

Saigon from the diaspora

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In the wake of reform in Vietnam and the end of the cold war, overseas Vietnamese are returning to their former homeland in increasing numbers. For most of the first generation in the diaspora, memories of wartime Saigon are now being augmented by a touristic experience of contemporary Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City. This essay asks how the co-presence of these differently spatialized and temporalized ways of knowing the city affects the production and consumption of images of Saigon in overseas Vietnamese communities in the West. Based on media ethnography carried out in Vietnamese households in Sydney, the paper argues that changes in the way Saigon is represented in overseas Vietnamese popular culture reflect a shift in the larger politics of diasporic identity. While narratives of exile and refugeehood remain potent forms of affective (if not instrumental) politics in overseas Vietnamese contexts, transnational forms of consciousness and identification are beginning to enter into diasporic public culture, albeit in a highly contested way.

Keywords: Vietnam, diaspora, media, Saigon, exile, transnationalism

Connecting spaces

As an anthropologist of migration, my interest when working on transnational media invariably lies in the way in which media flows interact with migratory circuits. How do media texts flow between diasporas and homelands? How do they circulate between different diasporic locations? How do such sites of media production and consumption both retain their distinctiveness and blur into one another? How do these flows produce audiences and, perhaps, public spheres that exceed the traditional borders of the nation state (Appadurai, 1996)? Explorations into these kinds of postnational geographies have been described by some as the 'return' of the problem of space to anthropological enquiry, and I believe they constitute a natural point of engagement between the disciplines of anthropology and geography (Rankin, 2003).

In this paper, I look at the role of media, and in particular visual representations of Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City, in articulating spatial connections between the Little Saigons of the Vietnamese diaspora and the 'Big Saigon' of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV).¹ How do contemporary flows of people, cash, commodities and culture between Little and Big Saigons show up in representations of Ho Chi Minh City produced in and by the diaspora? Media texts both represent and constitute these flows, such that this form of popular culture is arguably *the* most transnationalized aspect of Vietnamese social life. Thus it is necessary to ask how movements of media performers, producers and texts between homeland and diaspora operate to determine the visual representation of transnational Vietnamese geographies and, above all, the imag(in)ing of the city of Saigon. In addition, one must take into account the fact that the audience itself is mobile: the diasporic consumers of Vietnamese language music video periodically travel between diasporic sites (e.g. from Sydney to California) and between diaspora and homeland (Sydney to Saigon). These very mobilities are in turn beginning to shape the way Saigon is represented and interpreted in diasporic popular culture such that the city is shifting from being figured as a locus for diasporic nostalgia to an exciting site of culinary and cultural tourism. This representational shift intersects with the complex

transformations that are taking place in the politics of overseas Vietnamese identity. These dynamics include, on the one hand, a growing synchronization (Aksoy & Robins, 2003; Levitt & Schiller, 2004) of diasporic Vietnamese identities with the contemporary homeland as the relationship shifts from one of exile to a more engaged transnationalism, and, on the other, an intensification of the discourses of anticommunism and diasporic purity.

In conceptual terms, this case study takes us to the intersection of transnational and diaspora theory. Brubaker (2005: 6) has identified a tendency for fusion between these literatures. Transnational cultural studies in particular has drawn inspiration from Stuart Hall's (1990) definition of a cultural diaspora experience of hybridity, creolization and fluid identity, while tending to disregard the stricter social scientific definitions of migrant transnationalism (e.g. Mahler, 1998; Vertovec, 1999). One might add that diaspora is increasingly construed as a dated phenomenon relative to the brave new world of transnationalism. Clifford (1994), in his seminal article, had argued for the value of maintaining the distinction between the two. Werbner (2004: 461) has spoken in a similar vein about the sociological need to discriminate between 'transnational itinerants' and 'settled diaspora communities of economic migrants or refugees'. An anthropological perspective grounded in the experience of a displaced population such as the overseas Vietnamese furnishes us with a less arbitrary way of understanding the distinction between these two definitions of migrant identity. In this community we discover diasporic and transnational forms of consciousness, the former privileging memory and disjuncture, and the latter privileging contemporaneity and simultaneity, jostling side by side (sometimes embodied in the very same subject) in a strangely comfortable way. Diasporic identifications, narratives and symbols remain compelling. At the same time it is apparent that the spatial and temporal foundations on which diaspora is built are being deterritorialized as overseas Vietnamese reconnect, sometimes unwillingly, with their former homeland. Globalization, be it in the form of satellite signals emanating from SRV, Skype or discount flights from Sydney to Ho Chi Minh City, dictates that the homeland will not be contained in the 'then and there' of diasporic consciousness, but, rather, intrudes into the 'here and now' as a form of transnational consciousness. A new kind of split emerges in the diasporic subject – one which has significant consequences for the privileging of memory in studies of migration. Nostalgia is usually understood as an aspect of diasporic experience that is effectively quarantined from contemporaneous knowledge about former homelands. In the overseas Vietnamese case, however, allochronic and synchronic ways of knowing Vietnam interpenetrate and syncretize, producing novel contradictions.

Keeping a comfortable distance

Overseas Vietnamese communities in the West are composed principally of those who fled from southern Vietnam in the aftermath of the Vietnam War/American War. Official Vietnamese sources cite the size of the diaspora at 2.7 million, residing in more than 90 countries, with 80 per cent located in developed nations (Politbureau, 2004). In the USA alone there were 1 122 528 Vietnam-born individuals according to the 2000 census. Other significant communities include those in Australia (154 830, 2001 census), Canada (148 400, 2001 census), and France (roughly 300 000; exact figure unavailable). Overseas Vietnamese communities also exist in the former Eastern Bloc countries and in Vietnam's neighbours Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and China. While political contradictions between these latter communities and Hanoi do indeed exist,

they are not regarded as significant, and these groups are typically considered by the Vietnamese state to constitute a loyal diaspora. In the case of the refugee diaspora, however, considerable ideological differences remain.

Australia has the third-largest overseas Vietnamese population in the world and it ranks first in terms of Vietnam-born residents per head of population, comprising just less than 1 per cent of the total population. Around 60 000 overseas Vietnamese live in western Sydney, clustered around the three main community centres of Cabramatta, Bankstown and Marrickville. The Vietnamese community in Australia is broadly similar to that in the USA in terms of the various waves of migration that constituted it. Prior to the fall of Saigon, a small number of Republic of Vietnam (RVN) elites, including students, adoptees, academics, bureaucrats and military trainees, were already resident in the USA and Australia, among other wartime allies (Reyes, 1999: 107–9). In 1975 there were some 500 Vietnamese students in Australia, both privately funded and under the Colombo Plan, an Australian government scholarship scheme (about the same number of Vietnamese then present in the USA). The fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975 to advancing communist forces precipitated the departure of a first wave of ‘evacuees’. This group consisted of around 135 000 individuals, mostly military and government elites having close ties to the USA, where the majority of them were resettled. A small number of these ‘first wave’ refugees came to Australia (539 arrived in 1975) where, as in the USA, they took on community leadership roles (Lewins & Ly, 1985; BIPR, 1994; Viviani, 1996: 102).

