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Sensing Vietnam:  
Melodramas of Nation from Colonialism to Market Reform

by

Khải Thu Nguyễn

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Catherine Cole, Co-Chair

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## ABSTRACT

Sensing Vietnam: Melodramas of Nation from Colonialism to Market Reform

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Khải Thư Nguyễn

Doctor of Philosophy in Performance Studies

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Professor Catherine Cole, Co-Chair

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This dissertation traces the affective functions of popular and political discourse in Vietnamese postcolonial and post/socialist ideological formation. Looking at melodrama not only as a theatrical genre but also a mode of political discourse in twentieth-century Vietnam, I argue that melodrama is a double-edged sword for subversive and conservative political action within processes of decolonization, socialist development, and neoliberalism. As multiple images of nation and identity are imagined in melodramatic performance, I also identify ways that the intricate relationship between melodrama and nation-building opens up sites of resistance. As a performance studies project, this work is at the intersection of cultural studies, theater studies, literary studies, Asian studies, and anthropology. My interdisciplinary approach includes literary criticism, critical theory, ethnography, and historical research. Data has been collected from archives, interviews, play-texts, films, newspapers, journals, critical writings, and works of literature.

Countering other scholars' privileging of French 19<sup>th</sup> century melodrama as the source of all melodrama, I explore other genealogies of the melodramatic mode through the "reformed opera" *cải lương*, socialist realist works, and *đổi mới* and post-*đổi mới* popular discourse and cultural production. As melodrama has often been viewed as a conservative mode, I contrastingly stress the *performativity* of melodrama and the actions it carries out—erasing, doubling, deflecting, mimicking, overamplifying, sensationalizing—to build realities in the nation. The dissertation first details socialist realism's relationship to the syncretic melodrama *cải lương*—a form of "renovated opera" born during French colonialism. I show that socialist realism in Vietnam develops itself as masculine and "real" through and against the negation of *cải lương* melodrama, and furthermore, that a sensational discourse against *cải lương* functions in pathologizing regions of Vietnam as feminine, weak, and culturally deracinated to facilitate the party's erasure of Vietnam's colonial past and to rebuild nation after the Vietnam/American war. I then look at how cultural discourse about the playwright Lư Quang Vũ during and after *đổi mới* centers on the melodrama of his personal life, and how this melodrama both disavows ideological conflicts experienced by Lư Quang Vũ and members of his generation, and structures the ideological ambivalence between socialism and market

reform. Simultaneously, I show that the melodramatic qualities in his spoken drama generates multiple ideological meanings within the contemporary society and thus helps the play subversively escape the boundaries of censorship. Finally, by looking at melodrama of the 1990s in Vietnam and America, I argue that melodrama after the neoliberal turn stages the abjection of Vietnamese Americans in the construction of a variegated citizenry to meet the needs of global capital. These melodramas create conflicting feelings to produce a feminized and racialized workforce for the service of capital, suggesting that melodrama is a global mode that shapes and reflects desires structuring the contemporary neoliberal order. Looking at melodrama from colonialism to post- *đổi mới*, I argue that Vietnamese state power is produced through the melodramatic mode, a mode that simultaneously generates a multiplicity of meanings and possibilities of action for both producers and spectators.

*for John, Bó, Mẹ, Bi, Búp*

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I thank the artists, administrators, audience members, and friends in Vietnam who willingly sat down to interview with me and show me their world. Even though I could not name them personally here, their words formed the core of my understanding and discoveries.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### “All About Love” Melodramatic Action in Vietnam

On July 18, 2007, during my fieldwork in Vietnam, I sat in the Goethe Cafe in Hanoi with Khoa,<sup>1</sup> a prominent member of the national branch of the Association of Theater. Once a leading actor in one of Lư Quang Vũ’s famous plays, Khoa was a well-known actor as well as the leader of an association that “represented artists” based on the directives, funding, and censorship guidelines of the Ministry of Culture. A government administrator of the theater, Khoa probably wanted to hear my questions as much as I hoped to hear about his experience of acting in Lư Quang Vũ’s play and the force of Lư Quang Vũ’s theater.

Before my fieldwork in Vietnam began, I had heard about Lư Quang Vũ as a playwright in the context of Vietnam’s *đổi mới* (renovation) period of privatization, decentralization, and global integration beginning in 1986. As one of the most prominent playwrights in modern Vietnamese theatre, Lư Quang Vũ was known for the radical messages of his popular plays challenging government corruption, bureaucracy, and even revolutionary discourses of the past. After he died in a car accident on August 29, 1988, a rumor reverberated in Vietnam and internationally that he was killed in a government conspiracy to silence a dissident voice. I came to Vietnam with the questions: What did Lư Quang Vũ’s works suggest politically? How did Vietnamese audiences read his works? What exactly did he represent in *đổi mới*? What were the events of his death and why?

Near the end of my interview with Khoa, I asked him what he felt the *political* message of Lư Quang Vũ’s play was. Khoa looked me in the eye and said, “There was nothing about politics. It is all about love.”<sup>2</sup> Khoa was not the first to talk about the message of love in Lư Quang Vũ’s plays. Lư Quang Vũ’s sister, who more directly discusses in interviews with me the (political) controversies of Lư Quang Vũ’s plays and life, writes:

Time passes, the characters, the dialogue...lots of things become old and out of place in the rhythm of today’s life, but the message about love, happiness, good will and the nobleness of humanity that Lư Quang Vũ transmits to us through the deep ideas of the plays have stood the test of time. As long as we still live, love, hope and suffer, we will find in his works a source of understanding and empathy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Names of those interviewed have been fictionalized with constructed first-names.

<sup>2</sup> Khoa, interview with author, Hanoi, July 18, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Lư Khánh Thơ, “Đóng Góp của Lư Quang Vũ Đối Với Nền Văn Học Kịch Việt Nam,” [Lư Quang Vũ’s Contribution to Vietnamese Drama] in *Lư Quang Vũ: Tác Phẩm Được Giải Thưởng Hồ Chí Minh* [Lư Quang Vũ: Ho Chi Minh Prize Awarded Works], ed. Thế Ngọc (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Sân Khấu, 2003). 27-28.

There was something poignant and captivating about this sentimental and universal discourse about human compassion and care. It helped Khoa (not?) talk about politics with me by opting for a discourse of universality. It easily passed censorship to end up on the pages of Luru Khánh Thọ's writings about Luru Quang Vũ. But what did it mean to talk about love in contemporary Vietnam? If Luru Quang Vũ was talking about love, there seemed to be something explosive, something deadly, about his discourse. What does talking about love do? How does talking about love shape the nation, its senses of the past, and its imaginings for the future?

This dissertation examines the force of sentimental, affective, morally-Manichean, and "feminine" discourses—ingredients of varying combinations that make up what I call *melodrama*—in twentieth century Vietnam. I analyze melodrama as both a theatrical genre and a political mode—across different media of theater, opera, literature, film, literary criticism and popular discourse—that negotiates, transforms, and renovates the nation through its processes of decolonization, socialist development, and neoliberalism in the twentieth century. My central questions are: What is culturally, aesthetically, and historically unique to melodrama in Vietnam? What is the force of melodrama in Vietnam; how does it *act*? What does it do politically to shape, reify, and/or negotiate contesting images of the nation? Why has melodrama become integral to the process of nation building in Vietnam?

Central works in melodrama studies in theater and film have been critical in highlighting the pervasive presence of melodrama as a "mode" across genre that has social, political, and cultural operations.<sup>4</sup> The majority of works in melodrama studies, however, have taken for granted the historical origin of the melodramatic genre to nineteenth century France. As a result, scholars also in effect limit the development of scholarship on other origins and historical lineages of melodrama outside of this Euro-American genealogy. Pushing the scope of melodramatic studies to sites in Asia can facilitate a critical examination of conceptions of melodrama and their functions in a global terrain. Melodrama in fact is a critical form of nation building in sites in Asia where the discourse of nation is wrapped around conceptualizations of women, family, and socialist realist regulations about personal and sentimental expression.<sup>5</sup> In the

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<sup>4</sup> See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); and Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> See Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Wimal Dissanayake, ed. *Melodrama and Asian Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Robert Chi, "The Red Detachment of Women: Resenting, Regendering, Remembering," in *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, ed. Chris Berry (London: British Film Institute, 2003), 154-156; Jonathan Zwickler, *Practices of Sentimental Fiction: Melodrama, the Novel, and the Social Imaginary in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006); Ken Ito, *An Age of Melodrama: Family, Gender, and Social Hierarchy in the Turn-of-the-Century Japanese Novel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann, Ed., *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005).

twentieth century, Vietnam underwent tremendous transformation from French colonialism to modernization, revolution, socialist development and nation building amidst civil war and foreign aggression, and neoliberal reform. Such a chaotic, temporally compressed transformation of ideology necessitated foundational cultural and affective work by the state to make sense of national identity and interpellate citizens. In Vietnam, the discourse of nation has been integrally important to the Vietnamese Communist Party's (VCP) attainment and maintenance of power; and likewise, melodrama has been integral to the VCP's formation of nationalism and national identity throughout the twentieth century. Vietnam's dominant form of melodrama—socialist realism—is significant not only through the ways that it has set the principles of cultural production under the VCP, but also through the ways it has repressed and therefore imbued with subversive power other forms of melodrama.

The prominence and influence of socialist realism on the development of Vietnamese cultural production and in the formation of Vietnamese national identity necessitates a close study of Vietnamese melodrama. This is not just because this will identify socialist realism's unique development in Vietnam and its mode of producing subjects through the use of sentiment, but also disclose how socialist realism relates to other forms of sentiment—the way that it constrains some forms of melodrama, revises others, or develops through and against even other forms of melodrama. Socialist realism is a highly influential form of affective production in Vietnam not just in and of itself but through the ways that it impedes and shapes other forms of sentimental expression. A study of multiple forms of melodrama in Vietnam will reveal the ways that they relate to one another to produce and/or subvert hegemonic power.

This study will be one of the first works centering on not just Vietnamese theater and performance, but also the function of melodrama and affect in constructing Vietnamese national identity in the twentieth century. A number of works have traced the VCP's arduous construction of national identity in the twentieth century. Kim Ninh's *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-1965* focuses on the VCP's concerted efforts to build national culture and ideology through organizations and institutions in the revolutionary period.<sup>6</sup> Patricia Pelley's *Postcolonial Vietnam* analyzes the party's postcolonial narrative to reconstruct national history and origin, while Jayne Werner's *Gender, Household and State in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam* considers the discourse of gender and the family in the servicing of state economic and political policies.<sup>7</sup> However, no work has focused on the affective dimension of socialist national construction. The multiple affective forms of nation-building in Vietnam, and the ways they relate to one another, makes this study critical to the understanding of political, cultural, and ideological development in twentieth century Vietnam and other socialist nations.

Thus the title "Sensing Vietnam" is an index of an exploration of national identity as *sensed* and *perceived*. The Merriam Webster Online Dictionary writes that the

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<sup>6</sup> Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-1965* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Jayne Werner, *Gender, Household and State in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam* (London: Routledge, 2009).

etymology of the word *sense* comes from the Anglo-French *sens*, meaning “sensation, feeling, mechanism of perception,” and from the Latin *sensus*, *sentire*, meaning “to perceive, feel.” *Sense* has a variety of meanings: import; signification; “the faculty of perceiving by means of sense organs;” “a specialized function or mechanism (as sight, hearing, smell, taste or touch);” “conscious awareness or rationality,” “a particular sensation or . . . quality of sensation,” “a definite but often vague awareness;” intelligence. Its synonyms are *common sense*, *judgment*, *wisdom*: “sense implies a reliable ability to judge and decide with soundness, prudence, and intelligence.”<sup>8</sup> As sense combines an epistemology of feelings and consciousness, the Cartesian “mind” and “body,” it merges different ways that one can acquire knowledge—feeling, intuiting, relying on sensory mechanisms, thinking, and perceiving—conscious or unconscious, vague and definite. *Sense* counters the traditional bias against *feeling* as unreliable and subjective, by merging *feeling* with clairvoyance, *judgment*, and *wisdom*. A related meaning of *sense* is *consensus*, the way a community comes to know and act together. Building on Benedict Anderson’s notion of nation as an “imagined community,”<sup>9</sup> this work explores the way that a nation is *felt*, *perceived*, and narrativized. I explore the ways that sensation and sentiment operates *on* and *in* the (national) body, and the ways in which subjectivities come to assert their own sensory, sensual, and judging powers. Centrally, I focus on how ideology is made into feeling, and *lived* and *perceived* by subjects who enact it in the everyday.

### Expanding the Genealogy of Melodrama

This study aims to expand the scope of melodrama studies beyond its dominant consideration within a Euro-American genealogy in theater and film studies. While the scope of melodrama has expanded dramatically since film critics’ narrowing of the genre in the 1970s to a limited body of films by Douglas Sirk and Vincente Minnelli, the expansion has been both propelled and limited by important works that locate the origin of melodrama to nineteenth century French theater.<sup>10</sup> Peter Brook’s *The Melodramatic Imagination*, central to both film and theater melodramatic studies, was influential in broadening melodrama from a delimited and narrow genre of film (by Sirk and Minnelli) to a modern “mode” or “sensibility” across genre. Brooks situated the origin of melodrama to the self-named “melodrama” of nineteenth century French theater, founded by Guilbert de Pixérécourt and represented by such writers as Duncange and actors as Tautin, Marty, Mlle Levesque, Adele Dupuis, Bocage, Marie Dorval, and Frederick Lemaitre. For Brooks, melodrama was a “grandiose,”<sup>11</sup> “hyperbolic mode”<sup>12</sup> that imagined a world regulated by an “underlying manicheanism.”<sup>13</sup> Its primary aesthetic mode was a “metaphoricity of gesture” and *tableau* which operated on a “repertory of

<sup>8</sup> *The Merriam Webster Online Dictionary*, s.w. “sense”

<sup>9</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*; Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card*; Bruce McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

signs” representing inner moral sentiment and final “resolution[s] of meaning.”<sup>14</sup> The strikingly visual aesthetic of melodrama came from its origin as pantomime in the secondary French theaters in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, where, “restricted to the text of muteness,” under censorship laws, it “exercised increasing ingenuity in the manufacture of its messages.”<sup>15</sup>

Brooks argues that melodrama is a particularly modern form that seeks to retrieve moral legibility in a world where traditional laws of truth and morality have been violently ruptured. With the rise of the bourgeoisie, privatization, and the novel in revolutionary France, the fragmentation of “sacred myth” necessitated an articulation of a “moral occult.”<sup>16</sup> The loss of underlining meaning in the “operable idea of the Sacred” led to the decline of tragedy and the rise of melodrama and Romantic drama. Adjusting to the romantic age, melodrama became less cosmic in scope, centering on domestic and bourgeois morality, but Brooks argues, “never dies out.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed Brooks argues that the Romantic theatre is one means through which melodrama has permeated the modern consciousness; Romantic theatre “institutionalized the melodramatic without that name; it provides a particularly clear instance of an expressive mode that permeates much of Romanticism, and allows us to register the presence of melodrama in other Romantic and post-Romantic literature, whether or not it is literally in touch with stage melodrama.”<sup>18</sup> As melodrama has been institutionalized in romanticism and afterwards, “it can be exploited for a range of subjects in many different media. It is still very much with us today.”<sup>19</sup> Brooks’ work sets the foundation for what scholars understand as the main features of melodrama as well as for the broadening of the scope of analysis beyond theatrical genre.

Building on Brook’s work *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams expanded the scope of melodrama from genre to “mode.” Gledhill emphasized the study of melodrama’s operation of pathos. As one of three modes (melodrama, realism, and modernism), melodrama was “an aesthetic and epistemological mode distinct from (if related to) realism, having different purposes, and deploying different strategies, modes of address, and forms of engagement and identification.”<sup>20</sup> William stresses melodrama’s quality as a “leaping fish” across different media, “whether on page, stage, screen, or courtroom.”<sup>21</sup> Rather than seeing it as a genre tied to one medium, Williams calls melodrama instead an “aesthetic mode” entangling different media and “interpenetrating narrative cycles.”<sup>22</sup> Revising a narrowly defined “genre” of melodrama in film studies, Williams argues that melodrama is the “norm rather than the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>20</sup> Christine Gledhill, “Stella Dallas and Feminist Film Theory,” *Cinema Journal* 25, no. 4 (Summer 1986): 45.

<sup>21</sup> Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 12.

exception”<sup>23</sup> and indeed a “fundamental mode of popular American ‘moving pictures.’”<sup>24</sup> “It is this basic sense of melodrama as a modality of narrative with a high quotient of pathos and action to which we need to attend if we are to confront its most fundamental appeal.”<sup>25</sup>

As one of the primary scholars to develop a concept of the melodramatic “mode” from Peter Brooks’ work, Linda Williams argues that the melodramatic mode includes chiefly five characteristics. Melodramas present characters that have simple Manichean moral identities<sup>26</sup> in the overall focus on the recognition of virtue.<sup>27</sup> They invite affective identification from their audiences through spectacle and emotional height. Melodramas often begin in an idyllic space that becomes threatened or intruded upon. A sense of loss or nostalgia pervades the plot that seeks to “restore some semblance of a lost past.”<sup>28</sup> Since resolution of the central problem is often impossible without a radical challenge to the system of power, the melodramatic mode instead seeks restoration of the past through displacement; sometimes conservative in character, it figuratively replaces a political or structural force of opposition with a natural, symbolic or domestic representation that can perform in the struggle for purification and restoration.<sup>29</sup> Building on the work of Peter Brooks, critics such as Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams have emphasized the operation of pathos in melodrama as well as expanded the scope of melodrama to a “mode” or “sensibility” across media, highlighting the pervasiveness of this sentimental and moral discourse and the need critically to assess its social, political, and cultural operations.

While Brooks’ work has led to the necessary recognition of the pervasive aesthetic “mode” of melodrama, his approach has also limited the development of melodramatic studies in film and theatre to a particularly Euro-American trajectory. Brook’s grounding of the origin of melodrama to nineteenth century France, and his simultaneous consideration of melodrama as a pervasively modern form “very much with us today” marks a contradiction between a desire towards a historical grounding of the origin of melodrama and a formation of a general “sensibility” of melodrama. As J.W. Tuttleton points out in his review, Brooks seems to choose to make melodrama a “nineteenth or twentieth-century phenomenon” rather than a “sensibility” across different ages, yet fails to make the historical connections between the nineteenth century Boulevard melodrama he situates as the origin and its historical connections with Balzac and Henry James, both of whom he so much wants to tie to a “melodramatic sensibility.”<sup>30</sup> Brooks ambivalently historically situates the “origin” of melodrama to nineteenth century France while acknowledging that multiple forms sharing critical

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>26</sup> Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 40.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>30</sup> J. W. Tuttleton, “The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess by Peter Brooks,” *The Modern Language Review* 74, no. 1 (January 1979): 149-151.

features with theater melodramas do exist in different times and places. Indeed William Rothman argues, “by encouraging us to restrict the term ‘melodrama’ to what he takes to be one historically specific theatrical form, Brooks is discouraging us from comparing other forms of melodrama with that form, or with each other.”<sup>31</sup> The privileging of the French origin of melodrama, which, to Rothman, facilitates Brooks’ centrality as an American critic in melodramatic studies in theater and film, has allowed the “diversity of melodramatic forms, and the diversity of their sources...to collapse into a single form, a single source.” Rothman furthermore argues that this assumption that nineteenth century French theater melodrama is the source of filmic melodrama overlooks and limits critics’ insights about the diversity of sources contributing to film melodrama, and the unique medium of film.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to pushing melodrama scholarship beyond of the Euro-American genealogy, this dissertation emphasizes melodrama’s ability to carry out political action. The relationship of melodrama to political change has also been a topic of argument in Euro-American scholarly circles. Lauren Berlant critiques a melodramatic mode that grounds changes on affective identification and empathy. In the attempt to speak of social, political and economic problems within the code of accepted ideology, according to Berlant, melodrama substitutes real political and structural changes with the consumption of pleasure-producing, morally affirmative sentiments. Berlant questions the construction of citizenship based on a structure of trauma/reparation where citizens are given acknowledgment, sympathy, and inclusion into the “utopian-American dreamscape”<sup>33</sup> by their claim to suffering, while the essential political structure that causes their pain is affirmed and made universal. Berlant pushes for a greater field of action beyond a political strategy of sentimentality, one that allows agency for subalterns rather than mere inclusion earned from the sympathy of the privileged other. Linda Williams, on the other hand, questions the tendency to “relegate [pathos] to a realm of passivity that misses the degree to which sentiment enables action.”<sup>34</sup> By identifying melodrama’s “tension between pathos and action” as central to its achievement of moral legibility, Williams acknowledges the important ways that pathos helps establish the recognition of virtue and “ultimately gives way to action.”<sup>35</sup>

I emphasize even the conservative mode as action and not stasis—melodrama is used to *make* states of norms, to *facilitate* transitional modes, to *establish* new orders. More than William’s claim that it provokes sentiment that finally leads to action, I argue that melodrama’s ambiguity in the very process of acting makes its actions multiply subversive and conservative. While it is performing constructions of new worlds it also opens up avenues for subversion through the actions of people who ultimately interpret

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<sup>31</sup> William Rothman, “Overview: What is American about film study in America?” in *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 269.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>33</sup> Lauren Berlant, “The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics,” in *Cultural Studies and Political Theory*, ed. Jodi Dean (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), 44.

<sup>34</sup> Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 24.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

and perform, or do not perform, the roles it mediates. I stress the *performativity* of melodrama—what it can be made to *do*—and therefore, what others can *undo* within its very processes. I focus on specific actions implemented and performed by melodrama such as *erasing, doubling, displacing, sensationalizing, over-amplifying, sentimentalizing*, that build realities within the nation.

