4. Mother Vietnam in the Year 2000: The Deterritorialisation of Exile Culture

Variety Shows and the Exile Tradition

Sporting titles such as *Paris by Night, Asia, Hollywood Nights, Dem Saigon* (Saigon Nights) and *Lang Van*, to name the more prominent series, music variety shows are almost universally popular amongst overseas Vietnamese audiences. Structured on the premise of variety, the shows incorporate a wide range of musical styles, from pre-colonial works through Western-influenced “Modern Music” [*Tan nhac*] to bilingual covers of contemporary American pop songs like “Hotel California” and “Flashdance”. They also incorporate a wide range of Vietnamese identities, again ranging from pre-colonial figures through French-era cosmopolites to “hybrid” youth. As one overseas Vietnamese journalist put it, we find in these music videos:

a variety of musical styles to suit the tastes of many different classes of viewers: love songs, light music, music for the young, foreign music, music from home, trendy music, nostalgic music [*nhac sen*], comic skits and rich meetings of the old and new. The audience will see Lynda Trang Dai leaping about on the stage, then Huong Lan in black peasant’s pyjamas and a conical hat, then Ngoc Hue in a swimming costume and a pointed bra aping Madonna, then finally Ai Van,
holding a broad straw *quai thao* hat, following Elvis Phuong, dressed in Western trousers and a black coat going off to a festival... (Gia Mom 1996).

While the various segments may pander to individual tastes, the general mode of address of the music videos is very much a collective one. The diverse segments of performance only ever individuate parts of the audience for part of the time. Audience members are constantly recouped via the shows’ diegesis, and the anchoring role of the comperes and their commentaries, into an overarching conception of shared overseas Vietnamese identity. This is centred on an appeal to core cultural values, a common tradition, linguistic unity and an anticommmunist homeland politics. Viewers are addressed very much as the members of families, a fact that in itself tends to recognise and reinforce the Confucian centrality of the family as a key cultural value. Indeed, it is no doubt a large part of their commercial success that the videos don’t disrupt “family life”. In my experience, watching them is most frequently a family activity, even something that *produces* solitary family activity. Here the shows’ variety creates unity in that there is something for every one, and nothing likely to seriously alienate anyone. The videos’ loosely sequential, non-narrative structure is also “family-friendly” in that it presupposes a domestic context of reception in which viewing will be interrupted by and co-occur with a range of family activities like cooking, eating, conversation, care of children, family members and guests coming in and out of the television room, and so on.

Described by musicologist Tran Quang Hai as a vehicle for “a specifically Vietnamese exile-music” (1990: 52), the variety show form has been a mainstay of overseas Vietnamese anticommmunist culture from the mid seventies onwards. Composers
and performers were initially drawn from the ranks of artists who had been living in the RVN before becoming refugees subsequent to the fall of Saigon, and their works reflected their wartime experiences and continuing opposition to the communist regime. In the first decade of diaspora, exile music was explicitly constructed by its producers as being a political weapon in the struggle against Hanoi. Songs such as Nam Loc’s “Farewell Saigon” (1975) [Sai Gon Vinh Biet], and Viet Dzung’s “A Few Gifts Sent Home” [Mot Chut Qua cho Que Huong] were broadcast back to Vietnam via the BBC and Voice of America (VOA) with the intention of encouraging people to flee Vietnam, thus destabilising society. Nacif notes that Iranian exile political organisations pursue this same Gramscian conception of culture as an arena for political struggle (1993: 53-4).

Many older overseas and homeland Vietnamese remember listening to these broadcasts in secret in post-liberation Saigon. The composer of Sai Gon Vinh Biet, which has been performed by over thirty diasporic artists, claims that he received numerous letters from people in refugee camps saying that having heard the song - and specifically its promise of return - encouraged them to flee Vietnam by boat. Pham Duy, the most revered diasporic composer, is said to have been so moved when he performed it on VOA that he fell down unconscious. Finally, an author who escaped from a re-education camp in Vietnam told of how a friend had tried to copy down the song in secret so that the prisoners could sing it. He was caught, beaten, put in solitary confinement, and died next to the unfinished copy of the song (Nguyen Ninh Hoa 1995)!

Early themes for variety show songs include: nostalgia for the country, nostalgia for Saigon (1975-77); resistance, struggle for the reconquest of the country (1978-81); and description of prisoners’ lives in Vietnam (1981) (Tran Quang Hai 1990). Program titles include: Farewell Saigon, A Tear
for Vietnam, The Spring When We Return and Looking Back at the Last 20 Years. The trend over the last decade has been for these programs to become less and less explicitly political, to the extent that one is more likely nowadays to come across love songs and spectacular dance routines than statements of opposition to Hanoi. The gradual depoliticisation of diasporic identity that we charted in Chapter Two has produced market pressures that have led to a shift in the political and nostalgic concerns of a somewhat narrow exile culture to a more pluralistic, celebratory and “hedonistic” diasporic entertainment culture. Exile songs and identities vie here with a plethora of other identities in a postmodern space of plurality, hybridity and affect (see Cunningham and Nguyen 2000).

