independent genre. The optimism and hopefulness of the normalization fundamentally transformed *nhạc Hoa lời Việt*,

allowing it to depart from the staples of the *nhạc Vàng* style. Abandoning the themes of exile and melancholic love, the new *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* artists wrote songs about the joy of city life and, influenced by the flourishing of the Hong Kong movie industry in the 90s, penned erotic love songs set amidst a world of competing gangs.

8.1. Songs of Optimism

In the new optimistic songs, Vietnam is often personified as a woman. This tradition is taken from earlier *nhạc Vàng* songs, but unlike in these earlier works where the woman representing (South) Vietnam is lost, the consummation of amorous love signals the reunification of the diaspora with their lost family and friends in Vietnam. “Em Mãi Chờ Anh” (translated as “I will always wait for you”) is typical of this type of song [25]. Performed by Ngọc Hương in 1996, the song takes an optimistic tone, reversing the tropes of pre-1995 songs in the genre. The singer awaits an expected reunion with the beloved:

Love brought us close, at sunset there's you and me. /Our love will not fade, even as the years endlessly pass by./Because I miss you, because I long for you, our love has worn thin over time./Even without you, even far from you, I'm always waiting for you.

The last line, “waiting for you,” can also be interpreted as “waiting” for the reconciliation in Vietnam. Compared to pre-1995 love songs, “Em Mãi Chờ Anh” is more seductive and uses explicitly erotic lyrics, describing the “passionate kiss” of the lovers. The open expression of sensual passion and the image of triumphant love upended the common tropes of the genre before 1995.

8.2. Influence of Gangster Movies

Vietnamese artists have long incorporated elements from Hong Kong's Cantopop movie hits. Andy Lau, famous already for “The Return of the Condor Heroes” (1983), became well-known among Vietnamese audiences for his gangster movies. He successfully shaped the early image of the “young gangster” in later movies. Vietnamese artists translated many songs of the four kings of Cantopop (ranked as Jacky Cheung, Andy Lau, Leon Lai, and Aaron Kwok) in the Post 1995 US-Vietnam Normalization. Songs derived from these movies, such as “The Song of Sunset” (1989) and “The Day We Walked Together” (1991), both of which inspired several Vietnamese translations – often used the imagery of city-life, in contrast to the rural imagery of pre-1995 songs and spoke of the reconciliation of friends. The young men torn apart by gang violence but reunited by shared camaraderie offer a metaphor for the reunification of Vietnam after decades of civil war and exile. These songs also take up the reality of life in LA. After twenty years of exile, Vietnamese children who had left with their parents on the boats were now entering adulthood. Their lives were defined by the fast-paced city life of LA, and they identified with the “young gangster” hero of Hong Kong movies, who was always trying to get ahead in a world of competition. While retaining a memory of the Vietnam War, these new songs were able to take on the experiences of a generation raised in the diaspora, exemplifying the role of cultural borrowing and translation in giving expression to the unique experience of diasporic communities.

9. Conclusion

Nhạc Hoa lời Việt's long journey from its origins in *nhạc Vàng* to its triumph as an independent genre follows the contours of the Vietnamese exile experience. A genre of translation, *nhạc Hoa lời Việt*, emerges from the unstable cultural space of exile, where old values and practices have been lost and the refugee community must find new shared emotions, ideas, and forms of expression to take their place. The early translation practice of *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* allowed Vietnamese exiles in Orange County's Little Saigon to appropriate Cantonese “wuxia” stories for themselves, adapting these

borrowed cultural myths to give expression to the hardship and trauma of the Vietnam War. With the advent of the *Đổi mới* Policy in 1986, this practice of translation and songwriting exploded, forging underground connections with distant communities in Vietnam and giving rise to new record labels, TV programs, and performers. Nevertheless, the exiled status of *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* songwriters and fans hung over the practice of the genre, shaping its lyrical content and musical style, which remained attached to nostalgia for wartime Vietnamese music of *nhạc Vàng*. Only with the US-Vietnam Normalization Act of 1995, marking the first time many Vietnamese refugees could return home, did the genre come into its own, leaving behind the last vestiges of the *nhạc Vàng* style and taking up the hope and optimism of the refugee community that the wounds of the war might finally be healed. *Nhạc Hoa lời Việt*, after 1995, bears the unmistakable stamp of a diaspora community, retaining a robust bilingual performance practice and reflecting the dynamism of the cities in which they lived.

Nhạc Hoa lời Việt exemplifies the unique role of translation in diasporic and refugee communities. Many would consider *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* a derivative genre because it translates existing melodies from Cantopop, which were themselves often first translated from Western, Japanese, and Korean songs. A *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* song is the end of a long process of copying, borrowing, and translating, but this process of translation is itself constructive. Through the act of appropriating these Cantopop melodies – in which the songwriter gives these melodies a new audience, new lyrics, and new performance practices (for example, bilingual performance) – the *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* songwriter creates a unique work of art that crystallizes the experience of a multi-lingual, refugee community. As a result, *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* represents the Vietnamese exiled communities' struggles, pains, and frustrations, responding to their historical experience of war, exile, and, eventually, reconciliation. It is important to study translated music genres like *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* as unique expressions of their creators, not mere derivations of pre-existing genres. Diasporic culture is a culture of borrowing. The history of displacement and migration of transpacific communities in the 20th century has created rich practices of translation and borrowing that constitute important historical archives of diasporic and refugee identity.