Subsequent to the fall of Saigon, a second wave of refugees, the so-called boat people, began to depart Vietnam. This group comprised a broader cross-section of the population – peasants and workers as well as members of the petite bourgeoisie and urban middle classes – and a disproportionately high number of ethnic Chinese Vietnamese and Catholics. Amongst this group were many who had had prior experience of displacement, even multiple displacements, as internal refugees during wartime. Members of this group typically experienced stays of up to several years in refugee camps in regional countries. It has been estimated that up to 50 per cent of those who left Vietnam by boat in this period were lost at sea. This exodus, which peaked in 1981, was brought into some order following the inauguration of the Orderly Departure Program (ODP), and by 1984 ODP departures outnumbered ‘illegal’ ones. The ODP migrants were a heterogeneous group, including family reunion migrants, the so-called Amerasians, former political prisoners and those who had been associated with the old regime, the US military and other American institutions in Vietnam (Rutledge, 1992: 65). A final wave of migration from Vietnam coincided with the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA). This was a nationwide movement, including northerners as well as southerners, which is considered to have contained a high proportion of ‘economic refugees’, typically from the northern seaboard provinces (Thayer, 1989; Hitchcox, 1994).

One wave in which Australia did not share was that involving 165 000 re-education camp survivors who were resettled in the USA under the so-called HO (Humanitarian Operation) programme, which operated from the mid-1990s. Vietnamese migration to the USA and Australia continues, although in the Australian case it has been significantly scaled down since the late 1990s, when family reunion migration was sharply curtailed. Marriage migration is now by far the largest migration category by which Vietnamese nationals come to Australia, and since 2000 an average of more than 1600 ‘partners’ have arrived per year (DIMIA, 2006). Vietnamese students and temporary labour migrants are also part of this new wave. Figures on current Vietnamese migration

to the USA are not readily available, but we can assume that it follows the current Australian trend towards a scaled down and 'depoliticized', post-refugee migration.

Vietnamese Australians and Americans share roughly the same vision of diasporic identity and participate in the same public sphere, for instance over the Internet, in international meetings of diasporic political organizations and in the consumption of popular cultural products such as music videos produced in California. A further similarity between the communities is that they are both situated in multicultural settler nations that opposed Hồ Chí Minh in the Vietnam War/American War, a conflict in which some 500 Australian troops died, and which remains central to Australian national mythology in much the same manner it does to the American. The Vietnamese communities in Australia, America and Canada have been ranked by SRV scholar Trần Trọng Đăng Đàn (1997: 147) as 'extremely anticommunist', in contrast to the more moderate western European refugee communities. Many in these communities continue to identify, at least symbolically, with the former southern RVN regime and oppose what they see as the illegitimate dictatorship of the Communist Party of Vietnam.

Hanoi's attitude to this overseas population remains ambivalent. On the one hand, it fears the destabilizing effect that committed anticommunists and democracy advocates in the diaspora may have on the nation. On the other, it appreciates the potentially enormous contribution the refugee diaspora could make to the project of national development. It is estimated that up to USD 3 billion is now remitted each year from the diaspora to Vietnam, roughly equivalent to 10 per cent of Vietnam's gross domestic product, and constituting a major source of foreign exchange. In the first half of 2004, Ho Chi Minh City alone received some USD 900 million in remittances, exceeding the amount of foreign direct investment in the city for the same period (*Vietnam Investment Review Online*, 2004). When one includes the cash and gold brought back by some 300 000 annually returning relatives, and the significant small to medium unofficial investments that overseas Vietnamese or *Việt kiều*² make in the names of their domestic relatives, the actual figure could be substantially higher. It is also estimated that there are some 300 000 tertiary-educated *Việt kiều* who could provide much needed brainpower for Vietnam's national development. Such thinking is in part a consequence of the fact that since Vietnam's economic reforms in the mid- to late 1980s, the end of the cold war and the dropping of the US embargo on Vietnam, flows of people, cash and information between diaspora and homeland have rapidly accelerated.

While a very few exile elites continue to deny themselves the pleasure of returning to Vietnam, for the majority of overseas Vietnamese, going back for family visits, tourism and religious and other activities has become a mundane matter. Little Saigons around the world have become vibrant translocalities in which connections to the Big Saigon are visible in the street, from the pop music blaring out of shopfronts to newly arrived Vietnamese brides working for under-the-counter pay at *phở* and *cơm tấm* stalls. Nevertheless, there remain vitally important disconnects between Vietnam and the diaspora. Indeed, for many diasporic subjects, the maintenance of a 'decent interval' between themselves and contemporary Vietnam is a matter of the very survival of a diasporic subjectivity rooted in allegiance to the memory of the old regime, a commitment not to lose touch with the refugee experience, and an ongoing expression of anticommunist or pro-democracy homeland politics.

In Australia this boundary was recently threatened by the arrival of a touring music show from Vietnam entitled *Duyên Dáng Việt Nam* or 'Charming Vietnam Gala'. As the placards held by the thousands of protestors who picketed the performances suggested,

community leaders read this Air Vietnam-funded extravaganza as the latest and boldest initiative in an ongoing propaganda offensive aimed at infiltrating 'communist' popular culture into the overseas Vietnamese community. Speakers assured the crowd that just as they had won in the case of SBS TV – a multicultural broadcaster that briefly aired a news service from Vietnam's VTV4 before cancelling it in response to Vietnamese community outrage – so would they defeat *Duyên Dáng* and any other touring shows from Vietnam. If the popular feeling among the protestors was not against homeland Vietnamese commercial culture per se, there was certainly anxiety and outrage at the proximity of this culture as embodied in *Duyên Dáng*. Apparently, it is one thing for people to be able to buy pirated Vietnamese-produced variety shows and telemovies in their local Vietnamese grocery, or to quietly receive Vietnamese satellite television in their homes, and quite another to have an all-singing, all-dancing live show from Vietnam on the diasporic doorstep.