“Ca Dao Me” [My Mother’s Songs]

In 1997, the anticommunist credentials of the most prestigious and longest-running variety show, Thuy Nga’s Paris By Night, were very vocally questioned. Subsequent to the release in August 1997 of Paris By Night number 40, Mother, an unprecedented scandal erupted. Its makers claimed that they fully intended the program to be in the exile tradition sketched above, but something went horribly wrong. Due, depending on who you believe, to either careless editing, a cynical market ploy or a communist plot, the video included a dramatised segment in which Vietnamese civilians appeared to be being killed by the helicopters and jets of the air force of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) [South Vietnam]. Such was the outcry over Mother that Thuy Nga has been obliged to offer customers two newly edited versions of the video: the first minus the song “Ca Dao Me” [My Mother’s Songs], that to which the offending image track is
set; and the second minus this song plus a number of other amendments insisted upon by critics after viewing the first re-issue. Not satisfied with this exchange, a crowd demonstrated outside the Thuy Nga office in Westminster, California, dumping the videos in a pile and demanding their money back. A further protest was staged in front of the studio in Toronto where Thuy Nga will record its next production ("Bieu tinh truoc phong thu..."). Angry articles appeared thick and fast in newspapers and on overseas Vietnamese websites. Company director To Van Lai and Paris By Night compere Nguyen Ngoc Ngan were both obliged to publish apologia in the press and on the web, and Van Lai appeared on radio programs to take angry calls from Thuy Nga’s disaffected audience.

The release of Mother was timed to coincide with the festival of Vu Lan, otherwise known as the Season of Filial Piety, beginning on the 15th of the 7th lunar month (mid-August). This is meant to be a time in which children, in keeping with the Confucian prescription of unconditional love and respect for one’s parents, become particularly aware of the value of their mothers and of the great debt of gratitude they owe them. By acting properly towards their parents at this time, children may experience and attain the virtue of Hieu thao or filial piety. Accordingly, all of the songs in Thuy Nga’s program were dedicated to recognising and praising the selflessness of mothers and the sacrifices they undergo for their children. This proved to be an excellent marketing strategy. Mother sold better than any Thuy Nga video ever has (Interview with Thuy Nga representative in Sydney, 1997). Mother’s sales figures attest to the fact that music variety shows have been and continue to be seen as an important means of cultural maintenance and communal survival. Particularly important here is their perceived
pedagogic function. These shows have been looked upon by audiences and producers alike as a means of active “culture-building” across generations, i.e. as a means of acculturating the younger generations of overseas Vietnamese into an “authentic” Vietnamese socio-cultural universe, including of course an anticommunist homeland politics. These pedagogic expectations were, however, to be cruelly disappointed by Mother. In an article in a Vietnamese American newspaper, one journalist described how his small child had been asking him about the Mother tape every time he went to town:

- Hey Dad, do you have the Mother tape yet?
- Not yet, sweetheart!
- When it’s in, will you buy it for me, Dad?
- Sure, when it’s in, I’ll buy it!
- Are there songs about Mum in it, Dad?
- Of course there are, honey!
- Are there people who escaped across the sea like us, Dad?
Although I didn’t yet know what was in the tape, I confidently said:
- Of course there are!

Later, when the author comes home with the tape, his son wrests it out of his hands, runs inside with it and puts it in the machine to watch.
- Dad! There are helicopters from our army, Dad. There are jets as well. Come and look, Dad... Come and look quickly, there are people holding little children as well. Who are they, Dad?

I stepped forward, and looked at the screen:

- They’re people fleeing the enemy.

- Who’s chasing them, Dad?

- It must be the Viet Cong.

- Are the Viet Cong cruel, Dad?

- They sure are!

- Did you run like them, Dad?

- I sure did. Your Dad ran away and escaped across the ocean.

- Was running away across the sea hard, Dad?

- Of course it was!

- Dad, there’s another plane there. Is that plane from our side, Dad?

- That’s right.

- Is that house on fire, Dad? Who lit it?

There was a loud explosion. My son stopped his ears and pulled on my hand, calling out:

- But Dad, why are our army’s planes killing the little boy’s father?

My eyes widened at the images in the video. What conspiracy was this? Was it for profit, or clumsy propagandising? I had no answer, as my boy continued to cry out:
- Is the father of the little boy dead yet Dad? Does it hurt to die, Dad? Why are our planes killing his father? Is the little boy miserable? What about his mother? Is she unhappy? Who’s going to look after him? Is he angry at the planes of the army who killed his Dad?

The son then picks up his toy gun and, eyes wide, makes bang bang noises.

- What are you doing, son?
- I’m firing my gun.
- What are you shooting?
- I’m shooting the planes of the army that killed the little boy’s Dad!

I nearly died. I didn’t know what to say to my son... (Bui Xuan Vu 1997).

While there is perhaps an element of fiction in this account, what is significant here is the way the author constructs himself as having invited Thuy Nga into his home, the very stronghold of cultural maintenance and bosom of filial piety, only to be made to appear illegitimate in the eyes of his son. What was it he fought for, the author asks, what was it so many of his people died for, what was the purpose of his desperate flight across the sea if his son cannot be made to understand and hold dear the rightness and justice of the anticommunist cause? The offending video’s violation of this exalted pedagogic task is only compounded by its abuse of the hallowed name of Mother, which transmutes, easily enough, into a betrayal of the Mother-land itself. At least three critics of the cassette used the rhetorical device of dramatising the context of family viewing to
illustrate the harm that this video is capable of doing. In each of these remarkably similar accounts the video takes on something of the role of the jets and helicopters which, in the narrative of “Ca Dao Me”, come and shatter the tender domestic environment of a peasant family with bullets and bombs.

