3. The Return of Diasporic Commercial Music Culture to Vietnam

Doi Moi: The Political, Economic and Cultural Context

In the mid 1980s Vietnam’s leadership found itself in an untenable position. Internally, the Party was suffering a crisis of legitimacy. Stalinist central planning had failed to deliver an adequate standard of living, and had led by the mid eighties to economic crisis. The nation’s economic and developmental stagnation within the Soviet-backed Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) contrasted unfavourably with China’s successes under market reforms since 1978, let alone the prosperity its Tiger and Mini Tiger neighbours were experiencing in the eighties. In the eyes of many Vietnamese, the failure of the project of socialist modernity had left the country “backward”, instigating a leave-the-country-fever underpinned by the perception that modern subjectivity was not attainable within Vietnam, but had to be pursued overseas in the developed, capitalist world. Amongst a general breakdown of legitimacy, the Party was experiencing what may be described as a crisis of eudaemonic legitimacy (Holmes 1997: 44ff), i.e. a breakdown in the ability to deliver the “happiness” clause of the tripartite slogan of the SRV: Independence - Freedom - Happiness [Doc Lap - Tu Do - Hanh Phuc].

In response, Vietnamese reformers sought to implement their own versions of perestroika and glasnost, a policy initiative that was embodied in the implementation of
Doi Moi - Renovation or Renewal - at the Sixth Party Congress in 1986. This entailed a move from a command economy to a more decentralised system with a significant private sector. A gradual cutting back of the state sector saw the reduction or removal of state subsidies and forms of social assistance and welfare. Major reforms such as the decollectivisation of agriculture ought not to be seen as a radical break with the past but rather as a rationalisation of an already existing informal private sector and free market (the “black market”). These changes left cliental power relations more or less intact (Hitchcock 1994: 205). Callinicos (1991) sees similar transformations that took place in the former Soviet Union as a rationalisation of bureaucratic state capitalism, whereby communist elites who controlled (but did not own) the means of production conducted an economic normalisation to bring themselves into line with regular capitalism, which was becoming ever more global and powerful. Vietnamese reformers also sought to diversify the nation’s foreign trade relations and to attract aid and investment. Immediate consummation of this policy was, however, precluded by Vietnam’s continuing international pariah status due to its ongoing occupation of Cambodia (which it had invaded late in 1978) and, one might argue, to a still vivid American ressentiment at its victory in the war. A US-led embargo remained in force, effectively denying Vietnam access to the markets of the capitalist world and to international financial institutions.

In order to resolve this situation, initially under its own steam and later under pressure from the Soviets, Vietnam moved to cut its losses in Cambodia. Gorbachov had made it clear that the Soviet Union was no longer willing to support the military adventures of its client state, nor to intervene to solve its internal problems (as for the rest of the Comecon states). By 1989 the last Vietnamese military units had been withdrawn,
and by October 1991 the Paris Agreements on Cambodia had been finalised. These measures cleared the way for Vietnam’s subsequent gaining of access to the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and Asian Development Bank (1991-2), and to the normalisation of diplomatic ties and trade with China (1991) and a number of other Asian and Western nations, including the US (1995).

Meanwhile, the tumultuous events in Eastern Europe served to rapidly accelerate a process of distanciation from the Soviet Union that had begun in 1989. Thayer and Amer note that Vietnam survived the collapse of the socialist states system by reorienting its foreign economic relations away from the former CMEA nations and to the market economies of Northeast Asia, primarily Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea (Thayer and Amer 1999: 218). Prior to the early 1990s, Vietnam had relied on the Soviet bloc for 80% of its trade. By 1993, East Asia was receiving 62% of Vietnam’s exports, and was the source of 82% of its imports, while trade with the Commonwealth of Independent States had dropped off into single figures (Zagaria 1997: 161). The Soviet military withdrawal from Cam Ranh Bay in 1991, and the ultimate collapse of communism in the Soviet Union, saw relations between Vietnam and Russia deideologised and depoliticised.

With its withdrawal from Cambodia, Vietnam became eligible for membership of ASEAN, which it joined in 1993. The reasons for this are complex. It has been read in terms of Vietnam’s multilateralising its territorial conflicts with China in the South China Sea, as paving the way for APEC (1998) and WTO membership, and as a means of protecting itself from Washington’s somewhat self-interested human rights and “democratisation” agenda. It seems clear however that membership of ASEAN reflects a
post Cold War geopolitical imaginary in which Vietnam has resituated itself as culturally, economically and politically a part of Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific region. After years of stalling by anti-globalisation elements fighting to limit foreign investment and maintain the public sector (and their vested interests in it), Hanoi finally signed a bilateral trade agreement with the US in 2000. It is yet to be fully implemented.

