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TUAN HOANG
Pepperdine University, California

LOST, MOURNED, AND RETRIEVED
Exilic Nostalgia in the Music of Vietnamese Refugees

ABSTRACT
The fall of Saigon marked an abrupt loss of a state and national identity for tens of thousands of Vietnamese refugees. As they faced an exilic and diasporic existence in the United States they wrote, performed, and recorded a substantial amount of music. Much of this music reflected their new exilic identity. Three categories could be discerned about this music. First is the music of having lost the Republic of Vietnam, especially Saigon, to the communist enemies. Second is the music "for those remaining behind": family members and friends who were experiencing imprisonment, political repression, and economic impoverishment. Third is a music that articulates the hope for returning to a communist-free Vietnam, possibly through the support for armed violence. Together, these categories reveal the political identity that ref-

ugees attached to the former Republic of Vietnam while they adapted to a new society from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s. Their musical experience made up a restorative nostalgia that was heavily informed by noncommunist nationalism and republicanism.

Keywords: Exilism, Fall of Saigon, nationalism, refugee music, Republic of Vietnam, Vietnamese refugees, Vietnam War

The following events took place within ten summer weeks in 1975 at Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania. Designated for the training of the U.S. National Guard, Fort Indiantown Gap was a military site that temporarily housed tens of thousands of Indochinese refugees, mostly Vietnamese plus some Cambodians, since the end of May. It was one of four processing centers in continental United States, along with Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, and Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. The first event took place on July 4 and celebrated the 199th commemoration of the Declaration of Independence that led to the creation of the United States. The daytime festivities included a parade led by a high school marching band in the area; a picnic with some 25,000 pounds of watermelon, and an intramural volleyball tournament among the refugees. It was not the first time that this band played for the refugees. Along with the governor of Pennsylvania and about 1,000 schoolchildren and adults, the band had been present at Harrisburg Airport on May 28 to welcome the first 340 refugees to the processing center. This time, they marched in a parade along with refugee children holding the U.S. flag, paper cutouts of the Liberty Bell, and banners in the likes of "Happy Birthday America." In the evening, the refugees were presented with a concert performed by a sixteen-member musical group and a firework display that cost "a minimum of $2,000." The concert

ended with the singing of "God Bless America," whose copies had been distributed to the refugees earlier in the week. Two days after the festivities, the camp's newspaper published a letter in Vietnamese and English addressed to the governor of Pennsylvania. The letter expressed a deep appreciation for the State of Pennsylvania and the United States along with "our glad feelings" in sharing "with you all this happy day."[1]

The second event—or, rather, a series of events—took place over several days during the second week of September: concerts headlined by two Vietnamese refugees, the musician Phạm Duy and the singer Khánh Ly. Both had been well-known figures in the urban society of South Vietnam. Phạm Duy, then approaching his mid-fifties, grew up in Hanoi and joined the communist-led anticolonial movement, Việt Minh, during the early years of the First Indochina War and wrote some of the best-known nationalist songs. Internal restrictions and repression, however, led him to leave the Việt Minh and move to Saigon where his musical career flourished. Khánh Ly, then in her early thirties, was immensely popular for her collaboration with the composer Trịnh Công Sơn. Having been already processed out, they were hired by the Interagency Task Force, the primary federal organization dealing with the resettlement of Indochinese refugees, to perform at Fort Chaffee and Fort Indiantown Gap.[2] Khánh Ly and Phạm Duy traveled with Phạm Duy's wife Thái Hằng

[1] This information is gathered from *Đất Lành* [Good Land] (issues of June 27, July 2, July 3, and July 6, 1975); PennLive.com, "The Fourth of July at Fort Indiantown Gap in 1975," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtSGRB1cmb4; and Seth S. King, "Band and Applause Greet Refugees in Pennsylvania," *New York Times,* May 29, 1975, https://www.nytimes.com/1975/05/29/archives/band-and-applause-greet-refugees-in-pennsylvania.html. The Fourth of July event was organized and coordinated by Lawrence Howes, a former Air Force serviceman in Vietnam from New York; and Fred Wolford, a director of YMCA in New Jersey.

[2] Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký: Thời Hải Ngoại* [Memoir: The Diasporic Era] (Midway City, Calif., 1992), Chapter 4, online version: https://phamduy.com/en/van-nghien-

and their teenage daughter Thái Thảo, both of whom took part in the performances. At Fort Indiantown Gap, they were joined on stage by the refugee physician Ngô Thanh Trung, who accompanied Khánh Ly on the acoustic guitar; and Richard Fuller, an American worker for the International Rescue Committee who had lived in Vietnam for four years, spoke fluent Vietnamese, and went by the Vietnamese name Phú. The music performed was all Vietnamese songs, albeit with some of the lyrics translated into English.[3]

Put another way, the Vietnamese refugees had two very different experiences, musically speaking and otherwise, of patriotism. The Fourth of July festivities were designed to introduce them to the celebration of the central political holiday in the country that circumstances had compelled them to come to. Local resources such as the marching band were employed to present to the newcomers how Americans celebrated their most politically important national holiday. Judging from the photographs taken at the parade, however, the refugees looked somewhat ambivalent even amidst exciting sights and sounds. In all likelihood, most watched the parade with a mixture of high curiosity, low-key amusement, and momentary relief from the heavy stress and sorrow since the last week of April. Some children are shown

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cuu/hoi-ky-4/5679-chuong-4. The Interagency Task Force was created in May 1975 by the U.S. Department of State. It served as the main federal agency for the resettlement of Indochinese refugees.

[3] The announcement of the concerts appears in the one hundredth issue of the camp's newspaper *Đất Lành* (September 4, 1975). Following the concerts, the paper, mostly staffed by Vietnamese refugees, received copies of a number of songs, including English translations of the lyrics, and published them in several subsequent issues. A recording of some of the performances by Khánh Ly and Fuller is archived as "Ft. Indiantown Gap – 1975," The Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Archive, Texas Tech University: https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/129822. Several clips of the concert appear in the documentary *Closing the Gap* (Pennsylvania Public Television, 1975); they are collected in this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUr-YnA1fgc

smiling among the photographs, and few adults.[4] Discernable on their faces was shock at the fall of Saigon, sadness over family separation and an enormous lack of communication. There was also constant uncertainty and anxiety about their future while waiting for sponsorship by a local community in this new and vast country. In comparison, the audio and video recordings of the Vietnamese concerts show a lot of enthusiasm on the part of the audience. They clapped to certain portions of the performances and loudly applauded after each song. They heartily laughed at some of the lighthearted comments made by Khánh Ly, Phạm Duy, and Fuller. They applauded and laughed some more when the American spoke in Vietnamese. Accompanied by only a guitar played by Phạm Duy or Ngô Thanh Trung, the singers performed a combination of traditional and popular songs. Phạm Duy's family was responsible for the portion of traditional tunes, most of which he had helped to record in South Vietnam. Khánh Ly was mostly responsible for the second portion of popular songs, all of which were first published and recorded in South Vietnam during the war. A few of the popular songs were about warfare or being Vietnamese in the midst of warfare. Others were about unrequited romantic love, loneliness, or homesickness. Most prominent of the last category was "Nha Trang Ngày Về" [Day of Return to Nha Trang] about a popular beach town in southern Vietnam. Phạm Duy had published this song in 1969. Even though it was not among his best-known songs, Khánh Ly's choice was apt because the song was about the sadness of loss, albeit of romantic love. "I am very sad singing this song," remarked Khánh Ly after performing it, "because I have a lot of memories in Nha Trang." She quickly added that "singing any song

[4] PennLive.com, "The Fourth of July at Fort Indiantown Gap in 1975."

would be sad because I have memories everywhere [in South Vietnam]."[5] For a few minutes, the beach town stood in for all of Vietnam to the singer and listeners alike.