The source of melodramatic performativity is related to melodrama's innate ambivalence in relation to hegemonic order. Ken Ito calls melodrama a "slippery form"<sup>36</sup> that simultaneously produces contradicting ideology, echoing Peter Brook's situating of melodrama within sites of ideological ambivalence. Thomas Elseasser has discussed melodrama's "radical ambiguity:" "Depending on whether the emphasis fell on the odyssey of suffering of the happy ending, on the place and context of rupture...melodrama would appear to function either subversively or as escapism—categories which are always relative to the given historical and social context."<sup>37</sup> For Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, melodrama marks "ideological failure."<sup>38</sup> As Laura Mulvey states, "No ideology can even pretend to totality: it must provide an outlet for its own inconsistencies...The strength of the melodramatic form lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, a cloud of over-determined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes."<sup>39</sup> The inconsistencies of melodrama and excess of meaning carried by the mode returns authority to readers, spectators, and producers of melodramatic discourse, allowing for avenues of participation, meaning-making, and resistance.

### **Melodrama and Structures of Nation in Asia**

This study seeks to consider global forms of sentimentality and their social, cultural, and political functions. Scholars such as Lisa Rofel, Wimal Dissanayake, Robert Chi, Jonathan Zwickler, Ken Ito, Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann have begun to tie melodrama to the complex processes of nation-building in Asia that entwined narratives of women, family, gender, and the state.<sup>40</sup> While some scholars such as Maureen Turim have questioned the use of "melodrama" to look at genres of the non-West,<sup>41</sup> scholars such as Lisa Rofel have argued that to assume no cross-cultural influence in building the form is to "indulge in narcissistic and orientalist cultural hegemony in defining the genre."<sup>42</sup> Ann Kaplan also believes that the use of the

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<sup>36</sup> Ken Ito, *An Age of Melodrama*, 8.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Elseasser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in *Home is Where the Heart Is*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 47.

<sup>38</sup> Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Minnelli and Melodrama," in *Home is Where the Heart Is*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 74.

<sup>39</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama," in *Home is Where the Heart Is*, ed. Christine Gledhill, 75-76.

<sup>40</sup> See footnote 5, Chapter 1.

<sup>41</sup> Maureen Turim, "Psyches, Ideologies, and Melodrama: The United States and Japan," in *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake, 155.

<sup>42</sup> Lisa Rofel, "'Yearnings': Televisual Love and Melodramatic Politics in Contemporary China," *American Ethnologist* 21, no. 4 (November 1994): 707.



European-American framework to look at non-Western works allows a more honest acknowledgement of cultural difference and potentials for cross-cultural exchange.<sup>43</sup> Nancy Abelmann argues that the cross-cultural use of melodrama should not assume “analogous histories of similar narrative or dramatic forms;” yet there may be shared characteristic not in least related to Asia’s broad history of contact with the Western melodramatic form in the twentieth century. Like Abelmann, Wimal Dissanayake is especially attentive to the distinctive features of non-western melodrama.<sup>44</sup> My analysis of melodrama in the Vietnamese context takes into account intercultural connections that have introduced Western melodrama into Vietnam—such as French colonialism, Pan-Asian cultural influence and colonialism, and globalization. At the same time, it is attentive to the distinct features of Vietnamese melodrama arising from its unique historical and cultural context.

Lisa Rofel’s work most embodies my concerns about the operations of sentiment in socialist nation building in her case study of a Chinese television melodrama. Rofel is attentive to the operation of socialist power on the “terrain of ‘consciousness;’”<sup>45</sup> the manufacturing of the subject through a “production of desire.”<sup>46</sup> Particularly Rofel examines the 1991 Chinese television melodrama *Yearnings* to look at how it re-imagines what Benedict Anderson calls “nation-ness.”<sup>47</sup> *Yearnings* dealt with a critical moment of political and moral crisis in China after the Cultural Revolution, the institution of market reform, and the uprisings of Tiananmen Square:

*Yearnings* historically specific use of the melodramatic form bound this crisis of nation-ness to differential gender and class positionings of the characters and viewers, thus linking it to larger debates in China about which categories of persons might stand as heroes of the nation and therefore be encouraged to express their desires formed in light of the tentative neoliberal policies then emerging.<sup>48</sup>

In order to stage the heroes of the nation through positionings of gender and class, *Yearnings* turned away from past socialist realist melodramatic stories about landlord exploitation or working class heroes in party reform movements,<sup>49</sup> and returned melodrama towards narratives about “domestic life and personal fates,” making the “domesticated woman” and the intellectual the representation of the nation. The melodrama did this by “trafficking in icons of national identity,” using a genre called “speaking bitterness” (*suku*) established by the party in the 1940s and 1950s. In *suku*,

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<sup>43</sup> Ann Kaplan, “Melodrama/Subjectivity/Ideology: Western Melodrama Theories and Their Relevance to Recent Chinese Cinema,” in *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake, 26.

<sup>44</sup> Wimal Dissanayake, “Introduction,” in *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, 1-8.

<sup>45</sup> Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>47</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983), 13.

<sup>48</sup> Rofel, *Desiring China*, 33.

<sup>49</sup> Rofel, “‘Yearnings,’” 707.

groups would tell stories of their sufferings under the previous regime. According to Rofel, this genre emerged again as “scar literature” during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>50</sup> This genre was important in highlighting the “style in which [political communities] are imagined,” a mode through which different groups articulate suffering in order to “embrace new subjectivities and claim heroic stature in the eyes of the nation.”<sup>51</sup> By replaying the suffering of intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution, the television melodrama again “interpellated intellectuals...to claim themselves as victims of history and therefore rightful heirs to the national mantle,”<sup>52</sup> at the same time as it also refigures the woman as representations of “Chinese nation-ness.”<sup>53</sup> Rofel’s work importantly shows how contemporary melodrama reworks melodramatic genres of the past that interpellated subjects into the nation, in order to do new work to produce “intense longings” of national subjects. *Yearnings* “narrativized political allegories of nation-ness... by conjoining a historically specific use of the melodramatic form with speak bitterness narratives of national identity, which, in turn, became a site for divergent discourses of class, gender, and nation-ness.”<sup>54</sup> Rofel emphasizes, moreover, that this shaping is not deterministic, but rather “demonstrates the capacity of allegory to generate a range of distinct meanings simultaneously, as the allegorical tenor of nation-ness changes vehicles.”<sup>55</sup> This ambiguity of the melodramatic form in *Yearnings* produces feelings and desires of audiences as it at the same time allows them to make decisions about interpretations and how they would embody the norms in their everyday life. Robert Chi has done similar work, arguing the Chinese Communist Party’s political use of the melodramatic mode can be seen in the practice before 1949 of publicly airing stories of grievances and suffering of people under the feudal system, and the re-dramatizations of such airings in movies like 1960 *Red Detachment of Woman* by Xie Jin, that mobilize the pathos and identification of spectators who are moved by memories of their own personal experiences.<sup>56</sup> Such works highlight how multiple melodramatic genres have functioned critically in shaping the way that the nation and its subjects have been imagined.

Though not within a socialist context, Ken Ito has also developed work about the relationship between melodrama and nation building in the Meiji period in 19<sup>th</sup> century Japan.<sup>57</sup> For Ito, melodrama appropriately negotiates with the flux and “traumatic discontinuities” of the Meiji Period. He works with two forms of indigenous melodrama, the *shinbun shōsetsu* (newspaper fiction) and *taishū shōsetsu* (popular fiction). Melodrama was particularly relevant to the Meiji era, argues Ito, because of the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 708.

<sup>52</sup> Rofel, *Desiring China*, 51.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>55</sup> Rofel, *Desiring China*, 61.

<sup>56</sup> Robert Chi, “*The Red Detachment of Women*: Resenting, Regendering, Remembering,” 154-156.

<sup>57</sup> Jonathan Zwickler has also located practices of the “sentimental imagination” in such genres as the *sharebon*, *kusazoshi*, and *nijobon*. See Jonathan Zwickler, *Practices of Sentimental Fiction*.

predominance of the *ie* (family-state concept), an ideological movement supported by ideologues connected with the state that regulated a family system (based on the continuity of male privilege) directly aligned with the authority of the nation-state.<sup>58</sup> Meiji melodrama, therefore, created “fictive” and “alternate families” as a way of imagining alternate states.<sup>59</sup> Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann develop work on “Golden Age” melodrama of South Korea that explores “melodrama’s use of gender for its variable articulations of political and cultural forces within a particular national imaginary in a distinct historical moment. In the South Korean films of this period, the crises of the nation manifest themselves in persistent gender and genre trouble.”<sup>60</sup> The particular significance of melodramatic discourses of gender and family in constructing and negotiating national identity in these examples in Japan, China, and South Korea make melodrama integral to critical analysis. If melodrama is one of the critical modes of performing nation in Asia, a closer analysis of how it operates will lead to a greater understanding of the construction of hegemonic power in Asia, as well as the ways that that power must be enacted through the sentiments and behaviors of citizens.

### **Melodrama and Vietnamese Nationhood**

National identity has been a tremendously important challenge related to the formation and preservation of the VCP’s power in the second half of the twentieth century. Kim Ninh’s significant work *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam*, argues that the Vietnamese revolution could not rely on a coherent and preexistent notion of nation, but involved a painful inward struggle and arduous attempt (led by the VCP) to construct national identity within a history of French and Chinese colonialism. Indeed in his articulation in the Congress of Culture in 1948, Ho Chi Minh refers to the decolonizing movement as a movement of “nation-building resistance,”<sup>61</sup> stressing the project of national identity formation as a strategy of anti-colonial resistance and postcolonial development. Taking the lead in the nationalist and anti-colonial movement, the VCP would engage in a project to construct a postcolonial, modern Vietnam lasting until today.

One major front of the Party’s “nation-building resistance,” was the cultural policy of “socialist realism.” The term “socialist realism” was first used by Ivan Gronsky in a speech in May 20, 1932 at a meeting of the Organizing Committee of the Union of Writers, and taken up by Andrei Zhdanov, a member of the Political Bureau of the Party’s Central Committee, at the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1934.<sup>62</sup> In only one year, the theory was read by Vietnamese theorist through the medium of French translation and discussed heatedly in the art for art’s sake/art for life’s sake debate in Vietnamese newspapers.<sup>63</sup> The “Theses on Culture” in 1943 by Trường

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<sup>58</sup> Ken Ito, *An Age of Melodrama*, 22-26.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>60</sup> Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann, “Introduction,” in *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema*, 3.

<sup>61</sup> Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed*, 84.

<sup>62</sup> Nguyễn Ngọc Tuấn, “Socialist Realism in Vietnamese Literature: An Analysis of the Relationship between Literature and Politics” (Ph.D. diss, Victoria University, 2004), 75.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

Chinh (then the secretary general of the Central Committee and Head of the Department for Propaganda and Training), established the party's cultural policy of socialist realism through three guiding principles of Vietnamese culture: nationalization (*dân tộc hóa*), popularization (*đại chúng hóa*), and scientific orientation (*khoa học hóa*).<sup>64</sup> Within the constraints of socialist realism, art must then address the common people, use vernacular language, address issues of social and political life, and dramatize, according to Trường Chinh, the “truth in a society evolving towards socialism according to objective laws.”<sup>65</sup> Georges Boudarel describes the requirements of works of socialist realism during the anti-French resistance:

...works were expected to revolve around stock characters or ‘types’ (*điển hình*) and to serve the political requirements of the moment in a ‘timely’ fashion (*phục vụ kịp thời*). The catchword was ‘hate’ (*căm thù*): hate for the foreign ‘imperialists’ (*đế quốc*) and for the native ‘feudalists’ (*phong kiến*) or landowners.<sup>66</sup>

These descriptions reflect how forms of socialist realism rely on melodramatic principles such as emphasis on gesture, tableau, emotional and affective heights, revolutionary aspirations, and moral-manicheanism.

Socialist realism relied on a gendered discourse to facilitate the building of national identity during the revolution and its aftermath. As scholars have pointed out, gendered discourses support revolutionary and national socialist systems by building strong links between kinship and nationalism, tying nation building to maternal and feminine images, as well as linking the efforts of women to political, economic, and national struggles.<sup>67</sup> In the context of Vietnam, Jane Werner views “‘women’s liberation’ not only as a social condition or personal issue but as a political discourse tied to state building under both revolutionary and post-revolutionary conditions.”<sup>68</sup> She views that “gendered discourses served both as markers of state power and as tools for governance.”<sup>69</sup>

Melodrama in Vietnam can be argued to have existed since the classical *Truyện Thơ* masterpieces such as *Truyện Kiều* (*Story of Kiều*) based on melodramatic Chinese

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<sup>64</sup> Kim Ninh, 63.

<sup>65</sup> Trường Chinh, “Marxism and Vietnamese Culture” in *Trường Chinh: Selected Works* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977), 285.

<sup>66</sup> Georges Boudarel, “Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s: The Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm Affair,” *Vietnam Forum* 13 (1990): 155.

<sup>67</sup> Mabel Berezin, “Political Belonging: Emotion, Nation, and Identity in Fascist Italy,” in *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn*, ed. George Steinmetz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 355-378; Anne McClintock, “Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism, and the Family,” *Feminist Review* 44 (Summer 1993): 62-80.

<sup>68</sup> Jayne Werner, *Gender, Household and State in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam*, 2.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

prose narratives.<sup>70</sup> Since the *Story of Kiều*, written at the beginning of the nineteenth century, melodrama has been a familiar mode to Vietnamese intellectuals who have read such narratives as political and nationalist allegories. In the 1920s and 1930s, French Romanticism passed into Vietnamese society through the translation of such authors like Alphonse de Lamartine, Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, Alexandre Dumas, and Francois-René de Chateaubriand.<sup>71</sup> Reflecting the passage of the western concept of melodrama into Vietnam since French colonialism, the Vietnamese term *melo* refers to a musical when put after the word *kịch* (drama), and means “overly-wrought” when used as an adjective. Vietnamese intellectuals show familiarity with the term *melodrame* as a term designating a drama that focuses on the pursuit of moral recognition and draws the affective identification of the audience.<sup>72</sup> As will be detailed in Chapter Two, the Western form of melodrama became localized within the specific conditions of Vietnamese modernism and colonialism in the early twentieth century. The “reformed opera” form *cải lương*, a predominant theater form born in a period of radical mixing in the South during French colonialism, for example, is a syncretic form of melodrama that incorporated French, Vietnamese, and Chinese melodramatic narratives, Vietnamese chamber music *nhạc tài tử* and innovated gestural singing *ca ra bộ*, Western chamber music, traditional opera *hát bội*, and dramaturgical structures and performance forms from spoken drama. As the status of *cải lương* transformed in tension with socialist realist strictures against sentimental expression, the word *cải lương* itself often became synonymous with “melodramatic” in the present day, a term denoting aesthetic degeneration and emotional, stylistic excess.

The confrontation between sentimental aspects of melodrama and the requirements of socialist realism against pathos (countering the state) affected the development of socialist realism and *cải lương* through the First and Second Indochina Wars and after reunification in 1975. Socialist realism defined itself as “masculine” and “real” through the negation of *cải lương* melodrama, and wavered between outright banning the form for its maudlin (*ũy mị*) qualities, and enacting an agenda to use melodrama to advance its revolutionary goals. The socialist realist proscription of personal and “sad” stories countering the state has created the subversive quality of melodrama in post-war Vietnam. With *đổi mới* reforms of the Sixth Party Congress, writers like Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Dương Thu Hương, and Bảo Ninh used elements of melodrama to contest regulations of socialist realism and resisted its proscription against “sadness.” Departing from the optimism of socialist realism, *đổi mới* narratives often express the pathos of suffering and a gloomy hopelessness from loss of faith in the revolutionary ethic and disenchantment from post-war moral disintegration. The

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<sup>70</sup> Huỳnh Sanh Thông, “Introduction,” in *The Tale of Kiều: A Bilingual Edition of Nguyen Du’s Truyện Kiều*, trans. Huỳnh Sanh Thông (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), xx-xxi.

<sup>71</sup> Nguyễn Ngọc Tuấn, “Socialist Realism in Vietnamese Literature: An Analysis of the Relationship between Literature and Politics,” 37. French romanticism greatly influenced Vietnamese literature in the second and third decade of the twentieth century, leading to the New Poetry Movement and the Self Reliance literary movement that aimed at “modernization” through “westernization.” See Chapter 2: “A Personal Sorrow.”

<sup>72</sup> Fieldnotes, July 15, 2007.

particular power of melodrama in realist critique can be seen in the *đổi mới* 1987 documentary *Chuyện Tử Tế* (*Story of Kindness*) by Trần Văn Thủy, which operates through a strong evocation of affective identification and dramatization of moral questioning (the central question in the film is “how should one live?”). The juxtaposition of realist portrayal of human suffering in Vietnamese society with a discourse on moral righteousness (cited particularly from Marxist morality) creates a highly emotional and powerful critical work that highlights the political and social contradictions to morality, and the contradictions in socialism itself. *Chuyện Tử Tế* shows that in post-war Vietnam, ideological questioning occurs not directly but through melodramas combining affect and moral discourse.

Thus, socialist realism is significant not only through the ways that it has dominated and set the principles of cultural production, but also through the ways it has suppressed and therefore made subversive other forms of melodrama, from *cải lương*, to feminized discourses proscribed during dissident movements such as the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm affair,<sup>73</sup> to the personal and “sad” discourse about the past that emerged again in the *đổi mới* (renovation) period. My dissertation aims to strengthen this narrative of melodrama in Vietnam by expanding scholarship on socialist realism and the ways that it has developed through and against forms of melodrama to construct sentiment and nation. Uncovering such history will reveal the ways that state power has been produced through the melodramatic mode, and the means through which citizens inhabit or resist such affective modes.

### Research Methodology

This project is the first study of melodrama in theater and performance studies to include significant ethnographic research as a means of considering everyday meanings and actions that embody and enact cultural norms and politics. Melodrama studies in the discipline of theater, such as Peter Brook’s *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Bruce McConachie’s *Melodramatic Formations*, and David Grimsted’s *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800-1850* have relied on literary criticism and archival and historical research as their primary methodologies.<sup>74</sup> By including interview work and participant-observation research as a result of extensive fieldwork, this study considers the lived and social dimensions of aesthetic practice, as well as the aesthetic dimensions of social and everyday practice. By including ethnography, this dissertation considers melodrama not only as a theatrical genre but also as a mode of thought,

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<sup>73</sup> Nguyễn-Võ Thu-Hương argues that the dissenters of *Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm* contended with the party’s “top-down” construction of history and truth by “deploy[ing] an imagined sense of the feminine to mark an alterity arising out of the empirically real, disrupting the state’s masculinist *raison d’état* masquerading as historical truth” (199). Opposing a historically masculinist construction of the party and the state, *Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm* writers, according to Nguyễn-Võ, used the “feminine dimension of universal humanity” to construct an alternate history (203). From Nguyễn-Võ Thu-Hương, *The Ironies of Freedom* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 199-203.

<sup>74</sup> David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800-1850* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); See footnote 4 and 8 in Chapter 1 for other citations.

analysis, narrative, speech, and political action in everyday life. Melodrama not only becomes an aesthetic structure that seeks to shape everyday life and citizens (like socialist realist drama), but also becomes the means through which people enact and/or resist roles prescribed in official culture, as well as embody the personal, affective, and moral to make (subversive) marks on their political and social worlds. Aihwa Ong writes that anthropology can be a means of deepening the understanding of the embodied dimensions of specific processes of power:

I argue that an anthropology of the present should analyze people's everyday actions as a form of cultural politics embedded in specific power contexts. The *regulatory effects* of particular cultural institutions, projects, regimes, and markets that shape people's motivations, desires, and struggles and make them particular kinds of subjects in the world should be identified.<sup>75</sup>

Attention to everyday practices can extend the understanding of melodrama as a process that involves relations between producers, audiences, and their interpretative practices in aesthetic and everyday contexts. As a result, my work builds on an interdisciplinary approach that links the aesthetic, social, and processual components of melodrama.

As a performance studies project, this dissertation is at the intersection of theatre studies (theater history, performance, and drama), Asian studies, cultural studies, and anthropology. My interdisciplinary approach includes literary criticism, critical theory, ethnography (interview work and participant-observation research), and historical research. Fieldwork has given me contextual and experiential knowledge to inform my textual readings and applications of theory, at the same time as the skills from literary criticism has helped me analyze ethnographic material and non-fiction texts such as newspaper and journal articles. Ethnographic experience has also exposed me to multiple discourses from differing individual perspectives and across media, giving me a further embodied archive beyond printed literary and non-literary texts. This interdisciplinary approach has allowed me to gain previously unseen insights into theory, printed and unprinted literary texts, theater performance, embodied and lived experience, and historical production.

I conducted fieldwork in Vietnam primarily in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi from October 2006 through July 2007 under the Fulbright-Hays DDRA, the UC Pacific Rim Research fellowships, with the sponsorship of the Vietnam Institute of Research. My first fieldwork trip was followed by subsequent trips in November 2007, June-July 2008, and March 2009. During my fieldwork I deepened my knowledge of Vietnamese arts, culture, and politics through observation-participation research, interview work, and archival research.

In my participant-observation research, I surveyed the theater life in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, observing spectators, performers, managers, playwrights, and directors of theater. In Ho Chi Minh City, I frequently visited the Hội Sân Khấu (the Association of Theater), the site of government theater administration in the city. I watched performances in the major theaters of the city: The 5B "Small Theater," IDECAF, Phú Nhuận Theater, Sai Gon Theater, and New Laughter (Sân Khấu Nụ Cười Mới). In Hanoi,

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<sup>75</sup> Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 5-6.