Commercial Cultural Flows Between Homeland and Diaspora

Vietnam’s Doi Moi or Renovation policy has seen the country transform itself from a reclusive Marxist-Leninist state into a market economy ever-increasingly incorporated into the global capitalist system. Along with this new economic openness, Vietnam has variously embraced and had forced upon it a new cultural openness, a process that has seen the once relatively discrete borders of its national culture begin to exhibit an unsettling new porosity. As new media have flowed into the country alongside other consumer goods, the state has begun to find that the tight control it once exercised over virtually all fields of cultural production and consumption is slipping. Predictably, perhaps, this process has been quick to revivify the spectre of cultural pollution by a decadent West, one to which the state has periodically reacted since the advent of the policy in spectacular fashion.

But Doi Moi has not only let the West back in. A less remarked consequence of the policy is that it has precipitated something of a return of the repressed of national culture in the form of the popular culture of the Vietnamese diaspora. Doi Moi has seen the formation in Vietnam of a huge market in pirated versions of video music variety shows, karaoke, and compact discs produced by Vietnamese living the US, France and
Canada. Thus as well as introducing Vietnamese consumers to *Playboy* and *Die Hard*, "Renovation" has allowed them to meet such diasporic cultural icons as Elvis Phuong, Lynda Trang Dai and *Paris By Night*. While the state has over the past few years become more resigned to the presence in Vietnam of a commercial music culture produced by its former enemies, and recently has even allowed diasporic singers to perform in Vietnam, this state of affairs continues to afford it no little source of ambivalence and disquiet. The return of an overseas Vietnamese "exile culture" (Nacify 1993) violates a post reunification symbolic geography whereby the nation's traumatic North/South split is resolved by the driving of its enemies, American and Vietnamese, from the divided national space and into exile in the West. Consequently the renewed presence of these enemies (or at least their music) in the socialist homeland poses a threat to the purity and integrity of the reunited national space, one constituted as whole by the very fact of their banishment (see Duiker 1994).

The return of diasporic music and video to Vietnam is an ambivalent issue not only for the state but also, ironically enough, for a large number of diasporic community leaders, intellectuals, journalists and other people of influence in overseas Vietnamese communities around the world. The increasingly comfortable presence of diasporic commercial culture in Vietnam has led to accusations that cultural producers are no longer committed to the idea of a distinct Vietnamese exile culture. This anxiety is compounded by the reverse flow of homeland-produced commercial music culture into diasporic markets. Anticommunist elites in particular have sought to resist this opening up of the diasporic public sphere to the homeland, fearing that it must put into question the integrity of the oppositional cultural-national project of "Free Vietnam".
It is this somewhat unholy remarriage of the Vietnamese homeland and diaspora at the altar of popular music culture - a reunion brought about by the uncontrollable, unpredictable nature of cultural flows in these global times - that I wish to explore over the next two chapters. In the present chapter, I will look at some recent instances of official and popular discourse on the return of diasporic music culture to Vietnam. In the next, I will analyse a controversy centred around Thuy Nga (the largest of the diasporic popular culture producers) whereby the company was suspected of having abandoned its anticommmunist homeland politics in an attempt to break into the official music video market in Vietnam. In these two chapters, I will be interested in looking at the way in which the Vietnamese state and diasporic anticommmunist elites have sought to maintain their cultural-national boundaries in the face of a mutual “cultural pollution” by each other’s media. I will also explore the way in which Doi Moi has brought into being the possibility of a transnational Vietnamese commercial music culture, and look at the way in which this emergent transnational field has become a site of homeland-diaspora contestation.

**Contemporary Vietnamese Discourses of Cultural Pollution**

If since the advent of Doi Moi Vietnam has maintained something of a gracious silence on the international stage about its past and present abuses by the West, its actions on the domestic front have spoken louder than words in aligning it with the attitudes of states like Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia to the West’s cultural excesses. Over the past decade, the Vietnamese state has carried out a succession of cultural purity drives in an attempt to slow the nation’s perceived inundation with foreign cultural pollution. The
most recent drive was an early 1996 campaign so fervent that it was described by one local commentator as a “minor cultural revolution” (Nguyễn Tan Định 1996). Instigated by the Central Party Secretariat, this nationwide movement sought to “protect and develop the national character” through a massive effort to investigate the importation, reproduction and circulation of overseas cultural products (“Ban bi thu trung uong...”). In the course of the campaign, vehicles with loudspeakers drove through the streets calling on people to “eradicate ‘noxious’ culture and social evils and build an orderly and civilised environment” (“Thành phố và cuộc nuốc...”). The confidence of foreign investors was shaken when in Hanoi billboards bearing the brand names of companies like Panasonic, Kodak, Coca-Cola, Aiwa, Tiger Beer and Sony were torn down without warning because they featured English and other foreign-language slogans inscribed in letters more prominent and colourful than those written in Vietnamese (Nguyễn Tan Định 1996). Pornographic magazines were burnt. Pirated videocassette copies of films from Hong Kong and Taiwan, Asian neighbours perceived to have fallen victim to the Western