The juxtaposition of July 4 and the second week of September meant that the refugees were introduced to American patriotism only to return to their own patriotic sorrow. The pain did not subside any time soon and they grieved for years over the demise of the noncommunist republic that they had helped to construct. Because they had considered the Vietnamese communists to have followed a foreign ideology rather than a true kind of Vietnamese patriotism, they felt the loss of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) akin to a victory of foreigners who happened to be Vietnamese only in name. In the song "Tháng Tư Đen"[Black April], published in 1978 and recorded three years later, Phạm Duy wrote that the "courageous" thirty years of fighting against the French colonialists then the Vietnamese communists had been "shattered" and lost "to the [communist] imperialists."[6] In a three-minute spoken introduction at the start of Khánh Ly's album *Khi Tôi Về* [When I Return], her first in the United States, the singer stated that "we live in the world yet the world is very strange," and "we live among [non-Vietnamese] people but we feel indifferent about them."[7] Phạm Duy himself was separated from all of his adult children. Having resettled in the panhandle of Florida and being surrounded by "bright street lights,

[5] "Ft. Indiantown Gap – 1975."

[6] *Phạm Duy 3: Hát Trên Đường Tỵ Nạn* [Phạm Duy 3: Singing on the Road of Exile] (1981). The songs had been published in Phạm Duy and Duy Quang, *Hát Trên Đường Tỵ Nạn: Songs of the Refugee Road* (Santa Ana, California: Phương Đông, 1979). Quốc Anh was the lead singer of this song's recording for the album, and he was backed up by a small women's chorus, probably the women lead singers of the album.

[7] *Khi Tôi Về* [When I Return] (1976).

ocean breeze, the sound of music from somewhere, the sound of a plane flying above," he admitted to "wanting to scream" at the universe. In a frank admission, he attributed the mental anguish to have caused him sexual impotence for some time to come.[8]

The background of loss and anguish informed and inspired the music-making among the Vietnamese in their first decade in exile. At Fort Indiantown Gap and elsewhere they performed a mix of music made in South Vietnam: some songs articulating sorrow, others expressing their nationalist identity. Soon enough, they began recording such songs and writing new ones. The new music was recorded in 1976 and thereafter, and much of it was also about loss and mourning. Below, I examine some of the music of loss and mourning, particularly the lyrics that the refugees composed, performed, and recorded between the mid-1970s and the early 1980s. I divide this music into three major categories: mourning the lost republic, especially Saigon; mourning the postwar country; and reviving the hope for recovering the lost republic through force.

By this analysis, I wish to demonstrate that nostalgia dominates this music—and it was a distinct type of exilic nostalgia. The nostalgia was rooted in multiple factors. They included the nationalist and noncommunist identity among the refugees, their abrupt loss of a postcolonial and anticommunist state, sudden exile to an alien society, separation from loved ones and complete uncertainty about reunion in the future, and a series of devastating developments affecting their families and friends still in Vietnam. These factors prompted the creation and recording of the first and second categories above. After an initial period of desperation, the painful nostalgia empowered them, if

[8] Phạm Duy, *Hồi Ký – Thời Hải Ngoại*.

temporarily and within very limited means, to reassert their noncommunist nationalism and to try recovering the lost country. The empowerment coincided with a diasporic anticommunist movement that sought to overthrow the Vietnamese government through armed violence. This movement in fact failed miserably, and its armed members were arrested by the Vietnamese government. Yet it played into the illusory longing among many refugees that someday they might be able to return to a communist-free Vietnam. If their music was inspired by nostalgia, it was a kind that grieved losses but also sought to change the present and restore the past.

Mourning the Lost Nation

Like most of the music performed at Fort Indiantown Gap, grief and sorrow characterized most of the songs written and recorded by Vietnamese refugees in the next few years. The exilic identity is apparent from the very first album of original music produced and distributed in the United States, and sold in cassette tapes. Featuring another well-known singer from South Vietnam, it is entitled *Tiếng Hát Thanh Thúy 1– Vĩnh Biệt Saigon* [The Voice of Thanh Thúy 1: Farewell Saigon]. Recorded in California and released on June 28, 1976 to commemorate the first anniversary of the fall of Saigon, it features ten songs written by six refugees.[9] Like the aforementioned album by Khánh Ly, which was released around the same time, it begins with a spoken introduction by the singer, if shorter.

[9] The album's release date is given in Thy Nga, "Những Ca Khúc trong Các Tháng Năm sau Biến Cố 1975" [Songs in the Years Following the 1975 Upheaval], Radio Free Asia (May 4, 2008): https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/ in_depth/Songs-Remembering-The-Historical-1975-TNga-05042008141622.html

> We are apart from our country over thousands of miles. In our grief, we don't know what we can do to appease the pain of homesickness for the land where we were born, where we grew up, that we left behind. All left are sounds: sounds of little happiness and overwhelming sadness. [They are] sounds evoking many sights and many memories. Only they can alleviate our absolute sorrow and homesickness. For this reason, Thanh Thúy dearly introduces "Oh Saigon, Farewell: Thanh Thúy 1." This is the first album produced by Thanh Thúy during this exile faraway [from home].[10]

The impressionistic introduction stresses "we" and the collective experience among composers, musicians, and listeners. Its central linkage is a forced departure that led to mind-numbing homesickness and exilic depression. Refugee composers such as Tô Huyền Vân, an actor and singer in the RVN, relied on a variety of images and similes to convey the depression.[11] In "Quê Hương Bỏ Lại" ["Homeland Left Behind"], first recorded by Thanh Thúy for this album and later by other singers, Vân equated exile to corporeal demise from a lack of oxygen and water:

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[10] Original: *Bây giờ, quê hương và chúng ta đã ngàn trùng xa cách. Trong cái ngàn trùng xa cách đau đớn đó, chúng ta biết lấy gì để nguôi nhớ vơi thương, nơi chúng ta sinh ra, lớn lên rồi bỏ lại. Họa chăng chỉ còn âm thanh, âm thanh vui ít buồn nhiều, âm thanh đầy hình ảnh, âm thanh đầy kỷ niệm, mới xoa dịu nổi chúng ta trong niềm nhớ thương tột cùng. Vì lẽ đó, Thanh Thúy xin thiết tha giới thiệu "Saigon ơi! Vĩnh biệt!", băng nhạc "Thanh Thúy 1" mà Thanh Thúy đã thực hiện lần đầu tiên trên dặm đường ly hương*. Unless it is indicated otherwise, all translations from Vietnamese are mine.

[11] "Vài nét về nhạc sĩ Tô Huyền Vân" [A sketch of the musician Tô Huyền Vân] (August 18, 2018): https://thanhthuy.me/2018/08/21/vai-net-ve-nhac-si-to-huyen-van/

Một ngày không nắng ấm
Và một ngày mong mưa rào,
Một ngày thiếu hơi thở
Của đồng cỏ nước Việt Nam.

[A day without warm sunlight,
A day without tropical raindrops,
A day without breathing the air
From the grassy fields of Vietnam].

This feeling of breathlessness and lifelessness appears in another song called "Có Những Buổi Chiều Chết Trong Niềm Nhớ" ["There Are Afternoons When I Die of Homesickness"]. Its author is Hoàng Thi Thơ, who grew up in the central region of Vietnam and, like Phạm Duy, joined the Việt Minh-led anticolonial movement but eventually left it after seeing internal violence. He resettled in Saigon and became active in songwriting for records and films, choral conducting, and dancing. Having traveled widely for musical performances, he was in Japan when the fall of Saigon occurred and ended up a refugee in southern California. He was instrumental in organizing a musical program, probably the largest among the refugee community at the time, in Los Angeles on May 9, 1976.[12]

Hoàng Thi Thơ also contributed two new songs to the album. For him, exile turned the refugees into the living dead:

Có những chiều...
Tưởng long như chết,
Chết trong niềm nhớ.

[12] Thy Nga, "Những Ca Khúc trong Các Tháng Năm sau Biến Cố 1975."

[There are afternoons...
When I feel like dying,
Dying for homesickness].

Rather than mornings or evenings, the choice of afternoons, when one was most likely to be at work and in public, implies that the refugees could become numb and "dead" at any given time during a day. Moreover, the recording of this song opens with Thanh Thúy's spoken voice reiterating the deadly homesickness: "Far from home, our hearts are homesick without end, and there are afternoons when we feel as if we are dying from our longing for home."[13] The lyrics further name a number of specificities about this homesickness of Vietnam: missing "each shrub each lawn," "each road that we walked on," "each rainy afternoon," "each moon cycle," "each boat [carrying] an innocent girl," "each row of tamarind trees," "red dresses," and "towns and downtowns that haven't forgotten us." According to the lyrics, refugees move among memories of the natural world (plants, trees, rain, moon), human constructs (roads, boats, towns), and human beings, especially the feminine (girls and long dresses). The people and objects in the lyrics could be found in any town or city in southern Vietnam. This kind of evocation reflects a homesickness that all refugees shared, no matter where they had been in Vietnam.