I often visited the national center of the Association of Theater, as well as viewed performances in the primary theaters in the capital: Youth Theater (Nhà Hát Tuổi Trẻ) and the Central Dramatic Theater. From October 2006 to July 2007, I was an active audience member in the theaters and paid great attention to how these primary theaters functioned. I also spent time visiting classes at the College of Theater and Film in Ho Chi Minh City, and the University of Theater and Film in Hanoi, to understand training and theater pedagogy. Connections with administrators of theater also facilitated my attendance at “censor previews” that were mandatory reviews for all plays before public performance. Intense conversations between artists and theater administrators/censors in these meetings taught me a lot about socialist realist regulations of theater and the conditions of doing theater in Vietnam. In my first two months of fieldwork, I was also fortunate to attend two two-week length theater festivals, both funded by the state: the Festival of Privatized Theater in Ho Chi Minh City in November 2006, and the Annual International Theater Festival in Hanoi in December 2006. Attendance at both intensive festivals, which featured nightly theater performances, after-parties, and daytime discussions of performance works, gave me a broad orientation to the life of government-sponsored and private theater production in the country. Particularly important, it introduced me to theater managers, government administrators, theater directors, actors, critics, educators, students, audience members, and heads of the Association of Theater in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Participating in these discussions, I was able to glean the different beliefs about what characterized “good” theater, the purpose of theater, the central challenges to the field, tensions around the issues of censorship, and the overall processes of theater production.

Opportunities to work in the theater production also exposed me to other perspectives of making theater in Vietnam. In May 2006, I co-facilitated a workshop on physical theater with Norwegian Director Cliff Moustache of Nordic Black Theatre at the College of Theater and Film in Ho Chi Minh City, working with the college’s students on methods of improvisation and physical theater. Further workshops at the college in June 2008 led to our co-founding of the NEWS (North, East, West, South) Performance Troupe that aimed to promote international collaboration between Norwegian, American, and Vietnamese theater actors, directors, and students. NEWS explored intersections of Vietnamese traditional theater forms such as *cải lương*, *hát bội* and Western physical theater forms. Following these workshops, I co-directed NEWS productions entitled *Journey and Destination* that centered on local artists’ identities as residents of Ho Chi Minh City, and *Another Midsummer Night’s Dream* that integrated Shakespeare, Western physical theater, and Vietnamese opera *hát bội*. Working with Vietnamese actors, designers, managers, and directors, I learned first-hand the frameworks that were used to talk about performance, as well as the specific conditions of doing theater in Vietnam.

These experiences of participant-research also led to my interviews with theater managers, government officials, entrepreneurs of private theater, directors, designers, actors, audience members, students, family members of artists, and everyday people. I interviewed over 70 people and conducted a total of approximately 85 interviews throughout my fieldwork. Notes from interviews and fieldwork have been included in my analysis, and I have changed all names of those interviewed to fictionalized first names. My fieldwork also included archival research at the Archive of Theater Research (Viện Sân Khấu) in Hanoi, an archive that held play-texts and critical materials from



newspapers on traditional and contemporary theater. From the national libraries in Ho Chi Minh City and Ha Noi, I also gathered newspaper and journal articles from *Theater Journal (Tạp Chí Sân Khấu)*, *Theater Newspaper (Báo Sân Khấu)*, and *Literature and Arts (Văn Nghệ)* newspaper. I was also very fortunate to be able to receive materials from personal archives and homes of artists, including original play-texts and newspaper articles from the homes of Lư Khánh Thơ (Lư Quang Vũ's sister), Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc, Hồng Dung, and Văn Đức. From my interview work, archival-work, and participant-observation research, I gained a rich archive for analysis: interviews, play-texts, critical writings, visual documentations of performances, newspaper and journal articles, and performance histories. My own personal experiences of attending performances, interacting with artists and administrators, and living in the country also contribute to the archive for my analysis of social, processual, and aesthetic components of melodrama.

### Chapter Synopsis

My dissertation traces different forms of melodrama that have functioned critically in building nationalism and national identity in twentieth century Vietnam. By embodying multiply contradicting ideologies, melodrama negotiates transitional periods of decolonization, socialist development, and neoliberalism in Vietnam.

In Chapter Two: "A Personal Sorrow: Melodrama and the Politics of Affect in *Cải Lương* and Socialist Culture," I consider the development of socialist realism through and against *cải lương*. As a syncretic form of melodrama integrating Chinese, Western, and Vietnamese forms and narrative sources, *cải lương* participated in contestations and controversies about women and colonial collaboration that formed the discourse of nation building in Vietnamese modernity. The confrontation between melodramatic aspects of *cải lương* and the Vietnamese socialist realist proscription against personal and sentimental expression (that did not promote the state) shaped the development of *cải lương* and socialist realism through the First and Second Indochina Wars and the postwar. Party members wavered between outrightly prohibiting *cải lương* and *vọng cổ*, and devising methods to use affect scientifically and create revolutionary *cải lương*. The Party's sensationalization and overamplification of the form after reunification of North and South made *cải lương* serve as a metonymy of a Southern culture that was excessive, and therefore in need of reform. From Năm Châu's colonial era *cải lương* classics *The Stage Returns to Night* and *Wife and Love*, to Trần Hữu Trang's emergent Communist *cải lương* *Life of Lư*, to Hoài Linh's post-1975 *The Durian Flowers* (or *The Flowering of Personal Sorrow*), I analyze how the VCP's grappling with the form created the subversive quality of sentimentality in Vietnam, and constructed melodrama as an official mode of nation building.

In Chapter Three: "Model Dissent: Lư Quang Vũ and the Melodramatic Performance of Renovation in Post-war Vietnam," I argue that melodrama in public discourse structures the articulation the state's ideologically ambivalent policy of "market socialism" while opening up avenues for dissent within the ideologically permissible. Working in between socialism and neoliberalism, the contemporary Vietnamese state uses such figures as the famous playwright Lư Quang Vũ to represent the values of market reform and to displace political conflict onto personal, sentimental, and moral struggles capable of reform. This displacement of political and ideological conflict onto

the realms of the personal undergirds the ideals of “self-criticism” and moral reform at the foundation of *đổi mới* (renovation) discourse. By also performing a close reading of Luu Quang Vũ’s 1984 play *The Ninth Pledge*, I argue that simultaneously, the playwright crafts his own stage melodrama to make social and political critiques that pass the constraints of state censorship. This resistant potential of melodrama is also what allows for subversive material to be ingested into a state discourse that appropriates dissent within its very narrative of reform.

In Chapter Four, “Yearning for Home: Melodrama, the Abjection of Vietnamese Americans, and Neoliberalism in Vietnam and America,” I highlight how in the contemporary era, with the solid establishment of the market, the Vietnamese state makes its own use of melodrama’s generation of multiple and contradictory meanings to practice “graduated sovereignty”<sup>76</sup> and produce a variegated citizenry to meet the needs of global capital. Melodramas of the 1990s in Vietnam stage the Vietnamese American as a symbol of both international access and abject loss both to affirm desires for “traditional” femininity, and to structure new images of masculine transnational modernity grounded on conventional gender distinctions. The double abjection of the Vietnamese American in American and Vietnamese melodrama in the 1990s produce a feminized and racialized workforce for the service of global capital, suggesting that melodrama is a mode that works across local specificities to shape and reflect the desires structuring the contemporary neoliberal order.

As will become evident through subsequent chapters, melodrama is a critical site of negotiation in Vietnam through periods of socialist development such as the decolonization, reunification, and neoliberalism. Through the First Indochina War, the Vietnam/American war, and its aftermath, the discourse against *cải lương* assists in the formation of socialist culture as masculine and “real,” finally reshaping Southern *cải lương* to socialist realist principles after 1975. The State’s use of melodrama structures the ideological ambivalence of “market socialism” while opening up avenues of dissent through melodrama’s simultaneous generation of excess meaning. Socialist realist melodrama during the Vietnam/American war imagines the state and nation through and against an “enemy” such as America. Yet in the post-war the “family-state” is formed through an ambivalent identification with the Vietnamese-American member of the “family,” a member that builds desires for a “traditional” Vietnamese femininity that also grounds visions for the masculinization and modernization of the new state. The abjection and racialization of Vietnamese Americans in Vietnamese and American melodrama that assists in the building of variegated subjects for global capital suggests the role of melodrama in structuring neoliberalism in the contemporary moment. The dissertation’s analysis of melodrama reveals that Vietnamese melodrama has a distinctly hybrid identity that relates both to Vietnam’s history of multiple colonizations and to the form’s innate generation of excesses of meaning. If the state negotiates its power through the melodramatic mode, the mode itself offers resistant possibilities of action for producers and spectators.

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<sup>76</sup> Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*, 216.

## CHAPTER TWO

**A Personal Sorrow:  
The Politics of Affect in *Cải Lương* and Socialist Culture**

*“At a cải lương, the audience just wants to hear singing, vọng cổ. And there’s even flaunting of the length of the performer’s breath, as if in one breath they can sing hundreds of words for nothing at all. Action, gestures are clichéd and habituated, and don’t even try to show character or circumstances...[they] display the riches and new clothes of the troupe, flaunt the beauty of the actor—as well as display parts of their bodies for titillation.”*<sup>1</sup>

- Hoàng Như Mai, Professor and People’s Educator (GS-NGND),  
University of Social Sciences and Literature, Ho Chi Minh City

*“...[Nguyễn Đình Thi] struggles much with himself, and his poetry is a reflection of part of his soul rather than the voice of the masses.”*<sup>2</sup>

- Nguyễn Huy Tưởng

During the land reforms in North Vietnam from 1953 to 1956, *đấu tố* (fighting and accusation), modeled after the genre *suku* (speaking bitterness) established in the 1940s-50s by the Party in China, were public denunciation sessions in which groups of people would tell stories of sufferings they endured from evil landlords and the previous regime. In performances of suffering and grief, subjects would be interpellated into a socialist order by *feeling* and *living* the socialist world view, an otherwise abstract ideology removed from their lives. The use of highly affective, personal, and moral storytelling created new *lived* worlds to drive the revolutionary wars led by the Vietnamese Communist Party for ultimate “liberation.”

Flash back to less than a decade before the land reform: intellectuals such as Xuân Diệu and Thế Lữ who joined the Party, had to denounce their ties to the New Poetry and Self Reliant Literary Movements. Thế Lữ rejected the personal emotions, sadness, self-doubt, and dreams of individual liberation he had expressed in the romantic poetry of the early twentieth century as “self-conceit, self-satisfaction, and gratification.”<sup>3</sup> At the 1949 Conference of Debate on Literature and Art in Việt Bắc, writers Thế Lữ and Nguyễn Huy Tưởng critiqued their colleague Nguyễn Đình Thi for writings that were too personal, “complex and dark:” “...[Nguyễn Đình Thi] struggles much with himself, and his poetry

<sup>1</sup> Hoàng Như Mai, “Sân Khấu Các Tỉnh Phía Nam Trong Mười Năm Qua” [Southern Theater in the Last Ten Years], in *Mười năm xây dựng nền văn hóa mới con người mới tại miền nam (1975-1985)* [Ten years of Building a New Culture and New Person in the South 1975-1985] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa, 1985), 33.

<sup>2</sup> Kim Ninh 96; from “Hội nghị tranh luận văn nghệ tại Việt Bắc 25-26-27-28 tháng 9-1949” [The Conference of debate on literature and art in Việt Bắc, 25-28 September 1949], *Văn Nghệ* 17-18 (November-December 1949), 50.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed*, 114.

is a reflection of part of his soul rather than the voice of the masses.”<sup>4</sup> The establishment of socialist culture during the formation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) from 1945-1965 required the ceremonial casting off of connections to “bourgeois” Romanticism, to literary expression that was deemed too emotional, dark, sad, and personal.

On the one hand, the Romantic poets’ expression of sentiment was too “weak,” excessive, and personal to represent socialist identity. On the other hand, performers of *đấu tố* became socialist subjects precisely by living the emotional life of socialism and performing suffering and grief. This chapter examines the historical contradiction between socialist culture and sentimental, melodramatic expression. I focus on the story of *cải lương* from its birth during French colonialism through its confrontations with socialist realist proscriptions against sentimental expression from the First Indochina War to the post-war period. The struggle of Party members to grapple with *cải lương* through the First and Second Indochina Wars—from the banning of *vọng cổ* in regions of Vietminh control, to developing agendas to make use of the form’s sentimental powers for revolutionary purposes—shows that *cải lương* and Party members’ contentions with sentimental, moral, and personal expression have helped to shape the development of both the Party’s cultural policy of socialist realism and *cải lương*. *Cải lương* has served as a symbol of the radical opposite of ideal socialist realism as a masculine and “objective” form, as well as a means of advancing revolutionary cultural production.

Born in the South during French colonialism, *cải lương* was a uniquely hybrid form of musical drama that integrated local and Western forms converging during colonialism and within the South’s historical intersections with Chinese and Southeast Asian cultures. *Cải lương* created a means of imagining a vision of a dynamic and syncretic Vietnamese identity out of contemplations about the performance of gender and identity. During the First and Second Indochina Wars, the rejection of romantic and “bourgeois” leanings was an important performance of Party membership. The Party struggled between banning *cải lương* for its sentimental, pessimistic, and hybrid qualities, and developing agendas to shape melodramatic expression to fit revolutionary purposes. After the Vietnam/American war, the needs to construct a unified nation under the Party led to a state discourse against *cải lương*, which served as the antithesis to socialist realist works and as a metonymy of the South and its moral degradations. The Party’s sensationalism, overamplification, and harsh criticism of *cải lương* after the Vietnam/American war helped to reaffirm the values of socialist realism as well as to facilitate the reformation of Southern culture. At the same time, the Party created a reformed *cải lương* that reclaimed the discourse of the family to build nostalgia for a coherent family-state.

This chapter traces the development of *cải lương* and its conflicts with policies of the state over personal, moral, and sentimental expression. Through a reading of Năm Châu’s *Sân Khấu Về Khuya* (*The Stage Returns to Night*) and *Vợ và Tình* (*Wife and Love*) I first argue that *cải lương* was a movement during Vietnamese modernity that contributed to imaginings of national identity through the discourse of woman’s liberation. I then show the Party’s struggles with *cải lương* through the First and Second Indochina War through close readings of Party members’ debates at the 1949 Conference

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<sup>4</sup> See Footnote 2, Chapter 2

of Debate in Việt Bắc, Trần Hữu Trang's theories on *cải lương* production, and Trần Hữu Trang's revolutionary *cải lương* *Đời Cô Lựu* (*Life of Luu*). My analysis ends in the aftermath of the Vietnam/American war, when the Party uses a discourse against *cải lương* to mark the alterity of the South, as well as constructs reformed *cải lương* plays such as *Cây Sầu Riêng Trổ Bông* (*The Flowering of Personal Sorrow*, or *The Durian Flowers*) that call back abjected citizens to the family-state. The Party's simultaneous rejection and reshaping of *cải lương* shows anxiety towards melodrama as a form pointing back to a history of colonization, and generating excesses of meaning outside of official ideology. Though the state anxiously rejected melodrama for its "excesses," it would produce its own forms to overamplify and expel some modes of personal expression, while shaping others within a proper narrative arc, to create the *right* emotions for the production of socialist subjectivity.

### ***Cải lương* and Vietnamese Modernity**

*Cải lương*, meaning "reform" or "renovation" is a movement oriented towards the "new" that embodied a modern consciousness arising out of the diverse literary and cultural forms present in Vietnam at the turn of the twentieth century. The syncretic form of melodrama incorporated French, Vietnamese, and Chinese narrative sources, traditional opera *hát bội*, Vietnamese chamber music *nhạc tài tử*, innovated gestural singing *ca ra bộ*, Western chamber music, and dramaturgical structures and performance forms from spoken dram. Through such plays as Năm Châu's *Sân Khấu Về Khuya* (*The Stage Returns to Night*) and *Vợ và Tình* (*Wife and Love*) in its early formation, *cải lương* highlights the performative natures of gender and identity to question the conventions of traditional Confucian morality. This discourse could be considered as part of a larger movement in Vietnamese modernity that used the language of women's liberation as a means of questioning (colonial) authority.

*Cải lương* was born within dramatic transformations to the structure of language, education and literary culture introduced during French colonialism. According to Peter Zinoman, education reforms and the establishment of romanized script created a generation of Vietnamese that could no longer read the Chinese and *nôm* literature at the core of Vietnamese textual tradition. A new generation formed in the 1920-30s with "a historicist feeling of living in totally novel times—a feeling that originated with colonialism and early effects of capitalist development but that was intensified significantly by the abrupt linguistic transformation."<sup>5</sup> This feeling of the "radical novelty of the present"<sup>6</sup> propelled efforts to "discover a suitable aesthetic form to express their subjective experience of...incongruity" between older epistemologies and modern development.<sup>7</sup> Along with educating the public about traditional Vietnamese heroes and reviving Vietnamese traditional texts such as *Truyện Kiều*, such journals as *Nam Phong* published articles on French and Western culture and literature, exposing readers to Xavier de Maistre, Paul Bourget, Pascal, Descartes, Baudelaire, Guy de Maupassant,

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Zinoman, "Vu Trong Phung and the Nature of Vietnamese Modernism," in *Dumb Luck*, trans. Peter Zinoman and Nguyen Nguyet Cam (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan press, 2002), 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Voltaire, Lamartine, Chateaubriand.<sup>8</sup> It also explored literary forms of the West, such as the French novel, the essay, editorial, book review, and news report.<sup>9</sup> Western-educated intellectuals translated French works into Vietnamese, allowing readers previously tied to the Chinese literary tradition to consume works of Alexandre Dumas, Abbe Prevost, Jonathan Swift (through French-translation), Moliere, Descartes, Paul Gardon, and Pascal. The Vietnamese public also absorbed writers of French romanticism, including works of Francois Rene de Chateaubriand, Alphonse de Lamartine, Victor Hugo and Honore de Balzac.<sup>10</sup>

Scholars have highlighted how within the emergent traditions of the Self Reliant Literary Group (*Tự Lực Văn Đoàn*) and the New Poetry Movement, texts radically challenged the traditional family grounded in classic Confucianism. Coming into contact with French classicism and Romanticism, poets such as Luu Trọng Lư, Thê Lữ, Xuân Diệu challenged the strict rules of poetry based on Chinese classicism of the T'ang dynasty, and produced a more free-formed poetry to, according to Phan Khôi, “express the ideas close to one’s heart in verses that have rhymes, [but] that are not bound by (other) rules.”<sup>11</sup> The rebellion against traditional restrictive rules of poetry was both formal and thematic. New Poetry had romantic themes of love, disillusionment, escape, and liberation. The works were influenced by sentiments of French classicists and romanticists like Hugo, Lamartine, Musset and Vigny.<sup>12</sup> They emphasized solipsistic expressions of inner consciousness, agonies of love, and desire for freedom from society.

Through the *Phong Hóa* journal, the Self Reliant Literary Group was influential in reshaping Vietnamese consciousness by directly critiquing the family structure and demonstrating the clash between traditional family restraints and the desires for individual liberation. One of the most emblematic works of Vietnamese romanticism arising from this period, Nhất Linh’s famous novel *Breaking Away* (*Đoạn Tuyệt*), tells the story of a woman Loan who cannot marry the man she loves (Dũng, an intellectual who the author subtly suggests is involved in revolutionary exploits) because of a marriage arranged by her parents. Her arranged marriage results in a life of unhappiness and abuse by her mother-in-law and husband. It ends in her (accidental?) killing of her husband. In her trial, her eloquent lawyer pinpoints the oppressive family system as the main culprit. In another novel, *Cold and Lonely*, Nhất Linh addresses the problem of the

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<sup>8</sup> Hoang Ngoc Thanh, “Quoc Ngu and the Development of Modern Vietnamese Literature,” in Walter Vella, ed *Aspects of Vietnamese History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1973), 218-219.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>10</sup> Nguyễn Ngọc Tuấn, “Socialist Realism in Vietnamese Literature,” 37.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Cong Huyen Ton Nu Nha Trang, “The Role of French Romanticism in the New Poetry Movement in Vietnam,” in Truong Buu Lam, ed. *Borrowings and Adaptations in Vietnamese Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii at Manoa, Southeast Asian Studies Paper Series, 1987), 53. From Thanh Lăng, *Phê Bình Văn Học Thế Hệ 1932* [The Literature of the 1932 Generation: Criticisms] (Sai Gon: Quốc Học Tùng Thư, 1965), 35.

<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed description of the formal and thematic renovations of the New Poetry Movement, see Cong Huyen Ton Nu Nha Trang, “The Role of French Romanticism in the New Poetry Movement in Vietnam;” *Ibid.*, 59.

inability of widows to remarry. Self-Strength novels focus on the inhibition of the traditional family upon the development of the individual, particularly through the language of women's liberation.