5 Since I will use much of “Nguyễn Tan Định’s” work here, a note on his positionality is warranted. Firstly, “Nguyễn Tan Định”, or the “Man from Tân Định” is a pseudonym taken from the name of a street in Saigon’s District 3. While Nguyễn Tan Định’s articles appear in the Toronto-based newspaper Thoại Bao, he himself is actually based in Ho Chi Minh City, where he worked as a professor both before and after 1975, i.e. under both the southern Republic of Vietnam and the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam regimes. He is now retired. His being on the ground in Saigon, avid interest in matters of censorship and popular culture and exhaustive reading of Vietnamese newspapers and magazines make him an excellent source. His work is neither dogmatically anti-Hanoi, as is much overseas Vietnamese writing, nor is it excessively constrained by local censorship, since it is destined for publication overseas (Kim Nguyễn, personal letter; Nguyễn Đại (editor of Thoại Bao), personal letter).
cultural rot, were singled out for particular attention. The comic artist *But Sai Gon* [The Saigon Pen] saw fit to illustrate the risk posed by them in a picture of a foreign mercenary carrying a gun labelled “noxious culture”, wearing an ammunition belt loaded with video cassettes reading “violence”, “sex”, “horror” and “ghost stories”, and casting a shadow of *ngoai luong*, literally “foreign stream [of culture]” (*Saigon Giai Phong*, 12 January 1996, p.6). At the conclusion of the first step of the campaign, 202 000 videocassettes and several hundred thousand compact discs, laser discs and audio cassettes had been seized and destroyed, and around half of the estimated 6 000 video rental stores and “video cafés” in Ho Chi Minh City had been forced to temporarily close down (“Khoi dau buoc...”, “Thi truong video...”). Those remaining open were permitted to carry only stock approved by the censor. More recent manifestations include a 1999 “crackdown” on the cult of celebrity surrounding Vietnamese pop singers (“Communist media attacks...”).

Such endeavours have, of course, a precedent in post-revolutionary anti-Western movements in Vietnam, and to an extent have a continuity with the concerted attempt after the fall of Saigon to throw out the “harmful neo-colonialist garbage of the US imperialists” (Duiker 1989: 24, see also Taylor 1998: 177-185). After 1975, Vietnam’s authorities sought to implement a “cultural revolution” in the reunited nation alongside a “revolution in technology and industry” and a “revolution in production (class) relations”. This initiative was perceived to be as if not more important than the other revolutions, since it seems that Vietnam’s post-war leaders saw the cultural impact of the US during

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6 It was estimated that 85-90% of stock in Saigon’s 3 000 unlicensed video stores was foreign (“Thi truong video...”).
the war as having been even more serious than the physical impact of guns, bombs and herbicides (Denney 1982). Contemporary culture drives need to be read, however, as a specific response to the changes wrought on Vietnam’s cultural landscape by Doi Moi. As we have seen above, the state continues to be engaged in a process of border drawing between internal and external currents or streams of culture [noi luong/ngoai luong]. However, while earlier anti-Western movements were oriented towards a “simple” deglobalisation, contemporary discourses on cultural pollution take place against the background of a transformed national identity, one that is no longer autarchic but defines itself at least in part by its openness. Consistent with the convention that one speaks of Doi Moi as an “open door” [mo cua] period, contemporary discourses on Vietnamese national identity are not simply protectionist, rejecting all foreign influences, but rather focus on the maintenance of a traditional national character in the context of a global cultural exchange/integration [giao luu] and a project of cultural modernisation (see for instance Hoang Vinh 1995: 20). This is a context in which we find Vietnamese intellectuals arguing for respect of difference and the desirability of a relativist and pluralist conception of culture. Huynh Khai Vinh and Nguyen Thanh Tuan even begin their treatise on Cultural Tolerance by citing Jacques Derrida on the difficulty of defining culture (Huynh Khai Vinh and Nguyen Thanh Tuan 1997: 7), while Huynh Khai Vinh speaks elsewhere of a “dialectical relationship” between cultural unity and diversity in the relations between ethnic minorities and the majority ethnic Vietnamese (Huynh Khai Vinh 2000: 25). Policy and everyday practice do not of course necessarily live up to such an ethics of cultural relativism, but it is significant that intellectuals are beginning to think in such terms.
Rather than advocating a blanket rejection of foreign culture, it would seem that the state is trying to get clear about the grounds and criteria for selection; and where it is essaying to re-build boundaries, this is in order to retain control as the arbiter of cultural selection. Thus cultural purity drives address the need to renegotiate the terms of Vietnam’s integration into global culture, not to disentangle it once and for all. On a more pragmatic note, the possibility of really re-engineering national culture has been lost since Doi Moi let the genie of commercial culture out of the bottle. What we witness now is damage control in the unforeseen circumstances to which the influx of foreign capital has led. Indeed this latter, protective concern has absorbed much of the Party’s time and energy at a time when most international observers feel it ought to be concentrating on further economic reforms. In 1998 the Fifth Plenum of the Eighth Party Congress, in which the conservatives were seen to gain ascendancy over reformers, focused on “building and maintaining the national character” (Le Kha Phieu 1998) instead of implementing the Doi Moi II hoped for by international investors.