Has Thuy Nga Abandoned its Exile Politics?

Speculation has been rife as to what Thuy Nga is up to. The most popular interpretation is that the company has turned its back on its overseas audience, and has dumped its exile politics in order to break into the much larger homeland market. According to this reading, the controversial scene was included as a concession to Hanoi for permission to officially market Paris By Night in Vietnam. Currently only pirates of the show are marketed there informally, an activity from which the company derives no profit (see Dao Nguyen Phuc 1997, Thi-Anh 1997, Kathy Tran 1997). To Van Lai and Nguyen Ngoc Ngan have, however, vigorously denied allegations that they have sold out. Both were quick to point out that they have never been back to Vietnam, be it for tourism or business (To Van Lai 1997, Nguyen Ngoc Ngan 1997). Ngoc Ngan claims that he refused to return even as his father lay dying in hospital in Saigon. On the day he got the news that his father had died, he says, he was performing in Atlantic City - stoically doing his exilic duty. He also points out that he has written over twenty-six books and sixty audio books, the majority of which contain anticommunist content (Nguyen Ngoc Ngan 1997). To Van Lai cites the fact that Thuy Nga videos are officially banned in Vietnam, where they have been categorised by the National Censor as “extremely reactionary”. The Thuy Nga directors have been told in the Party paper Saigon Giai
Phong [Saigon Liberation], Van Lai claims, “[not to] hope that there will be a spring when you’ll return”. Van Lai was also quick to point out that people returning to Vietnam with copies of Thuy Nga products risk having them confiscated at the airport, and that this in fact had recently happened to someone bringing a copy of Mother into Vietnam (To Van Lai 1997). Finally, all politics aside, the company denies that the strategy of changing its ideological colours would even make economic sense: “If people in Canada are producing pirate copies in droves, wealthy as that country is, then try asking, who’s going to be able to pay over twenty US dollars to buy an original copy in Vietnam?” (Hoang Dang Son Ha 1997).

Thuy Nga has attributed the Mother blunder to an inexperienced director in whom it put too much faith. The company is guilty only, it says, of releasing the video without properly checking his work (To Van Lai 1997, 1997a, Hoang Dang Son Ha 1997). I am inclined to believe this account. One reason is that it admits to the embarrassing fact that one of the company’s young directors should be so unaware of the iconography of the war as to have used the American-provided helicopters and jets of the Republic of Vietnam’s air force to symbolise the “enemy”. This says something about inter-generational alienation that rings true. I also find it far-fetched to believe that Thuy Nga should have changed its politics overnight, or that it would make such a clumsy attempt to pander to the communist regime. Given the company’s impeccable anticommunist credentials, it seems unlikely that Hanoi would respond to such overtures. Ironically, it seems that the Thuy Nga company itself deplores as much if not more so than its critics the fact that its videos are consumed in Vietnam. The integrity of the absolutely committed anticommunist position it would like to claim for itself is undermined by the
fact that the evil communist other does not hate Thuy Nga as much as the company might
like it to, but rather quite liberally tolerates the circulation of its products on a “grey
market” of quasi-legal popular culture (see Chapter Three). Indeed, such is the
embarrassment on the behalf of the company about its inability to control the circulation
of its videos that a Sydney representative of Thuy Nga asserted to me that the company’s
products are in fact not available in Vietnam in any form. The fact that one can obtain the
latest copy of Paris By Night from any corner video store in Saigon is one the company
needs to repress because it disrupts entirely the exile fantasy of the lost homeland as a
communist dystopia and of itself as the radical oppositional voice of the “Free
Vietnamese”.

Media Flows and the Violation of the of Boundaries of the Exile Nation

During the Mother incident, critics became hyper-aware of the Thuy Nga
company’s alleged breaches of the boundary - economic, political, symbolic, physical -
between diaspora and homeland. Apart from the main charge of a betrayal of its
anticommunist politics motivated by a desire to profit from the Vietnamese market,
critics were able to pinpoint the facts that: Thuy Nga sent a crew to Vietnam to shoot
locations there; one has to sign a contract with the Vietnamese government to do this;
they employed Vietnamese nationals (not overseas Vietnamese) to act in the film clip;
and, perhaps worst of all, they borrowed a “communist” song. “While ‘Free Vietnam’ is
not short of quality songs about mothers,” wrote one critic, “Thuy Nga has used a Viet
Cong song: the song ‘Missing Mother’, performed by Hoai Nam, in which there is a line
‘waiting for a time soon to come when the enemy will be dead and gone’ (alluding to the
army of the Republic of Vietnam, our Allies and the ongoing resistance of the Free Vietnamese)” (Lang Van Editor’s Office 1997).