This study faced methodological challenges that are common to researching popular music, mass culture and informal economies. It relies heavily on the song lyrics and recorded music as the primary source for analyzing the emergence of *nhạc Hoa lời Việt*. This genre was heavily censored by the Vietnamese communist regime after 1975, resulting in its circulation in largely informal economies and performance in underground and secretive locations that did not produce typical historical records such as newspaper ads or promotional posters. In addition, *nhạc Hoa lời Việt* initially flourished among Vietnamese refugees inside Little Saigon in Westminster, LA, where fans of the genre used informal methods of sharing, performing, and buying music. These informal economies and networks can be studied through oral history interviews, personal journals, and memoirs, but they often lack institutional records that are present for other forms of musical performance.

Despite these limitations, the analysis of lyrical translation, bilingual performance practices, and the emerging diasporic music and television industry allows this study to make a distinct contribution to Vietnamese diasporic studies. Contributing to an understanding of how bilingual performance and translation can become a site for shaping a unique cultural identity, it raises further questions about how marginalized and displaced groups of refugees can create a shared identity and give expression to a shared struggle, often under conditions of censorship and discrimination. This study hopes to open a broader discussion of translation, music-making, and identity formation in cultural diasporas.

References

- [1] Quynh N. *Chuyện Hoa Sim*. California (CA): Asia Entertainment; 1995.
- [2] Wong F. *Coming Home*. Hong Kong (HK): Cinepoly Records; 1992.

- [3] Valverde KLC. *Making Vietnamese Music Transnational: Sounds of Home, Resistance and Change Amerasia Journal*. [J] *Amerasia Journal*. 2003; 29(1): 29-50.
- [4] Dinh D. *The Revival of Bolero in Vietnam*. *The Diplomat*. 2016 Oct 12. Available from: <https://thediplomat.com/2016/10/the-revival-of-Bolero-in-vietnam/>.
- [5] Gibb J. *Nhạc Tiền Chiến: The Origins of Vietnamese Popular Song*. *Thingsasian*. 2017 Mar 2. Available from: <http://thingsasian.com/story/nhac-tien-chien-origins-vietnamese-popular-song>.
- [6] Noseworthy WB. *The Needle Drop: History and Hip-Hop Mobility in the Transpacific (EP)*. *Transfers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Mobility Studies*. 2018; 8(3).;
- [7] Nguyen MX. *Vietnamese Sorrow: A Study of Literary Discourse in Popular Music Life [D]*. Riverside (CA): University of California Riverside; 2018.
- [8] Nguyen M. *Love is Yellow in Vietnamese Popular Music [D]*. Riverside (CA): University of California Riverside; 2012.
- [9] Nguyễn PY. *Nhìn lại âm nhạc miền Nam 1954-1975 (kỳ 13) (Looking Back at Southern Music 1954-1975 (Part 13))*. *vanviet*. 2016 Sept 27. Available from: <https://vanviet.info/tu-lieu/nhn-lai-m-nhac-mien-nam-1954-1975-ky-13/>.
- [10] Taylor P. *Music as a “neocolonial poison” in postwar Southern Vietnam*. *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. 2000; 14(1): 99–131.
- [11] Ly QT. *The Music of Saigon During the Sixties and the Seventies*. *Int J Engl Lang Lit Humanit*. 2017 Apr;5(4):333-343.
- [12] Ó Briain L. *Voices of Vietnam: A Century of Radio, Red Music, and Revolution*. New York (NY): Oxford University Press; 2021.
- [13] Hauch DE. *The Cai Luong Theatre of Vietnam, 1915-1970 [dissertation]*. [Carbondale (IL)]: Southern Illinois University; 1972.
- [14] Selkin J. *An Opera Lover’s Introduction to Cải Lương*. *Saigoneer*. 2019. Available from: <https://saigoneer.com/saigon-music-art/18010-an-opera-lover’s-introduction-to-cai-luong>.
- [15] Lê VN. *Nhạc ngoại lời Việt thời vang bóng: 'Bài Tây theo điệu ta'*. *Thanh Nien*. 2017. Available from: <https://thanhvien.vn/nhac-ngoai-loi-viet-thoi-vang-bong-bai-tay-theo-dieu-ta-185657722.htm>.
- [16] Schafer JC. *The curious memoirs of the Vietnamese composer Phạm Duy*. *J Southeast Asian Stud*. 2012 Feb;43(1):77-110.
- [17] Nguyen K. *Echoic survivals: Re-documenting pre-1975 Vietnamese music as historical sound/tracks of remembering*. *Violence Int J*. 2020;1(2):303-31.
- [18] Eaton A. *Vietnam: Trịnh Công Sơn and Văn Cao*. In: *Homeland*. Season 1, Episode 6. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC); 1990.
- [19] Huang J. *40 percent of nation’s Vietnamese immigrants call California home*. 89.3 KPCC. 2014. Available from: <https://archive.kpcc.org/blogs/multiamerican/2014/08/25/17200/california-vietnamese-immigrant-orange-county/>.
- [20] Kiều Nga. *Mỗi cánh phong mỗi cánh tình*. California (CA): Hải Âu Phi Xứ; 1985.
- [21] *Nhạc Phim bộ chọn lọc (Dạ Lan Tape 022)*. California (CA): Dạ Lan; 1986.
- [22] Olsen DA. *Popular Music of Vietnam: The Politics of Remembering, the Economics of Forgetting*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge; 2008.
- [23] *A History About Asian Garden: The Heart of Little Saigon*. *Asian Garden*. Available from: <https://www.asiangardenmall.com/about.html>.
- [24] Reyes D. *Asiantown: Commercial-Cultural Complex Expected to Anchor Southland’s Next Chinatown*. *Los Angeles Times*. March 16, 1987.
- [25] Ngọc H. *Em Mãi Chờ Anh*. California (CA): Một Đồi Thương Yêu; 1996.