This song evokes memories without naming particular places; many other songs, however, include names of cities, towns, provinces, rivers, and other geographical designations. This is the case about several songs in the album *Thanh Thúy 1*, including "Buồn Xa Nhà" ["Sorrow Over Missing Home"] by Anh Bằng. A prominent composer in

[13] Original: *Xa quê hương, lòng ta thương nhớ không nguôi, nên có những buổi chiều dường như ta chết, chết trong lòng nhớ.*

South Vietnam, Anh Bằng came to California in 1975 and founded the companies Dạ Lan and Asia Entertainment Inc. during the 1980s. Setting the lyrics of this song to a waltz, Anh Bằng ties homesickness to images like the water buffalo and the "old banyan tree" in the first verst. Next, the second verse names no fewer than seven Vietnamese cities.

> *Người ơi biết ta tương tư vì tiếc nhớ.*
> *Hình dung lũy tre quê hương đẹp vô bờ.*
> *Cà Mau, Sóc Trăng, Tây Ninh, Rạch Giá,*
> *Huế, Nha Trang, hay Biên Hòa,*
> *Ngàn kiếp không thể xóa nhòa.*
>
> [Know that I am lovesick because I miss home,
> Thinking of the bamboo walls in the beautiful country.
> Cà Mau, Sóc Trăng, Tây Ninh, Rạch Giá,
> Huế, Nha Trang, or Biên Hòa,
> They will never fade [from my memory] for ages ahead].

Since the vast majority of refugees left from cities in southern Vietnam, it was not a surprise that all seven were southern cities. But it was notable and unusual that they did not include Saigon. Songs with geographical names tend to include Saigon, which, indeed, is the first of seven names to appear in the recording of Tô Huỳnh Vân's "Quê Hương Bỏ Lại" [Country Left Behind] for the same album. Moreover, Thanh Thúy chose to open the album with a tune called "Sài Gòn ơi Vĩnh Biệt" [Dear Saigon, Farewell!] written by Lam Phương *and* close it with another song of the *same* title. The latter song was composed by Nam Lộc, who had been an important figure in the urban "youth music" scene in South Vietnam during the late 1960s and early 1970s. He began writing

this while waiting for resettlement at Camp Pendleton, and completed it in Los Angeles in November 1975. Besides appearing in the Thanh Thúy album, it was recorded twice by Khánh Ly. The first recording was broadcast over a BBC Vietnamese program on the first anniversary of the fall of Saigon. The second recording appears in the Khánh Ly album.[14] In a rare diasporic television program in 1978, the second recording was dubbed into a video of Khánh Ly performing the song.[15]

Figure 1. Khánh Ly performed Nam Lộc's song "Sài Gònơi Vĩnh Biệt" ["Dear Saigon, Farewell!"] in 1978. The JIMMY TV, April 26, 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MibpkJqcOKk. Author's screenshot.

[14] Nam Lộc, "Mỗi Ngày Một Ca Khúc Tưởng Niệm Ba Mươi Tháng Tư" [Each Day a Song Commemorating April 30] *T. Vấn & Bạn Hữu* (April 28, 2020): https://t-van.net/nam-loc-moi-ngay-mot-ca-khuc-tuong-niem-30-thang-tu-11/; Trần Chí Phúc, "Sài Gòn Ơi Vĩnh Biệt: Bài Hát Nổi Tiếng của Nhạc Sĩ Nam Lộc" [*Dear Saigon, Farewell*: The Best-known Song of the Musician Nam Lộc], *Thanh Thúy* (May 11, 2017): https://thanhthuy.me/2017/05/11/sai-gon-oi-vinh-biet-bai-hat-noi-tieng-cua-nhac-si-nam-loc/. To avoid confusion with Lam Phương's song, Nam Lộc's is listed on the album as "Sài Gòn ơi Thôi Đã Hết" [Dear Saigon, It's Over].

[15] "Sài Gòn Ơi Vĩnh Biệt & nhạc sĩ Nam Lộc" [*Farewell, Dear Saigon!* and the Musician Nam Lộc], The JIMMY TV, April 26, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MibpkJqcOKk

Few singers would later record the Lam Phương song for commercial release. On the other hand, Nam Lộc's song instantly became popular among the refugees. Since Khánh Ly's and Thanh Thúy's initial recordings, it has been recorded by a number of diasporic vocalists: as varied as Sĩ Phú for an album of multiple singers entitled *Sài Gòn Vĩnh Biệt* [Farewell Saigon] in 1980 and Khánh Hà for the DVD program *ASIA 18: Nhớ Sài Gòn* [Remembering Saigon] twenty-eight years later. Khánh Ly herself recorded it again, this time in France, for her album *Người Di Tản Buồn* [The Sad Displaced Person] released in 1979. The song's melody and singability no doubt helped to fuel its popularity. But it was the lyrics that captured the deepening pain of loss, which peaked in the chorus, only to receive a resolution of a kind in the final stanza. Directly addressing Saigon, the symbol of noncommunist modernity and nationalism, the lyrics open with an undeniable finality.

> *Sài gòn ơi, tôi đã mất người trong cuộc đời,*
> *Sài gòn ơi, thôi đã hết thời gian tuyệt vời,*
> *Giờ còn đây, những kỷ niệm sống trong tôi,*
> *Những nụ cười nát trên môi,*
> *Những giọt lệ ôi sầu đắng.*
>
> [O Saigon, I've lost you in my life.
> O Saigon, the wondrous time is now over,
> What is left but the living memories in me,
> Wounded smiles on the lips,
> Sad and bitter tears].

The second verse brings memories of sunlight, raindrops, and falling leaves in Saigon. Although the loss of Saigon does not lead to the death of the refugee in this case, it leads to bitter and permanent separation. In

exile, the refugee is redefined to be separate from the imagined community of the Vietnamese nation.

Tôi giờ như con thú hoang lạc đàn,
Từng ngày qua, từng kiếp sống quên thời gian,
Kiếp tha hương, lắm đau thương, lắm chua cay,
Tôi gọi tên em mãi thôi.

[I am like an animal apart from its flock.
Living each day as if forgetting time,
Life in exile is full of pain and bitterness,
I'll forever call your name].

This verse indicates that separation notwithstanding, loyalty to the old city and the extinct state became a defining characteristic of exile. The refugees are compelled by this loyalty to make the following vow.

Sài gòn ơi, tôi xin hứa rằng tôi trở về,
Người tình ơi, tôi xin giữ trọn mãi lời thề,
Dù thời gian, có là một thoáng đam mê,
Phố phường vạn ánh sao đêm,
Nhưng tôi vẫn không bao giờ quên.

[Dear Saigon, I promise I will return,
Dear lover, I will forever keep this vow,
No matter that time might tempt me away
To bright urban skylights,
I will never forget you].

The vow to return subverts and contradicts the permanent farewell at the beginning of the song. Having been asked about the contradiction, Nam Lộc responded that making this vow was necessary for his mental condition during the first and most difficult years in exile.[16] Grief over the fall of Saigon dominated and overwhelmed the psyche of the refugees, and they felt many moments of hopelessness. But the loyalty to Saigon demanded that they kept their grief from turning into complete despair.

Other notable exilic songs about Saigon include a pair of tunes whose lyrics were based on poetry. One is "Sài Gòn Vĩnh Biệt Tình Ta" ["Saigon Farewell My Love"], a collaboration of two refugees in Texas. Song Ngọc wrote the melody based on a poem by Hoàng Ngọc Ẩn: the latter an entrepreneur that opened several businesses, including a bookstore and a restaurant in the ethnic community of Houston.[17] Like Nam Lộc's song, it was first recorded by Khánh Ly (in 1980) and, judging from other recordings in the next three decades, was among the most well-received songs about exile. The lyrics of this song are notable for having a double chorus. Each half of the chorus consists of two stanzas, and the first half is about remembering old Saigon. The second half shifts to Saigon in the present, starting with the painful acknowledgment that the postwar government had named the city after Hồ Chí Minh, the arch-enemy of the anticommunist nationalists in South Vietnam.

[16] Trần Chí Phúc, "Sài Gòn Ơi Vĩnh Biệt."