*Cải lương* was a contemporaneous movement in performance that connected strongly to themes of woman's liberation. *Cải lương* plays were so heterogeneous they were known in categories such as *tuồng bay* (flying plays of high theatrics and acrobatics), *tuồng tây* (western plays), *tuồng la mã* (plays set in Roman setting, often based on Chinese legends), *tuồng kiếm hiệp* (sword fighting plays, often based on Chinese legends), and *tuồng tàu* (Chinese plays), to name a few.<sup>13</sup> *Tuồng xã hội* (plays with social themes) in the 1930-40s such as *Tô Ánh Nguyệt*, *Đời Cô Lựu*, *Lan và Điệp*, *Vợ và Tình*, *Ông Già Nhà Ai*, and *Đoạn Tuyệt*,<sup>14</sup> (an adaptation of the novel *Đoạn Tuyệt*) address issues relevant to women such as arranged marriages, feminine virtue, the cult of the mother in law, the strength of patriarchal power, infidelity, premarital sex and conception, and contesting conceptions of traditional Confucian and "modern" femininity. Trần Hữu Trang's *Tô Ánh Nguyệt*, for example, dramatizes the conflict between the heroine Tô Ánh Nguyệt's Westernized attitudes, born from her access to a Western education (*Tây học*), and her father's strict conformity to Confucian ritual and morality. Tô Ánh Nguyệt's father tries to force her into an arranged marriage, but she is in love with Minh. When she discovers that she is pregnant with Minh's child, she runs away to have her baby. After having her child, she finds Minh again, who is newly married, and gives her child to Minh and his wife to care for. The play dramatizes the agonies of Tô Ánh Nguyệt's loss of her original love Minh, her leap of faith to run away from her family to have her baby, and her fight to defend her own rights of maternity. Võ Tuấn Thiện argues that in plays such as these,

The shadows of the king, princess, and prince disappear along with members of the court. This is because there was a demand in society to resolve social issues of a new audience. New characters...emerged on the stage to represent audiences that demanded the rights to live, enjoy themselves, and have freedom to love. More to the point, they demanded the freeing of the individual.<sup>15</sup>

For Võ Tuấn Thiện these plays reflected strong themes of individualism: "In *cải lương* the 'I' rang out strongly. It is the "I" of the people who want to escape the constraints of ritual and ceremony, who want to free themselves, who want to live for love, follow the calls of love to give up their social roles, positions, and sometimes to take their own lives."<sup>16</sup> According to *cải lương* director Nga, an important member of Ho Chi Minh City's Theater Artist's Association and a family member of Năm Châu, in some ways these *cải lương* plays held back from total rejection of traditional values, but their themes

<sup>13</sup> Duane Huach, "The Cai Luong Theatre of Viet Nam, 1915-1970" (Ph.D. Diss, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 1972), 35-59.

<sup>14</sup> *Tô Ánh Nguyệt, Life of Lựu, Lan and Điệp, Wife and Lover, Miss Hằng's Daughter, Whose Family Does That Man Belong To, Breaking Away*

<sup>15</sup> Võ Tuấn Thiện, "Một Số Vấn Đề Lịch Sử Cải Lương" [Issues in the History of Cai Luong], (Masters Thesis, College of Theater and Film, 2006), 17.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

still represented radical questionings of Confucian social norms and moral conventions, even if to restore order in the end.<sup>17</sup>

*Cải lương* is characterized by its signature and central refrain *vọng cổ* (or lament for the past). The *vọng cổ* melody can be improvised and varied in performance, and the lyrics are altered to express the protagonists' sentiments in emotional climaxes of a play, but its strains are instantly familiar to audiences who judge popular *cải lương* stars foremost by their ability to perform the refrain. The *vọng cổ* and other songs are performed to the accompaniment of traditional instruments such as the moon-shaped lute (*nguyệt kìm*), pear-shaped lute (*đàn tỳ bà*), the transverse flute (*sáo*), the end-blown flute (*tiểu*), the two-stringed spike fiddle (*nhị*), six-string zither (*đàn tranh*), monochord (*đàn bầu*) and the western instruments violin and guitar that were used since 1920-1925.<sup>18</sup> The original song entitled “Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang [Yearning for her husband at the sound of the midnight drum]” was written by musician Cao Văn Lầu, also known as Sáu Lầu, in 1918. It has often been told that Cao Văn Lầu wrote the lyrics to the song when he was forced to part with his wife he loved because she could not bear him a child. The song speaks from the perspective of a wife yearning for her departed husband:

*Sine the day, husband, you  
Left on duty  
I am consciously looking forward to hearing from you.  
I can't sleep well at night  
Just because I have not heard anything from you  
My heart saddens ...*<sup>19</sup>

The song's lyrical quality emphasized a personal story-telling mode that forms the confessional nature of the *vọng cổ* in *cải lương*. Often characters reveal their deepest emotions lyrically in the singing of *vọng cổ*. The “Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang” song transformed from a two-beat version, to 4, 8, 16, 32, and 64-beat versions, with the 32-beat version being most commonly used today. The stretching of the melody with each version expanded the ability of singers and musicians to improvise, making the *vọng cổ* unique as one of the songs most open to improvisation in the *cải lương* repertoire. Singers could alter the rhythms and ornamentations of the melody, as well as improvise during marked cadences, moving freely at points in the song as long as they returned to specific points. Given more improvisational control, musicians and singers could use their own interpretations to emphasize the emotions of their characters, as well as punctuate their

<sup>17</sup> Nga, interview with author, Ho Chi Minh City, July 4, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Phạm Duy, *Musics of Vietnam* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975), 149.

<sup>19</sup> *Từ là từ phu tướng*

*Bảo kiếm sắc phong lên đàn*

*Vào ra luống trông tin chàng*

*Năm canh mơ màng*

*Em luống trông tin chàng*

*Ôi gan vàng quặn đau í a ...*

From Phạm Duy, *Musics of Vietnam*, 142.



own unique performances of the song. These characteristics make the *vọng cổ* a central means of expressing both the “soul” of performers and of characters, making the *vọng cổ* the one of the most memorable aspects of *cải lương* for audiences. As Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc and Đỗ Hương write, “*cải lương* is not *cải lương* without the *vọng cổ*.”<sup>20</sup>

*Cải lương* bears the imprints of multiple colonialisms that have occurred in Vietnam’s history. One of its paths of development was through a modernization and simplification of the traditional opera *hát bội*. The nascent form of *hát bội* existed in Vietnam before Trần Hưng Đạo defeated Mongolian invaders and captured the Chinese actor Lý Nguyên Cát, a performer of the Chinese opera genre *zaju*. Lý Nguyên Cát was taken to the Đại Việt court in Ha Noi in 1285, where he was known to have taught the techniques of *zaju* to help develop the form of court entertainment. To Trần Văn Khải, *hát bội* was unique because Vietnamese artists knew how to innovate Chinese movement and form with content and rhythms from Vietnam to “create a way of singing unique to Vietnam.”<sup>21</sup> According to Duane Huach, Đào Duy Từ (1572-1634), an official advisor to the Nguyễn Princes, was one of the main figures to bring *hát bội* south to Phú Xuân (Huế). Đào Duy Từ developed *hát nam*, or southern songs, from songs of the Cham people mixed with Vietnamese lyrics.<sup>22</sup> In the eighteenth century, performances of *hát bội* featured actors using make up and stage costumes, performing in the open air rather than proscenium stages. Emperor Minh Mạng particularly pushed the development of *hát bội* by bringing in Chinese actors from Guangzhou to the Hue court theatre to introduce techniques of Cantonese Opera. The form reached its apex under the patronage of King Tự Đức (1847-1883) who supported performers and built two theaters for *hát bội* performance. During this time, playwright, poet, director Đào Tấn is credited with developing more than forty plays for *hát bội*, making the form popular among the common people by organizing public performances in Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi, Phú Yên and Bình Định.<sup>23</sup> By 1945, *hát bội* was losing its popular audience to *cải lương*, which partly grew out of forms of renovated *hát bội*.

*Cải lương* maintained some of the movements of *hát bội* while using modern Vietnamese vernacular and more naturalistic acting to create a cross between spoken drama and traditional opera. As education in French and *quốc ngữ* became dominant, fewer audience members could understand the Chinese-based language *chữ nôm* in *hát bội* songs and dialogue. In a memoir, famous *cải lương* performer Ba Vân recalls the demands for the renovation of *hát bội* in the 1920s:

Because of the limitations of a classical form of theater [*hát bội*] and its strict rules, [*hát bội*] could no longer fit with a new audience, who was transforming in

<sup>20</sup> Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc and Đỗ Hương, *Sân Khấu Cải Lương ở Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh* [Cải Lương Theater in Ho Chi Minh City] (Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Văn Hóa Sài Gòn, 2007), 23.

<sup>21</sup> Trần Văn Khải, *Nghệ Thuật Sân Khấu Việt Nam* [The Art of Theater in Vietnam] (Sai Gon: Nhà Sách Khai Trí, 1970), 9.

<sup>22</sup> Duane Huach, 13-14.

<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, “Classical Theater- tuồng (hát bội),” Vietnam Cultural Profile, [http://www.culturalprofiles.net/viet\\_nam/Directories/Vi\\_ACYAIw-7879\\_ADs-t\\_Nam\\_Cultural\\_Profile/-3646.html](http://www.culturalprofiles.net/viet_nam/Directories/Vi_ACYAIw-7879_ADs-t_Nam_Cultural_Profile/-3646.html) (accessed April 20, 2010).

their aesthetic and their perspectives as a result of direct influence of Western culture at the turn of the century. Is this the result of a Western education replacing a Chinese-based education?

Obviously the audience has asked for a renewal of form and content of traditional theater. And from a performer's perspective it can be said that it is much easier to make *cải lương* in some ways than to make *hát bội*. You only need to train very well in singing, but in performing there is a freedom much greater than in *hát bội*, even though in the beginning they performed old dramas that had not changed much.<sup>24</sup>

In the “Quốc Trái” performances, Dang Thuc Lieng modernized *hát bội* by replacing older Chinese style songs with modern and popular songs. He also used a more naturalistic acting style in the place of the symbolic acting style of *hát bội*.<sup>25</sup> Renovated *hát bội* adopted Western dramatic forms such as the curtain and proscenium stage. The Phước Long Ban group used fabric to draw different sceneries such as the “palace a poor home, a rich home, a huge forest inside, and a small forest outside (décor-fix).”<sup>26</sup> The renovations of *hát bội* also served exigencies in the context of French colonialism. The old *hát bội* plays were all longer than six hours, but the French did not let the plays perform past 1 a.m., retells Ba Vân. As a result, the performers strategized to “cut dialogue and singing to reduce the length of the performance to a moderate time to conform to what the westerners allowed but still be able to have the same content and story.”<sup>27</sup> Even after the regulations of the French ended, *hát bội* plays remained shortened.<sup>28</sup>

The French colonial setting also influenced the development of Vietnamese chamber music *nhạc tài tử* and a dramatic form of musical storytelling called *ca ra bộ* (literally meaning, singing with gestures), both of which, in addition to *hát bội*, formed the foundation for music, movements and dramaturgical structures of *cải lương*. *Nhạc tài tử*, literally meaning “music of amateurs,” is a form of Vietnamese chamber music formed in the mid-eighteenth century and developed in the nineteenth century in the South. It is a form of music accompaniment for traditional ceremonies and rituals held at communal houses (*đình*), often alongside *hát bội* performances that are held outside of communal houses. The dramatic nature of the *nhạc tài tử* songs also led to improvisation and dramatic gesturing by performers, forming *ca ra bộ*. As Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc and Đỗ Hương describe, “in the salons, the performers of *nhạc tài tử* wanted to express more emotions of the songs by standing on the pedestal and using gestures to express the psychology of the characters. That was when *ca ra bộ* became a mode of performance.”<sup>29</sup> Cross-influences occurred between the development of Vietnamese and French chamber music to create the syncretic flavor of *cải lương*. In 1910, Vietnamese

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>25</sup> Duane Huach, 23.

<sup>26</sup> Ba Vân, 32-33.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>29</sup> Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc and Đỗ Hương, 20.

musicians who traveled to Paris to perform Vietnamese chamber music were exposed to Western chamber musical concerts, giving birth to a mixed form of chamber music combining Vietnamese traditional instruments and the violin and guitar.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Vietnamese musicians were recruited into military bands and increasingly exposed to Western music and French spoken theater. The Conservatoire d'Extreme Orient trained musicians in classical music and instruments like the piano, violin, cello, and double bass.<sup>31</sup> *Cải lương* performers used both traditional instruments and separate Western instruments for Western melodies. In the 1920s, *cải lương* scripts included songs such as “La Marseillaise” and “La Madelon.”<sup>32</sup> “Our songs in Western rhythm” (“*bài ta theo điệu tây*”) songs merged Vietnamese lyrics with Western rhythms and melodies.<sup>33</sup> *Cải lương* grew out of the development of *nhạc tài tử*, which developed into *ca ra bộ*, which cross-fertilized with renovated *hát bội*, French chamber music, and conventions from French spoken drama such as the curtain, set design, costumes, and naturalized make-up.

*Cải lương* developed in the eclectic variety shows that merged genres and cultural forms. André Thận of Sadec was one of the first innovators who organized these variety shows before and after film showings. His shows mixed acrobatic, circus acts, and *nhạc tài tử* and *ca ra bộ* performances of “*từ đại*” songs that incorporated dramatic elements such as costumes, sung dialogue, and implied scenery.<sup>34</sup> Considered the first *cải lương*, *Lục Văn Tiên*, adapted by playwright Trương Duy Toàn, was performed at André Thận’s theater in 1917. The *cải lương* was based on the *ca ra bộ* song *Bùi Kiệm-Nguyệt Nga* and Nguyễn Đình Chiểu’s 19<sup>th</sup> century epic poem. The main performers of the first *cải lương* were famous *ca ra bộ* performers of the era: Hai Cúc, Hai Mão, Bảy Thông, and Tám Cang.<sup>35</sup> Another contemporaneous circus group was the Sadec Amis, which performed *xiếc cải lương* (renovated circus). Theater owner Tư Triều had *nhạc tài tử* singers perform before films at his Mỹ Tho theater, mixing a number of different acts together in a form of a “variety show.”<sup>36</sup> “Quốc trái” performances were also variety shows staging *cải lương* used by Albert Sarraut to raise money to fund Vietnamese troops that fought for France in World War I.<sup>37</sup>

For scholars, the development of Vietnamese literature through such movements as New Poetry and the Self Reliant Literary Movement reveals most importantly a radical questioning of traditional mores during a period where linguistic, educational, and cultural shifts sparked new imaginaries of identity and nation. *Cải lương* also played critical roles in the development of Vietnamese (particularly Southern) culture and identity. For the folklorist Huỳnh Ngọc Trang and many Southerners, the characteristic trait of the South is its inherent hybridity and openness to constant change represented in

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<sup>30</sup> Duane Huach, 18-19.

<sup>31</sup> Jason Gibbs, “Spoken Theater, La Scène Tonkinoise, and the First Modern Vietnamese Songs,” *Asian Music* 31, no. 2 (Spring-Summer, 2000), 4.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>34</sup> Duane Huach 22; Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc and Đỗ Hương, 211; Phạm Duy, *Musics of Vietnam*, 140.

<sup>35</sup> Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc and Đỗ Hương, 27.

<sup>36</sup> Duane Huach 22; Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc and Đỗ Hương, 19.

<sup>37</sup> Duane Huach 22-23; Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc and Đỗ Hương, 21.

the syncretic form *cải lương*.<sup>38</sup> Philip Taylor points out that folk-scholars like Huỳnh Ngọc Trang believed that the South had a unique “indigenous identity” connected to its location as a “melting pot” since its pre-colonial intersections between the Cham, Chinese, and Cambodian empires.<sup>39</sup>

Like Huỳnh Ngọc Trang, famous researcher and archivist Vương Hồng Sển also situates the birth of *cải lương* within a history of indigenous pride and burgeoning nationalism. Author of *A Diary of Fifty Years of Love for Singing*, a memoir about *cải lương* in the early years of its formation, Vương Hồng Sển ties the birth of *cải lương* with a brewing sense of national identity emerging in the South during colonialism: “At that time, in the South there was a mysterious wind: ‘the rise of patriotism’. We no longer resisted, because we could not defeat [the French] with force, we could no longer be revolutionaries, so patriotism boiled and brewed silently within us.”<sup>40</sup>

Vương Hồng Sển attributes *cải lương*’s ability to double as a pure form of entertainment as a means through which national identity could be (surreptitiously) imagined: “at first, singing and playing, mixing French into our language, playing at life, making fun... putting a love of country into an old performance, we kept on transforming, changing it, and *cải lương* was born unexpectedly, from what year no one knows for certain.”<sup>41</sup> *Cải lương* was a means of “burying” the patriotic spirit “within a surface of enjoyment and play” that allowed the latter to develop:

Southerners are talented in knowing that use of violence only hurts and incarcerates them, so they do not use force. They try to suppress their love of the nation, to bury and hide it within a surface of enjoyment and play... Back then we had to know, the police would wait for opportunities to earn rewards from the Westerners [by capturing us]. Some of the intelligent ones [in our group] would end up exiled or captured, leaving us extras behind, who [got by] pretending to indulge in gambling and games to mislead the ministers and investigators. To our luck, singing and gambling became boring, and we found a mission in life.”<sup>42</sup>

As *cải lương* performers participated in *quốc trái* (government fundraising/selling of bonds) performances that helped raise money for Vietnamese war veterans fighting for France after the end of World War I, they developed a “way to transform *hát bội* into a new, ‘renovated, renewed’ thing.”<sup>43</sup> By collaborating with French authorities in performances to support the colonial regime as well as feeding the conceptualization that people would “forget about politics and the nation to indulge in singing,” *cải lương*

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<sup>38</sup> Philip Taylor, *Fragments of the Present*, 103; 115.

<sup>39</sup> Philip Taylor, “Opera and Cultural Identity in Ho Chi Minh City,” in *Consuming Urban Culture in Contemporary Vietnam*, ed. Lisa Drummond and Mandy Thomas (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 147.

<sup>40</sup> Vương Hồng Sển, *Hồi Ký 50 Năm Mê Hát* [A Diary of Fifty Years of Love for Singing] (Sai Gon: Cơ Sở Xuất Bản Phạm Quang Khai, 1968), 26.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22. Also see Ba Vân, *Kể Chuyện Cải Lương* [Story of Cai Luong] (Ho Chi Minh: NXB TPHCM, 1988).

<sup>42</sup> Vương Hồng Sển, 18-19.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

performers were given a stage to develop their art-form. Vương Hồng Sển insists that this subversive history of *cải lương* melodrama is central: “I consider this information to be the most important, because this reveals to us *art under the disguise of government fundraising:’ because of that the Westerners didn’t say anything, and we became stronger and stronger each day and developed the art of cải lương in the present day.*”<sup>44</sup>

Indeed *cải lương* opened up ways of imagining the nation through a “beautiful and real” mix of different aesthetic forms and narratives. One of the most famous innovators of *cải lương* in the colonial period was the actor, director, and writer Năm Châu, whose education in Vietnamese and Western literature, and knowledge of realist acting styles from film and theorists such as Stanislavsky, allowed him to become one of the main playwright and directors to adapt Western works to *cải lương*. Năm Châu was also most well known for devising an acting method he called “beautiful and real” (*thật và đẹp*) that emphasized both a “realist” renovation of classical acting (*real*), as well as a recuperation of stylizations as those from *hát bội* (*beautiful*). His method adapted stylizations from *hát bội* so that they look more “true to life,” while also devising an aesthetic of movements, music, and design from traditional theater.

Năm Châu’s *Sân Khấu Về Khuya* (*The Stage Returns to Night*), written in the 1930s, is an exemplary *cải lương* play for its exceptionally poetic language, incorporation of romantic influences, and experimentation with codes of marriage and gender. Still taught today in colleges such as the College of Theater and Film in Ho Chi Minh City, the play is one of the most well known classics of *cải lương*. Năm Châu’s plays highlighted the performance of femininity and identity that denaturalized traditional notions of gender and morality. They staged fantasy worlds that allowed not just a reaction against realistic constraints of the mother in law or the convention of marriage in Vietnamese society, but questioned the gaps between life, theater, identity, and performance. Such themes of personal liberation contributed to an overall radicalism of the period that entwined personal liberation with anticolonialism.

*The Stage Returns to Night* centers on actor Lĩnh Nam and actress Giáng Hương, who have worked most of their lives on the stage together. Though they are officially “divorced,” they share a strong “marriage” bond through the stage. When Lĩnh Nam leaves Giáng Hương in preparation to marry his lover Mỹ Tiên, the reflection of their past bond in life and the stage, epitomized through their highly performative last conversation that also doubles as rehearsal, makes Lĩnh Nam return to her and declare her his undying love. As the play ends, the sound of clapping dies down.

The play uses performance to denaturalize conventions marriage and femininity. Lĩnh Nam and Giáng Hương have a completely different type of “marriage” than the conventional marriage system refuted by writers of the Self Reliance Literary Movement. They are officially divorced even though socially they are treated as husband and wife, living together and intimately intertwined through the stage. While both have affairs and relationships with people outside their “marriage,” their bond remains inseparable. Between them, a relationship emerges somewhere between authentic friendship, sexual intimacy, and an “open” relationship, outside of the conventional marriage system dominant in their time. The play emphasizes the improvisational nature of their relationship:

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<sup>44</sup> Vương Hồng Sển’s emphasis; *Ibid.*, 29.

Lĩnh Nam: ...I do not want my wife to become a laughingstock for others.  
 Giáng Hương: Your wife? You really should say your co-star.  
 Lĩnh Nam: Yes, but everyone calls you Miss Lĩnh Nam.  
 Giáng Hương: Thank you. Unfortunately, before everything else I am Giáng Hương.<sup>45</sup>

As a wife, a “co-star,” or herself, Giáng Hương improvises and plays with her own femininity. Responding to Quốc Sơn’s suggestion that he had seen her walk with another young man in a garden at the zoo, she toys with a theatrical image of herself that merges real and fictional identity playfully:

Giáng Hương: Mr. Quốc Sơn, you are right, I was with a young man in the garden of animals, and Lĩnh Nam was very proud.  
 Quốc Sơn: Hmm! And your husband was proud?  
 Giáng Hương: Very proud, because I had succeeded! In the play “Trên Vĩa Hè” I played the role of a street-girl. Nam told me that I needed to act like I’ve been on the job for a long time. I immediately went into the zoo, batted my eyes at everyone and walked hand in hand with a young man into a monkey cage.  
 Quốc Sơn: God willing. Oh my God, what did you do in the monkey cage?  
 Giáng Hương: [Singing Lý Phước Kiến]  
*Gave the man a gift,  
 A golden autograph in his blackbook  
 Because he recognized and knew me  
 The real Giáng Hương, never just the surface.*<sup>46</sup>

Giáng Hương makes unclear whether her entrance into the monkey cage is a scene in the play “Trên Vĩa Hè” or a real life *rehearsal* to play the role of the prostitute. These different levels of fake and real only make the “real Giáng Hương” all the more inaccessible, a mere composite of performances.