Exile and the absence of the city

Overseas Vietnamese in the West have been producing print and broadcast media since the early days of resettlement. There is now a large and diverse diasporic mediasphere that includes newspapers, websites, radio, cable and direct-to-home (DTH) television, and most importantly, a commercial music culture based in the Los Angeles conurbation (see Cunningham & Nguyen, 2000; 2003; Carruthers, 2001; Valverde, 2003). This is a relatively low profit business in which producers recoup their investments through ticket sales for live performances and a limited release of original DVD versions of shows which can have budgets of up to half a million US dollars (interview, music video director, Ho Chi Minh City, 27 March 2006). Piracy is rampant and, despite periodic legal initiatives by the larger producers, a significant proportion of the copies of Vietnamese American music videos sold in the diaspora are counterfeit. Practically all of those sold in Vietnam, where they are officially banned but unofficially tolerated, are pirated versions. For its part the Vietnamese Australian community is not large enough to support its own music video industry, and performances are limited to weekly dance evenings in clubs in the main community centres of Cabramatta and Bankstown. Those aspiring to larger things have had to move to California. Thus Vietnamese Australians, like people of Vietnamese origin in virtually every other part of the diaspora, consume media texts produced by their counterparts in the USA.

While Vietnamese diasporic media culture exhibits substantial diversity in terms of content, genre, style and format, when it comes to homeland politics it is remarkably homogeneous. With some notable exceptions, such as the noncommercial websites *Tiền Vệ* and *Talawas* (visited mostly by intellectuals), the representation of political positions and identities in the overseas Vietnamese media is limited to those forthrightly opposing Hanoi.³ Overseas Vietnamese media culture can be described as diasporic, even exilic, rather than truly transnational, since it is characterized by strong prohibitions against the flow of homeland texts to the diaspora (and vice-versa), and a continuing commitment to the expression of a politicized refugee/exile identity. While cultural products and producers *do* circulate between overseas communities and Vietnam, this is typically in an informal and disorganized manner, exemplified by the economy of pirated music CDs and music video DVDs, and the circulation of singers themselves between diaspora and homeland. Indeed, the protests against *Duyên Dáng* are at least partially a response to the threat of the 'normalization' of this cultural traffic and the spectre of the eventual integration of homeland and diasporic popular cultures.

What is being negotiated in the protests, and in transnational Vietnamese cultural flows in general, is thus the experiential closeness and synchronicity of the Little and Big Saigons. In the exile imaginary that continues to inform overseas Vietnamese politics and culture, the two spaces are most definitely ‘out of synch’. In political speeches, music videos and living room discussions alike, Saigon is situated in the past, as idealized capital of the old RVN regime (Việt Nam Cộng Hòa), or in the future, as the restored capital of a post-communist Vietnam. The city is also held ‘at a distance’, a locus for nostalgia and longing rather than a component of dual consciousness or bifocality that one does not need to ‘miss’.⁴ In public diasporic culture, Saigon is typically not imagined as a place that can be prosaically returned to, despite the fact that hundreds of thousands of overseas Vietnamese do this every year. In the exilic mode of discourse, these quotidian returns are typically bracketed from the mythicized Final Return that would signify the fall of communism and, ironically, the end of Diaspora.⁵

These exile politics have meant that, until very recently, visual representations of contemporary Saigon have been all but absent from overseas Vietnamese popular culture. When images of Saigon are called for, for instance when the city is the subject of a song, production designers often resort to rear-projected footage of the city from before 1975; I have even seen a stage set reproducing a pre-1975 Saigonese street scene. When images from contemporary Vietnam are used as part of the montage for a given segment of a variety show, directors are typically careful to avoid any acknowledgement or celebration of urban modernity and instead favour timeless rural scenes or anonymous images of urban decay and poverty. War-era footage of ruined cities or the chaos of the fall of Saigon is also not uncommon. Writing of a similar anti-contemporaneity in Iranian exile television in Los Angeles, Hamid Naficy (1993: 138) observes:

Television constructs a representation of present Islamic Iran as a ruined motherland in the throes of death, eulogizes the death of the present by mourning it, memorializes the past by commemorating and celebrating it, and produces masochistic pleasure by identifying with the tortured and dying country.

This dynamic is very much in evidence in the commemorative production *30 năm viễn xứ* [30 Years in a Distant Land], released in 2005 by the prestigious Thúy Nga company based in California. Thúy Nga is the oldest overseas Vietnamese media company, and it continues to stage the most lavish and, for many, the most exciting productions. A typical edition of its longstanding *Paris by Night* DVD series includes themes of nostalgia, patriotism, refugeehood, tradition and communal survival alongside lively and pleasure-oriented acts that reflect the history of the Vietnamese encounter with French and American popular culture, from Edith Piaf to Britney Spears. *30 năm viễn xứ* is a somewhat atypical edition of *Paris by Night* in that, as a commemorative show, its focus is solely on the refugee experience. This DVD begins with heart-wrenching documentary images of the fall of Saigon before moving on to a choreographed reenactment of peasant refugees fleeing Vietnam by boat. Images such as these, repeated *ad infinitum* over the 30-year history of diasporic video production, have arguably functioned to re-liminalize overseas Vietnamese viewers, returning them to the agony of the early days of flight and exile, and stirring up the kind of political affect that periodically explodes into mass protests such as the one described above.

In *30 năm viễn xứ*, the raw ‘masochistic pleasure’ of the first tracks recedes somewhat into resigned nostalgia with the 1976 Lam Phương song *Sài Gòn ơi! Vĩnh biệt* or ‘Farewell Saigon’ (Figure 1) performed by the legendary Khánh Hà. In this number, we do indeed see images of Saigon, but what is shown is file footage from before 1975. This



Figure 1. 'Farewell Saigon' – lyrics for *Sài Gòn ơi! Vĩnh biệt* (original composition by Lam Phương, 1976) from the *Thúy Nga DVD* version in '*30 năm viễn xứ*' (2005). Translation by Ashley Carruthers.

vision is projected onto a small oblong of white screen behind the singer, and shows Saigonese landmarks that are instantly recognizable to Vietnamese viewers. The distancing effect created by projecting the grainy black and white footage on a slim fragment of screen is compounded by the fact that the image is 'barred' behind a superimposed graphic, a golden globe with horizontal stripes across it (reminiscent of a Chinese character, and perhaps representing a sunset or cloud-striped moon). The almost excessive layering of nostalgia and distancing in the *mise-en-scène* evokes a fragmented memory of a Saigon perpetually frozen in time on the eve of the fall of the old society and inaccessible to return by so mundane a means as aeroplane. In Naficy's (1993: 151) words, the vintage Saigon footage is a nostalgic fetish which 'serve[s] to authenticate a past and simultaneously to discredit the present'. Indeed, the very presence of the singer Khánh Hà, who emerges out of the darkness (as though out of history) wearing a deep green *áo dài* made of sumptuous velvet, becomes itself a signifier of nostalgia, since she is one of that dwindling generation of performers who had already achieved fame in pre-communist Saigon. Ultimately, the piece is a refusal of the contemporaneity and contiguity of Saigon to the here and now of the *mise-en-scène*, the diasporic present.⁶