The Circulation and Consumption of Diasporic Music in Vietnam

This section draws on archival and ethnographic research I carried out in Ho Chi Minh City at the end of 1997, as well as overseas Vietnamese publications pertaining to diasporic culture in Saigon. While I have focused on Saigon, much of what I have to say is applicable to urban Vietnam in general. Note that a number of subjects interviewed by Thomas and Heng in Hanoi (2001) named diasporic singers amongst their “favourite well-known people in Vietnam”, thus indicating a familiarity among Hanoi youth with the overseas Vietnamese music scene.
Doi Moi has seen the formation in Vietnam of a huge market in pirated versions
of video music variety shows, karaoke videos, laserdiscs, VCDs, DVDs and compact
discs produced by Vietnamese living in the US, France and Canada. The coming into being
of this market is connected to the growth in availability of private information
technologies such as the VCR, CD player, karaoke machine, laserdisc and personal
computers. Ho Chi Minh City is the largest market for diasporic culture in Vietnam. Its
economy has revived much more quickly under Doi Moi than has that of Hanoi, where
central planning was implemented as early as 1954. As a consequence, private
entertainment technologies continue to be more within the financial reach of Saigon
residents than their northern counterparts. Such technologies are necessary to access
diasporic culture, which rarely if ever features on broadcast media. Those without access
to these technologies in their private homes can access them in public places like
restaurants, music and video cafes and a bewildering variety of karaoke parlours,
including the “hugging karaoke”, “alleyway karaoke” and even the “under the bridge
karaoke”. It is hard to find anyone in Saigon who has not had some kind of exposure to
diasporic commercial culture through one or another of these media.

Contemporary diasporic music, having evolved out of a cosmopolitan pre-1975
Saigonese culture that the communist victors sought in the aftermath of the war to
suppress and erase (Duiker 1989: 32-33), is still officially considered reactionary and
subversive in Vietnam. Pre-1975 musical works produced in the south and those written
after 1975 by diasporic artists are submitted to intense scrutiny before being officially
passed for circulation and performance. Illegally circulating diasporic works have been
subject to periodic crackdowns, which have traditionally been part and parcel of anti-
foreign culture drives such as the one described above. Stephen Denney (1982) describes a 1981 campaign in which diasporic cultural products were targeted, following concern since 1979 at the unofficial cultural liberalisation being brought about by Vietnamese refugees abusing the "exceptionally tolerant" policy of allowing gifts and remittances to be sent to relatives.

While the 1996 campaign seems to have been directed primarily against East Asian cultural products, diasporic commercial music culture was not neglected. Hundreds of thousands of pirated karaoke videos, laserdiscs, cassette tapes and compact discs were seized, and hundreds of unlicensed karaoke machines used to play them were confiscated ("Tren 870 vu..."). Customs officials at Ho Chi Minh City’s Tan Son Nhat airport, a key strategic and symbolic site during the campaign, seized over 1 000 cultural products described as having "decadent and reactionary contents", i.e. having originated in the diaspora ("Tai cua khau Tan Son Nhat..."). It is estimated that more than half of the karaoke parlours in Saigon were either shut down (or voluntarily closed) during the course of the campaign for failure to comply with licensing and censorship regulations, including possession of illegal videos and laserdiscs ("Ket qua thuc hien..."). One official noted during the campaign, with evident satisfaction, that "when the (pirated) overseas music videos disappear then local music and karaoke videos reappear, bright and shining, in the display cases of the city’s video shops" ("Thi truong video...").

But such initiatives rarely have lasting effects. Despite the state’s evident will to regulate their activities, consumers are easily able to sidestep state control and obtain a wide range of diasporic titles on a barely clandestine "grey market". This market is grey in that, while the state appears to have the will to curtail it, it lacks an apparatus of
surveillance and discipline sufficiently powerful and efficient to do so (except for extremely limited periods, and then only imperfectly). Even during the height of the 1996 campaign, video store proprietors who had been forced to temporarily close down their stores continued to trade by taking their wares from house to house, a practice so common it has a name, *dich vu video gio xach* [carry bag video service] (Nguyễn Tan Dinh 1996). The state is thus obliged to tacitly permit the existence of diasporic popular music and video, and to suffer its nagging presence on the cultural landscape. When I conducted research for this paper in Saigon at the end of 1997, a time when there was not a “culture drive” in action, it was possible to obtain copies of overseas-produced music variety shows with ease at corner video stores, while vendors around Saigon’s central market, Cho Ben Thanh, were openly showing the latest edition of the diasporic variety show *Paris by Night* on their display screens. Karaoke parlours were being a little more cautious, particularly those using laserdisc technology, many initially showing patrons only song menus with local music on them, but carrying diasporic discs “out the back”, to be produced at the request of trusted customers.