Giáng Hương’s multiple levels of acting underscores different performances of feminine identity that subverts the conception of an inherent femininity. Teasing Dũng, an old male secretary, she asks if he sees her as “a woman he would like to sit beside to have a conversation, or one that he wants to capture alive, put on a horse, and take to his camp in the desert.”<sup>47</sup> As Dũng responds that he would prefer the former because he, according to Lĩnh Nam, prefers the role as “poet” rather than “super-hero,”<sup>48</sup> the play shows characters engaging in fantasy that allow identities endlessly to be imagined. As Giáng Hương’s daughter Giáng Kiều expresses in her “Lý Giao Duyên” song, Giáng Hương’s identity is an act:

<sup>45</sup> Năm Châu, *Sân Khấu Về Khuya* [The Stage Returns to Night] (Sai Gon: Continental Dĩa Hát, 1957), 1.12.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.4.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.6.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.7.

*If someone does something  
 ...that hurts me, I would cry...  
 But you [Giáng Hương] are different  
 You have a despondent voice  
 An exceptional expression as if you put all your private emotions  
 Onto your face effortlessly...  
 It's as if you want to send your whole spirit  
 And all your suffering and misery  
 To the clouds and winds  
 In those moments I do not pity you  
 But see that you are as beautiful as a looking-glass  
 As pure as the ray of the moon  
 I do not want to comfort you  
 But have the urge to applaud you.<sup>49</sup>*

The stage is also a place to stage the most beautiful versions of femininity one imagines. Giáng Hương argues that Lĩnh Nam cannot possibly love Mỹ Tiên because he has the “stage” in his heart, “And the stage is me! The stage is me!!!”<sup>50</sup> She explains that she herself embodies on the stage “the picture of the beauty and completeness of love” that is “cherished by thousands” of audience members. These idyllic visions of femininity are not only embraced by the audience, but by Giáng Hương herself, who cannot let go of the audience and swears always to “pay her debt to the audience” that “gave birth” to her.<sup>51</sup> While she is the picture of a woman that improvises her identity outside of conventional boundaries, she also in the end cannot let go of the idyllic image of herself on the stage, always lamenting that she must fade away like a dying flower in her age. These stagings underscore conventional narratives of identity as performance, but also reveal audiences’ and characters’ attachment to these very fantasies.

The play stages affective climaxes revolving around passion for love, for the stage, and for life. The emotions are mere performances and play, but the characters sing the central *cải lương* melody *vọng cổ* (lament for the past) when they cry about their losses of each other, and their passions for the stage:

(In *vọng cổ*.)  
 Giáng Hương:  
 But [Lĩnh] Nam has refused me, let's not speak anymore. Oh my love! I've always had the desire to make my last performance. The night when I'll prepare my costumes<sup>52</sup> to say goodbye to the stage; I want to be able to raise my hands high to say my goodbyes and gratitude to the audience that have admired me for

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 2.9.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 2.3.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> also meaning “clothes for departure”

tens of years. But this dream cannot be made true, I will have to end my life like a wilted flower.<sup>53</sup>

Oh Lĩnh Nam! If you only knew! There are nights when others are sleeping deeply, and I awake alone. I step gently onto the empty stage with a tiny candle light. I quietly look at the unfinished stage pieces, the curtains hung half straight. I look at them as my friends for life, lifeless but still close to me, and I remember a caring hand of a person at faraway skies, who has left a writhing shoulder, straining heavy and light burdens on her own.<sup>54</sup>

The play's emotional climaxes build affect around questions of mortality and the real. They lament a world of "unfinished stage pieces" where the most "real" thing (the stage) is a precarious world of imagination, but also the site of one's longings and life. Love seems both something certain beyond this realm of falseness, as well as the epitome of such falseness, as Mỹ Tiên concludes at the end of the play that the united lovers will "live together, so that they can be jealous of one another, lie to one another, and their ironic love will never die in their souls."<sup>55</sup> The play laments the precariousness of one's life, yet celebrate an ironic passion for life and emotions that ultimately are short-lived. Affective performances of gender and identity are ultimately what is most "real" in the world of *The Stage Returns to Night*, a "real" that is staged through a number of repeated performances.

*Cải lương* plays such as *The Stage Returns to Night* are part of a number of other *xã hội* (society) plays that portray strong women who behave outside of the conventions of traditional Confucian femininity. As another example, Năm Châu's play *Vợ và Tình* (*Wife and Love*), first performed on July 14, 1940 at nhà hát Tây Sài Gòn (West Sai Gon Theater), stages a debate about the ideal woman.<sup>56</sup> The play shows the man torn between a "traditional" and "modern" woman. The architect Trần Tích Lương is torn between two women, his devout and obedient young wife Phụng, and a strong lover Thu. When Thu, Lương's old flame, has an illness and pays him a visit, he decides to leave his wife Phụng to reunite with Thu. In the end, however, he decides that he still loves Phụng. Thu does not to fight and gives Phụng to Lương, ultimately deciding for Lương that he should stay with Phụng. The play ends with Thu calling Phụng her sister: "Goodbye Lương, good bye to all my confidences, who have tasted the bitterness of love, know me, who have loved and sacrificed for others to love."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 3.9-3.10.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 4.4.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 11.11-11.12.

<sup>56</sup> The first performance starred Sáu Nết as Thu, Ngọc Hảo as Phụng, Bảy Ngọc as Mai, Ba Liên as Chị Sen, Từ Anh as Trần Tích Lương, Năm Châu as Minh, and Ba Vân as Chung. From Huỳnh Công Minh, *Vang Bóng Một Thời: Sân Khấu Cải Lương Sài Gòn 3* [Celebrated for a Time: Cai Luong Theater in Sai Gon] (Ho Chi Minh City: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa Sài Gòn, 2006), 9.

<sup>57</sup> Năm Châu, *Vợ và Tình* [Wife and Love], Play Manuscript, Personal Archive of Năm Châu, acquired July 8, 2008, 45.



In *Wife and Love*, Phụng represents the fantasy of the obedient, domesticated wife for Lương, fit-to-be molded to his desire and needs. Lương's wife Phụng is a Nora-like<sup>58</sup> woman/child who first knows very little and looks to Lương as a husband and father-figure. When we first meet Phụng, she is described as "joyful, playful, spontaneous, [and] singing quietly, while decorating her room with flowers."<sup>59</sup> Lương calls her, and Phụng refers to herself, as a "child" (*một đứa trẻ con*).<sup>60</sup> He must teach her to change from an innocent girl into a domesticated woman. In a scene symbolic of their relationship, Lương asks Phụng to pose for him as he molds her into a sculpture:

[*Tây Thi* song]

Lương : *It's been eight months since our marriage  
You were still an innocent girl  
Now you have a little more of the decency of a strong domestic  
woman<sup>61</sup>  
Keep learning the work of domesticity (tê gia)  
For just another year  
And I won't have to interfere anymore....*

Phụng: *I love you with all my heart and mind  
I just want to do everything to please you  
Any work inside or outside  
Please teach and instruct me  
But you are so strict  
I worry that you won't love me anymore.*

Lương : *...Sit still. I just saw you from a very good angle.<sup>62</sup>*

Emphasizing Phụng's status as an object to be handled by Lương, their mutual friend asks if he has "put her in a box."<sup>63</sup> He denies that she is such a "doll" that would be able to fit into one.<sup>64</sup>

Thu, on the other hand, is a strong and mysterious woman. Sick with an illness, she visits Lương's home with an emaciated and gaunt face, but still with a "silent, passionate beauty" and "sparkling eyes and pride."<sup>65</sup> Even though Lương says it is inappropriate for her to be at his wife's home, she marches in to demand that he give her an explanation for why he left her. Interestingly, Thu dominates the relationship between

<sup>58</sup> I am making a comparison to Nora from Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 24, 27.

<sup>61</sup> Lương uses the term *đảm đang*, describing a woman well versed in the duties of household, production, and fighting.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

herself and Luong. She takes charge of narrating the story of their relationship, dictating his personality from her point of view:

Please remember carefully! Back then...at a dance reception, they introduced me to a college architecture student who had just graduated from the Arts College. Back then you were...very young. Awkward, hesitant, scared, and often ashamed. A child who had not found his soul. But you knew how to be star-struck before a beautiful woman, and you knew how to be shaken with a loving glance. And...one day you came to my peaceful house and begged, cried, asking me to become the master of your young soul.<sup>66</sup>

Like Luong has molded and taught Phuong, Thu claims to have taught and shaped Luong as an architect and as a man, therefore having authority and possession over him:

I lost four years to sculpt him into a person that he is, the person you now call your husband...Before Luong was not an ignorant person, but he was naïve, very naïve in love. I was able to peel away his dullness. I taught him how to want, how to have self-respect, how to be brave and how to be gentle. He wants to become wealthy? Because of me! He can bear poverty? Because of me! That sophistication is mine, that talent is mine...his whole being is mine.<sup>67</sup>

Thu claims to have created Luong as a man, to be master over his masculinity. She further defies Confucian convention by boldly rejecting values of feminine chastity and virtue, admitting that she had another lover while in a relationship with Luong. Thu places herself outside of the conventional logic of marriage and its protections. Unable to rely on any social structures for her well-being, she must ultimately rely on herself and her own fortitude to fight the battle until the end:

No! I am not a wife for Luong, I am only a lover of his. A wife, an official wife has marriage and engagement ceremonies, and when they fall there are people who support them, when they trip people hold them up and when they suffer there are people who comfort and advise them. For us, those of us who are often called a “play thing” (*nhon tinh*), we give, we give a lot, we give all that we have and never know to ask for anything back, and when we trip and fall and suffer we bear it without anyone’s pity. And that is why we have to fight, fight to the end of the battle like an animal. You have your logic, and I have mine.<sup>68</sup>

As Thu and Phuong represent contrasting ideals of femininity, Luong is portrayed as weak and indecisive in his conflict between the two. He expresses that he wants to marry Phuong so that he can “hide” and “bandage” himself, calling himself a “coward,”<sup>69</sup> yet at the same time longs for Thu: “I love her, not because of her beauty, gentleness, propriety

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 16.

or purity...I don't need that. I love her because she has, because she lives on earth, has a form, and a life."<sup>70</sup> It is Thu who makes the decision that Luong should return to Phuong in the end, even with Luong's strong psychological attachment to Thu's unconventional femininity. The play dramatizes the conflicting values between traditional Confucian femininity, and a form of liberated femininity outside of the norms of marriage, chastity, and domesticity. The draw of both types of women appear powerful and confusing to the man. *Wife and Love* embodies desires for new images of femininity by audiences and producers of theater in the 1930s and 1940s. The resonance of such women as Thu would seem to be part of the extreme appeal of the growing form of *cải lương* in the first half of the twentieth century.

To Hue Tam Ho Tai and David Marr, these confrontations with the issues of the woman in literature (and I argue, in *cải lương*) showed more than just concerns about woman's liberation, but also as a means of questioning (colonial) authority under strict censorship. The tendency of radical youths to associate their struggles against the authority of the family with the resistance against the authority of the colonial state made the contestation against arranged marriages, the cult of the mother-in-law, and man's dominance of women also about the *nation*, argues Hue Tam Ho Tai. According to her, youths "easily persuaded themselves that their plight was the plight of the nation, that their efforts to emancipate themselves from all forms of authority would advance the cause of national independence, and that a new order would arise from their struggle toward self-realization. Out of this marriage of the personal and the political emerged the urban radicalism of the 1920s,"<sup>71</sup> a radicalism she defines as "the nonideological current of reaction, both to colonial rule and to native accommodation to that rule."<sup>72</sup> According to this interpretation, the resistance against traditional mores in literature and performance of the 1930s could be seen to form the vocabulary through which collectivity and nation was conceived. *Cải lương* was active in building romantic culture in Vietnam in the first half of the twentieth century, asking questions about human freedom, desire, and the performance of identity to model other imaginaries of modernity critical to the formation of what Hue Tam Ho Tai calls the "radicalism" in the period.

### ***Cải lương* and Communist Culture**

Since Ho Chi Minh's Declaration of Independence from French colonization in August 1945 and the Vietnamese Communist Party's take-over of leadership of the anti-colonial movement, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), as Kim Ninh argues, struggled to build a nation amidst lingering doubts about the authenticity of national origins and forms.<sup>73</sup> One central form of nation-building was the systematic mobilization of cultural institutions under the principles of socialist realism.<sup>74</sup> The "Theses on Culture" in 1943 by Trường Chinh established the party's cultural policy of socialist realism

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>71</sup> Hue Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 56.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>73</sup> See Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed*.

<sup>74</sup> For a description of socialist realism, see Chapter One: "All About Love: Melodramatic Action in Vietnam"

through three guiding principles of Vietnamese culture: nationalization (*dân tộc hóa*), popularization (*đại chúng hóa*), and scientific orientation (*khoa học hóa*).<sup>75</sup> Socialist realism required that art must then address the common people, use vernacular language, address issues of social and political life, and dramatize the teleological development of socialism.

The confrontation between socialist realist proscriptions of sentimental expression and *cái lương* reveal grapplings over issues of sentimentality in the development of revolutionary culture through the First and Second Indochina Wars. The 1949 Conference of Debate on Literature and Art in Việt Bắc reveal that the Party did not reject the use of sentiment in revolutionary culture if it successfully promoted socialist realist aims (particularly towards “popularization”). However, socialist realism proscribed the production of sentiments such as pessimism and sadness if they did not ultimately promote the party’s revolutionary goals. The Party’s conflict towards *cái lương* was revealed through both its banning of *vọng cổ* in regions of Vietnam rule and the efforts of such playwrights as Trần Hữu Trang to create a formula to use *cái lương* to create revolutionary works. The rejection and reshaping of *cái lương* served in the efforts to discover the best ways of using melodrama towards the production of *right* sentiments to shape socialist subjects.

In the initial stages of socialist realism in Vietnam, the ceremonial rejection of “bourgeois” leanings and affiliations with Romantic literature was integral to the formation of party members’ identities. In Trường Chinh’s 1948 “Marxism and Vietnamese Culture,” which expanded on the Party’s cultural policy after the 1943 “Thesis on Culture,” Trường Chinh linked romanticism with bourgeois culture, amorality, political apathy, and excess enjoyment promoted by the French colonial government:

Romanticism in literature and art complemented the ‘joy and youth’ movement that was sponsored by the young people, intellectuals and urban bourgeois and conducive to debauchery. In encouraging these tendencies, the French colonialist aimed at leading the masses, especially the young people, astray. They permitted the running of opium-dens and dance-halls in the cities; they promoted the publication of pornography, wild adventure...<sup>76</sup>

Trường Chinh spoke of “hedonism, romanticism, pessimism, defeatism and skepticism” in French culture as “indoctrinating our people with mystic and fatalistic theories,”<sup>77</sup> showing the perception of romanticism as the radical opposition to the party’s prescribed cultural form of socialist realism. As Ben Vu Tran argues,

With the rise of the communist state and its socialist narrative, Vietnamese literary history has canonized realistic works that advanced the communist movement, while systematically devaluing works that do not. Romanticist literature was perceived as individualistic, apolitical, amoral, and escapist, while

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<sup>75</sup> Kim Ninh, 63.

<sup>76</sup> Trường Chinh, “Marxism and Vietnamese Culture,” 253.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

realist literature was seen as socially conscious, political, and grounded in reality. Subsequently, Vietnam's communist literary history has situated romanticism in a rigid binary system as the reactionary other to the venerated literary category of realism. *Chủ nghĩa lãng mạn* [romanticism] has been charged with being a passive and negative movement that worked against the struggles of anticolonialism and nationalism.<sup>78</sup>

To Ben Vu Tran, the party's construction of socialist realism worked through the negation of romanticism as the radical other. The symbolic negation of romantic leanings was organized in the winter of 1951 in rectification courses run by cadres after training from Chinese instructors. These courses forced artists to “*disclose weaknesses...Measure loyalty.*”<sup>79</sup> The self-criticisms that resulted from such “struggle sessions” were published in 1953.<sup>80</sup> In such sessions, writers such as Thế Lữ condemned his relations to the Self Reliant Literary Movement and its leader Nguyễn Tường Tam. Thế Lữ judged works from his past as

...increasing the dose of poison in the minds of youth from 1932 to 1945. That influence had not ended. As for myself, passionate for fame at one time, I contracted the strange diseases of literature, leading to self-corruption and spreading it around me. I have been imprisoned for so long in the errors of self-conceit, self-satisfaction, and gratification.<sup>81</sup>

The 1949 Conference of Debate on Literature and Art in Việt Bắc,<sup>82</sup> convened by the Association of Art and Literature, was an important meeting where party members worked to make cultural policies more coherent and organize tightly the activities of intellectuals. These proceedings reveal that party members challenged the use of sentiment that was personal, pessimistic, and counter to the party's official morality.

The proceedings reveal that the Party did not deny sentimental expression as much as it required a specific type of sentiment that was effective in promoting socialist development and victory through the First and Second Indochina Wars. The Party's cultural authority Tố Hữu's critique of Nguyễn Đình Thi's poetry at the conference reveals the Party's preference for specific uses of sentiment that must reflect the emotions of the “masses” and by association the Party:

An artist has to ask himself: How do the masses respond? Are they touched? Can the suffering of the masses be brought to the fore? If a work has not spoken, or expresses the opposite direction of the life of the masses, than we must consider it a bad work. Thi's poetry, to me, is not good poetry, because they cannot yet

<sup>78</sup> Ben Vu Tran, “The Politics of Vietnamese Romanticism and Literary History” (Ph.D. Diss, University of California- Berkeley, 2008), 18.

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Kim Ninh, 113; from Tô Hoài, *Cát Bụi Chân Ai* [Dust on Whose Feet] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Hội Nhà Văn, 1992), 100.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>82</sup> I will subsequently refer to this conference as the 1949 Việt Bắc Conference.

express the innermost feelings of the masses....[Thi] must reevaluate his thoughts and feelings through the masses. There are times when the spirit of the masses is tired, debilitated, and they can hear that weariness [in Thi's poetry].<sup>83</sup>

The use of emotions must be consistent with the Party's policy of "popularization" (*đại chúng hóa*) outlined in Trường Chinh's 1943 "Thesis on Culture" and articulated in Mao Tse-Tung's 1942 *Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art*. The artist's ability to learn about, live, and express the life of the masses is reflected in his capability to live their affective and emotional life. Trường Chinh writes in "Marxism and Vietnamese Culture,"

What is essential is to live among the masses of the people, that is to live a worthy life, the militant life of our people. To investigate, research, collect information, study, be in sympathy with the masses and commit oneself wholly to the movement; to let one's heart beat in harmony with the heart of the nation; to share in its joys and sorrows, to labour and fight with the people and to share their faith and hatred. If we do this, why fear that life will not be rich in ideas and emotions?<sup>84</sup>

Discussing strategies for the "popularization of [the Party's] activities" (*quần chúng hóa sinh hoạt*) during the Việt Bắc conference, Đoàn Phú Tứ articulates, "To me...we have to get close to the people, feel sentiments with the people, take in such sentiments and then direct it back to the masses."<sup>85</sup> Indeed the artist connects with the masses precisely through affective communication that includes both the reception of the sentiments of the people and the reflection of those emotions back to them.

This affective empathy between the artist and the masses is a means of countering the supposed elite individualism of the artist, as Party members revealed at the 1949 Việt Bắc Conference. Artists were critiqued for being elite if they turned too much towards themselves and could not communicate their emotions with the people. At the conference, Xuân Diệu critiqued Thế Lữ for his elitism and inability to "express what moves him" to the people: "Thi's poem has a haughty manner...and does not express fully what moves him...[he is] self-assured that others have to search for him to become moved."<sup>86</sup> The artist's inability to relate to the masses translates to his elitism, running counter to socialist realist goals of "popularization." In a debate about visual art at the conference, Nguyễn Huy Tưởng critiques Nguyễn Đỗ Cung's artwork:

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<sup>83</sup> "The Conference of debate on literature and art in Việt Bắc, 25-28 September 1949," 56.

<sup>84</sup> Trường Chinh, "Marxism and Vietnamese Culture," 290.