The return of the city

If *30 năm viễn xứ* carries a compelling psychological realism for many overseas Vietnamese viewers, it is less in touch with the social reality of diasporic return to Vietnam. This latter tendency is captured in the DVD *Sài Gòn ơi!*, produced by the recently established Rainbow Entertainment, based in Westminster, California. The narrative of return presented on the opening track of this production, *Sài Gòn đẹp lắm* or 'Saigon is Beautiful' (Figure 2), is a far more banal affair than the quasi-sacred symbolic journey

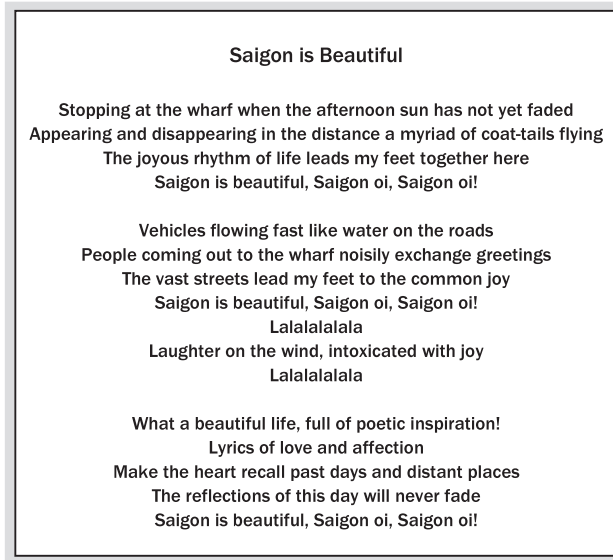


Figure 2. 'Saigon is Beautiful'– lyrics for *Sài Gòn đẹp lắm* (original composition by Y Vân, probably circa 1960s) from the version in the Rainbow Productions DVD *Sài Gòn ơi!* (2005). Translation by Ashley Carruthers.

hinted at in 'Farewell Saigon'. Here, instead of contemplating the city from a distance, we are immediately immersed in a joyous Saigon, the camera's gaze bringing us face to face with the beaming visages of schoolchildren, barbers and street sellers. The scene then shifts to Saigon's Tân Sơn Nhất Airport, where four colourfully dressed women⁷ await the arrival of the singer Hoài Linh, who is cast in the role of a glamorous returning *Việt kiều*. The group proceeds to the famous Bến Thành market, where they sample an extraordinary number of dishes, including *bún mắm* and *chè*, a pungent noodle soup and a dessert respectively, before proceeding through the city in a convertible car. The ensemble sings and dances before both colonial Saigonese landmarks and modern skyscrapers. The piece lasts some 15 minutes (!) as the song is repeated over and over, apparently so as to allow viewers to totally immerse themselves in the city and be presented an image of practically every recognizable Saigonese landmark. Noteworthy is the absence of flags in the Saigon of this video clip. Ho Chi Minh City is so festooned with the SRV's yellow star against a red field that this can only have been achieved with the utmost effort on the part of the camera crew. It is very obvious to overseas Vietnamese viewers that the image of the Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee building, formerly the Hôtel de Ville, is cropped so that the flagpole at its peak does not show. Thus, while it may offend exilic sensibilities in its celebration of contemporary Saigon, Rainbow Entertainment is careful not to commit the unforgivable sin of showing a communist flag to its diasporic audience. As a consequence, the Saigon presented in the video is nominally removed from the sovereignty of the Vietnamese state, and presents itself as a depoliticized 'playground' (culinary, sexual and otherwise) for returning *Việt kiều*.

Overseas Vietnamese music fans are able to categorize this video as belonging to a 'stream' of video production, associated with the newer and smaller companies, that puts the emphasis on fun and entertainment and is more or less dissociated from the exile cultural heritage in which the more established companies (Thúy Nga, Asia and

Vân Sơn) are steeped. However, this clip does appear to represent something new in the way it so directly challenges the code of exile that has hitherto organized representations of Saigon in diasporic music video. What are the cultural and, given that this is a commercial medium, economic logics of this potentially risky strategy? In cultural terms, one could argue that this clip evidences tendencies towards the 'de-diasporization', 'transnationalization' and 'ethnicization' of overseas Vietnamese identities as a result of revived links with Vietnam, and the decline of exile politics with generational change (however, as we see below, such arguments are not so easily made). In economic terms the clip makes sense in that, as a Vietnamese American director who now works in Saigon explained to me, it is far cheaper to do a location shoot in Vietnam (USD 3000) than it is in the USA (USD 20 000). Thus setting this clip in downtown Saigon allowed the producers to present to the audience some new and exciting locations, and keep production costs down at the same time. This cost saving strategy brings an attendant risk of course, that is, the negative reaction viewers may have to such images of Saigon. Indeed, Thúy Nga itself has in the past suffered boycotts and protests when suspected of going soft on its previously impeccable homeland politics (Carruthers, 2001). However, taking the risk of representing Saigon as a 'playground' for a new generation of fun-loving *Việt kiều* is justified as a competitive strategy.

Rainbow Entertainment is a new and low-end player in the music video production market. ('If Thúy Nga is class A then Rainbow is class C', remarked one informed viewer.) It appears to be seeking to compensate for its lack of capital and established reputation by taking a more 'liberal' stance on representing the homeland and diasporic links to it than that taken by the more staid producers. In so doing, it is seeking to identify and capture a new audience: that group of people who do not view cultural products such as *Sài Gòn ơi!*, or for that matter their own ties to Vietnam, from the critical political perspective of exile elites. As we shall see below, the class location, size and age of this imagined community of 'apolitical' viewers is the subject of much speculation. One tentative source of information on who this audience might be, however, is the *go2viet* website, an Amazon.com-style retailer dealing in Vietnamese language cultural products (<http://www.go2viet.com>). When one clicks on *Sài Gòn ơi!* on this site, one is presented with a list of DVDs that 'other customers who bought this product also purchased'. These include a video by Hoa Biền company (a minor new player with a similar style to Rainbow), cooking DVDs, karaoke DVDs and Vietnamese pornography, including one DVD promising a 'Sex tour of Vietnam'! Interestingly, the list does not include products of the major music video companies Vân Sơn, Asia or Thúy Nga. Of course, one must be sceptical of using this kind of advertising as data, but this constellation of products does seem to suggest a certain kind of working class, first generation spectator, interested in feel-good music, cooking, karaoke and – let us hope only in a voyeuristic way – sex tourism to Vietnam.