**Appropriating the Diasporic Product**

The state’s fear of the threat of subversion posed by diasporic culture is not, of course, untempered with desire - for the technical accomplishment, high production values and cosmopolitan aura of the diasporic product. What really smarts about the popularity of diasporic music is that it demonstrates the failure of national culture to meet consumers’ needs from within local cultural and economic resources. Much to the chagrin of Vietnam’s official cultural police and producers, the culture of its former
enemies has in the recent past bested the local product in the competition for consumers’ hearts and wallets. This has been one of the pressures that have led to the wholesale transformation of local music, music video and karaoke. According to Philip Taylor, the early 1980s saw the introduction of some Western pop and a broadening of themes in “revolutionary music”. The mid 1980s brought a rehabilitation of the work of pre-reunification South Vietnamese artists such as Van Cao and Trinh Cong Son, while 1986 saw an informal return to pre-1975 music, and to overseas Vietnamese rearrangements of these works, as well as post-1975 diasporic compositions (Taylor 1998: 214). In the 1990s, Vietnamese artists and producers have sought, as far as they have been allowed, to emulate their diasporic counterparts, initially in broadening the scope of song subject matter from revolutionary and patriotic themes to more personal and introspective narratives - including, of course, love songs - and then in adopting the same fashions, performative styles and televisual genres (especially the music variety show) favoured in the diaspora. Production and distribution companies such as Fafilm and Saigon Television have sought and been granted permission to include songs written and performed by diasporic artists on their own releases in an attempt to reclaim their market share from a monopoly of overseas artists, which was such in 1995 that most karaoke businesses, including state-owned ones, had no local Vietnamese songs on their lists, only overseas ones (Nguoi Tan Dinh 1995).7

7 For instance, the Tay Uyen Karaoke Restaurant, belonging to the state-run “House of Culture” of Saigon’s district one, had in 1995 “no local Vietnamese songs on its list, only Overseas (Vietnamese) music”. According to one author, this was because “Overseas laserdiscs have more good songs, especially noisy rock songs and feelgood songs, and also background shots of Europe and America, that our people just
Saigonese Consumers

In 1997 I undertook informal interviews with over twenty Saigonese, ranging in age from 16 to over 40, about their tastes in music, music video and karaoke, in all cases asking specifically whether they preferred diasporic or local products and performers. Where possible I also watched diasporic music videos with informants in their homes.

Interviewees evidenced a genuine desire for the newly cosmopolitan products of the local music industry, and many took pride in the assertion that the local product is in fact now superior to the diasporic one. A high percentage of interviewees recounted that the heyday of diasporic music (and in particular Paris by Night) had been in the eighties. This was a decade in which local performers were still not entirely free to shrug off the Confucian moral/political didactic function expected of popular music by the Party, and in which production values remained extremely low. Indeed, in the early nineties, the “Young Music” (Nhac tuoi tre) program on Hanoi TV still consisted of badly dubbed and unfashionably dressed singers self-consciously gesticulating beneath mirror balls in sparsely decorated studios. In addition, informants stressed, Paris by Night had in the eighties been “new”. Audiences were curious. No doubt the image of their diasporic compatriots amidst the trappings of Western modernity provided a fascinating mirror to audiences’ own (largely frustrated³) fantasies of consumption.

There was also perhaps an element of nostalgia here. In the south, the consumer habitus for exiled wartime celebrities and their works was readily revived, since the “yellow music” [*nhac vang*] of the old regime had never ceased to circulate in secret during the “closed door” period (Taylor 1998: 179, Denney 1982). Respondents also stressed that a sense of transgression had then adhered to watching the show, which the authorities had regarded far more seriously than they do now. “If you were caught with a copy of it then” a university student told me, making a grave face, “then ‘Oh my God!’” [*Oi troi o!*]. By way of showing how audiences’ desire for diasporic music has cooled, virtually all of the interviewees recounted the story of the unfavourable popular response to a much anticipated live show staged by diasporic performers around *Tet* 1996 at the Peace Concert Hall [*Nha Hat Hoa Binh*], featuring Elvis Phuong and other diasporic luminaries. This was the first time a large, high profile diasporic show had come to Vietnam, and the tickets to this event had been several times more expensive than those to concerts given by local star performers such as Siu Black or My Linh. Audiences were, reportedly, “extremely disappointed”. One respondent pointed out that the technical ability of the singers had not been equal to that of local singers, while another reported, tellingly, that audiences were immensely let down to see that “on the stage they [the diasporic artists] looked just like anyone else!”

It would be unwise not to take these comments critically. There is a structural sense in which the diasporic artists’ live performances could not but have been disappointing to Vietnamese audiences, since the cosmopolitan aura which makes diasporic music culture so desirable is, paradoxically, dependent on the absence and distance of the diaspora. The banality of the performers’ empirical presence ruptures it,
and the magic is gone; they become "just like anyone else". A further interpretation is suggested by one respondent's reflection that perhaps the negative response to the singers was unfair, since people in Vietnam generally delight in "trashing" [chui] Viet Kieu - a term for overseas Vietnamese with potentially pejorative connotations - at any opportunity they get. Thus we might read the unfavourable response to the singers as the taking of a kind of nationalist pleasure, whereby Vietnamese nationals seek to assert their cultural superiority over their diasporic counterparts. In this vein, a university lecturer told me that overseas Vietnamese composers are incapable of producing new works, and can only rehash pre-1975 songs. His suggestion that the diaspora is "culturally exhausted" makes a claim, I would argue, that those who remained in the homeland have access to a source of cultural regeneration which those who left do not - one that flows directly out of the soil, as it were. We might read such a claim as an attempt on the part of the informant to valorise his "hereness", his having stayed behind in Vietnam, as a way of dealing with his lack of the qualities stereotypically attributed to Viet Kieu (cosmopolitanism, wealth, international mobility and so on). Claiming that their immersion in the homeland is what gives local artists the edge over diasporic artists arrogates the lack to the diasporic artists, who become culturally stagnant and inauthentic.