<sup>85</sup> "The Conference of debate on literature and art in Việt Bắc, 25-28 September 1949," 13.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

His attitude is still that of the intellectual; he has only changed in the mind. That is why his paintings are more full of ideas than of emotion. It has only expresses reality realistically; it is sharp and dry. It is too clean.<sup>87</sup>

Nguyễn Huy Tường conceptualizes the “intellectual” as “sharp and dry” and “too clean” in his expression of emotion. The ways to popularize would be to embrace works that facilitated affective identification and communication among artists, the party, and the people. Empathy with the masses was also a means of achieving “objectivity,” according writer Đoàn Phú Tứ at the 1949 Việt Bắc Conference. Emotions that were centered on the personal experience of individuals were subjective, incommunicative, and elite, but emotions that expressed a common experience of the masses were a means towards objectivity. In his criticism of *Đường Vui (Road to Happiness)*, an example of cadre (*bộ đội*) poetry, Đoàn Phú Tứ states, “All arts and literature is subjective, emotional. The emotions belong to the self. But when the emotions of the self are also the emotions of others, the subjective becomes objective.”<sup>88</sup>

Art had to create emotions that were appropriate to dramatize the “truth” of a society moving towards socialism.<sup>89</sup> Speaking of art’s role in the production of emotion at the seventh meeting at the conference, Thanh Tịnh says: “We cannot create fear. We need to express things so that people rise, feel hatred and want immediately to forge towards enemies and destroy them...that would be of value.”<sup>90</sup> Georges Boudarel summarizes the constraints of socialist realism during the anti-French resistance:

...works were expected to revolve around stock characters or ‘types’ (*điển hình*) and to serve the political requirements of the moment in a ‘timely’ fashion (*phục vụ kịp thời*). The catchword was ‘hate’ (*căm thù*): hate for the foreign ‘imperialists’ (*đế quốc*) and for the native ‘feudalists’ (*phong kiến*) or landowners.<sup>91</sup>

The emotions of works needed to reinforce moral-manicheanism to conform to socialist realism’s task of promoting the teleological advance of socialism and the Party. Moreover, it had to conform to what Trường Chinh specifies as the function of criticism:

Some friends object to criticism as tantamount to “washing our dirty linen in public,” and thereby displaying our weaknesses for the enemy to seize and beat us with. The criticism we have in mind is criticism that abides by principles and democratic discipline and not “free criticism.” There may be some who wish to use criticism to sow dissension and doubt in the ranks of our people and supply

<sup>87</sup> “Tranh Luận Về Họa” [Debate about Visual Art], in *Văn Nghệ 17-18* (November-December 1949), 59.

<sup>88</sup> “The Conference of debate on literature and art in Việt Bắc, 25-28 September 1949,” 27.

<sup>89</sup> Trường Chinh, “Marxism and Vietnamese Culture,” 285.

<sup>90</sup> “The Conference of debate on literature and art in Việt Bắc, 25-28 September 1949,” 30.

<sup>91</sup> Georges Boudarel, 155.

the enemy with documents to be used against us. They are not critics but trouble-makers, who seek not progress but provocation. Their place is not on the public debating platform of a democratic country but in the prisons of the people's state.<sup>92</sup>

Criticism according to Trường Chinh was not “free” and could not “sow dissension and doubt among the ranks of our people.” Some negativity was warranted only if the success of the revolution was ultimately reinforced in the overall narrative arc:

The attitude of socialist realism is objective. There are objective truths which are unfavourable to us. For example, shall we report a battle we have lost truthfully? We can, of course, depict a lost battle, but in doing so, we must see to it that people realize how heroically our combatants accepted sacrifices, why the battle was lost, what our gains were and notwithstanding the defeat, that our combatants never felt demoralized because all were eager to learn and draw the appropriate lessons in order to secure victories in future battles. We can depict a local defeat while showing that the war is going our way. It should be borne in mind that there are truths worth mentioning, but there are also truths which are better left unmentioned, at least temporarily, and if mentioned at all, the question is where and how they should be revealed.<sup>93</sup>

Socialist realist works had to avoid demoralization, even at the cost of “truths...left unmentioned.” To conform to the political ideology of the state, works had to follow prescriptions of what Peter Zinoman calls “obligatory optimism” in their positive portrayal of the state and its revolutionary missions.<sup>94</sup>

Negotiations with these ideological and “objective” regulations of sentiment led to the party's ambivalence towards *cải lương*—from their outright rejection of the form for its pessimistic and sentimental characteristics, to their efforts to shape the form for political use. The *Hội Nghị Tranh Luận Sân Khấu Việt Bắc* (*Conference Debate about Theater in Việt Bắc*) in 1950 marked the Party's privileging of *spoken drama* over the traditional arts in the service of the revolution because of its conformity to the principles of socialist realism, simplicity and mobility of form, “ability to address modern life,” and perceived effectiveness in mobilizing the public.<sup>95</sup> According to Kim Ninh, in the short period between 1949 to 1950, in fact, *cải lương* was banned in Viet-minh controlled parts of the south, until the traditional arts again received official stature in 1952.<sup>96</sup> Theater administrator Khánh<sup>97</sup> and College of Theater and Film instructor Tú have admitted to me this “error” in the prohibition of *vọng cổ* in Vietminh controlled areas from 1954 to

<sup>92</sup> Trường Chinh, “Marxism and Vietnamese Culture,” 288.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>94</sup> Peter Zinoman, “Declassifying Nguyen Huy Thiep,” *Positions East Asian Cultural Critique* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 300.

<sup>95</sup> Phan Trọng Thường, Cù Đề Phan, et al., *Văn Học Việt Nam Thế Kỷ XX* [Vietnamese Literature in the Twentieth Century] (Ha Noi: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Học, 2001), 617-618.

<sup>96</sup> Kim Ninh, 100.

<sup>97</sup> Khánh, interview with author, Ha Noi, July 7, 2007.



1975.<sup>98</sup> In her history of *cải lương*, Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc and Đỗ Hương (2007) record this “error” in the proscription of the *vọng cổ*, a central melody in *cải lương*:

In the areas under Vietminh control, there were cadres that were young and too strict, who made errors in their criticisms, making mistakes in their viewing of *cải lương* so that the form could not develop.

Because of that, around 1950, in the conference about theater in Việt Bắc, *cải lương* was harshly criticized: “*Cải lương* is the residue of *hát bội*, it’s the product of the bourgeoisie at the beginning of their rise, but it quickly became the tool of capitalists and through that route became depraved, lacking of innovation, and hybrid...”<sup>99</sup>

Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc and Đỗ Hương write that this prohibition spread in Vietminh controlled areas from the decision at the 1950 conference through the end of the Vietnam/American war:

...Between 1954-1975, because of ignorance about important issues, many Vietminh controlled areas in the south had the policy, “*Vọng cổ* is prohibited; *vọng cổ* cannot be used in *cải lương* performance.” This was changed and reformed later on.<sup>100</sup>

Hung, theater professor and one of the Party’s most prominent figures in theater criticism, explains to me that the central *vọng cổ* melody in *cải lương* was criticized for its sentimental, nostalgic, and “maudlin” (*uỷ mị*) characteristics.<sup>101</sup> But the banning of *vọng cổ* seemed sporadic and short. Indeed, while Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc and Đỗ Hương record that *vọng cổ* was not allowed in some areas of Vietminh control from 1954 to 1975, revolutionary *cải lương* (with or without *vọng cổ*) was still performed in many of these areas. In response to the banning of *vọng cổ*, in January 1951, the Central Office of South Vietnam (Xứ ủy Nam Bộ) made a corrective ruling that “The administration of culture in the South has made many errors, fundamentally not understanding the operation of sentiment in the people, unable to use [affect] to build a system of emotions that is appropriate to the development of the nation.”<sup>102</sup> A number of *cải lương* troops operated in Vietminh controlled regions, performing short *cải lương* plays with revolutionary content. These were troops such as the Đoàn PL Khu Miền Đông (in Zone 7), Ngũ Yên (in Long Châu Sa), Lúa Vàng (in Mỹ Tho), Cửu Long Giang, and Lam Sơn (in Bạc Liêu). These troops relied on the participation of southerners such as Tám Danh, Thanh Loan, Bảy Vân, Ba Du, Ngọc Thạch, Tám Củi, Tư Xe, Ba Thừa Vĩnh, and Chín

<sup>98</sup> Tú, interview with author, Ho Chi Minh City, July 15, 2008.

<sup>99</sup> Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc and Đỗ Hương, 107.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>101</sup> Hung, interview with author, Ha Noi, July 7, 2007.

<sup>102</sup> Quoted in Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc and Đỗ Hương, 107.

Châu.<sup>103</sup> Indeed the Party wavered between out-rightly rejecting the form for its melodramatic features and using the form to construct the right feelings for its subjects.

Trần Hữu Trang<sup>104</sup> and Hoàng Như Mai's reflections on *cải lương* show the bias of Party ideologues against *cải lương* as a sentimental, contaminated (hybrid), emotionally weak and therefore politically questionable form, yet also reveal efforts to reconstruct the form towards revolutionary goals. The playwright Trần Hữu Trang (1906-1966) is one of the primary *cải lương* playwrights involved in developing revolutionary *cải lương* under the Vietnamese Communist Party. The existence of the Trần Hữu Trang Theater (a major theater for *cải lương* in Ho Chi Minh City after 1975), and the Trần Hữu Trang Prize, a prestigious award for actors, mark the playwright's important work and close relationship to the Party. The playwright is known for such plays as *Đời Cô Lựu*, *Tô Ánh Nguyệt*, *Mộng Hoa Vương*, *Lan và Diệp*, *Tám Lòng Trinh*, *Chị Chồng Tôi*, and *Tìm Hạnh Phúc*.<sup>105</sup> He helped organized the Con Tầm group, the Năm Châu group, and the Việt Kịch Năm Châu (Nam Chau Vietnamese Theater) group, which had the mission to "perform plays that were progressive and expressed the love for nation" in regions of Communist rule.<sup>106</sup> Ran by Nguyễn Văn Hiếu, who later was Director of the Ministry of Culture and Information, the Việt Kịch Năm Châu group, later named the Phước Chung group, performed plays that found expression for nationalist and patriotic sentiment (*lòng yêu nước*) under the Vietnamese Communist Party. Hoàng Như Mai, the Ha Noi born author of Trần Hữu Trang's biography, and the Party's cultural critic on Vietnamese, Southern, and socialist realist drama, emphasizes the resistant activities and Communist affiliations of the Việt Kịch Năm Châu group. On December 20, 1960, Trần Hữu Trang attended the assembly that founded the National Front for the Liberation of the South, later known as the National Liberation Front, and was elected into the Central

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<sup>103</sup> Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc and Đỗ Hương, 108.

<sup>104</sup> Trần Hữu Trang was born in Phú Kiết in Tiền Giang (formerly Mỹ Tho), in a farming family that lost their possessions during French colonialism. While his grandfather still had some property, by his father's generation, the family had become tenant farmers. Trần Hữu Trang and his family were educated in Chinese, while the author also studied a wide variety of literatures on his own. Trần Hữu Trang had a close relationship to the famous *cải lương* playwright Năm Châu, who was his first cousin. In 1929, when Năm Châu joined the Trần Đắc performance group run by Trần Đắc Nghĩa, Năm Châu invited Trần Hữu Trang to join to sell tickets and notate scripts. Previously also a barber, boat-rower, and *cải lương* performer, he wrote plays between 1930 to 1952, slowing down after the August Revolution in 1945 to engage in anti-colonial activity. The playwright had been active in anti-colonial work from 1926 to 1928, when he helped fight for the release of revolutionist Phan Bội Châu and attended lectures by Phan Chu Trinh, even supposedly helping revolutionaries in his barbor shop. From Hoàng Như Mai, ed., *Trần Hữu Trang* (Ho Chi Minh: NXBTPHCM, 1982), 15.

<sup>105</sup> *Life of Luu, To Anh Nguyet* (name of the female protagonist), *Dream of Royal Flower*, *Lan and Diep*, *A Pure Heart*, *My Sister-in-Law*, and *Searching for Happiness*

<sup>106</sup> Trần Hữu Trang also established the Hội Nghệ Sĩ Ái Hữu in 1948, and the Nghiệp Đoàn Nghệ Sĩ Công Nhân Sân Khấu that protected the rights of artists in 1957. He served as the head of Hội Văn Nghệ Giải Phóng in 1960; Hoàng Như Mai, *Trần Hữu Trang*, 28-29.

Committee, taking the role as Chairman of the Hội Văn Nghệ Giải Phóng (The Association of Arts for Liberation). In January 19, 1966 Trần Hữu Trang was killed by a B52 bomb that hit his trenches in Tây Ninh.<sup>107</sup>

Trần Hữu Trang's dramaturgy was known to address "real" life conditions and issues in contrast to displaying "romantic" characteristics associated with Năm Châu's work. According to Hoàng Như Mai, "[Trần Hữu Trang] was oriented towards the belief that art served life, while Năm Châu was still embroiled in the belief of art for its own sake."<sup>108</sup> The playwright has been known to meet with the Communist member Nguyễn Chí Diều to talk about the principles of "social realism," (*tả thực xã hội*) or "socialist realism," (*hiện thực xã hội chủ nghĩa*), opting for simpler prose and demonstrating the modest and disciplined life of an artist connected with his people.<sup>109</sup> For Hoàng Như Mai, Trần Hữu Trang managed to tame the excesses and the "capitalistic" (*tư sản*)<sup>110</sup> quality of the *cải lương* form to address important social and national issues: "Born in the old regime, *cải lương* was restricted by the dominators—used, distorted and converted into a commodity. Even so, there were playwrights who developed and improved *cải lương* so that it could have its good plays that resisted colonization, and challenged an unjust and depraved society."<sup>111</sup>

In his speech "A few thoughts about the Art of Cải lương Musical," addressed to *cải lương* playwrights and published in *Văn Nghệ Giải Phóng* [*Revolutionary Literature and Arts*], Trần Hữu Trang discusses the tendency for communist cadres to criticize *cải lương* for its excess sentimentality, hybrid nature, and perceived colonial and bourgeois ties. At the same time, he tries to recover *cải lương* to add it into the party's revolutionary canon. Trần Hữu Trang addresses the question of whether the form, seen to display excesses of emotion and spiritual debilitation, should continue to develop:

Recently, a few comrades have been concerned about the issue of whether *cải lương* should be further developed. Some people who have raised this issue feel that with the revolution only new music (*nhạc mới*) and a new musical form (*ca kịch mới*) can satisfy the requirements of [the revolution], while *cải lương* is something rather weak (*không lành mạnh*), lamenting and belaboring (*rên rỉ, khóc than*). And if we distribute and develop this genre we will make maudlin (*uỷ mị*) the spirit of the people, and disrupt their spirit to fight.<sup>112</sup>

Trần Hữu Trang underscores the Party's critique of *cải lương* as a form that expressed excessive sentiment and pessimism that would counter socialist realist requirements that art must promote the appropriate ideology. Not only did *cải lương* threaten to disrupt the

<sup>107</sup> Hoàng Như Mai, *Trần Hữu Trang*, 37; Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc and Đỗ Hương, 50.

<sup>108</sup> Hoàng Như Mai, *Trần Hữu Trang*, 20.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>112</sup> Trần Hữu Trang, "Vài Ý Kiến Về Nghệ Thuật Ca Kịch Cải Lương" [A few thoughts about the Art of Cải lương Musical], in Hoàng Như Mai, *Trần Hữu Trang*, 188. Talk published in *Văn Nghệ Giải Phóng* [*Revolutionary Literature and Arts*] in November 1965 and September 1965.

people's "spirit to fight" but its "maudlin" qualities were linked to its colonial relations to France and the American backed Republic of Vietnam during the Vietnam/American war. The hybrid quality of *cải lương* is contrasted to more "proper" and "wholistic" (*hoàn chỉnh*) forms such as *chèo* and *hát bội* that pre-existed French and American (but not Chinese) colonial influence. Trần Hữu Trang argues,

What is the future of *cải lương* development? Can it survive over time or merely exist in the context of a time where it satisfied the masses and their demands? This question concerns many comrades. Some are of the opinion that *cải lương* musical theater should not develop because it is maudlin and "hybrid" (*lai*) in multiple ways. When we watch a night of *hát bội* or a performance of northern *chèo*, they have their own complete and wholistic (*hoàn chỉnh*) approach. In a night of *cải lương* performance, one sees the presence of everything [mixed together]. This critique seems legitimate, but in reality one must recognize that this observation applies to some examples of *cải lương*, but not all.<sup>113</sup>

Trần Hữu Trang defends *cải lương* by arguing that the form is not necessarily innately inauthentic or hybrid (*lai*), but that the history of colonialism has corrupted the form:

*Cải lương* was strong from origin; it should have developed in a progressive manner. But right at its birth, it faced a desperate and impassible environment. All the plays that were forward-thinking in content were censored by the colonial regime. A number of people used *cải lương* as a commodity for profit. To avoid making plays with progressive themes that would be censored, they switched to developing plays adapted from classical Chinese stories, taking an easier route. Moreover, from August 1945, our people's lives have become more and more difficult under the empire's terrorism, the people could not articulate their hatred towards those who sold off or stole the nation. This suffocating and desperate situation affected *cải lương*.

However, in this time, even though there were many difficult situations there were still playwrights who developed *cải lương* plays that resisted colonialism, and challenged an unjust and depraved society.<sup>114</sup>

Trần Hữu Trang critiques *cải lương* mainly for what he assumes to be its *apolitical* nature, its inability to "articulate" anticolonial politics. While assigning *cải lương* to "colonial" culture, he also recognizes the ability of *vọng cổ* and emotional songs from *cải lương* to be performed effectively and strongly.

Thus while critiquing the "excessive" qualities of *cải lương*, Trần Hữu Trang attempts to mobilize a highly successful and popular form for revolutionary purposes. The playwright argues that in the context of the Vietnam/American war, *cải lương* can be an extremely productive form of revolutionary culture: "the *cải lương* genre, with its rich expressions...strong popularist quality...will be a sharp weapon to fight enemies, a form

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>114</sup> Trần Hữu Trang, "Vài Ý Kiến Về Nghệ Thuật Ca Kịch Cải Lương [A few thoughts about the Art of Cải lương Musical]," 189.

that cannot be lost in our lively revolutionary culture,” especially if work can be done in the use of the form to “erase the negative [*tiêu cực*]” and “develop the positive or constructive [*tích cực*],” and preserve literary and technical qualities.<sup>115</sup> Trần Hữu Trang demonstrates a purposeful effort of communist playwrights to think technically about the uses of sentiment in the production of communist subjectivity, despite the Party’s history of reservations about *cải lương*’s sentimental qualities. In the speech, he lists names of *cải lương* melodies under the emotions “happiness,” “sadness,” “anger,” “neutrality,” “urgency,” and “relief,” making specific lists of melodies that are “happy, short, and to the point;” “to the point, strong, and determinate;” “sad, longing, disappointed,” etc.<sup>116</sup> He writes instructions on “how to choose melodies” by using as the basis “the content of the song,” listing songs to use for such emotions as blissfulness, sadness, anger, vengeance, courage.<sup>117</sup> While attempting to devise a more systematic formula for the use of affect in revolutionary culture, Trần Hữu Trang also insists that no strict formula applies to all and that the appropriateness and compatibility of music, content, and emotion must be based on careful consideration on a case-by-case basis:

I [am looking at] broad characteristics [of each emotion] because in each sentiment and melody there are subtleties, for example: sadness- there is strong sadness, or mild sadness; happiness—there is a gentle complacency, light happiness or boisterous elation; anger, squabbling can be determined or contentious... This is why in relation to sentiment and melody, sometimes the melody is very clear, and in other situations it is hard to determine the emotionality of the melody in an affirmative or definite way. The only definite thing is that one should never put a very sorrowful (*buồn não nùng*) song in a boisterous (*vui rộn rã*) situation or vice versa. And between the melodies of contentment, ecstasy, nostalgia, extreme sadness... one should judge accordingly, listen to each song and play it in a specific way, using flexibly rather than being mechanical or forced. But avoid approaches that are too sketchy or general. One needs to research each song so as to present it the right way for each situation, and only that way would one ensure that the melody will be used in a way that fits the circumstances and appropriate emotions (*hợp tình*).<sup>118</sup>

In his recovery of *cải lương* Trần Hữu Trang systematizes ways to use the emotionality of the form to fit revolutionary content. At the same time, he also pushes for recognition of the flexibility of components of sentiment in relation to meaning.

Trần Hữu Trang makes such arguments for flexibility of meaning in order to recover such forms as *vọng cổ*, which had been proscribed in some areas of Vietnam rule between 1954 and 1975. He argues that since only case-by-case examination would reveal a song’s relation to the content of the play in a specific historical moment, the widespread proscription of *cải lương* is unwarranted:

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 190-196.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 198.

Comrades have talked about taking the *vọng cổ* out of *cải lương* because they think that the *vọng cổ* is weak, sad, and maudlin, and that the only reason to use the *vọng cổ* is to appeal to the penchant of spectators. According to our research, in the *vọng cổ*, and even the lyrics of Sáu Lầu from Bạc Liêu—the writer of the first iteration of the song—there is nothing maudlin or weak [in the song]. When it is used on the stages... *vọng cổ* began to develop from the 4 to the 8, 16, 32, and 64 beats. Due to this development the melody and lyrics expanded, but the main characteristic of the song has not changed; it is still predominantly lyrical (*trữ tình*). Its sadness is not even comparable to songs like Nam Ai, Văn Thiên Tường, and Trương Tư. We recognize that some people have sung *vọng cổ* in such a way that the lyrics sound maudlin, the voice sobbing and overwrought, and that is due to the lyrics that are written, and the expression of the singer, and not the *vọng cổ* itself!<sup>119</sup>

Trần Hữu Trang defends the use of *vọng cổ*:

In scenes of parting or in longed-for reunions, in moments of longing and waiting, and before a situation generating hatred and vengeance, [the *vọng cổ* can] express emotions of sadness that has potential to rise (*vuon lên*) [to happiness], of a hope for a promised future, without the tragic sadness that requires a Nam ai or Trương Tư song... [T]he *vọng cổ*, besides the lyrical quality (*trữ tình*) of its melody, has the ability to facilitate long passages of lyrics, a flexibility of rhythm to allow a more free selection of lyrics—a situation that is hard to find in other songs. We just need to not misuse it, we need to know the limitations; we cannot just use it to appeal to the penchant of the spectators whenever we want... rather, we must select the most appropriate situations [for its use].<sup>120</sup>

Trần Hữu Trang recovers the use of sentiment, even emotions of sadness or disappointment, if it fits within a dramatic structure that builds the right feelings and “appropriate” resolutions. He moves away from looking at emotions in isolation, towards looking at the operations of emotions within a dramatic and narrative arc, of which the master text is the teleology of socialist development.