[17] "Trang Thơ Hoàng Ngọc Ẩn" [The Poet Hoàng Ngọc Ẩn], Thi Ca (no date): https://www.thica.net/tac-gia/hoang-ngoc-an/

Ta thương Sài Gòn, giờ đã đổi tên,
Thương người than yêu, đã lạc đường tìm,
Phố buồn xanh xao, em còn một mình,
Lạc loài chân chim.

[I love Saigon, whose name was changed,
Loving my dear ones, getting lost while looking for them,
Sad and ill-looking streets, you've been left alone,
Birds having lost their path of flight].

It was much more than a change of name for the city; it was also an altered state of being as its streets turned "sad and ill-looking." It matched the refugees' homesickness for the old. The next line confirms the loyalty between the city and its former residents now in exile: *Ta thương Sài Gòn, trọn kiếp thủy chung:* I love Saigon, forever faithful. Even without an open vow to return like one in Nam Lộc's song, the affirmation of the loyal bond suggests a hope for return in the distant future.

The second of these songs is "Khi Xa Sài Gòn" ["Far from Saigon"], whose lyrics derived from a poem by Kim Tuấn and whose melody came from Lê Minh Lập, a member of the married duo Lê Uyên Phương. Originally from Đà Lạt, the duo settled in Saigon in 1970 and rapidly grew in popularity, especially among university students and other young patrons. Still in Vietnam after the fall of Saigon, they resettled in California in 1979, and quickly entered the musical scene of the diasporic community. Released in 1980, the recording of this song opens the album of the same name. The poem was published in 1973, presumably because the author, as suggested by a line in the lyrics, was living in the Highlands far from Saigon. Yet the meaning of the lyrics

proved fitting to the situation of the refugees in 1975 and after. In particular, nearly every line of the lyrics includes the name of Saigon. The repetition renders a prayer-like quality to the tune. The song begins,

> *Sài Gòn bây giờ trời mưa hay nắng?*
> *Sài Gòn bây giờ ai khóc thương ai?*
> *Sài Gòn giới nghiêm che kín đêm dài,*
> *Sài Gòn khói bay, Sài Gòn nắng đổ,*
> *Sài Gòn đã buồn như trời sớm mai.*
>
> [Is there rain or sunlight in Saigon?
> Who is weeping for whom in Saigon?
> Curfew in Saigon is covering up the long night.
> Smoke fly in Saigon, sunlight burns in Saigon,
> Saigon was sad like an early tomorrow].

Both of these songs illustrate that exilic sorrow means the grief over loss *as well as* the deteriorating situation in Vietnam. The "sad city" was already a motif in popular Vietnamese music before the fall of Saigon. Indeed, one of the most popular songs was "Thành Phố Buồn"["Sad City"], written by Lam Phương about the city of Đà Lạt and published in 1970 to, supposedly, record sales. The sadness, however, was usually attributed to romantic failures or problems, not to political problems or security issues. The main exceptions were a few songs by Trịnh Công Sơn about the horror of urban warfare, especially after the Tết Offensive. It was not until after April 1975 that the motif of a "sad Saigon" formed the background of Vietnamese music. Sorrow is attributed to the former capital as if it was a lover now separated from the refugees, or an ancestral member weeping for its loss of status alongside a loss of residents. Lê Minh Lập's song ends with this kind of personification,

Sài Gòn bong nghiêng, Sài Gòn đứng đợi,
Sài Gòn bây giờ cúi mặt xa nhau.

[Saigon's shadow leaning, Saigon awaits.
Saigon lowers her head in separation].

No lists of exilic songs about Saigon would be complete without "Sài Gòn Niềm Nhớ Không Tên" ["Saigon Nameless Memory"], whose creation was atypical because it was written in Vietnam and clandestinely made its way abroad. The composer, Nguyễn Đình Toàn, had been a very productive writer of both fiction and nonfiction in South Vietnam, and managed an important weekly musical radio program under the RVN. After the fall of Saigon, he was imprisoned for six years and created this song, initially entitled "Nước Mắt Cho Sài Gòn"["Tears for Saigon"], during the first year of incarceration. Through oral means, the song was passed on to his fellow inmates, sneaked out of the reeducation camp, and eventually made its way to France thanks to the writer Hồ Trường An. The first rendition, sung by Jeannie Mai and recorded in 1978, was produced by the group Quê Mẹ [Motherland] in Paris. Distribution was limited, however, and it was Khánh Ly's recording in the following year for her aforementioned album *Người Di Tản Buồn* that turned this song into an instant hit among refugees.[18]

In AABAA form, the song begins with a double loss, *Sài Gòn ơi, ta mất người như người đã mất tên*: Dear Saigon, I've lost you as you'd lost your name. Much of the rest of the lyrics are about specific images of Saigon during the republican past: tamarind trees, fallen leaves, rainy

[18] "Sài Gòn Niềm Nhớ Không Tên & nhạc sĩ Nguyễn Đình Toàn" [Saigon Nameless Memory and the Musician Nguyễn Đình Toàn], *The Jimmy TV* (April 27, 2023): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gaqGmpnwhc

season, statues in parks, night clubs, the singing voice of Khánh Ly, and the music of Phạm Duy. The second and last stanzas end with resignation: *Còn gì đâu:* What is left? The resignation points us to the next layer of sorrow: mourning for the country in the aftermath of the communist victory.

Mourning the Postwar Nation

The abrupt fall of Saigon created by far the biggest shock among the refugees, but it was not the only earthquake that they felt. The earthquake was followed by a wave of aftershocks that took place in the next several years. After a brief period of "calm," the new regime imposed a series of restrictive political, economic, and cultural policies and programs in the hope of speeding up a socialist society. Governmental officials and military officers of the old regime were lured to local "reeducation" supposedly for days but actually went on for years in distant reeducation camps. Currency changes sought to restrict the amount of money that each person could have, and economic collectivization of industries and especially agriculture rapidly followed, leading to one of the worst economies in Asia. Many southern families were forced to leave their lives in towns and cities for "new economic zones" that provided for little living and farming resources. The new government also created anti-bourgeois policies that banned the circulation of most cultural products, including music, from the RVN. It closely watched over organized religion in particular and civil society in general, and limited their reach as much as possible. Growing conflict with China, once its biggest supporter in the armed conflict against the French and the Americans, led to the expulsion of ethnic Chinese. The

expulsion in turn began a new wave of refugees: the boat people.[19]

These postwar developments had a direct bearing upon the refugees and the songwriters among them. If the fall of Saigon had created the foundation of their exilic identity, the postwar afterquakes pounded them with further bad news and added more anxiety and grief to their mental state. Living in a Western country, they were safe from persecution and deep poverty. Although they had to work, usually at low-paying jobs, their economic situation was much better than their loved ones back in Vietnam. Out of this contrast of situations, the refugees developed another motif called *hát cho người ở lại*: Sing for those staying behind.

Hát Cho Người ở Lại, indeed, is the title of the second album of Khánh Ly recorded and distributed in 1977. All songs in this album were written before 1975, and most had been recorded before the fall of Saigon. Nonetheless, the album's title captured the experience of separation between the refugee community and their homeland. Phạm Duy later wrote a song under this title, and Khánh Ly recorded it for the album of the same name: *Phượng Nga 5: Hát Cho Người Ở Lại* ["Phượng Nga 5: Sing for Those Staying Behind"]. Recorded in France with five singers and released in 1981, this album opens with Khánh Ly's recording of the song. It directly addresses all the people "staying behind" now living in poverty and other devastating consequences of the postwar regime's policies.

[19] For a comprehensive critique of postwar Vietnam, see Huy Đức, *Bên Thắng Cuộc* [The Winning Side], 2 volumes (Place unknown: Osinbooks, 2012).

Hát cho người ở lại quê hương
Với tấm long xót thương vô vàn.
Hát cho người trong họ hàng
Đang biến thành ma đói lang thang.

[Sing for the people staying behind
Sing with a loving heart for them.
Sing for our relatives and family members,
Now turning into starved, wandering ghosts].

Economic poverty was accompanied by political repression, especially the incarceration of officials and officers from the previous regime who were considered enemies of the state even after their unconditional surrender. Later in the same song:

Hát cho từng bạn bè anh em
Chúng bắt dần nhốt sâu trong rừng.
Hát cho người dưới mộ vàng
Đã chết vì chế độ lầm than.