The critics’ painstaking attention to detail in picking the bones of Mother for signs of communist otherness reveals an obsessive concern with the establishment and maintenance of boundaries and borders. As Mary Douglas (1966) has famously shown, this activity is characteristically accompanied by a discourse of “corruption”, “pollution” and “purity”. The reaction to Mother in the diasporic public sphere is consistent with an exile spatial imaginary that continues to underpin dominant discourses of diasporic identity. One sees its intensification particularly at moments of crisis, when it seems to shift registers, from being an imagined to a literal geography, allowing it to become the basis for policing the boundary between diaspora and homeland. In this imaginary, the diaspora continues to be conceived, as it was in the Cold War days, as inhabiting a bounded “national” space. While deterritorialised in that it comprises communities spread throughout the world, this space is nevertheless experienced as having a territorial integrity in that it belongs to the geopolitical bloc of the West - a bloc that excludes, or at least keeps at a distance, communist Vietnam. The West here becomes a haven for the protection and maintenance of a non-communist Vietnamese identity, experienced as the authentic Vietnamese cultural identity in opposition to the “unnatural” identity imposed on homeland Vietnamese by the communists. Indeed, elites from the RVN were already inculcated in this overdetermined sense of Vietnameseness as a sacred object of cultural maintenance prior to emigration as a result of the civil war.

Do Quy Toan, a well-known writer in exile, has gone so far as to say that it is inappropriate for overseas Vietnamese to be calling their literature an “exile literature”,
since the real exiles are those left behind in Vietnam (in Nguyen Hung Quoc 1994: 144).
Those who stayed behind, he claims, have been alienated from their own culture and
traditions by the communist party’s program of Marxist-Leninist social engineering
(Marx-Leninism being a Western import antithetical to Vietnam’s indigenous and
Confucian heritages). In this formulation, which is by no means uncommon, the overseas
Vietnamese are cast as the true inheritors of Vietnamese culture and tradition. They
become the caretakers of the national “Thing”, as Zizek puts it (1993: 201ff). They are
the ones who really possess the spirit or essence of the homeland, which now exists
uniquely in the imaginary nation of “Free Vietnam”. Taking this logic to the limit, some
describe the homeland as having been deterritorialised by communism to the extent that it
has vanished or is forever unrecoverable (Scott in Thomas 1999: 24). Here future
generations of overseas Vietnamese become the homeland, hence the popular statement
“Our children are now our homeland”. Alternatively, cultural reproduction becomes a
sacred mission, since it is future generations of overseas Vietnamese who will return to
rebuild a post-communist homeland. In the exile imaginary, then, the breaching of the
boundaries of diaspora leads not only to the loss of a specific overseas Vietnamese

\[10\] This imaginary is not dissimilar to that found in Taiwan, which during Chiang Kai Shek’s days was
viewed as a model Chinese society, a site for cultural preservation and also one from which to launch a
political offensive against communism (Hughes 1997: 27). The ROC spatial imaginary “engulfed” the
homeland, with Taiwanese maps showing the national territory as including the whole of the Chinese
mainland and Outer Mongolia, and schoolchildren being required to memorise the names of railway
stations as they had existed in pre-1949 China (ibid: 29).
identity, but to the loss of authentic Vietnameseness itself, and thus to any hope of restoring the nation.

For Appadurai, electronic media and mass migration, and their joint effects upon the work of the imagination, are key dimensions of modern subjectivity. He argues that, in an era of deterritorialised consumers and texts-in-motion, “neither images nor viewers fit into circuits or audiences that are easily bound within local, national, or regional spaces” (Appadurai 1996: 4). Mother is problematic to its exile critics precisely because of the way its diegesis weaves together a transnational space which links sites in Vietnam, the US and France. In the confusion of boundaries, there is also a confusion of friends and enemies. As the result of a director’s “mistake”, the history of the Vietnam War/The American War is not presented from a single, diasporic perspective. Instead, the video presents a contrapuntal history that includes a “communist” perspective, in which the Air Force of the RVN is the enemy. Its address is not to a “closed” audience, located exclusively in the diaspora, but rather to a transnational one, located in both sites - thus disastrously (for anticommunists) collapsing the difference between homeland and diasporic Vietnameseness, and erasing a history of suffering, exodus and anticommunist resistance.

The Disjunctive Temporality of Diaspora-Homeland Relations

Having analysed the response to “Mother” in terms of breaches of the spatial boundary between diaspora and homeland, I wish now to turn to the temporality of relations between the pair. Just as the delimiting of space is crucial to the labour of imagining national communities, so is the segmentation and synchronisation of the time
of the nation (Anderson 1991). In the exile imaginary, representations of the respective
“presents” of diaspora and homeland are perhaps even more disjunctive than images of
their spatial separation. In all of the diasporic videos I have watched, I cannot recall
having once seen an image of everyday urban life in contemporary Vietnam. While some
videos feature exteriors shot in Vietnam, these are limited to tableaux of landscapes and
sequences of “timeless” traditional activities such as ploughing behind a buffalo or
pumping water by hand. When a representation of urban life in Vietnam is required, this
is typically drawn from pre-1975 file footage or, alternatively, reconstructed in a studio.
Representations of the homeland are inevitably asynchronous with the present of the
diaspora. In the place of the present, one finds images of the timeless premodern
homeland; the future, post-communist homeland (evoked by the millenarian fantasy of
“Mother Vietnam in the Year 2000”); and the dystopic “homeland as a re-education
camp”, i.e. a Vietnam frozen in the immediate post-war period. It is thus that exile culture
effects a total denial of contemporaneity and modernity in the SRV. This “staggered”
temporality adds a teleological dimension to the spatial boundary marking between
diaspora and homeland, making the contemporary SRV not only a place but also a time
that cannot be returned to.