In addition to recovery of the use of *vọng cổ*, Trần Hữu Trang stresses that both spoken drama or *cải lương* can be used for historical topics, folk themes, and contemporary issues. While at the *Hội Nghị Tranh Luận Sân Khấu Việt Bắc* (*Conference Debate about Theater in Việt Bắc*) in 1950, cadres showed a preference for spoken drama over *cải lương* in addressing contemporary issues, Trần Hữu Trang insists that on a case-by-case basis, each genre can more or less successfully address a range of topics. In his promotion of *cải lương*, the playwright argues,

...*cải lương* needs to recognize its own strengths as a musical form, so it should not only address situations that are exciting and suspenseful from beginning to

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 199-200.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 200.

end, but pursue deep psychological and emotional development, the dramas of psychology, to portray inner spirit in a more sensitive manner.<sup>121</sup>

*Cải lương* opens up opportunities for not only the epic, but for deeply psychological drama. Trần Hữu Trang addresses Party member's early anxieties towards melodrama and lays out an agenda to use *cải lương* and affect in the service of the revolution and the production of socialist subjectivity. If personal, moral, and sentimental expression was deemed to be dangerous in its generation of uncontrolled emotions, it could be tamed within the proper revolutionary narrative arc.

An example of such *cải lương* plays of revolutionary content is Trần Hữu Trang's *Đời Cô Lựu (Life of Luu)*, first written in 1936 and rewritten to emphasize socialist content in the 1960s. The play uses *cải lương* to build a narrative of colonial exile and alienation that drives nationalist fervor and socialist development. *Life of Luu* is one of the most well-known and enduring *cải lương* melodramas from colonialism through the present day, surviving particularly in the present era because of its anticolonial and socialist themes. Set in a colonial era, it stages the colonization of the nation on the body of the woman, and develops an allegory about colonial collaboration and exile. The melodramatic facets of the play are easily recognizable in the morally-manichean contrast between the villainy of the Councilman who represents collaboration and masks deep greed and lust, and the innocent Hai Thành, who believes that if he lives well, the Councilman will return his goodness with goodness.<sup>122</sup> As a central characteristic of melodrama, the play dramatizes the loss of home as a central metaphor merging domestic and political strife. It builds emotional heights by expressing the experiences of loss and exile during colonialism, staging a heated argument about the morality of collaboration, and using the woman as the site for the nation and its colonial (and sexual) exploitation.

In the play, Hai Thành, a tenant farmer, is falsely accused of participating in anti-colonial activity and sent to Côn Đảo to live for nineteen years. Once he is sent away, the landlord and councilmember Thằng (Ông Hội Đồng), who had conspired to falsely entrap Hai Thành, courts his wife Cô Lựu by pretending to offer legal help for her husband, and marries her. Hai Thành escapes from prison and discovers that his wife is now the landowner. United with his son Minh Luân, Hai Thành sends his son to deliver a note to his wife Cô Lựu to tell her he and his son are alive, and demands that she sends her son money to make up for his lifetime of impoverishment. With little money under her own auspices, Cô Lựu receives the help of her daughter Kim Anh, who sells away jewelry given to her from her husband Mẫn Đạt. After a mix-up in which Mẫn Đạt misunderstands and accuses Kim Anh of having an affair with her half-brother Minh Luân, Mẫn Đạt shoots Minh Luân. Hai Thành and Cô Lựu come face to face to articulate and sing their experiences of loss, exile, guilt, inevitable submission, and the shattering of their beloved family. When the landlord Thằng faces Hai Thành, Minh Luân ends up stabbing Thằng. In the earlier version of *Life of Luu*, left with no other choice when her family prevents her from committing suicide, Cô Lựu joins the nunnery in the conclusion.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>122</sup> Trần Hữu Trang, *Life of Luu (Later Version)*, circa 1965, Manuscript from Archive of Theater and Film, 6.

The play ties the experience of colonial subjugation to national exile and the loss of home. Hai Thành is sent away to Hải Đảo Côn Nôn (Côn Nôn Island), or Côn Đảo, the colonial prison that held anti-colonial and Communist activists. He describes his state of exile in imprisonment: “The ocean searches for disconnected phrases, the deep forests and hard rocks...I flavor my food with my tears, bathe in my sweat...grueling difficulty, many sufferings”<sup>123</sup> Escaping prison, he spends many days “wandering,” until “he could find his home again.”<sup>124</sup> Hai Thành’s exile operates at many levels, connecting the domestic and personal with political spheres. The French colonial system imprisons him at the same time as his wife becomes the councilwoman and he loses his own home. He laments his losses in an emotional *vọng cổ* song:

the day I truly became a prisoner, is the day you became the wife of the Councilwoman. In 19 years in the accursed place (*noi đầu gân mặt bể*), I had to silently watch people die and my home perish, my wife now knows no place upon which to lean, and the day I parted with my child it was still in the womb...<sup>125</sup>

The lamenting melodies of *vọng cổ* express the longing for home, and the melancholic loss of homeland in the experience of colonialism:

(singing in *vọng cổ*)

Hai Thành:

1—Oh uncle, jailed and guilty, since the day I left the native village and toiled in sun and fog, I thought that I would be forever on the Côn Nôn island.

2—But the lord has been kind to me, after all the toil, suffering, rain and wind, and changes, today I have been able to find my homeland.<sup>126</sup>

The play’s emotional heights thus build a longing for a nation out of the dramatic experience of loss. It dramatizes exile and loss of home as a direct result of colonialism and allegorizes colonialism as the loss of and betrayal of the woman, who doubles as home and as nation.

Lộ’s experience is gendered to show the desperation, weakness, and loss of will resulting from colonial subjugation, doubling as sexual subjugation. The romantic lyrics of *vọng cổ* stress Lộ’s feminine tossing and turning within the elements that control her. Similarly exiled, Lộ is a “floating boat” without knowledge of where the “shores” are, “begging” for rescue. The melodies of *vọng cổ* evoke strong emotions about her loss of

<sup>123</sup> “Biển cả mò nghêu, rừng sâu đập đá...chan cơm bằng nước mắt, tắm mát bằng mồ hôi, nai lưng hứng những cái đá thoi, cấm cổ chịu đủ lần roi vọt, gian lao, khổ sở cực nhục trăm điều;” quoted from Hoàng Nhu Mai, *Trần Hữu Trang*, excerpt of *Life of Luu*, 65.

<sup>124</sup> “linh-định trên mặt bể, chừng tấp vào vùng nội địa cháu phải lẩn-lúc mấy tháng trường mới về tới nhà, khổ lắm bác à!” Trần Hữu Trang, *Life of Luu (Earlier Version)* (Sai Gon, Nguyễn Văn Huân, 1952), 8.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.



home and feminine subjection when she fails to wait for her husband and marries the Councilman:

(singing in *vọng cổ*)

Lữu:

5—I want to go crazy, submit to anyone, and anyone who commands me I will follow running back and forth, and having gotten nowhere, I had to take a risk.

6—At that moment, in the wind, a boat not knowing where is shore, I prayed all sorts of things so that I would avoid tragedy, and I vowed that no matter how painful I would bear the cost.<sup>127</sup>

The lyrics of the emotional *vọng cổ* song dramatize psychology of the colonized, who are so “crazed” that they “do whatever others say,” “running back and forth.” Collaboration, or the “begging” for rescue from the landowner, is equated with a situation of extreme psychological confusion. The author domesticates colonialism by staging it on the body and psychology of Lữu, whose decision to marry the Councilman merges sexual, domestic, and political betrayal and subjugation.

The Hai Thành family becomes an emblem for the nation that is ripped apart by colonization and collaboration between colonists and the Vietnamese. Indeed colonization has caused such turmoil in the family that Minh Luân ends up killing the father of his half-sister, the Councilmember, for destroying his own family. With the landowner as the “culprit” that tears up the family, the play suggests the choice of resistance or subordination:

Hai Thành:

...I risked death to return here to visit my wife and find my child, and also to see who conspired to make me suffer twenty years of punishment. Now that I have seen my son, understood my wife’s situation, and found the culprit, I can either kill the enemy for causing the split between husband and wife, mother and son, or leave this place so to give your family peace.<sup>128</sup>

In a version of the play that Trần Hữu Trang revised to emphasize his revolutionary message, the play ends with Hai Thành and his son Minh Luân leaving their home to join the revolution.

Even as socialist discourses rejected *cải lương* for its melodramatic qualities, revolutionary *cải lương* revealed the Party’s use of melodrama and purposeful

<sup>127</sup> 5—Tâm trí em muốn điên, ai bảo sao cũng vâng theo, mà ai bầy sao cũng nghe được hết chạy xuôi rồi chạy ngược, rốt cuộc đã chẳng ra đâu, em nghĩ nước đến cho thôi thì sự thế âu phải liều.

6--Giữa lúc sóng-gió ngoài khơi, một con thuyền chơi-voi chưa có biết đâu là bờ bến, em vái-van cầu khẩn đủ điều miễn sao mình thoát khỏi điều ly-tiết, dầu cực như thế nào em cũng đành cam. Ibid., 39.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 45.

manipulation of emotional laboratories to allegorize national suffering, situate the woman as the site of the nation and its loss, dramatize the pathos of colonial subjugation, and fuel revolutionary action. The confrontation between socialist realist proscriptions of sentimental expression and *cải lương* reveal grappings over issues of sentimentality in the development of revolutionary culture. Socialist realism proscribed the use of sadness and pessimism that did not promote socialist victory. As a result, Party members struggled with the sentiments of *cải lương*, from outright banning the form for its maudlin (*uỷ mị*) qualities, to working to mold its sentimental qualities systematically to do political work. Working out conflicts over *cải lương*, the Party developed a system that used melodrama for the production of the *right* feelings for the construction of socialist subjectivity.

### ***Cải lương* and the Politics of North and South**

At the end of the Vietnam/American war and the formation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the North Vietnam leadership took the monumental task of rebuilding the South in the image of the “modernized” North, which had been structured through the mobilization of cultural forms under socialist realist principles. The abjection, overamplification, and reshaping of Southern *cải lương* worked to reaffirm the masculinity and legitimacy of socialist realism, to rebuild Ho Chi Minh City through facilitating the erasure of “colonial” culture, and to build images of a coherent nation towards which citizens can return. A discourse against melodrama and *cải lương* helped in the purging of “excess” Southern culture and identity, while a reformed *cải lương* would help reshape new subjects for a unified Vietnam.

As Philip Taylor argues, the marking of the South as a “neocolonial” site through such discourses as those against *cải lương* facilitated the rapid reconstruction of the South after the take-over of Sai Gon.<sup>129</sup> The transformations of the South included the shutting down of the diverse presses, regulations against “yellow” music before 1975, the removal of works by Nguyễn Tường Tam and Khải Hưng and banning of books of Southern writers. Over one million people in the former Republic of Vietnam were sent to “reeducation” camps of hard manual labor and starvation. “New economic zones” sent a million people from Ho Chi Minh City to undeveloped and unviable areas to develop farmland, while 250,000 highland people were relocated to grow industrial foods and make way for lowland Vietnamese to make use of the land. One million Vietnamese also left the country in a mass exodus, becoming refugees in camps in Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Indonesia before settling in the United States, Canada, France, and countries around the world.<sup>130</sup>

My analysis of writings by Northern state ideologues in the first years of reunification show that *cải lương* served as a metonymy for Southern culture and the Southern terrain. The erasures to the culture of the South was accompanied by an overamplification of the space as melodramatic. Through *cải lương*, the melodramatic

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<sup>129</sup> See Philip Taylor, *Fragments of the Present: Searching for Modernity in Vietnam's South* (Crow's Nest, NSW, Australia: Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with Allen & Unwin; Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 23-55.

<sup>130</sup> See Neil Jameison, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 361-366.

mode gets superimposed on the body of the Southerner, where excesses of genre come to represent excesses and aberrations of identity in need of purification.

*Cải lương* functioned within the marking of the South as a sentimentally excessive and emotionally weak landscape open to manipulation, doubly imprinted by French and American colonialism. The first part of rebuilding Southern culture was to imbue it as a site of neocolonialism.<sup>131</sup> As the publisher of “Culture and the Arts in the South under the American-puppet Regime” writes:

In the south, within colonialism and neocolonialism, and thirty years of war, have left cultural and ideological imprints. Through malicious means, the puppets to Americans have created a subjugated, depraved, hybrid (miscellaneous) ‘culture’ that is extremely resistant—and as a result youths in the cities have followed this fast, self-centered, leech-like way of living, destroying cultural and national riches and our people’s healthy way of being.”<sup>132</sup>

This “depraved” culture functioned particularly, according to critics, only for “those in rule, the capitalist and corrupt businessmen, the American soldiers and their service workers...” The people themselves are only there as “commodities” feeding the desires and lusts of the colonialists, as the subjects of colonial pleasure.<sup>133</sup>

*Cải lương* was a marker of colonization as it bore the imprints of colonial hybridity in its inception as well as during the perceived tragic “downfall” of the form during the Vietnam/American war. The type of freedom it represents, is freedom from constraint and control to the “chaos” of bodily desire.<sup>134</sup> In this discourse, *cải lương* creates the lulling and sedative qualities of emotional consumption that detracted from political awareness. In this discourse against *cải lương*, for example, Hòa Lạc Bình claims that *cải lương* creates the lulling and sedative qualities of emotional consumption:

They manipulated *cải lương* using some of its operations of the voice, of songs that made plays sentimental and maudlin, creating emotional attachment and empathy in the viewer, making them feel for the characters who are sinning, as if they had no choice but to commit such acts, and those circumstances are only

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<sup>131</sup> See Philip Taylor, *Fragments of the Present*.

<sup>132</sup> Trà Linh, et al., *Văn Hóa, Văn Nghệ Miền Nam Dưới Chế Độ Mỹ-Ngụy* [Culture and the Arts in the South under the American-puppet Regime] (Ha Noi: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa, 1977), 1.

<sup>133</sup> Tôn Thất Lập, “Tiếng Hát Yêu Đòi và Niềm Tin” [The Song of Belief and Love for Life], in *Mười năm xây dựng nền văn hóa mới con người mới tại miền nam* [Ten years of Building a New Culture and New Person in the South] (1975-1985) (Ha Noi: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa, 1985), 44.

<sup>134</sup> Trần Hữu Tá, “‘Đồi Trụy Hóa Con Người’ Một Mục Tiêu Quan Trọng của Văn Hóa, Văn Nghệ Thực Dân Mới” [“Depraving Humans,” An Important Mission in Neocolonial Culture and Arts], in Trà Linh, et al., *Văn Hóa, Văn Nghệ Miền Nam Dưới Chế Độ Mỹ-Ngụy* [Culture and the Arts in the South under the American-puppet Regime], 366.

domestic and distinct, not due to one common national enemy, and the characters are of no fault of their own.<sup>135</sup>

In a Brecht-like critique, Hòa Lục Bình argues that the emotional pull of *cải lương* involves the viewer in such a linear narrative that he never questions the inevitability of events. For him, the emotions of the theater are strong when there is a clear audience and “purpose;” but the emotions demonstrated by *cải lương* do not have the higher purpose of promoting the right causes or representing the emotions of the people as they should: “but if we are laughing to erase everything, and everything is laughable, and everyone is laughable... then those who are good and those who are bad become indistinguishable.”<sup>136</sup> Excess emotion seems easily conflated with bad morality and adulteration of form lumped with hybridity: *cải lương* “predominantly includes the made-up, untruthful, low class humor, and profanity. For the most part the plot is borrowed and stitched up in a tacky way.”<sup>137</sup> Trần Hữu Tá, now a director of research and literature at the University of Social Sciences and Literature in Ho Chi Minh City, writes, “in the hodgepodge [of *cải lương*] there is French, English, inserted within epigrams, anecdotes, all from Pierre Benoi, Ernest Hemingway, not to mention Heraclide and Alfred de Vigny” in indiscriminant chaos.<sup>138</sup>

These critiques against *cải lương* reaffirm the socialist realist goal to portray the “truth” of a society moving towards socialism. The form has created “cheap, dirty, sinful” characteristics of capitalistic society, “valueless” “counterfeits,”<sup>139</sup> according to professor and theater critic Hoàng Như Mai. *Cải lương* plays have a performative excess and flair that he finds distracting to the actual *content* of the work:

At a *cải lương*, the audience just wants to hear singing, *vọng cổ*. And there’s even flaunting of the length of the performer’s breath, as if in one breath they can sing hundreds of words for nothing at all. Action, gestures are clichéd and habituated, and don’t even try to show character or circumstances... [they] display the riches and new clothes of the troupe, flaunt the beauty of the actor—as well as display parts of their bodies for titillation.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Hòa Lục Bình, “Sân Khấu Sài Gòn Trong Hai Chục Năm Qua” [Sai Gon Theater in the Last Twenty Years], in Trà Linh, et al., *Văn Hóa, Văn Nghệ Miền Nam Dưới Chế Độ Mỹ-Ngụy* [Culture and the Arts in the South under the American-puppet Regime], 230.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>138</sup> Trần Hữu Tá, “‘Đồi Trụy Hóa Con Người’ Một Mục Tiêu Quan Trọng của Văn Hóa, Văn Nghệ Thực Dân Mới” [“Depraving Humans,” An Important Mission in Neocolonial Culture and Arts], 367.

<sup>139</sup> Hoàng Như Mai, “Sân Khấu Các Tỉnh Phía Nam Trong Mười Năm Qua” [Southern Theater in the Last Ten Years], in *Mười năm xây dựng nền văn hóa mới con người mới tại miền nam* [Ten years of Building a New Culture and New Person in the South] (1975-1985), 27.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 33.

Too wrapped up in the excesses of form, *cải lương* plays, according to Hoàng Như Mai, as a result do not reveal the “truths” of society, but “distort history.” Their performative emphasis on form, gesture, and visual qualities, according to this argument, work against the principles of socialist realist theater, which aims to “make producers of theater follow the rules of truth.”<sup>141</sup> This argument disavows the performative stylizations of socialist realist theater, its historical reaching towards revolutionary and emotional “truths” beyond the “real,”<sup>142</sup> to claim the access of socialist culture to an *empirical* truth. Using *cải lương* as its antithesis, the advocates of socialist realism masculinize the form as unsentimental, purposeful, and action-oriented, while making claims to divulge both an empirical and teleological “real” in socialist history.

The critiques also deal with the threatening legacy of South’s capitalist economy. According to these critiques, *cải lương*’s example of private theater stood for the exploitation of the artist-cum-laborer in a capitalist market.<sup>143</sup> The actor is unprotected under a system that exploits his abilities while putting him at the mercy of demand, “selling and trading, [and] competition,” in an irreverent “market setting.”<sup>144</sup> According to Hoàng Như Mai, it wasn’t until the reform of *cải lương* theater in the South after reunification, that the de-commercialization and nationalization of theater made people no longer “prisoner” to money (25).<sup>145</sup> Yet the rhetoric also reflected the difficulty of taming the vigorous small-scale capitalist economy in the South and the failure of attempts at collectivization from 1977, that led to the decrease of production, the passive resistance of farmers, and a resurgence of a black market economy—economic failures that were aggravated by Vietnam’s war with Cambodia, a strained relationship with China, and increasing dependence on foreign aid from the Soviet Union.

The discourse against *cải lương* reflected anxieties of the state towards the hybrid identity and capitalist economy of the South. It became important to transform both the administration of *cải lương* and the characteristics of *cải lương* performance to define the new identity of the region. *Cải lương* performance in Ho Chi Minh City had to be “remade starting from scratch,” according to writer Trương Bình Tòng, a playwright and cadre who worked on the reorganization of *cải lương* after 1975.<sup>146</sup> The *Đoàn Văn Công Giải Phóng* (*National Liberation Performance Group*), which had performed *cải lương* in Communist territories during the war, became the first national *cải lương* troupe in the city. With the elimination of private *cải lương* troupes, two types of *cải lương* groups formed in the city: *đoàn nhà nước* (national group) under the management of the government, or *đoàn tập thể* (collectives) under the management and oversight of government cadres. *Cải lương* artists still determined as viable were grouped into collectives called *Sai Gon I*, *Sai Gon II*, and *Sai Gon III* to “fulfill audiences’ desires for

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Trường Chinh, “Marxism and Vietnamese Culture,” 285.

<sup>143</sup> See Hòa Lục Bình, “Sân Khấu Sài Gòn Trong Hai Chục Năm Qua” [Sai Gon Theater in the Last Twenty Years], 235-6.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 236-237.

<sup>145</sup> Hoàng Như Mai, “Southern Theater in the Last Ten Years,” 25.