[Sing for each of our friends
Who have been arrested and kept in the woods.
Sing for the people buried underneath,
Who are dead because of the wretched regime].

The association of poverty and incarceration quickly formed another motif for the first stage of postwar diasporic music. This association reached its height with the song "Một Chút Quà cho Quê Hương" ["A Few Gifts for the Homeland"] by Việt Dzũng, who was only sixteen years old when the communists won the Vietnam War. He wrote dozens of songs

in the next few years, and recorded fourteen for his first album, *Kinh Tỵ Nạn* [Prayer of the Refugees]. Released in 1980, the album included several songs that were covered by other refugees in the next few years. In particular was a recording of Khánh Ly for her 1981 album *Bông Hồng cho Người Ngã Ngựa* [Roses for the Fallen]. Thanks to multiple broadcasts over the BBC, this version became the best-known recording of the song during the 1980s.

Việt Dzũng set the lyrics of "Một Chút Quà cho Quên Hương" to six verses. Its basic format is AAÁAAÁ, including a modulation of the third and sixth verses. Seizing on the common experience of postwar separation, the lyrics take turns addressing imagined members of a nuclear family: an older brother and the mother in the first verse; an older sister and a younger sibling (no gender is specified) in the second verse; and the father and the Vietnamese homeland in the third verse. The pattern repeats after an instrumental break. There is a specific gift that accompanies each family member.

> *Em gửi về cho anh dăm bao thuốc lá,*
> *Anh đốt cuộc đời cháy mòn trên ngón tay.*
> *Gửi về cho mẹ dăm chiếc kim may,*
> *Mẹ may hộ con tim gan quá đọa đày.*

[I send my older brother a few packs of cigarettes,
So you can burn your life on your fingertips.
Sending mother a few needles,
So you can sew for me the anguish in the heart].

Among other gifts were fabric, candy, pens, jewelry, and medicine. They illustrate the steep decline of the postwar economy where few consumer goods were available.

Figure 2. Việt Dzũng performed his song "Một Chút Quà cho Quê Hương" ["A Few Gifts for the Homeland"] in the video program *"Asia 27: Chào Mừng Năm 2000"* [Greeting the Year 2000] (2000). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRx5QIsiKnU. Author's screenshot.

Even many necessities like fabric and writing materials were scarce. In addition, the modulated third and sixth verses highlight the association between economic poverty and political imprisonment. Both verses focus on the father, who would receive, in the third verse, "a piece of white cloth" to be worn for his execution; and, in the last verse, "a few sleeping pills" so he could "sleep in prison for life." That is, the father's fate was death by execution or death by a sentence for life.

Estimates of reeducation camps inmates have varied, as have estimates about the number of inmates that died during incarceration. But there was no doubt that they were held indefinitely and arbitrarily, and without any legal representation. The experience led Phạm Duy to pen about twenty songs under a new category of exilic music called *ngục ca*: music of incarceration. The musician was inspired by the poetry of Nguyễn Chí Thiện, a northerner who was incarcerated for "anti-revolutionary propaganda" between 1960 and 1991 for a total of twenty-

seven years. Phạm Duy performed some of these songs when he went on tour, and recorded some of them.[20]

The best-known song, however, has been "Ai Trở Về Xứ Việt" ["Who Is Returning to the Land of Vietnam?"] Very loosely based on a poem by Minh Đức Hoài Trinh, who studied journalism in France during the early 1960s, the poem is about the homesickness, especially for her mother, of a sojourner in France. In 1977, a Vietnamese student in France by the name of Phan Văn Hưng was inspired by the poem to write this song. At first he called it "Ai Về Xứ Việt" and credited it to Nhóm Sáng Tác Tổng Hội Sinh Viên: The Creative Team of the Association of Vietnamese University Students.[21] Khánh Ly recorded it in 1979.

The song's narrator was once imprisoned but is now living abroad. He speaks about a former fellow prisoner who is still incarcerated.

Ai trở về xứ Việt,
Nhắn giùm ta, người ấy ở trong tù.
Nghe đâu đây vang giọng hờn rên xiết
Dài lắm không đằng đẵng mấy mùa thu

[Who is returning to the land of Vietnam?

[20] Phạm Duy, "Ngục Ca - Hoàng Cầm Ca - Vài Bài Ca Tị Nạn Cuối Cùng" [Music of Incarceration, Hoàng Cầm Music, and Some Last Refugee Songs"] (no date): https://phamduy.com/en/am-nhac/chuong-khuc/nguc-ca/5321-nguc-ca-hoang-cam-ca-vai-bai-ca-ti-nan-cuoi-cung

[21] Đặng Phú Phong, "Phỏng Vấn Nhạc Sĩ Phan Văn Hưng" [Interviewing the Musician Phan Văn Hưng] *Thanh Thúy* (May 9, 2014): https://thanhthuy.me/2014/05/09/phong-van-nhac-si-phan-van-hung-dang-phu-phong-thuc-hien/. Phạm Lưu Đạt, "Tiểu Sử và Sự Nghiệp MĐHT" [Life and Works], *Trung Tâm Minh Đức Hoài Trinh / Minh Duc Hoai Trinh Foundation*: https://minhduchoaitrinh.wordpress.com/2020/07/05/tieu-su-minh-duc-hoai-trinh/

Please take my message to him in prison.
Listen to the constant cries nearby,
Long cries that have gone on for several autumns].

After another similar plea in the second verse, the refugee reaches a crescendo of anguish in the chorus, singing as if shouting to the skies.

Các bạn ta ơi, bao giờ được thả?
Đến bao giờ ăn được bát cơm tươi?
Được lắng nghe tiếng chim cười trong gió lá?
Đến bao giờ, đến bao giờ?

[My friends, when will they be released?
When will they eat a good bowl of rice?
When will they listen to chirpy birds in the open?
When will they, when will they?]

The chorus is sung twice in a row for emphasis, which means the lyrics give out eight rhetorical questions without stops. The questions underscore the complete uncertainty about the future: a central characteristic of the exilic identity among the refugees. This characteristic, in turn, brings us back to loyalty. As seen from the last verse (before a short concluding coda), the resolution is a vow never to forget, not unlike the vow to never forget Saigon.

Người bạn tù ơi, ta không quên đâu.
Nhớ hôm xưa, nhìn đôi tay cùng xích.
Hàng song thưa, chia cách vạn tình Ngâu.
Ai tra tấn, nghe long đau kim chích!

[My incarcerated friend, I do not forget you.

Remember back then when we watched our arms jointly shackled.
The iron gate separating our lasting affection.
Like a pain-inflicting needle, it pains me knowing that you are tortured].

The spiritual death among the refugees, discussed in the previous section, is now juxtaposed to the suffering and literal deaths among Vietnamese in the homeland. Homesickness and nostalgia were not merely the desire for home among sojourners such as Minh Đức Hoài Trinh in the 1960s. The homesickness and nostalgia among the refugees were informed by the cruelty of the postwar regime and the suffering of loved ones in Vietnam. The refugees were obliged by duty and affection for family members and close friends to support them with remittances and gift packages. These obligations led to the encouragement of their families and friends to leave Vietnam, and the obligation of sponsoring those that successfully escaped the country for a refugee camp in Southeast Asia.

The late 1970s and early 1980s, indeed, witnessed a new and larger wave of refugees: the boat people. This wave began when the postwar government drove many ethnic Chinese out of the country. Many other Vietnamese quickly followed and engaged in border-crossing through clandestine organizations, bribery of officials, and other means. Escape by boat served as the reason for these lines in Việt Dzũng's song "Một Chút Quà cho Quê Hương":

Gửi về cho em chiếc nhẫn yêu thương
Em bán cho đời tìm đường vượt biên.

[Sending my young sister a loving ring,
So you can sell it and seek to cross the borders].

In comparison to the refugees in 1975, boat escapees encountered greater dangers such as arrest and incarceration, capsizing of boats, hunger and running out of fuel, and piracy in the Gulf of Thailand. For those that successfully crossed Vietnamese borders and defied death, they still faced uncertainty about resettlement in a third country after landing in a refugee camp.[22] Reflecting the multiple hazards, including rape and death, a number of songs highlight the experience of escape as one against tyranny and for freedom. Similar to the inspiration about incarceration songs, Phạm Duy was inspired by the news about the escapees to write a series of songs about them. Some of these songs were recorded for the album *Phạm Duy 3: Hát Trên Đường Tỵ Nạn* [Pham Duy 3: Sing on the Road of Exile] (1981), sung mostly by his children, especially Duy Quang, his oldest son who migrated to the United States in 1979. In "Biển Máu"["Bloody Sea"], Phạm Duy condemns American wartime bombing, postwar communist policies that led many to leave their beloved homeland, and Thai pirates that robbed boats, raped women, and killed many of the men.