'Pleby young folks'

In order to get a socially grounded sense of how the *Sài Gòn đẹp lắm* clip might signify in overseas Vietnamese communities, I undertook a modest media ethnography by screening the video for 10 first generation refugees and migrants and five second generation Vietnamese-Australians in Sydney in late 2005 and early 2006. The first generation group included six women and four men, and the second generation group included four boys and a girl, three of whom were the children of members of the first

generation group. Some of these screenings took the form of impromptu focus groups, while in the other cases my research assistant and I screened the clip to individuals. First and second generation viewers watched separately. First generation viewers were shown only the *Sài Gòn đẹp Lắm* clip, while second generation viewers were shown both this and *Sài Gòn ơi! Vĩnh biệt*. This was done to minimize the chances of the clip being presented to first-generation viewers in a politicized frame, as I wanted to see if such interpretations emerged spontaneously. All screenings took place in the interviewees' living rooms. Three of those in the first generation group were relatively recent arrivals in Australia, (two as brides and one as a student); the others had come earlier as refugees themselves or had been sponsored by their refugee children. All had returned to Vietnam on numerous occasions.

All of the first generation viewers pointed, in different ways, to the clip's transgression of the ethics and aesthetics of exile. Almost without exception, this group perceived the clip to be a kind of advertisement for *Việt kiều* tourism to Vietnam, and one man even suggested that it was possible this production had been funded by Hanoi. 'It is as if they are trying to convince people it is safe to return, that Saigon is really magnificent now,' remarked another viewer. The majority of this group pointed out that this was only a facade, however. One woman was outraged that such an image of the city could be presented when so many lived in poverty. Another found evidence for the social inequities in the city in its very physical unevenness, tracing with her hand the jagged skyline produced by unplanned development. There was also consensus that this production was very much a low-brow affair, as opposed to the perceived high-brow, or for some middle-brow, output of the more distinguished companies such as Asia and Thúy Nga. More than one viewer used the term '*bình dân*' or 'plebby' to describe the clip. This was an interesting reaction, since this 1960s hit by composer Y Vân has an air of classicism about it, originally having been set to a cha-cha-cha rhythm, and featuring poetic lyrics that include a quote from Nguyễn Du, author of the celebrated classical text *Truyện Kiều* [The Story of Kiều].

If it was not the song itself that was 'plebby' then it must have been its 'shameless' celebration of contemporary Saigon. An elderly female viewer remarked that the production showed no concern for the past suffering overseas Saigonese viewers might have gone through, for instance in having their homes confiscated by the new regime. How was it possible to celebrate a city in which such trauma had occurred? Perceiving its unconcern with reproducing the diasporic myth of flight and exile, all viewers agreed that this clip was targeted to appeal to the young [*giới trẻ*], and not the first generation. *Sài Gòn đẹp lắm* was effectively read by the first generation viewers as embracing a very un-diasporic sense of synchronicity with Ho Chi Minh City, and the transnational habitus of a viewer who could respond to and enjoy such a thing was automatically judged to be one lacking in cultural capital. 'This is for plebby young folks [*giới trẻ bình dân*] who know nothing of politics or of the past', remarked a singer in her 50s.⁸

The youngsters to whom I screened the two video clips discussed here were in fact positioned as spectators in a much more complex way than the remarks of the first generation would allow. As expected, they did not react in the highly politicized manner of their parents' and grandparents' generations. However, neither were they oblivious to the political and identitarian categories their parents applied to the video in their interpretations. These second generation viewers, aged between 13 and 15, were all familiar with the genre of diasporic popular culture represented by *Paris by Night* and *Sài Gòn ơi!*, having watched such videos with their families from a young age. All spoke Vietnamese at home and regularly consumed Vietnamese popular music alongside more

global forms of pop culture. Given what we know about the high rates of linguistic and cultural maintenance in the Vietnamese community,⁹ this would appear to be representative. Of the five interviewees, one preferred the Khánh Hà song, one liked both, and three boys who watched together preferred Rainbow's Hoài Linh song because it was more 'fun' [*vui*] than the other. All apprehended, however, that there was something 'wrong' with the way the Rainbow clip represented the city. Two remarked that the clip failed to show culture and tradition, while one suggested the city as represented in the clip was 'a little bit fake'. Two also pointed out that the Saigon of the clip does not reflect the realities of poverty and hardship in the city. All indicated (when asked) that their parents would prefer the Khánh Hà song over the Hoài Linh one, since 'they like to hear songs of their time' and 'they want to see the old Saigon'. All also apprehended that the Rainbow video was a more low brow production than the Thúy Nga one. However, the three male friends asserted that they preferred it nonetheless.

These reactions demonstrate that, on the one hand, the young viewers apply a relatively apolitical set of critical evaluative criteria to these two songs, judging them principally in terms of their perceived musical and entertainment value. On the other hand, however, their responses demonstrate that they have indeed internalized the perceptive categories of their parents' generation's 'exile habitus' (e.g. nostalgic and 'modern', high and low brow, authentic and 'fake' culture, 'dignified' and 'fun' performance). However, they are much less inclined to attribute the same markedly positive and negative values to the two clips, or to apply the same ideologically overdetermined meanings. This speaks of a second generation that is both incorporated into its parents' political culture and at the same time embedded in a different, and more plural, context of reception for texts such as these. The question is, of course, will the members of this generation reproduce or abandon the political commitments of their parents when they come to maturity? Whether they do or not, it appears that the political culture of their parents is certainly *legible* to them, and thus these young people, who may not be able to articulate much knowledge about the war or other aspects of Vietnamese history, are by no means the 'unknowing' subjects evoked by the older interviewees.

One shortcoming of this second generation focus group is that the subjects are too young to contemplate independent travel to Vietnam and do not fully identify with the 'adult' activities celebrated in the video clip. Further, the artificial situation created by having anthropologists in their living rooms screening videos for them may well have affected the mode in which they consumed and interpreted the texts! However, second-generation Vietnamese Australians who are slightly older than these respondents certainly are capable of discussing Saigon in very different kind of register. A good example is an overheard conversation at a café in Cabramatta where, in a mixture of strongly Australian-accented English and Vietnamese, a young man was enthralling his friends with tales of his recent trip back to Ho Chi Minh City:

You have to be careful. If you don't have anyone to show you around you can get into trouble. District one is like high-class people, but district four, six, ten . . . [exhalation] Say if we were sitting like this [in a café], there'd be people all around us, 70-year-old grannies trying to sell us lottery tickets. It's crazy.