The assertion, made by almost all of the informants, that they did not like and rarely watched diasporic videos, was contradicted however by the fact that all viewers with whom I watched Paris By Night knew numerous details about the show, such as the fact that Paris By Night co-presenter Ky Duyen is the lawyer daughter of former Republic of Vietnam President and Air Force Commander Nguyen Cao Ky; or that Nguyen Ngoc Ngan has literary pretensions, and has published a number of anti-Hanoi
treatises. Interviewees recognised many of the singers appearing on the show, and displayed a high degree of familiarity with its format. After having been told by the members of a household where I was staying that they never watched diasporic videos, I was surprised to discover upon looking into the video drawer that it was in fact full of them! Members of this same household also watched with evident delight when I brought home diasporic videos, and even scolded me one time for renting a pirate copy of inferior quality, giving me directions to go to a more reputable pirateer. By contrast, the only informants who expressed an unashamed preference for diasporic videos were members of a family with a professed dislike of the communist regime, a large number of family members living overseas, and a keen desire to emigrate themselves.

Unfavourable popular feeling against diasporic music might be seen as an expression of audiences’ desire to participate in the state’s vision of a self-sufficient national culture that rejects corrupting influences from the West. It may also be read as a (state-sponsored) denial of the model of cultural modernity presented by the diaspora, which is considered to have played too dangerous a game with Western modernity, and lost its roots in the process. Significantly, where it was once considered that the only route to modernity was by leaving the country for the first world (at least amongst the vast majority who rejected a socialist “modernity from above” as a true one), there is now a claim to an indigenous Vietnamese modernity, which is asserted as being superior to diasporic versions. This is not to deny that Vietnam still suffers from a mild case of “leave-the-country-fever”, but points to the fact that modern subjectivity and its trappings (wealth, consumer power, lifestyle choice etc) are now conceivable within Vietnam’s urban centres, especially Saigon, and not constantly projected overseas. Audiences’
actual practices of consumption, however, indicate the inability of national culture to meet their (disavowed) consumer aspirations and desire for the glittering products of Western modernity. What we discover is an uneasy coexistence of xenophobia and xenophilia. For Clammer, the use of semiotically ambiguous objects (such as the diasporic videos) can serve to mediate this contradiction, allowing one to be cosmopolitan and indigenous at the same time (Clammer 1997: 76-77).

Responses to questions about the politics of diasporic culture suggested that Vietnamese consumers themselves do the work of “censoring” these products. Thus editions of variety shows that contain too much political pedagogy are unpopular. While most Saigonese have numerous gripes with their rulers, they are not it seems receptive to criticism of them originating in the diaspora, and few if any diasporic political leaders have a following in Vietnam - while on the contrary homeland dissidents like the recently released prisoners of conscience Doan Viet Hoat and Nguyen Dan Que have large followings in the diaspora. When I was in Saigon in 1997 researching this chapter, *Paris by Night* 39 and 41 were available, but number 40, *Mother*, a video containing a great deal of anticommunist political statement (despite claims that it was procommunist (see Chapter Four)), was not widely available, although apparently some shops had it. Given that virtually the whole video rental market is unregulated, one has to assume that this absence was not because of censorship, but because of a lack of demand or perceived lack of demand for the video. Certainly, Vietnamese consumers have often come into conflict with the state, and have found it necessary to adopt what one interviewee actually called “guerrilla” strategies to obtain forbidden cultural products. However, this conflict seems not so much to occur at the level of the overt politics of foreign cultural products,
but rather with consumers' refusal to cede to the state the authority to perform a censoring function that would ensure their “protection”. Consumers appear to claim the power to perform this negotiation for themselves, and popularly reject the paternal intrusion of the state. Thus the struggle is about whether the defence of Vietnamese identity is to be performed officially, at the level of regulating cultural flows, or in a laissez faire way, at the level of consumption and interpretation. It seems that the latter paradigm is unofficially dominant.