This asynchronicity, I would point out, does not dominate all overseas
Vietnamese media. While the overseas Vietnamese media in general are typically
described as being dominated by an exile consciousness (e.g. Cunningham and Nguyen
2000: 99-102), I would differentiate between the modalities of exile found in music video
and those operative in other media, particularly the press. For instance, while the
“quality” Vietnamese Australian newspaper Viet Luan takes an anticommunist stance, it
also gives one a sense of simultaneity and connectedness with Vietnam that one
definitely does not experience in video. Likewise, the more “populist” Chieu Duong
features on its front page a segment entitled “The Homeland Over the Last 24 Hours”
[Que Nha 24 gio qua], and inside a titillating “Vietnam Story” [Chuyen Viet Nam],
excerpted verbatim (but unacknowledged) from SRV newspapers. Such segments reflect
the experience of Vietnamese transmigrancy in that they offer information
comprehensible and relevant to those who are “in touch” with Vietnam, and familiar with
the contemporary forms of everyday life there. This simultaneity is particularly important
in times of crisis in the homeland, for instance during recent floods, or the Thai Binh
unrest.

Mother’s Violations of the Teleology of Return

Mother’s producers were accused not only of spatial breaches of the imaginary
boundary between diaspora and homeland, but also of temporal transgressions of exile. In
the wake of the initial reaction against “Ca Dao Me”, critics began to find other faults
with Mother, as if vying with each other to discover new signs of its betrayal. The focus
shifted to the video’s finale, “Mother Vietnam in the Year 2000” [Me Viet Nam Vao Nam
2000], a song conjuring up the image of a soon-to-be-reunited Vietnam, composed by
Pham Duy (the composer most renowned in the diaspora and most hated by the
Vietnamese state) and performed by Khanh Ly. The critics’ central charge against the
song was that it advocated a premature return to Vietnam, i.e. before the fall of the
communist regime - in effect a surrender of and end to diaspora. In his spoken
Introduction to the piece, compere Ngoc Ngan makes explicit the connection between Mother and the Motherland that is hinted at throughout the video:

We all have mothers of flesh and bone... But above and beyond all, there is Mother Vietnam, the mother of our race ... In less than a decade, our mother will be opening her arms wide to receive her children from all the four corners of the earth, to rebuild mother Vietnam so that she may proudly stand beside the rest of humanity... We must rub out the divisions of ideology and dogma, to leave only one ideology, and that’s the ideology of love, built on the pride of our race ...

(Thuy Nga, “Paris By Night” #40).

Critics were quick to point out that Ngoc Ngan was encouraging overseas Vietnamese to return to help build the homeland without specifying the vital condition that this be after the fall of the communist regime. They found evidence for this putative attempt to seduce exiles back to a socialist homeland in the symbolism of the video, which uses both animation and live action to present a dreamlike, affectively charged allegorical narrative. Juxtaposed with shots of the performer, Khanh Ly, we see the animated image of a white dove flying over villages and rice paddies, carrying a red rice-seed in its beak. It drops the seed into a field of paddy rice. From the red seed a red rice bushel sprouts. The bushel grows up and matures almost instantly amid the field of green. Meanwhile, in live action, an old woman is sitting in a ploughed field sewing an enormous yellow silk map of Vietnam. We see a close-up of the brilliant, solid yellow of the map against the freshly turned soil. Next, a young girl picks the red rice bushel and goes about handing strands of
it to people she meets by the roadside, who are cheered and encouraged to receive them. Eventually, she comes across another little girl who is holding a styrofoam version of the yellow silk map, and takes it from her, holding the bushel of red rice horizontally across the front of the yellow map in an unmistakable reference to the flag of the RVN (consisting of three horizontal red stripes against a field of yellow).

Conveniently forgetting about the yellow of the map and the reference to the RVN flag, critics have read the red of the rice-seed and bushel as the red of the communist flag, and the little girl’s distribution of strands of it to the joyous people as the dissemination of communist propaganda. One writer draws readers’ attention to the fact that rice, as represented in legend, is a symbol of the source of life of the Vietnamese people. “Now”, he says, “Paris By Night 40 plans to ‘open our eyes and hearts’ to a new source of life, red grains of rice, i.e. the Viet Cong” (Ha Nhan 1997). I read the makers of the video as intending that there be a sense in which the red of the rice grain does signify the red of the communist flag. In his spoken introduction, Ngoc Ngan stresses that all Vietnamese, “whether they followed their father into the sea, or their mother into the mountains”, still owe an unrepayable debt to Mother Vietnam. He refers here to Vietnam’s creation myth, in which a sea dragon [Lac Long Quan] and mountain fairy [Au Co] couple, and produce a hundred progeny, the progenitors of the race. Finding their dispositions incompatible, they later separate, each taking fifty of their children with them. While they are different, an essential complementarity exists between the dragon and fairy - indeed it is this complementarity that, in the myth, produces the Vietnamese race itself. Likewise, the video suggests a yin/yang-like difference yet essential unity of the yellow and red shared by the exile and communist flags alike. Remember that both
colours are represented in the video as actually coming out of or being closely connected with the soil. Thus the red signifies those who stayed behind in the homeland, the yellow the exiles. These colours also have a traditional symbolism, taken from Chinese cosmology, whereby red symbolises life and earthly human endeavour while yellow symbolises heavenly bounty and the transcendent. Again, there is an essential complementarity of these different attributes.