> *Tư bản đến: bom đạn và thuốc độc*
> *Lũ Cộng vào: xác ngập Thái Bình Dương*
> *Ra biển mà coi lũ người ác nghiệt*
> *Xua đuổi thuyền bè, cướp của hãm hiếp.*
>
> [Capitalists came: bombs and poison.
> Commies entered [the south]: corpses all over the Pacific.
> Go to the sea to see the wicked people

[22] For a comprehensive study of refugee camps in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and the Philippines, see Jana K. Lipman, *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Repatriates* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).

Pushing boats out to sea [after] they rape and kill!]

The boat people's experience was therefore viewed in sequence with other events: again, a devastating aftershock after a more devastating earthquake. Some songs emphasize the helplessness of the boat people once they went to sea. According to "Lời Kinh Đêm" ["Night Prayer"], written and initially recorded by Việt Dzũng for his first album, the boat people, once at sea, only had their rickety boats, a limited amount of fuel, and little foodstuff and drinkable water. Similar to inmates in reeducation camps, death could have occurred to the boat escapees at any time.

Người có mộng một nấm mộ xanh?
Biển ngây ngô hay biển man rợ?
Biển có buồn hay biển chỉ làm ngơ?

[Do you dream of a fresh grave?
Is the sea innocent or is it barbaric?
Is the sea sad or is it indifferent?]

The helplessness is implied rather than described in "Đêm Chôn Dầu Vượt Biển" ("Hiding Diesel at Night for the Boat Escape"). Written by Châu Đình An in a Hong Kong refugee camp, this song expresses the thought that the refugees are being "fated" for exile after national loss.

Đêm nay anh gánh dầu ra biển anh đi,
Ra đi trên song cuộn, thấy gì ở quê hương,
Xa xa ôi núi mờ xa dần,
Một giọt nước mắt khóc phận thân,
Hò ơi hò ới phận kẻ lưu vong,

Hó ơi hò ới phận kẻ lưu vong.

[Tonight I carry diesel to the sea for an escape,
I travel over the waves and look back at my homeland,
The distance grows and the mountains fade,
A teardrop weeping for our fate.
Chant! Chant for our fate in exile,
Chant! Chant for our fate in exile].

Several diasporic singers later recorded this song, including Phượng Mai for the video series *Paris by Night* in 1986 and Như Quỳnh in 2005. To the intended audience, "Đêm Chôn Dầu Vượt Biển" and similar songs reflect the belief in the tyrannical nature of communist rule, which in turn confirmed the wartime belief that they had rightly belonged to the side of human freedom. A number of songs, therefore, portray the turmoil among the boat people to symbolize the quest for liberty over oppression. The last verse of Châu Đình An's song ends by naming freedom to be the paramount purpose of the dangerous border-crossing.

Đêm nay trên bản đồ có một thuyền ra đi
Hiên ngang trên song gào tự do đón chào
Xin chào tự do với nỗi niềm cay đắng...

[Tonight there's a departing boat on the map,
Moving proudly over screaming waves towards welcoming liberty,
We greet freedom with pain and bitterness in the heart...]

In a similar fashion, Phạm Duy describes escapees in the song "Hát cho Người Vượt Biển" ["Sing for the Boat People"] to be "tiny like leaves in

the woods [and] sand in a hot desert" and "brave" because they "seek freedom." Even in a song like "Lời Kinh Đêm" [Night Prayers], which focuses completely on refugees in the middle of their journey at sea, liberty is named in passing:

> *Thuyền trôi xa về đâu ai biết*
> *Thuyền có về ghé bến tự do.*
>
> [No one knows where this boat will land.
> Will this boat end up at a land of liberty?]

The implication is that the refugees were first and foremost political beings, and not typical immigrants, whose loyalty was directed to the Vietnam of the RVN, which was assumed to be free. Oppression led to their departure for freedom elsewhere, but they would have preferred to remain in their homeland under the condition of freedom.

Retrieving the Lost Nation in Dreams

The theme of freedom underscored another development in the music of Vietnamese refugees and led to a new wave of songs during the 1980s. This wave was more assertive in tone, even openly antagonistic against the postwar regime. The assertiveness could be spotted in the aforementioned album *Phượng Nga 5: Hát cho Người Ở Lại* (1981). Sung by Khánh Ly, the opening song of the same title includes a call to armed violence in the chorus:

> *Đồng bào ơi! Vùng lên tranh đấu!*
> *Ngày chiến thắng sẽ không lâu.*
>
> [Our people! Rise up and fight!
> The day of victory won't be long].

The lyrics end with a similar call for action:

> *Hát cho đời! Hát cho người!*
> *Quyết đấu tranh cho nước Việt tôi!*
>
> [Sing for life! Sing for people!
> Determined to fight for my Vietnamese country!]

Even as Vietnamese continued to leave the country through legal and illegal means, the shifting direction meant that it was no longer (or, at least, not only) running away. The refugees also sought to counter the grief of loss with the belief that they would return to Vietnam in the future. The assertiveness is expressed in faster beats than the mournful songs, and its language is equally condemnatory of communism and celebratory of noncommunist nationalism. Having mourned the loss of Saigon and the RVN, exilic musicians now wanted to articulate their nationalist identity on brighter notes and images. Moreover, the assertiveness coincided with political developments within the diaspora, especially the founding of Mặt trận Quốc gia Thống nhất Giải phóng Việt Nam: National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam, commonly abbreviated as the Front. Formed on the fifth anniversary of the fall of Saigon in southern California, the Front was a result of different militant groups coming together to plan for an armed struggle against the postwar regime. Led by Hoàng Cơ Minh, a former naval officer in the RVN military, the Front raised an apparently large but undisclosed amount of money among the diaspora and enjoyed, at least for a time, editorial support from a number of diasporic periodicals. It received the greatest support, financial and otherwise, during the first two or three years, especially after Hoàng Cơ Minh established a military base at the border

between Thailand and Laos and recruited members from refugee camps in Thailand. A number of ethnic magazines, however, became critical of the Front's tactics and questioned some of its biggest claims. Assassination attempts, including some successful ones, were made on several Vietnamese journalists in the United States. No perpetrators have been caught, and it has never proven that the Front was responsible for the assassinations. But the support declined over time, and drastically so after a failed attempt to enter Vietnam that led to total defeat of the militant group and Hoàng Cơ Minh's suicide.[23]

In some respects, the Front's miserable failures did not diminish but magnified the identity expressed by the new music that sought a return to a noncommunist Vietnam. A strong example, possibly the strongest, is the album *Em Nhớ Màu Cờ* [I Remember the Flag's Colors], released in 1980 by the female singer-songwriter is Nguyệt Ánh. (Her gender was a rarity among diasporic composers.) Some of the songs in this album crucially contributed to a new direction in postwar diasporic music, which was known variably as *hưng ca*, *hùng ca,* and *nhạc đấu tranh*: music of national restoration, music of national pride, and music of struggle, respectively. To be sure, the music of this album still grieves a great deal. Republican Saigon looms large in three songs, two of which include the name of the city in their titles. Ironically, the song that does not include Saigon in the title has remained among Nguyệt Ánh's best-

[23] See Phạm Ngọc Lũy, *Hồi Ký Một Đời Người* [Memoir of a Life], 2 volumes (Tokyo: Tân Văn, 1993); and Phạm Hoàng Tùng, *Hồi Ký Kháng Chiến: Hành Trình Người Đi Cứu Nước* [Memoir of a Struggle: Itinerary of a Nation-Saving Volunteer] (Tokyo: Tân Văn, 2006). On the assassinations, see the PBS documentary "Terror in Little Saigon: An Old War Comes to a New Country," ProPublica and Frontline (2015). In 1982, the Front established its political wing, Việt Nam Canh tân Cách mạng Đảng (the Vietnam Reform Revolutionary Party), commonly referred to as Việt Tân. It has continued to operate in the diaspora and in secret in Vietnam.

known songs. The refugees of "Một Lần Đi" ["Once Departed"] begin with an acknowledgement of sudden loss:

Sài Gòn ơi, ta có ngờ đâu rằng
Một lần đi là một lần vĩnh biệt
Một lần đi là mòn lối quay về
Một lần đi là mãi mãi thương đau.