His friends listened to his authoritative travelogue with respect as he portrayed Saigon as an exotic place with an edge of danger – not somewhere you would want to live, but somewhere it would be an adventure to visit. In this discussion between older teenagers, the categories outlined above do not feature at all. Rather, the frisson the young man's listeners experience is the result of his skilful aestheticization of the difference between

here and there – ‘cosy’ Cabramatta versus ‘wild’ Saigon, an imagined social world without boundaries or safety nets. This discourse is more one of discovery of something alien than one of return to the missed and the familiar, as celebrated in the Hoài Linh clip. Thus, even in the case of willing second generation returnees, the clip misses its mark somewhat.

Unrepresentable identities?

Who, then, is the audience for *Sài Gòn Ở Ơi*? My first-generation viewers were clear on the fact that it certainly was not *them*. They were also clear on who they thought the audience was: the apolitical second generation. Interestingly, however, this assumption is contradicted by the text itself, most notably in the anchoring discourse of the late-fortyish first generation compères of the show, who appear in the ‘diasporic present’ of Laguna Beach, Los Angeles, after Hoài Linh has faded from the screen. This pair immediately begin to discuss Saigon in a nostalgic mode, referring to the very specific local fruits they miss, such as a certain species of mango that must be eaten before it ripens (*xoài tưng*), and the pineapples from a specific district in the Mekong Delta (*thơm Bến Lức*) – foods the second generation could not possibly have a nostalgia for, provided they even knew what they were! Thus the diasporic time lag that is transgressed in the opening clip is reestablished at the first opportunity. Subsequent clips demonstrate a concern with first generation themes, including anxiety around filial piety and cultural reproduction in the second generation. A later clip tells a melodramatic tale of an Americanized daughter’s ingratitude and refusal to share her parents’ culture. Her behaviour eventually causes her father to have a heart attack (!) and the chastened daughter relents at his hospital bedside. Such material suggests to me that, at least in the intention of the people behind the show, the imagined viewers of *Sài Gòn Ở Ơi* are the ‘*bình dân*’ first generation.

Paradoxically, one of the fiercest critics of the Hoài Linh clip was a respondent chosen precisely because she fitted (or I believed she did) into this non-elite social category. Hoa is in her early 40s and migrated to Australia with her son three years ago as a single mother. Being a principally economic migrant rather than a refugee, she possesses absolutely no ‘exile cultural capital’ at all. Hoa retains extremely strong social and family connections with Vietnam, surviving each difficult day as a waitress in a Vietnamese restaurant in Cabramatta, Sydney’s Little Saigon, by looking forward to her annual three-month sojourn in Ho Chi Minh City. Her migration remains tenuous and it is possible that she and her son may at any time give up on trying to ‘make it’ in Australia and return to Vietnam. She blames the unexpected difficulty of their life in Australia, where they live in a shared flat in an extremely rundown apartment complex in Cabramatta, not on an unwelcoming host nation but on the established Vietnamese refugees. Their lack of a ‘Vietnamese spirit’ that would oblige them to help a newly arrived countrywoman and their exploitation of her labour and petty discrimination against her as an ‘air person’ who came by plane rather than boat are constant themes in her conversation. She lives for the family photographs, letters, magazines and DVDs that are either sent or brought back by hand from Saigon when an acquaintance visits.

I fully expected Hoa to respond positively to the Hoài Linh video, perhaps even becoming nostalgic for Saigon when she saw the familiar sights shown in the clip. Contrary to this, however, she was adamant in her critique of the clip, declaring that it was only a superficial façade that hid the truth of poverty and ugliness. ‘They need to stamp out corruption and improve living standards for the people’, she said, before such celebration would be decent. Growing theatrically impatient, she strutted from the

room to return to her chores in the kitchen, remarking with a wicked glint in her eye that the women in the clip were ‘very like prostitutes!’. Hoa’s reaction to this clip is perhaps best understood in terms of the main ‘push factor’ that led her to leave Vietnam, being the unmeritocratic nature of the labour market in that country and the blocking of her social mobility as a middle-aged female professional without special connections. Perhaps spurred on by the ‘official’ presence of myself and my research assistant, Hoa took a critical social justice perspective on the clip, which stemmed not so much from ideological anticommunism as from her recent life experience of the inequalities, great and petty, of contemporary Vietnamese society.

I would certainly assert that the negative responses of the refugee viewers to the Hoàì Linh clip are an expression of a diasporic cultural politics that valorizes a distanced and asynchronous relation to Vietnam. In terms of homeland politics proper, these dispositions manifest as a refusal to accept the legitimacy of the Vietnamese Communist Party and a continued loyalty to the old Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). However, Vietnamese Australians’ viewing positions are clearly more complex than this simple formula might suggest. These subjects’ spatiotemporal orientations to Vietnam intersect in complex ways not only with their avowed political positions, but also their migratory histories and their social origins and trajectories. Thus the more elderly viewers’ positions might be read in terms of their achievement of ‘settlement’ in Australia in the sense of having established citizenship, economic security and family consolidation. They have reached the end of their working lives and their bicultural children are now either studying or working themselves. From this stable base, they can ‘afford’ to keep Saigon at a distance. In Hoa’s case, by contrast, the city is still a vital node in the monetary and affective economy of her household. Her especially strong reaction to the Hoàì Linh clip is thus arguably a reflection of the fact that she remains in the gravitational field of this unfair social world and feels compelled to symbolically lash out at it (as she does at the Vietnamese Australian social world that is also ‘cruel’ to her) because she still has a vital ‘interest’ in it. These social logics are, it will be appreciated, extremely difficult to disentangle from the political logics that more explicitly emerge in the critiques made by the subjects under discussion here.