What occurs in “Mother Vietnam in the Year 2000” is a disavowal or deferral of the contemporary political and material barriers separating the exiles from Vietnam. This deferral is performed by drawing on the legends and symbolism of a timeless pre-communist past to suggest an essential unity of the exiles and those at home, allowing us to enter an imaginary realm in which the dreams of return and reunification can be consummated now. Ngoc Ngan argued in his apologia that, had there been no scandal over “Ca Dao Me”, nobody would have read anything sinister into “Mother Vietnam in the Year 2000” (Nguyen Ngoc Ngan 1997). I am inclined to agree with him. The language of desire deployed in this clip is by no means atypical in a video culture in which the staging of return is a constant, almost obsessive motif. However, the suspicious mode of interpretation critics have applied to the song has meant that it has been read far more literally than it otherwise would have been. The critics’ enjoyment of the fantasy of return and reconciliation the video potentially furnishes is disrupted by the threat of actual return they read into Thuy Nga’s actions.

We can perhaps say that as an expression of the politics of return, “Mother Vietnam” is of the order of the imaginary, while the more instrumentalist political discourse deployed by its critics is of the order of the symbolic (although, of course, we
would not want to draw a neat line between the two). The imaginary order, from the
development perspective, is the pre-oedipal order that the child enters through the mirror
phase. It is dominated by the specular, dyadic relation with the mother - one that is prior
to the location of the subject in the plurality of the symbolic (the social context, in Lacan
(1977, 1981)). Here we might read the clip as offering a specular identification with the
Mother(land) that is prior to the subject’s entry into a complex social and symbolic
universe. That is to say “Mother Vietnam” returns us, via the myth of *Lac Long Quan* and
*Au Co* (imaginary) to a phase of homeland-diaspora relations prior to the complex history
of war and exile (symbolic). According to this reading, the clip would not be advocating
an “actual” return to Vietnam, which would amount to a premature consummation of the
post-communist teleology of return. Rather, it stages a regression to a
psychological/historical stage at which the current impediments to return can be
bracketed, and then projects this forwards to a soon-to-arrive future of reconciliation. In
the event, these subtleties were lost. As I have pointed out above, *Mother* was accused of
transgressing the exile principle of deferred return by urging overseas Vietnamese to
return to Vietnam at a time when diasporic political identity is not yet realisable there - a
prospect which is intolerable to the critics because it raises the spectre of the loss of exile
identity and the end of diaspora.

**A Vietnamese Transnational Commercial Culture?**

Putting the exile critique of *Mother* in a broader context, we may interpret it as a
reaction not only to one text but also to the emergence of a transnational field of
Vietnamese language cultural production and consumption of which that text is
symptomatic. No doubt there were a number of *Mother* critics among a group of anticommunists who stomped on domestic Vietnamese CDs and other cultural products for sale on Bolsa Ave, Little Saigon on the eve of the 25th anniversary of the collapse of the RVN. Since at least the mid 1990s, the increased traffic between the diaspora and the SRV has meant that homeland singers and songs have found their way into diasporic tastes, and that homeland-produced music is increasingly visible on the shelves of CD and video stores in overseas Vietnamese communities. Indeed, it is reported that these products are posing a serious market challenge to diasporic artists, whose sales have dropped 70% since a peak in 1995, causing some eight production companies to shut down (Morosi 2000). (Whether or not this drop is solely attributable to SRV cultural products, as claimed by Thuy Nga and others, is debatable. Possibly it also represents a loss of audiences to host nation popular cultural forms.)

From research I performed in music and video stores in Cabramatta, Sydney, and interviews I conducted with Vietnamese Californian consumers over the Internet, I determined that the homeland-made cultural products which are available on the diasporic market are largely pirates. These are versions that have been reproduced by smaller diasporic companies, who take advantage of the fact that reciprocal copyright agreements do not yet exist between the SRV and the host nations. They are able to offer audio CDs for sale at around $US 2 - not much more than the 25 000 Dong consumers in Vietnam pay - as opposed to $ US 8-12 for an original diasporic CD. These pirateers are careful to remove the SRV producers’ names, fearful not of copyright issues, but rather of a potential backlash against anyone selling cultural products with the logos of state-owned Vietnamese media companies on them. The repackaging of homeland cultural
products is, it seems, a strategy of “decommunising” them. SRV scholar Tran Trong Dang Dan laments “For a long time, a number of songs by composers in Vietnam have been used in videos by overseas Vietnamese producers, but have been distorted; the words and melody are ours, but the images put with them contain anticommunist content, against the new regime” (Tran Trong Dang Dan 1997: 294). This de/reideologising is operative in a more subtle way in the incorporation of homeland stars and songs into overseas Vietnamese-pirated and distributed music videos, karaoke and CDs, in the context of which their homeland identities are unmarked or, alternatively, positively marked in terms of “freshness” or “new talent”. This “diasporisation” of homeland songs and identities is, arguably, operative even in Vietnam itself. The transformation of cultural values in Vietnam from autarchic, anti-colonial statist to global consumerist ones has been accompanied by a shift of song subject matter from war and revolution to love and nostalgia for a timeless and apolitical homeland (see Chapter Three). Diasporic genres have played an important part in the cosmopolitanisation of SRV commercial music culture, to the extent that overseas Vietnamese fans can now watch diasporic stars like Huong Lan, Thanh Ha, Dalena or Hoai Linh perform in the SRV production Duyên Dang (#9) in a televisual format (the music variety show) which they experience as being a familiar part of diasporic culture. The cosmopolitanisation of homeland music in turn gives rise to inter-city competition. Just as Guangzhou, Shanghai Beijing and Xi’an are gaining ground against Hong Kong and Taiwan in the competition to serve as the geographic centre of Chinese popular cultural production (Harding 1995: 23), so Ho Chi Minh City appears to be coming into contention with Westminster (California) and Paris.
Having just arrived in Ho Chi Minh City from San Jose to perform in *Duyên Dang* (#6), Huong Lan declared to the show’s host that she’d been particularly keen to fly in to take part, since *Duyên Dang* is “so popular both at home and overseas”. In this utterance, Huong Lan gives expression to the experience, shared with other mobile overseas Vietnamese, of the overlap which exists in the music one hears played in restaurants, cafés and wedding reception halls in HCMC, Orange County, Paris and Sydney. A less cosmopolitan transmigrant, “Hong” (a recent migrant from Saigon to Sydney) told me that she had been able to continue following the new releases of her favourite *cai luong*¹¹ singers uninterruptedly, and had even been able to pick up at the very episode at which she had left off watching a popular dubbed Taiwanese serial (*Bao Cong*) in Saigon. When asked what popular cultural product she would ask a friend returning from Vietnam to bring back for her, Hong was perplexed to find that she could not think of a single thing. This small sense of continuity did not erase but certainly seems to have reduced the considerable disjuncture she experienced in other aspects of her life as a result of her migration.