Conservative Resistance to the “Diasporisation” of Vietnamese Music

In 1995, the Office for the Protection of Culture of the Ho Chi Minh City Ministry of Information and Culture, in co-ordination with the police, performed a series of raids on a number of famous karaoke restaurants in Saigon. Officials seized 240 laserdiscs belonging to the “Golden Discs” or “Super Best Collection 20” series. The significant thing about this case was that these three discs, each containing 20 selected songs, were not pirates of diasporic music, but were actually produced by the state-owned Saigon Television Service, in co-operation with Lek video Hong Kong. The official reason for the seizure of the discs was that they contained “a number of songs closely connected with the military of the Republic of Vietnam”. This was not, however, a clear-cut case. All of these songs, made popular by their performance by diasporic artists, were in fact on a list of 130 works written in South Vietnam before 1975 that had been passed for performance and circulation by the national Office for Culture and Information. The Saigon Television Service was furious at the confiscation of the discs and, supported by
the newspaper *Thanh Nien* [Youth], entered into a vitriolic public debate with the Ministry (Nguyễn Tan Dinh 1995, “Quang cao, bang video…”).

What I want to highlight here is the fact that a government agency in Ho Chi Minh City should have felt so strongly that it took it upon itself to actually go beyond the guidelines laid down by Hanoi for the regulation of diasporic and pre-revolutionary Saigonese culture to seize copies of the “Golden Discs” series, thus coming into conflict with the national censor. We may read many things into this action. For one, it is reminiscent of a historical anxiety about southern Vietnamese cultural identity as being “determined by hostile and alien forces” (Taylor 1998: 185). (I can remember a time when it was illegal to dance the lambada in Saigon while it was legal in Hanoi!) For another, it is perhaps an instance of conflict between conservatives and progressives in the regime. The 1996 cultural purity campaign described above came in the wake of a marshalling of conservative forces against reformers in the lead up to the Eighth Party Congress (Thi Lam 1996, see also Thayer 1999: 11). Factionalism aside, such bickering between government agencies over the suitability of particular songs is, I would argue, indicative of a more general ambivalence towards the diaspora. The state’s desire to co-opt overseas Vietnamese subjects’ capital and professional skills for its own project of nation-building is coupled with a fear of their politically subversive potential and oppositional conception of the national project, and also the fear that the overseas Vietnamese have become too Western, too modern, and that their presence in the

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9 The Ministry of Culture was unresponsive to my requests to interview officials about this incident. When I tried to contact officials through informal channels, I found myself in a meeting with a group who thought that I represented a diasporic production company and wanted to cut a deal with me!
homeland must undermine the moral basis of the Confucian-authoritarian state (see Chapter Seven).

Another instance of conflict between government agencies sprang up in 1996 over the song *A Love Ten Years Past*, written by exile composer Tran Quang Nam and performed by overseas star Elvis Phuong. Young Film Saigon had submitted the song to the Ministry of Art and Performance in Hanoi who, after close consideration, found that Tran Quang Nam’s attitude to the nation and the contents of his song had “no problems” (Nguyễn Tâm Định 1996a). After the song’s release, however, musician Diep Minh Tuyen, vice general secretary of the Saigon Music Association, wrote a scathing newspaper article about the piece, which he described as “a reactionary overseas song of extremely subtle wickedness”. He is worth quoting at length:

This song which has been supposed to be purely a love song really has an accusatory and inimical character ... Its reactionary intention comes out in its name ... There is no question that [the composer] was writing about the ten years since the defeat and flight [of the southern regime] (1975-1985) ... The lyrics of “A Love Ten Years Past” ... announce its deep and subtle reactionary character. The love of this song isn’t the love of people who live in our national community, it isn’t that of those who stood beside us in the front line. The thirtieth of April 1975 is for us a great day, marking the glorious victory of our people, when we were “happy after the tears flowed”, as Xuan Hong has sung. But in “A Love Ten Years Past”, the man in the song abandoned his nation, and from under Western skies fraudulently spews forth moving words about a past lover, to whom he is
without doubt still faithful, moaning and crying for a love cut short: “A love unexpectedly cut short, a love still like a dream”. Ask yourself, who does the author mean to accuse of “breaking up” this affair? He left his lover and ran away but still asks: “My love, over there are your eyes still sad?”, then lifts his voice to counsel her to “Forget, forget this sad dream”. We see clearly what the author is trying to say here: whoever stayed behind to live under the new regime must have “sad eyes and sad dreams”. When the composer says “[We had] a whole sky full of love, when will it come back?”, he longingly remembers the love he has lost: South Vietnam before liberation (in Nguoi Tan Dinh 1996a).

What strikes me most about Diep Minh Tuyen’s somewhat paranoid reading of A Love Ten Years Past - a song which the censor was satisfied is nothing but an innocuous love ballad - is its emphatic insistence on the difference of the diasporic Vietnamese, a people “whose love is not our love” (is theirs a bourgeois love?), from those who stayed in the homeland. The author is in such earnest to convert these strangers into unequivocal enemies that he is obliged to indulge in an almost comically forced interpretation of the song’s lyrics to “find out” its subtly concealed subversive intentions.