While a number of respondents identified themselves as being the ‘proper’ audience for Thúy Nga – in the words of one, a company that ‘knows how to respect the feelings of the Vietnamese refugees overseas’ – no-one identified as an addressee of the Rainbow DVD. It seemed this audience was absent, or at least it morphed out of the way the moment the screen was pointed directly at it. Yet what is most curious about this is the fact that the Hoàì Linh clip represents and celebrates a transnational practice (returning for family and tourism) that *all* of my respondents had, at some time or another, engaged in. Hoa herself had just returned from three months in Saigon, during which time she relaxed at home or went out with friends and family – that is, she went back to *ăn chơi* [literally, ‘eat’ fun] just like the singer in the clip. The most critical of all my viewers, a lady in her 60s, punctuated her scathing comments with more prosaic observations about contemporary Saigon. She claimed to recognize the apparently nondescript *bún mắm* stall the singers in the clip eat at, and when an image of the famous colonial patisserie Brodard appeared, she remarked that they had ‘restored it beautifully’, but that ‘the prices are now cut-throat!’ Such knowledge, which is clearly the product of their own recent travels to Ho Chi Minh City, implicates the critics in the fun world of eating and shopping depicted in the video. However, when these familiar activities are re-presented to them, their meaning is overdetermined by the discourse of ideological anticommunism which is deployed to apprehend and interpret them. It

seems that the *positive* symbolization of these mundane transnational practices, of which *Sài Gòn đẹp lắm* is a rare example, does not yet have a discursive space in public diasporic culture. At present these are practices which, it seems, *cannot be represented*.¹⁰ They are in a sense the Real of the symbolic formation of exile that structures the diasporic public sphere. Prosaic discussions about the pleasures and annoyances of returning to Vietnam go on, of course, but these remain relegated to the private sphere. In public, memories of flight from Vietnam are still privileged over contemporary experiences of return. However, in the disjunctive narrative of the lady who comments on Brodard, fragments of the present irrupt into the discourse of exile and nostalgia.

'Miss' Saigon

There is, of course, a 'structural' reason for the unrepresentability of return, and for our viewers' related refusal to enjoy the fun tourism dramatized in the *Sài Gòn đẹp lắm* clip. As Brah (1996: 192) observes:

'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'.

Indeed, to choose the 'real' homeland over the mythic place of desire is to surrender one's diasporic identity and become either an 'ethnic minority' or 'transnational' subject. It seems clear that phenomena such as homeland tourism and transnational cultural traffic are perceived as forces pushing overseas Vietnamese identifications in these directions. In their study of Turkish audiences for transnational television in London, Aksoy and Robins (2003: 95) argue that the medium acts as an agent of 'cultural de-mythologization', upsetting the spatial and temporal binarisms on which diasporic selfhood often rests:

as a consequence of bringing the mundane, everyday reality of Turkey 'closer', [transnational television] is undermining this false polarising logic. The 'here and now' reality of Turkish media culture disturbs the imagination of a 'there and then' Turkey – thereby working against the romance of diaspora-as-exile, against the tendency to false idealization of the 'homeland'.

In this light, we can read the viewer reactions described above as a kind of self-imposition of the imperative to stay loyal to the romance of exile, and to resist the 'cheap titillation' of transnationalism.

This analysis helps us make sense of the final viewer reaction, namely the strong objection to the crass materialism of the clip. The essence of its commonness was, it appears, to be found in the way it cast off the asceticism and self-sacrifice of exile, even if only symbolic exile, for immediate gratification in the material pleasures of Saigon (the food, the sights, the lascivious beauty of the girls). All of my female interviewees were intensely critical of the women featured in the clip, one remarking they were 'Just like a bunch of Australian girls gone to Saigon. Even worse than Australian girls!'. By this, she was apparently referring to the boldness and even sluttiness of the models who accompany Hoài Linh around Saigon. Yet another remarked that in Vietnam people would not permit young girls to get around in such outfits and herself had seen a local woman refused entry to a temple in Dalat because of her inappropriate clothing. All concurred that these were local and not *Việt kiều* women, judging this on criteria such as their skin, their way of dressing, their make-up and their body hexis.

This figure of Saigon as a woman, embodied in the first clip in the elegant and ladylike Khánh Hà, and in the second by the 'trashy' local girls singled out for criticism

by the female viewers, is interesting to ponder in terms of Do and Tarr's (2008) analysis of *Bar Girls*. We rediscover here the familiar trope of 'woman as nation', or rather woman's symbolic body as being the ground on which the nation is staged (Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989; Walby, 1996). It is significant that the most vociferous critics of the Hoài Linh clip were the women viewers. In the mixed group to whom I screened this video, the women confidently took the lead in criticizing it, while their husbands confined themselves to making supportive exclamations. The two single men who watched the clip commented exclusively about the politics they speculated were behind it; one commented that he wouldn't be surprised if the clip were funded by Hanoi, while the other pointed out to me the absence of flags. The women, however, took it as their part to criticize both the clip's politics and the demeanour of the models, giving emphasis to the latter. One might speculate that this gendered division of critical labour has to do with the fact that the female viewers felt themselves to be especially maligned by the (mis)representation of Saigon as this kind of woman. Given that the moral and cultural decline of Vietnam under socialism is a constant theme of Vietnamese exilic discourse, female viewers might be expected to take it as their particular province to identify and condemn the perceived corruption of Vietnamese femininity in the postwar society when presented with an opportunity such as that offered by the Hoài Linh clip.

In seeking to further explain the first generation viewers' strong reaction to the women in the Hoài Linh clip I was, odd as it might seem, reminded of Slavoj Žižek's (1991) analysis of the Hitchcock film *Vertigo*, in which he makes much of the fact that the film's hero Scottie (James Stewart) loses his love object Madeleine (Kim Novak) not once but *twice*. The first time is when he believes he sees Madeleine falling from the top of a bell tower. The second loss, which according to Žižek is far more complex than the first, comes when Scottie, unable to renounce his infatuation, stumbles across the 'real' Madeleine, a 'common' woman named Judy who was hired to play Madeleine as part of an elaborate alibi. It is only with this *second* loss that Scottie truly loses the idealized figure of Madeleine, discovering she never in fact existed. Drawing a larger psychoanalytic lesson, Žižek (1991: 86) points out that the intriguing object of desire is lost as fantasy the moment we get hold of it in reality:

Madeleine's 'second death' functions as the 'loss of loss': by obtaining the object, we lose the fascinating dimension of loss as that which captivates our desire. True, Judy finally gives herself to Scottie, but – to paraphrase Lacan – this gift of her person 'is changed inexplicably into a gift of shit': she becomes a common woman, repulsive even.

The stately and graceful woman who represents Saigon before 1975, perfectly embodied in the singer Khánh Hà, would then represent the idealized woman who was originally lost. It is only on returning to the real Saigon, however, that she is *really* lost, and the beautiful woman turns out to be the 'cheap whore' identified by my Sydney viewers. The comments of Nam Lộc (composer of a song entitled *Vĩnh biệt Sài Gòn* [also translated 'Farewell Saigon']), on returning to his home town after a 16-year absence, illustrate this dynamic poignantly:

Before, in the song 'Farewell Saigon', I promised, 'Saigon, I will return'. When the plane landed at Tân Sơn Nhất, I was still singing that song. But the ironical thing was that in those few days living there, I really felt that I had truly lost Saigon. At that time, I said 'Farewell, Saigon'. Why? In the old days, Saigon was only in my imagination. In 1991, the communists tried to rebuild, tried to recall a Saigon past by letting schoolgirls go to school in white *áo dài*,

reestablishing the familiar old street names, re-erecting the old billboards like Givral, Queen-Bee, Bodard . . . But to me it was all pretence, forced and clumsy. So I felt that I had returned to Saigon and at the same time, I had bade farewell to Saigon. Saigon is still there, but the image and mood of my Saigon are no more . . . (Nguyễn Ninh Hóa, 1995; my translation).