Mayfair Yang argues that phenomena such as satellite television transmission, transportable media, and the development of the Internet, are leading to the reception of “an increasingly common body of cultural products by dispersed Chinese audiences and readers” (Yang 1999: 8). We might point to a similar development, although far more tentative, and characterised by a significantly higher degree of political disjuncture, amongst dispersed Vietnamese audiences. For Yang, consumers of Chinese cultural products are potentially enabled “to inhabit trans-spatial and trans-temporal imaginaries

¹¹ Traditional southern opera.
that dissolve the fixity and boundedness of historical nationhood and state territorial imperatives” (Yang 1997: 288). This, in turn, is leading to the integration of Chinese local, regional and national public spheres (Yang 1999: 8). I would argue that we should not be so ready to announce the melting into air of national and political borders. As we have had ample evidence of above, the emergent Vietnamese transnational media space is by no means a “smooth” one. Even in the case of popular cultural traffic between Taiwan and the PRC (a far more established and de-ideologised circuit than that between Vietnam and the diaspora), political and national boundaries are always ready and waiting to reassert themselves. Witness, for instance, Beijing’s banning of the Taiwanese singer A Mei, the mainland’s favourite performer, after she sang at the inauguration of the new Taiwanese President - a move seen by Beijing to support independence for Taiwan (Kang 1998: 166). The freedom from the imperatives of the nation-state of which Yang speaks is, it seems, relative and impermanent. If transnational music culture appears at some moments to negate the difference between homeland and diaspora, it is also capable of functioning as the ground on which this difference is re-established and reasserted. The Mother incident shows how video can furnish both a rich semiotic resource for the articulation of homeland-diaspora difference, and an ample object for the panoptic gaze of those who style themselves as the police of the diaspora-homeland boundary. While others argue that diasporic video is inherently given to a postmodern culture of anti-essentialism and hybridity (Nacify 1993, Kolar-Panov 1996), it seems to me that it can equally well be appropriated by those wishing to pursue very modernist cultural projects and protect and make viable essentialist versions of ethnic and national identity.
Bhabha notes that the political unity of the nation is achieved only by the displacement of the heterogeneity that resides within it to the outside. If a firm boundary is maintained, aggression may be directed outwards. If this boundary is compromised, however, these "paranoid projections 'outwards' [will] return to haunt and split the place from which they are made" (Bhabha 1994: 149). The irruption of a Vietnamese language transnational commercial culture into the imaginary space of exile appears to have precipitated just such a splitting. This crisis of the limits of the nation is projected back inwards in the form of a crisis of internal liminality, leading to the discovery of "procommunists" and "traitors in our midst". Ironically, however, it is those very commercial cultural flows that compromise the imaginary boundary of Free Vietnam by transgressing it which enable the possibility of its being constituted, i.e. making it "visible" and enforceable. Thus if the "in-between" space of a transnational Vietnamese music culture tends to be conceptualised in terms of the contestatory idioms of national space on either "end" (SRV vs RVN), so the local ends connected by the transnational field of commercial music culture can only be thought by virtue of the in-between. Ironically, transnational flows of culture reveal themselves as being both that which threatens the possibility of the formation of the Exile Nation, and the very condition for the possibility of constructing its borders, which can only be discovered in the act of being transgressed.