[Dear Saigon, I did not expect
Once departed means farewell forever,
Once departed means no returning path,
Once departed means eternal pain and sorrow].

Not surprisingly, the theme of "seeking freedom" is prominent in the album. Like other refugee composers, Nguyệt Ánh was acutely aware of the boat people crisis, which provided the setting and background for some of the music, especially the eighth and the ninth songs: "Người Đi Tìm Tự Do" ["Searcher for Freedom"]; and "Người Ở Lại Việt Nam" ["The People Staying Behind in Vietnam"]. Although they are not well remembered today, these songs were important historically because they provide another piece of evidence that the notion of "freedom" came from the refugees themselves, who directly experienced political, economic, and cultural oppression after the war.

Most significantly, much of the album has to do with the lost Vietnamese nation and the desire to recover and retrieve it. The beat of these recordings is usually fast—and certainly faster than most of the songs grieving national loss, incarceration, poverty, and escape by boat. The contents of the lyrics are usually oriented towards the Vietnamese nation lost to the communists. For instance, the marching tune *"Ta Là*

Người Việt Nam" ["We are Vietnamese"] begins by playing upon the long-standing trope that Vietnamese inherit a heroic tradition fighting against invaders.

> *Ta là người, người Việt Nam anh dũng*
> *Đã bao năm xưa xâm lăng bạo cường.*
> *Ta là người, người Việt Nam yêu nước,*
> *Bốn nghìn năm cùng xây đắp quê hương.*
>
> [We are Vietnamese, heroic Vietnamese,
> Whose country had been cruelly invaded.
> We are Vietnamese, patriotic Vietnamese,
> Having four millennia of building our country].

Like the verses, the refrain is proudly declamatory:

> *Việt Nam muôn năm, Việt Nam oai hùng*
> *Việt Nam quật cường không thể mất quê hương*
> *Việt Nam muôn năm, Việt Nam anh dũng*
> *Việt Nam kiêu hung thề diệt lũ xâm lăng.*
>
> [Vietnam forever, Vietnam glorious,
> Vietnam fearless, we will never lose our country,
> Vietnam forever, Vietnam heroic,
> Proud and brave Vietnam will defeat the invaders].

The notion of "invaders" is significant because it was taken in the RVN to mean resistance against Chinese, Mongols, and French. But it also implied that South Vietnam had been "invaded" by North Vietnam. Indeed, the lyrics would signify that the communist victors were not

"pure" Vietnamese by equating them to be slaves of communism, a foreign ideology in their eyes.

Ta là người, người Việt Nam anh dũng,
Giết Cộng nô ta đập tan ngục tù
Ta là người Việt Nam yêu nước
Phá xiềng gong diệt một lũ vô luân.

[We are Vietnamese, heroic Vietnamese,
We kill the slavish communists and break down prisons.
We are Vietnamese, heroic Vietnamese,
We destroy chains to rid of the immoral [communists].

Once the association between communists and invaders is made clear, the song moves to liberation and restoration.

Ta là người, người Việt Nam kiêu hãnh
Dẫu ly hương ta luôn mong ngày về
Ta là người, người Việt Nam cương quyết
Quyết dâng cao cờ giải phóng quê hương.

[We are Vietnamese, proud Vietnamese
In exile, we always desire to return one day
We are Vietnamese, determined Vietnamese,
Determined to uplift the flag to liberate the country].

After five years of shock and grief over the Fall of Saigon, the refugees superimposed the hope and desire of liberating the country over the depression of national loss.

Few if any songs could illustrate this hope and desire more than the opening song of Nguyệt Ánh's 1980 album. Entitled "Anh Vẫn Mơ

Một Ngày Về" ["I Still Dream of Returning One Day"], the upbeat song remains Nguyệt Ánh's signature song to this day. It is easy to sing along and its lyrics are full of patriotic images. It articulates not only the desire to return to Vietnam someday, but also the long-standing nationalist desire since colonialism for an independent and prosperous Vietnamese nation. The latter point is easy to forget because the lyrics begin with the desire from the immediate present. This starting point makes sense because the refugees were most concerned with national loss five years earlier. In this case, the thematic "dream" becomes a counterpoint to the dominating theme of "grief" in the bulk of music written and recorded during 1975-1979.[24]

Following the verse format of AABBAABB, the lyrics begin by sketching an outline of this dream of peace and romance.

> *Anh vẫn mơ một ngày nào*
> *Quê dấu yêu không còn cộng thù*
> *Trên con đường mòn, sau cơn mưa chiều,*
> *Anh ôm đàn dìu em đi dưới trăng.*
> [I still dream of one day
>
> When there are no communist enemies in our beloved land.
> On the small road, and after the afternoon rain,
> I carry the guitar and walk you under the moonlight].

The second verse continues the vision of the couple united in the communist-free country. Next, the lyrics move from the couple to the

[24] Although Nguyệt Ánh is the vocalist in the original recording, the narrator of the song is male. It was very common that women sang in the persona of a man, but this case is interesting because the singer wrote the melody herself.One explanation is that the songwriter employed the expected gender roles among Vietnamese at the time, especially since almost all people involved in the armed rebel forces were portrayed to be men.

larger community, which is the village. Regardless of the fact that most Vietnamese refugees, including Nguyệt Ánh, came from cities and towns, the village remains so popular a trope in the nationalist mindset of Vietnamese that she could not *not* employ it.

> *Rồi bình minh tới anh đưa em về làng*
> *Này bà con đón kìa anh em chào mừng*
> *Thôn quê tưng bừng, muôn chim reo hò*
> *Hát mừng người vừa về sau chiến chinh.*
>
> [When dawn arrives, I walk you to the village,
> There, our friends and people welcome us.
> The countryside is joyful, the birds sing loudly
> Welcoming those returning after war].

A safe return from war is matched by a liberation from incarceration in the next verse:

> *Rồi hoàng hôn xuống ta say men rượu nồng*
> *Họ hang trong xóm thay nhau nhen lửa hồng*
> *Sương giăng mịt mùng, đêm sâu chập chùng*
> *Xóa ngục tù xiềng gông bao năm.*
>
> [When sunset comes, we drink warm wine,
> People in our village take turns lighting warm fires,
> Amidst thick mist and deep into the night,
> We break down chains that imprison us for too long!]

The images move from dawn to sunset, from morning to night. Birds, wine, and fires are supplementary to the imagined village community,

which functions as a small embodiment of the larger imagined community called the Vietnamese nation.

Having painted a vision of eventual independence from communism in the first half, the composer shifts the marital and familial life, albeit always in the context of the nation. First is marriage: that petit bourgeois notion of marriage based on affection and is meant to produce children.

Anh vẫn mơ một ngày nào
Anh với em chung tình bạc đầu.
Trên quê hương nghèo, trong khu rừng già,
Trước mái nhà cờ vàng bay phất phơ.

[I still dream of one day
You and I will live forever happily after
In our poor country, in the old woods,
With the yellow flag flying in front of our home].

The next verse retains the image of the village while moving on to children, who are the ultimate symbol of future for both the married couple *and* the nation.

Bên mái hiên ta ngồi chuyện trò.
Khoai nướng thơm hương tình ruộng đồng.
Con thơ ngoan hiền ê a đánh vần
Vê en nờ là Việt Nam kiêu hung.

[We sit and talk under these roofs,
With baked potatoes scented by our fields.
Our sweet children will learn to spell letters,
The letters V and N mean proud Vietnam].

The lyrics shift to children and their inheritance of the Vietnamese nation that their parents had proudly fought to regain. The motif of music—guitar, people singing, birdsong—appears one more time. The lyrics end with an affirmation of nationalism and freedom.

> *Rồi ngày con lớn con đi xây cuộc đời*
> *Màu cờ tổ quốc con tô them rạng ngời*
> *Quê hương thanh bình, muôn dân yên lành*
> *Sống cuộc đời tự do muôn năm!*
>
> [When grown up, you will build lives
> Under the nation's flag, you'll brighten this country.
> The peaceful country, the prosperous people,
> Living a life of freedom forever more!]