Conclusion

What, then, can one conclude about the current state of overseas Vietnamese identity from this case study? On the one hand, I have identified a trend towards the transnationalization of relations between Vietnam and the diaspora, exemplified here in the popular experience of homeland tourism and the gradual convergence of diasporic and SRV commercial culture. It might be supposed that the increasing sense of synchronicity and 'distant proximity' (Rosenau, 2003) between diaspora and homeland these developments foster should pose a challenge to traditional exilic-diasporic identities, potentially destabilizing their spatiotemporal limits. Certainly, many in overseas Vietnamese communities feel the purity and historical difference of diasporic culture to be under attack as a result of the unlooked-for 'return of the homeland' to overseas Vietnamese social life. And yet, as our Vietnamese-Australian viewers' passionately negative reactions to the representation and celebration of homeland tourism show, the intensification of transnational Vietnamese flows, practices and identifications in which they themselves participate triggers a reactive intensification of anticommunist and exilic affect.

Ironically, we are witnessing the largest anti-communist protests ever at precisely the moment at which flows of people, symbols, cash and commodities between homeland and diaspora are at their greatest. While overseas Vietnamese have responded to the opportunities for renewed transnational engagement opened up by reform in Vietnam, they have not abandoned their diasporic identity politics. The spatiality and temporality of exile continue to be compelling coordinates of overseas Vietnamese subjectivity, even though the idea of a discrete and allochronic diaspora is more and more a semiotic edifice with crumbling foundations. Thus, overseas Vietnamese continue to construct their identity in the language of victim diaspora, while at the same time engaging in border-crossing practices and identifications, effectively living a sort of 'mobile exile'. This novel subjectivity poses a challenge to existing ways of conceptualizing and distinguishing 'diasporic' and 'transnational' subjects.

While it may appear that I have identified two opposing tendencies in this paper, an exilic desire to cut oneself off from Vietnam, and a transnational one to fully synchronize oneself with it, I would like to conclude by saying that I think this is a false antinomy. This is to say that what is happening here is the expression of a desire to control the diaspora's temporal and spatial distancing from Big Saigon through controlling one's own, and one's community's cultural consumption, a little in the way Aksoy and Robins (2003: 93) propose that their Turkish subjects use transnational television to control the effects of distance and separation. Indeed, the cities imagined in the representations we have just looked at are nothing if not fantasmatic Saigons, spaces which overseas Vietnamese viewers can imagine themselves as having the power to bring closer or push away at will, a little like the child's game of *fort-da* spoken of by Freud. This fantasy of spatiotemporal control is desirable and compelling precisely because Vietnamese diasporic communities, like others grappling with 'the growing tides of global turbulence – tides originating as a rule in faraway places which no locality can control on its own' (Bauman, 2001: 142), are currently experiencing a sense of loss

of control over the distance between Little and Big Saigons. While diasporic political activists have had some successes in their political battles to maintain a decent interval between diaspora and homeland, the larger truth is that events beyond the control of those in the diaspora or Vietnam are bringing the two sides into an ever greater intimacy. The production and consumption of images of Saigon, as we have seen, form a significant semiotic and material platform on which this rapprochement can be made sense of, negotiated, celebrated and resisted.

Endnotes

- 1 Using the name 'Saigon' in place of Ho Chi Minh City is now common practice in Vietnam and conveys no marked political meaning. For instance, the official 300th-year celebration of the city in 1998 was titled 'Sài Gòn 300 năm' or 'Saigon 300 Years'.
- 2 In some overseas Vietnamese contexts the term *Việt kiều* ['distant' Vietnamese] remains a sensitive one. In the recent past it carried negative connotations of 'national betrayal' in Vietnam, although this is arguably no longer the case. Compared with the official term, *Người Việt Nam ở Nước ngoài* [Overseas Vietnamese], *Việt kiều* simply sounds somewhat informal. Nevertheless, some in the diaspora see the term as an undesirably homeland-centric way of defining overseas Vietnamese identity, and prefer alternative phrases. It has been my observation that Vietnamese Australians typically do not refer to themselves as *Việt kiều* while in Australia, but may well do so while in Vietnam.
- 3 There is some diversity in anti-Hanoi perspectives which, in diasporic politics, are crucial, and matters of bitter dispute. The key distinction is between an anti-engagement position (lobbying host nation governments and multilateral institutions to isolate and 'punish' the SRV) and a pro-engagement one (advocating reform in Vietnam from a platform of economic, humanitarian and educational interaction).
- 4 This is of course principally a 'first generation' mindset that, while not universal among this generation, has been reproduced in a significant segment of the 1.5 and second generations.
- 5 The concept of return is so loaded in overseas Vietnamese contexts that when Sydney playwright Hoàng Ngọc Tuấn entitled a work that had nothing to do with Vietnam *Return* [Trở về], the first performance was picketed by community members who assumed he was advocating a premature and traitorous return to a homeland still blighted by communism.
- 6 I would stress that this mode of relating to Vietnam as a 'ruined motherland' without a social future exists not just in the realm of representation, but as a social imaginary. I have come across two cases in which Vietnamese women who were encouraged to leave their relatively comfortable middle-class existences in Ho Chi Minh City were abandoned by their sponsors to difficult lives on welfare in Sydney's working-class outer western suburbs. The mindset of their patrons, it seems, was that they had acquitted their duties entirely by 'saving' their charges from the futureless misery of Vietnam, and thus had no further obligations towards them.
- 7 The usual trope is three women, representing North, Central and South Vietnam respectively; one might speculate that the fourth woman in this clip represents the diaspora (!)
- 8 A similar mindset is evident in the communal judgement of those who subscribe to homeland Vietnamese television via satellite. My research shows, however, that this service is watched by both non-elites and independent-minded intellectual elites alike.
- 9 Census data shows that Vietnamese is 'the best maintained of Australia's community languages' (Kipp & Clyne, 2003: 35).
- 10 Appadurai (1996: 166) notes that 'no idiom has yet emerged to capture the collective interests of many groups in translocal solidarities, cross-border mobilizations, and postnational identities', while Schiller *et al.* (1992: 15) observe that transmigrants are still 'given and assert their identities, and seek or exercise legal and social rights within national structures that monopolize power and foster ideologies of identity'.

Videography

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