The Politics of Homeland Music in the Diasporic Public Sphere

The split between those who see SRV-produced music as "communist propaganda" and those who see it simply as "Vietnamese" cannot be characterised
entirely in terms of criteria such as social class and period and context of migration. Those who came to subjectivity through the experiences of RVN antimoney, flight and an exile identification in the diaspora are not uniformly opposed to the transnationalisation of Vietnamese language commercial music culture. Participants in the Vnforum Internet discussion list, for instance, are largely middle-aged professionals who retain a commitment to political reform in Vietnam, yet regularly swap information about their favourite homeland music stars. Conversely, “1.5” and second generation overseas Vietnamese are not uniformly apolitical in their stances towards the SRV and SRV cultural production. In particular, younger overseas Vietnamese who are active in Vietnamese student, community and political organisations tend to adopt and “perform” an exile identity, since “exile capital” remains indispensable to success in community politics. Such a stance might involve a refusal or disinclination to consume homeland music and to return to Vietnam. This was the position of “An”, the leader of a Vietnamese student association who I met at a community meeting. She distinguished herself at the meeting by making a speech about how Vietnamese Australian parents do not sufficiently encourage their children to participate in community associations. In response to my question about homeland music, An referred me to her friend “Thuyen”, who was also active in the student association but did not aspire to a leadership role within it. Thuyen, An told me, was the person to talk to, since she was up on all the latest stars and hits in Vietnam - something about which An professed to know absolutely nothing. Finally, more recently arrived migrants, particularly those from the north, are less likely to be steeped in the exile consciousness described above, and thus less inclined to draw a distinction between homeland and diasporic cultural products. For example, a
recent migrant from Hanoi to Sydney, hearing that I was interested in Vietnamese media, lent me a video of a famous documentary made in Hanoi in the 1980s, *Hanoi in Whose/Someone’s Eyes* [*Ha Noi trong mat ai*], which he had recorded when it was screened on SBS. When I asked a group of former refugees about this film, they were horrified that I had been watching such “communist propaganda”.

Cunningham and Nguyen note “most overseas Vietnamese reject the output of the ‘homeland’ as fatally compromised by being produced under a communist regime” (2000: 91). Reyes (1999: 174), likewise, suggests a total rejection of SRV produced music in the diasporic context. These statements would appear to be contradicted by the material I have presented above. I would argue that what is happening here is a compounding of theoretical assumptions about exile culture with the ideologies that dominate the diasporic public sphere, thus making heterodox, transnational modes of consumption “invisible”. Exile voices monopolised the production of knowledge about the *Mother* video in the Vietnamese language media, while transnational consumer practices remained all but unspoken. Indeed, these practices appear to remain virtually unrepresentable in the diasporic public sphere. However, while exile discourse gives the impression that *Mother*’s critics are “defending” Free Vietnam and excluding national otherness from it, these desires must remain largely in the realm of fantasy. The moral authority of anticommunist elites is in fact weak when it comes to enforcing a rigorously anticommunist stance on overseas Vietnamese, controlling flows of culture and migration to and from Vietnam, or hegemonising the politics of cultural consumption in the diaspora. A more nuanced approach would acknowledge that while heterodox texts and consumer practices can be excluded from the arena of public diasporic culture by the
moral authority of anticommmunist elites, they certainly do exist in a privatised, commercialised space of consumption. (For instance, overseas Vietnamese radio stations in the US and Australia do not play homeland music. Thus if one wants to hear it, one must go and buy it oneself on the streets of a Little Saigon.) The Mother furore may in fact be read in terms of a conflict between the public and private, and political and commercial, dimensions of diasporic culture. What critics object to is the apparent spillage of private, heterodox modes of consumption into the production of a public diasporic text which occurs in the video (deliberately or not), such that an address is perceived to be made to a transnational audience rather than an exclusively diasporic one, and a transnational market is sought. These fears may in turn be read as the recognition of a contradiction that has always existed between the commercial and political imperatives of exile popular culture. While diasporic culture affirms an exile identity, it also profits from meeting the desires of an audience that identifies with a refugee/exile subjectivity. Cultural producers, no matter how ideologically committed, must engage to some extent in the commodification the homeland politics (among other facets of identity) of their audience. (Indeed, one of Thuy Nga’s competitors fortuitously released a video entitled Exile Songs in the aftermath of the Mother imbroglio.) As I have argued above, however, I find claims that Thuy Nga has “sold out” a dwindling diasporic audience in order to pursue a new market in Vietnam difficult to credit. I prefer to read these accusations as a disguised recognition, on the part of anticommmunists, of the potential of the market and consumer desires to undermine the integrity of exile. It was frequently pointed out to me that at Thuy Nga concerts subsequent to the Mother furore the protestors outside numbered in the hundreds, while those inside at the concerts numbered in the thousands.
Bryan Turner has observed that the main threat to religious faith in the contemporary world comes not in the form of a cognitive or ideological challenge, but in that of the commodification of everyday life (in Clammer 1997: 155). Likewise, the hegemony of a communal exile identity is challenged less by any counter-hegemonic identity (for instance a “reconciliationist” or “procommunist” one) than by consumer desires that violate or simply sideline the principle of exile.

Conclusion

We might also read the reaction to mother as a response to the “first wave” generation’s perception of its own downward mobility within overseas Vietnamese community politics. With the general erosion of exile culture, exile cultural capital risks losing its value in the field of community politics. Were this to happen, the fact that one was once an officer in the South Vietnamese army, or that one was once imprisoned by the communists, would no longer convey the sense of legitimacy and right to speak for others in the community that they currently do, putting into doubt the exile class’s ability to reproduce its domination of diasporic politics. Given the context of the downward social mobility of Mother’s critics, we may read their heated and even paranoid reactions to the video in terms of a crisis of subjectivity associated with the threat of the loss of one’s national fantasy (Hage 1998: 23). The exile voices we have heard in this chapter belong to those whose selfhood is anchored in the nationalist fantasy of the Exile Nation, and who do not have the social resources to adapt to the new fantasy of transnational engagement.