“Progressive” Discourses on Diasporic Culture

Co-existing with discourses such as the above, we find a more liberal discourse on the incorporation of overseas Vietnamese culture emanating from “pro-overseas Vietnamese” institutions such as the Committee on Overseas Vietnamese, and from intellectuals such as Tran Trong Dang Dan, who argues that it should not be assumed that
all overseas Vietnamese culture is undesirable. Much of it is, Dan says, but some overseas Vietnamese culture also “has many positive elements, those which continue the beautiful traditions of our race, and which incorporate the best elements of world culture” (Tran Trong Dang Dan 1997: 285). He stresses the need for a clearer policy on overseas Vietnamese cultural products, asking why do we have policies permitting the importation of foreign cultural goods but do not permit the importation of overseas Vietnamese ones? To legalise their importation so that they may by screened and censored is better than banning them in form but having them continue to be smuggled into the country, Dan argues. He also advocates more co-operation in cultural production between the advanced overseas culture industry and the homeland one (ibid: 288).

Along the lines of the idea that overseas Vietnamese might act as mediators for Vietnam’s entry into global markets (an oft-expressed desire of Vietnamese transnational nation-builders), we also find the suggestion that they might act as a “vanguard” for global cultural contacts. While Vietnamese American commercial music culture looks at first glance very Westernised, on closer inspection we see a marked process of selection, mimicry, indigenisation and hybridisation. This is often informed, paradoxically, by cultural forms encountered in the colonial period such as Vaudeville and cabaret, which we rediscover in the music variety show. Here the diasporic experience of what Hamid Nacify calls cultural “haggling” (1993: 8) is visible as a model/guide for local cultural producers and consumers faced with the cornucopia of global commercial culture. Consistent with Robin Cohen’s observation that diasporas act as a bridge between the particular and the universal (Cohen 1997: 170), we can see cultural producers in the diaspora as possessing the ability to mimic and hybridise global culture to adapt it to the
"Vietnamese taste”. This dynamic offers us an alternative perspective on the encounter between Vietnam and global commercial culture. Despite the state’s tendency to cast this as a confrontation between an anti-imperialist national culture and the aggressive intrusions of Western and East Asian cultural flows, here we encounter a Vietnamese consumer habitus eager to borrow, adapt and synthesise, and willing to be schooled in this activity by the diasporic experience. Indeed, we can say that homeland cultural producers have already learnt this lesson sufficiently well to be gaining the upper hand in the struggle between local and diasporic music as to who can best represent the modern and the desires of local audiences.

**Conclusion: Diasporic Culture and the Disruption of Vietnamese Occidentalism**

State discourses on the return of overseas Vietnamese popular culture are intertwined in larger discourses on modernisation, globalisation and national identity in the Doi Moi period. These discourses have been characterised in Vietnam, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, by a desire for a cosmopolitan modernity tempered by an intense concern that national identity be bulwarked against erosion in the face of powerful currents of Euramerican and, increasingly, East Asian, global culture. Globalisation has been experienced in Southeast Asia as a process in which the distinction between inside and outside begins to fail as “the person who was unequivocally outside now becomes a neighbour” (Featherstone 1990: 11), and the old centres of colonial power are readmitted into an uncomfortable proximity. In this context, observers have noted a general tendency among Southeast Asian states towards the “micromanagement of cultural affairs” (Steedly 1999: 442). With the Marxist grand narrative of the international dictatorship of
the proletariat in tatters, one of the Vietnamese state’s reactions to the encroachments of
globalisation has been to attempt to reconstruct firm boundaries separating the inside and
outside of the national community. As in the past, cultural flows have been an important
site for the enunciation of a discourse which seeks to put the West back in its place as the
absolute other in opposition to which Vietnamese identity and morality is constructed, the
“that which we are not”. This kind of Occidentalism is a discursive strategy by which
Southeast Asian states have reversed the classical Orientalist idiom (albeit
asymmetrically) to construct themselves as the positive term in a relation whose other is a
degenerate and ailing West (a category which in Vietnam may include East Asia). For
Yao, such a production of the West as an object of fear/desire articulates the Southeast
Asian subject’s anxieties in a globalised world (Yao 2001) - an uncertain and fluid
context in which we all, no doubt, need others against whom to fix our own identities. It
is here that Yao’s reading (after Bauman) of the ambivalent signification of the cultural
products of the West according to the logic of “the stranger” is instructive. Like the
stranger, who refuses the distinction friend/enemy and the spatial order of
proximity/distance it supports, the nagging and protracted presence “amongst us” of the
now familiar and desirable, now strange and dangerous cultural products of the West puts
into doubt the very principle of oppositionality itself (see Bauman 1990: 148-9). Their
presence in many Southeast Asian contexts is, we can say, chronically ambivalent.

Diasporic cultural products introduce a further level of complexity into the flawed
and troubled narratives of Occidentalism. While with the readmission of the West the
Vietnamese state has had to deal with the fact that “those who used to be outsiders now
live amongst us”, with the return of diasporic culture it has had to cope with the more
troubling realisation that this particular stranger is not as strange as it might like him to be. Cosmopolitan yet familiar, Western yet unmistakably Vietnamese, global yet filled with such local knowledge as the names of Saigon streets or the colour of an autumn afternoon in Hanoi, this popular diasporic music culture refuses to fit unproblematically into the blanket category of “external” or “foreign” culture [ngoai luong] applied to it in official discourse.