The assertive lyrics, the rhythmic beat, the nationalist pulse: they contribute to make one of the most well written songs by Vietnamese refugees. In retrospect, this dream of a noncommunist Vietnam remains in the realm of a dream: distant, even far-fetched. But it also complicates the portrayal of Vietnamese refugees as merely mournful and grieving people. The evidence above shows that their grief was big and profound. But it was big because of the underlining republican and noncommunist nationalism—and it was profound because of the reassertion of nationalism. The RVN, of course, remains extinct to this day. Yet the refugees could not really move on without an attempt to retrieve the lost republic, if only in dreams and through music.

Conclusion

Nostalgia for the homeland, especially Saigon and South Vietnam before 1975, was the defining characteristic of the early postwar period among Vietnamese refugees. A quarter-century ago, the musicologist Adelaida

Reyes noted well this characteristic during her fieldworks with refugees in the Philippines and the United States[25] Reyes' focus, however, was on Vietnamese traditional music and pop romantic music rather than the music about the refugee experiences. Her analysis acknowledges that loss and separation were significant to the refugees, but it does not really explain the multiplicity of loss and separation in conjunction to noncommunist nationalism that, in turn, created the exilic identity. Without examining the exilic music created by the refugees during the 1970s and 1980s, Reyes' analysis further misses out entirely on the dynamics between loss and the attempt to recoup and recover it.

In recent years, scholars have been more attentive to the place of Vietnamese noncommunist nationalism in the making of their diasporic identity. In fact, they are cautious about studying diasporic music as merely nostalgia. The literary scholar Vinh Phu Pham, for example, has argued against interpreting diasporic performances and recordings of "yellow music" (*nhạc vàng*) to be merely a reflection of melancholia and nostalgia. Pham acknowledges that there are many popular sentiments, including mourning and fond remembrances, in this music. But he also cautions that "qualitative terms like 'mechancholic' and 'nostalgic' are incomplete descriptors of *nhạc vàng* and that their continual use is a way to brush over the sentiments of loss from those who maintain a nationalist identity with the RVN. However, rather than looking at this nationalism as a concrete, monolithic ideology attached singularly to the physical homeland, here, I take it as a performance that locates the space of the nation within the diasporic imaginary of the impossible return."[26]

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[25] Adelaida Reyes, *Songs of the Caged, Songs of the Free: Music and the Vietnamese Refugee Experience* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).

[26] Vinh Phu Pham, "Rhizomatic Transnationalism: Nhạc Vàng and the Legacy of Republicanism in Overseas Vietnamese Communities," in *Republican Vietnam,*

Pham calls this performance "a form of rhizomatic transnationalism" that does not have a real center. This center is not in Vietnam because the refugees are not there. Besides, the Saigon of their memory no longer exists. And it is not in the diaspora either because no Little Saigons could replicate the republican identities and traditions before 1975.

The central concern of this article is not about transnationalism or diasporic center (or, more precisely, a lack of a center). Nonetheless, I share Pham's analysis about the complexity of melancholia and nostalgia in diasporic music. It applies to pre-1975 music rerecorded in the diaspora *as well as* new music about the homeland written and recorded after the Vietnam War. My analysis confirms some of the insights that Pham and other scholars have made about the relationship of diasporic nationalism and anticommunism to Vietnamese refugees and immigrants in cultural and artistic representations.[27]

At the same time, I wish to complicate this scholarship on diasporic representation, musically and otherwise, by inviting scholars and listeners to consider applying the concept "restorative nostalgia" to the music by the refugees. This concept has been commonly attributed to the late scholar Svetlana Boym, who made a distinction between "restorative nostalgia" and "reflective nostalgia." Restorative nostalgia is more elemental of the two types while reflective nostalgia is more

1963–1975: War, Society, Diaspora, eds., Trinh M. Luu and Tuong Vu (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023), 204.

[27] See Nhi T. Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 59–77; Lan Duong and Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, "Vietnamese American Art and Community Politics: An Engaged Feminist Perspective," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 15.3 (2012): 241–269; Ashley Carruthers, "Saigon from the Diaspora," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 29 (2008): 68–86. See also Deborah Wong, *Speak it Louder: Asian Americans Making Music* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

removed in time and space. Reflective nostalgia, for Boym, "thrives on *algia* (the longing itself) and delays the homecoming." It also "dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging." In comparison, its restorative counterpart "does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition." It further "protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt." If reflective nostalgia is "about taking time out of time and about grasping the fleeing present," restorative nostalgia focuses not on "the past" but, rather, on "universal values, family, nature, homeland, truth."[28]

Given the exposition of refugee music during the 1970s and 1980s, we can conceptualize this music as a venue of restorative nostalgia for Vietnamese in North America, Western Europe, and other parts of the diaspora. Although the Republic of Vietnam had ceased to exist, it remained very real for them that they conjured the impossible dream of returning to it in the future. It was for them "the absolute truth" in addition to family, nature, homeland, and universal values. Even when they mourned with Nam Lộc that they have bid farewell forever to Saigon, they could not help to declare that they would return one day. Forever farewell was modified to a temporary goodbye; within the excruciating pain of loss still lay a tiny hope for recovery and restoration. Even though the refugees were despairing, they could not quite yet accept the recent past.

Lastly, scholars of diasporic culture have focused on representations in the 1990s and 2000s. One reason for this focus is the availability of entertainment video series produced by companies such as Thúy Nga, Asia, and Vân Sơn. They are historically important music

[28] Svetlana Boym, "Nostalgia and Its Discontents," *The Hedgehog Review* (Summer 2007): https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/the-uses-of-the-past/articles/nostalgia-and-its-discontents

video series that deserve deeper study. This article, however, seeks an intervention by placing greater import on the music written and produced by refugees during the first ten or twelve years following the fall of Saigon. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the refugees were *extremely* close to the memories of the RVN: republican Saigon existed vividly in their minds. It was this vivid experience of loss that formed the center of their new exilic identity while adjusting to life in a new society. Their mental proximity to the lost nation made them weep but it also led them to reassert their nationalist belief: their "truth and tradition," to return to Boym's words. The reassertion helped them cope with exile and, especially, wait for reunion with loved ones.

The music of this period largely ended after the Front's failed attempt to enter Vietnam in 1987. In the same year, the U.S. Congress passed the Amerasian Homecoming Act that ushered in a new era of migration for many Vietnamese associated with the former RVN. As a result, diasporic music once again shifted direction. Once reunion became probable, they found new ways, especially musical and entertainment video programs from the aforementioned companies to engage their nostalgia, musically speaking. Those video productions were a long way from the concerts that Khánh Ly, Phạm Duy, and others gave at Fort Indiantown Gap in 1975. Whether Boym's notion of reflective nostalgia would be applicable in the 1990s and 2000s, is a question awaiting an examination of those programs. What we know for sure is that they were rooted in the earthquake of national loss and the afterquakes that powerfully and distinctly shaped the type of nostalgia among the refugees and immigrants.

Note on the Author

Tuan Hoang is Blanche E. Seaver Professor of Humanities and Teacher Education, and associate professor of Great Books at Pepperdine University in California. He grew up in Vietnam and the United States, and received his PhD in History from the University of Notre Dame.His research has focused on twentieth-century Vietnamese history and the history of Vietnamese refugees in the United States. Among his publications are "'Our Lady's Immaculate Heart Will Prevail': Vietnamese Marianism and Anticommunism, 1940–1975," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 17.2–3 (2022); "Ultramontanism, Nationalism, and the Fall of Saigon: Historicizing the Vietnamese American Catholic Experience," *American Catholic Studies* 130.1 (2019), and others. His book chapters include "The Vietnamese Diaspora," in *The Cambridge History of the Vietnam War*, vol. 3 (Cambridge University Press, 2024); "Pray the Rosary and Do Apostolic Work: The Catholic Associational Culture in South Vietnam and the Diaspora," in *Republican Vietnam, 1963-1975: War, Society, Diaspora* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2023); "Social Mobility and the Meaning of Freedom among Vietnamese Refugees and Immigrants," in *The Vietnamese Diaspora in a Transnational Context: Contested Spaces, Contested Narratives* (Brill, 2022); and others. His commentary on the South Vietnamese flag at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 appeared in the second issue of *Rising Asia Journal* (2021).