<sup>146</sup> Trương Bình Tòng, *Nghệ Thuật Cải Lương: Những Trang Sử* [The Art of Cai Luong: A History] (Hanoi: Viện Sân Khấu, 1997), 219.

opera,” while a few “private” groups from the past were reestablished under collectives such as *Hương Mùa Thu*, *Thanh Minh-Thanh Nga*, and *Phước Chung*.<sup>147</sup>

In his summary about the reorganization of *cải lương* after 1975 in the South, Trương Bình Tòng describes the importance of regulating and making uniform (*trương đồng*) regional forms of *cải lương* into a national form.<sup>148</sup> Though there are regional differences such as dialect, “beyond the different dialects, *cải lương* still is recognizably *cải lương*, especially because of one self-contained part of it, that is the *traditional musical ensemble* of *cải lương*, that remains itself no matter where it develops and that cannot be confused with any other form of theater.”<sup>149</sup> Trương Bình Tòng’s emphasis on the regularization and nationalization of *cải lương* reflects the orientation towards making *cải lương* a more homogenous cultural form removed of its essentially hybrid qualities in post-1975 reforms. Philip Taylor writes that much of Chinese stories, costumes and choreography were eliminated from reformed *cải lương*, as well as “Western melodies, musical genres from the tango to love songs, eclectic foreign costumes, use of Western stories and motifs drawn from sources as varied as Ancient Rome, Egypt, India and the US Wild West.” Attempts to purify the hybridity of the form led many fans to feel the changes as a “severe breach with the genre’s tradition of eclecticism and sensual stimulation... To many, as both victim and vehicle of post-unification cultural reform, *cải lương* had become didactic and unappealing.”<sup>150</sup> According to Taylor, revolutionary reforms in the South after 1975 tamed the “excesses” of *cải lương* by directing its emotional components towards the building of socialist and revolutionary values. The emotions of *cải lương* were stripped of personal components, while its pathos was purged of sadness or “nuances of emotion that signified ‘indeterminacy.’” A music critic tells Philip Taylor that the post-war *cải lương* songs “never... [spoke] of love between two people or for one’s family. Neither did it refer to disappointments in love, nor to feelings of sorrow or loneliness.”<sup>151</sup> According to him, the melancholy and wistful melody *vọng cổ* (lament for the past) was even almost prohibited in the post-war because its melody was deemed “weak” and disheartening. Because the melody was too popular to discard, says the music critic, *vọng cổ* was then used as a way to “express sorrow... at some predicament” to present the opportunity for heroic resolution.<sup>152</sup>

Yet the reformed post-1975 *cải lương* plays did not abandon the historical relationship with sentimentality and narratives of woman and the family for their political functions. In remaking *cải lương*, the state would borrow from the immensely popular form to create nostalgia towards an original and coherent state, or “homeland,” as a way to erase the loss of Southern society and facilitate an imaginary of a united nation. Concerned with building a coherent nation after civil war, these reformed melodramas would feature the family as a site of wholeness towards which to return. Trương Bình Tòng’s 1975 *Cây Sầu Riêng Trổ Bông* (*The Durian Flowers*, or *The Flowering of*

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>150</sup> Philip Taylor, *Fragments of the Present*, 151.

<sup>151</sup> Quoted in Philip Taylor, “Opera and Cultural Identity in Ho Chi Minh City,” 145.

<sup>152</sup> Quoted in Ibid., 145-6.

*Personal Sorrow*)<sup>153</sup> is an example of reformed drama that stages alienated family members as primary protagonists who must reconcile from the trauma caused by colonialism. As the plays of the previous era dramatize the experience of exile to stage nostalgia for the “homeland” but also reject the authority of the patriarchal family to propel revolutionary action, these melodramas return the soldier back to a patriarchal order where abjected and feminized figures must unite back into the fold.

*The Flowering of Personal Sorrow* tells the story of Hạnh, a woman from Củ Chi in the Southern region of Vietnam, who marries Ngọc, an officer of the Republic of Vietnam, after her first husband Hùng (Courage), a soldier of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, leaves home to fight. The play stages a family torn apart by contradicting affiliations. Hạnh is a woman whose home is “between two lines of fire...belonging to one side at night and another side during the day.”<sup>154</sup> The inherently contradicting family/nation is built through the mistakes and betrayal of the woman who, according to her father, has not “kept whole her loyalty and love with her former husband so that the family is wholesome and full of love.”<sup>155</sup> Instead, he has sacrificed “a daughter and abandoned values of love and respect.”<sup>156</sup> Hạnh describes herself as lost and ignorant of “where to place herself,”<sup>157</sup> and compares herself to “the lady Kiều”<sup>158</sup> whose inevitable sacrifice affirms patriarchy. The nation and family are torn through the inevitable weakness and vulnerability of the woman to the brutality of the enemy/traitor who collaborates with American colonialists.

The play codes the American as the real enemy, the South as the feminized other (Hạnh) in need of reform, and the North as the site of the original nation. When Hạnh reunites with her former husband Hùng, he reassures her that through her mistakes the American is the real enemy: “I’ve come back to heal all of our painful loss, if we are to lose anything, it should be our evil enemy, the American attackers.”<sup>159</sup> Meanwhile, the South is represented as the site of exploitation, promiscuity, and pathology. As a “bar girl” who allows “anyone to play with a flower and break and sell its branches,”<sup>160</sup> Mai represents the degeneracy and exploitation/victimization of Southern women in American neocolonialism: “Who said I was ever proud of myself...abused and raped/ victim of pacifism and collaboration/ I faltered because I was weak/ I blame you and I denounce this society.”<sup>161</sup>

Mai vows to leave Sài Gòn, which she describes with nostalgia and loss in her *vọng cổ*:

<sup>153</sup> The author Trương Bình Tòng is also known as Hoài Linh.

<sup>154</sup> Trương Bình Tòng, *Cây Sầu Riêng Trổ Bông* [The Durian Flowers, or, The Flowering of Personal Sorrow] in *Kịch Hát Việt Nam Chọn Lạc Cải Lương*, ed. Thế Ngọc [Selected Cải Lương Vietnamese Musical Theater] (Hà Nội: NXB Sân Khấu, 2002), 1016.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 1013.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 1015.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 1020.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 1053.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 1036.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 1037.

The night is long, in the city where shame stacks higher than buildings...landmarks of injustice and years of oppression, under the seductive lights of the city...And behind them are dark alleys where I've walked through the muddy streets where crime is painted with roses, where evil is stacked on top of tall story buildings...

Do you want to leave or are you still longing for it? In that society there are bars, some "dancing" where people can count thousands...dollars that have destroyed a way of living and ruined us spiritually...I have wrestled within a society where money rules all, and all degeneration receive accolades. Today I swear that I will leave...to model after those who are noble, who dare to sacrifice for their homeland.<sup>162</sup>

Through Mai's emotional *vong cổ* song, the play attempts to deal with the trauma of the loss of the Southern way of life after major reforms with the Communist take-over. It addresses the loss of and "longing" for the city, but also emphasizes the social and moral problems born with American presence: prostitution, drug-use, crime, and an industry catering to foreigners with dollars and salaries completely out of proportion to locals. As much as the lamentations make the South an abject terrain of moral degeneration, they also sympathize with the attachment to the city but urge citizens to move on from dependence on an American service economy that no longer exists.

The play asks audiences to turn towards a "homeland" situated by Hùng and his daughter Sầu Riêng, a name meaning *durian*, and *personal sorrow*. This Sầu Riêng represents the untouched fertility of the homeland, according to Út:

In the past the durian was whole, the leaves were fresh from the branches, uncle and I lived as neighbors, and when we visited one another all we had to do was step over the tree and the small bridge. Our life was peaceful until the sudden storm, husbands forced into the Côn Đảo, and I was left with two children adrift.<sup>163</sup>

The images here are multiple. The fruit of the homeland is also the personal sorrow of pain and loss, that when buried away, bears fruit to feed the home. Vietnamese identity coded this way *is* personal sorrow, but it is also the denial of personal agony for the sake of the nation. The play urges personal emotions to be buried away for the service of the country, but the *cải lương* form builds the emotions of the audience to great heights. It is the contradiction between the image of the nation as personal sorrow, and as the burying of private pathos, that drives the emotional heights of the play. The play operates through emotional iconographies of the personal and familial—it begins with the central image of a father holding his child while she is sleeping, only to have to leave when she wakes. It builds up the desires and longings for the lost family in the tearful songs between Hùng and Hạnh, only to have Hùng urge for deferral of personal sorrow until the time is appropriate for personal happiness or grieving. When Hung leaves at the end of

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 1072.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 1007.



the play to continue to fight so that all personal sorrows can flower one day, Út says, “with the loss of the nation, how can we prevent the losses to families, but I believe that when there is independence, in the common happiness of the nation, there will be individual happiness for all.” The play demonstrates contradictory impulses to dramatize the loss of the nation, the family, and personal sorrow, while urging the burying of such emotions. In both advocating for the deferral of personal sorrow, and the feeling of such sentiment, the play shows the historical contradiction between socialist realism’s prescription that art should create *communal* (not personal) affect, and the need of socialist realist works to stage the national in *personal* terms to build the right feelings of subjects.

The story of *cải lương* constructs the contradictory potentials of melodrama in twentieth century Vietnam. *Cải lương* uniquely generated a multiplicity of meanings in its diverse mix of French, Chinese, and Vietnamese cultural forms to allow syncretic imaginings of national identity and modernity. Through the First and Second Indochina Wars, the Party repressed particular forms of sentimental expression at the same time as it constructed its own revolutionary form of *cải lương* that produced melodramatic narratives of woman as the nation, colonial exile, and revolutionary heroism. Yet in the aftermath of the Vietnam/American war, in the ideological writings of the state that flattened out syncretic identity as colonial identity, melodrama was also a form imposed onto the bodies of Southerners to over-amplify their cultural and geographical terrain as excessive. The needs to construct a unified nation under the Party led to a simultaneous rejection of *cải lương* that used anticolonial discourse to alienate and tame the South, and the use of a reformed *cải lương* that built nostalgia for a coherent family-state while reclaiming abjected citizens.

The Party’s anxiety towards, as well as the use of melodrama to do political work in the twentieth century reveals a historical contradiction between socialist culture and sentimental, melodramatic expression. While socialist realist ideological writings stress the need for works to be in touch deeply with the feelings of the nation and of the masses as a whole (and not with isolated individuals), socialist realist works use the iconography of the personal and familial as a means of allegorizing the national. This centering on the personal and sentimental offers the grounding for national construction but also empowers a melodramatic form that could harbor and generate a multiplicity of meanings and potential actions outside of official constructs. This characteristic of melodrama as both threatening and safe creates the subversive and conservative potentials of the form in the aftermath of reunification, when market reform opens up discourses of the personal as a means of negotiating the ideological ambivalences of market socialism. Artists would borrow from the ostensibly safe iconography of the family melodrama to articulate ideological conflicts in the language of the personal. The state would also borrow from these urgings of personal, sentimental, and ethical reform, to deflect its own ambivalences between socialism and marketization, between nationalism and global integration, in the neoliberal era.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Model Dissent: Lư Quang Vũ and the Melodramatic Performance of Renovation in Post-War Vietnam

*“If one wants to make a critique of society one needs to do it within certain emotional stories...all writers and artists know this”*<sup>1</sup>

–Hiền, Journalist and Researcher

*“We realize that we have many shortcomings in dealing with cadres, workers, and civil servants...Your criticisms are valid...We won’t try to avoid taking responsibility. I also know my responsibility. You can blame me. You can shoot me for this. I will voluntarily accept discipline—self-conscious discipline.”*<sup>2</sup>

–Đỗ Mười, Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam,  
1988 Speech to the trade union congress

On August 29, 1988, Lư Quang Vũ, one of the most prominent playwrights in the history of modern Vietnamese theater, was pronounced dead in a traffic accident at Phú Lương Bridge en route from Hai Phong to Ha Noi. News of the death of Lư Quang Vũ, his wife the poet Xuân Quỳnh, and their son Lư Quang Thơ, shocked the artist community and the country at large. Referred to as the “Moliere of Vietnam,”<sup>3</sup> Lư Quang Vũ had become a cultural icon known to “represent the sentiments of the people,” by courageously speaking up against government and societal ills in his highly popular dramas at a time of post-war economic deprivation and ideological questioning about socialism.<sup>4</sup> Critic Tất Thắng remembers in a memoir, “In this whole decade, there has been no other funeral that was as big or strongly felt in the whole capital as this one.”<sup>5</sup> Thousands joined the funeral procession, lined the streets of the city to watch the casket pass, and lighted incense near the deceased’s home. At the funeral, members from all segments of society honored Vũ as a distinguished national artist representative of the *đổi mới* (renovation) period of market reforms, decentralization, and de-collectivization beginning officially with the Sixth Party Congress in 1986. Revealing his status as a nationally celebrated artist, the state gave Lư Quang Vũ the Ho Chi Minh Prize posthumously in 2000 for his contributions to building the socialist republic.

<sup>1</sup> Hiền, interview by author, Ho Chi Minh City, June 22, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Philip Taylor, *Fragments of the Present*, 60-61.

<sup>3</sup> Christine Hoche, “The Moliere of Vietnam is Lư Quang Vũ,” [Moliere ở Việt Nam Tên Là Lư Quang Vũ] in *Lư Quang Vũ: Tài Năng và Lao Động Nghệ Thuật* [Lư Quang Vũ: Artistic Talent and Work], ed. Lư Khánh Thơ (Ha Noi: Văn Hoá Thông Tin, 2001), 162.

<sup>4</sup> Ha Noi residents, interviews by the author, Ha Noi, Vietnam, July 14-15, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Tất Thắng, “Lư Quang Vũ: Anh Đã là ‘Người Trong Cõi Nhớ’” [Lư Quang Vũ: He has Become ‘A Person in Memory,’] *Artistic Talent*, ed. Lư Khánh Thơ, 259.

As Vũ won unambiguous praise as a national representative of *đổi mới*, a common rumor reverberated that his death was part of a conspiracy by the government to silence a dissident voice.<sup>6</sup> A recent article written in 2006 by Lê Bảo Trung still discusses the mysteries of this death and asks the question, “what are the untold ‘truths’ about the death of Luu Quang Vũ and Xuân Quỳnh?” Doãn Châu, a stage designer who, along with his wife and daughter, was present in Vũ’s car and survived the accident, wrote: “until this day people still ask me whether the accident was real or made-up...people are indeed gossipy and sensational!”<sup>7</sup> Even twenty years after the playwright’s death, a Ha Noi shopkeeper explains freshly, “Luu Quang Vũ was too truthful, he lived so truthfully that he could not live for long...He was very brave and paid the price for speaking the truth.”<sup>8</sup> The rumor also circulates in the international, diasporic world. When members of Central Dramatic Theater (*Nhà Hát Kịch Việt Nam*) came to Seattle to perform Vũ’s famous play *Truong Ba’s Soul in the Butcher’s Skin* in 1998, Vietnamese-American anti-communist strikers protested their performance. According to a troupe member, “to increase the dramatic effect, they screamed that this play was censored in Viet Nam and that its playwright was assassinated.”<sup>9</sup>

How is Luu Quang Vũ simultaneously embraced as a national figure of renovation by the most official and “progressive” members of the state, while also symbolizing that which is so antithetical to the state that people believe that he was assassinated in a government conspiracy? The casting of Luu Quang Vũ as both hero of renovation and radical dissident who becomes a victim of state reprisal reflects melodramas about Luu Quang Vũ that use the personal, moral, and sentimental sometimes to heighten, sometimes to deflect his political conflict with the state. This chapter evaluates how the dramatization of Luu Quang Vũ’s life as a sentimental and personal tale of moral suffering in popular discourse, journalism, and critical reception, contributes to the post-war narrative of renovation that situates reform as personal and ethical in order to structure the ideological ambivalence of “market socialism.” By also performing a close reading of Luu Quang Vũ’s 1984 play *The Ninth Pledge*, one of the plays that earned him the Ho Chi Minh Prize in 2000, the chapter argues that while melodramatic criticism shapes Luu Quang Vũ into a representative of state reform, the playwright crafts his own stage melodrama to make social and political critiques that pass the constraints of state censorship. Countering claims that melodrama deters political

<sup>6</sup> From fieldnotes, October 2006-July 2007; Phùng Dũng, “Cuốn Sách Đầu Tiên Về Luu Quang Vũ” [The First Book about Luu Quang Vu], *Hà Nội Mới*, April 18, 1989; Doãn Châu, “Niềm Bí Ẩn của Sáng Tạo và Sự Chết” [The Mystery of Creation and Death], in Luu Khánh Thơ, *Artistic Talent*, 230-241; Lê Bảo Trung, “Vụ Tai Nạn Luu Quang Vũ Xuân Quỳnh: Mùa Hè Định Mệnh” [Luu Quang Vu and Xuan Quynh’s Accident: The Fatal Summer], *Diễn Đàn Dân Trí Việt Nam*, August 28, 2006, <http://dantri.com.vn/Sukien/2006/8/137882.vip> (accessed February 14, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Doãn Châu, “Niềm Bí Ẩn của Sáng Tạo và Sự Chết” [Mystery of Creation and Death], 236.

<sup>8</sup> Hanoi Shopkeeper, interview by the author, Ha Noi, July 15, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Hồ Anh Thái, “Đêm Không Ngủ ở Seattle” [A Sleepless Night in Seattle], in Unknown Author, *Họ Trở Thành Nhân Vật Của Tôi* [They’ve Become My Characters] (Ha Noi, Hội Nhà Văn, 2003).

action through its encouragement of a consumption of affect, melodrama by and about Luu Quang Vũ show that by displacing political and ideological conflicts onto the realm of the personal, melodrama mimics the ideological ambivalence of post-war Vietnamese renovation and, through its generation of excesses of meanings, structures the grammar of both conservative and subversive political action in the country.

### **Between Market Reform And Socialism**

In December 1986, the Sixth National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) responded to Vietnam's socio-economic crisis by announcing the policy of *đổi mới* that aimed at transforming the Vietnamese economy from a centralized planning to a market system without challenging socialism. The state's legitimacy was based on the legacy of its success in freeing the country from French, American, and Japanese colonial aggression and leading the country towards modernization through socialism. After the end of the Vietnam/American war and the party's "reunification" of the country under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, state power would be critically challenged by failures of collectivization in the South, the rise and fall of factions that took advantage of the state's Southern failures, tensions with China over Cambodia, economic turmoil as a result of the international embargo led by the United States, and increasing dependence on foreign aid from the Soviet Union. Protection of state power through and against market reform, according to David Elliot, has created the country's "central dilemma" of "how to achieve change within the framework of socialism without eroding the bases of socialism itself."<sup>10</sup> Negotiation between economic reform and political stability has led to such movements as the expansion of creative freedom in the period from 1986-89 that served to promote economic reform, followed by retrenchment of cultural reforms with economic recovery and rising anxieties that economic reforms would lead to political turnover.<sup>11</sup> Another way of negotiating this balance has been to separate economic reform from political reform; General Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh, for example, stresses in his speech at the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the party: "As in the past, we stand for parallel renovation in both economic and political fields, with emphasis on economic renovation. Renovation in the political sphere ought be carried out...steadily...causing no political instability."<sup>12</sup> As David Elliot argues, the government has "compartmental[ized]... democracy" in the economic sphere as "a way of avoiding discussion of political democracy."<sup>13</sup>

The instability of incomplete neoliberalism that negotiates between state power (socialism) and market reform becomes manifest in the particular relevance of melodrama as a source of political action in contemporary Vietnam. In the twentieth century, melodrama has been a highly contested form in Vietnamese literature, particularly in tension with the Vietnamese Communist Party's agenda of socialist

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<sup>10</sup> David Elliot, "Dilemmas of Reform in Vietnam," in William Turley and Mark Selden, *Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism: Doi Moi in Comparative Perspective* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 53.

<sup>11</sup> David Wurfel, "Doi Moi in Comparative Perspective," Turley and Selden, *Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism*, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 41.

<sup>13</sup> David Elliot, "Dilemmas of Reform in Vietnam," 73.

realism. As shown in the previous chapter, the confrontation between sentimental aspects of melodrama and the requirements of socialist realism shaped the development of *cải lương* and socialist realism from the First Indochina War through the post-war. The socialist realist proscription of personal and “sad” stories countering the state has created the subversive quality of melodrama in post-war Vietnam. With *đổi mới* reforms of the Sixth Party Congress, writers like Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Dương Thu Hương, and Bảo Ninh used elements of melodrama to contest regulations of socialist realism and resisted its proscription against “sadness.” As I argued in Chapter One, *đổi mới* literature and arts, such as the documentary *Chuyện Từ Tế* (*Story of Kindness*), show that in post-war Vietnam, ideological questioning occurs not directly, but through melodramas combining affect and moral discourse.

### Luu Quang Vũ and the Melodrama of *Đổi Mới*

The example of Luu Quang Vũ shows that melodrama is used towards resistant ends as well as towards the building of a state discourse of renovation based on self criticism, moral reform, and “market socialism” that situates ethical mistakes and renovation in the locus of the individual rather than the political or ideological. Luu Quang Vũ’s biography offers the raw materials for the construction of a reform narrative. The playwright was born on April 17, 1948 in the midst of the First Indochina War. His father, Luu Quang Thuận, was a devoted nationalist playwright whose plays were performed in the propaganda campaigns for the Vietnamese Communist Party through the 1950s and 1960s. At seventeen years of age, Luu Quang Vũ eschewed options of art school to volunteer for military service for North Vietnam (DRV) in 1965. His life took a ideological turn from strong faith in socialist and nationalist ideology to painful questioning of nationalist belief, which he expresses in his 1970-1975 “black poetry” that his mother explained as “pessimistic or suspicious of the system” and was therefore not publishable, some even until today.<sup>14</sup> In addition to his poor attendance record, this poetry caused Vu to be reprimanded several times in the military and resulted in his short service, according to friends, fellow artists, and family members. Furthermore, the strife in the military caused him to struggle with employment in his first years out. This was also a time of personal heartbreak when Tô Uyên, his sweetheart from youth and famous actress of the wartime film *The Passerine Bird* (1962), divorced him after one year of marriage and the birth of their son Luu Minh Vũ. But Vũ would then become one of the central figures of *đổi mới* reform through his highly successful renovation drama (eventually marrying the poet Xuân Quỳnh). The making of Luu Quang Vũ into a model of reform requires a series of melodramas in cultural discourse that reframe his ideological and political struggles against the establishment as personal suffering that can be overcome with moral reform.

Writings about Luu Quang Vũ reveal a painful negotiation with the history of his controversial poetry, his poor military record, and his period of political alienation after leaving the military. It can be argued his work before 1970 used a strong personal voice

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<sup>14</sup> Vũ Thị Khánh, “Luu Quang Vũ Cuộc Đời và Năm Tháng” [Luu Quang Vũ: Life and Time], in *Xuân Quỳnh—Luu Quang Vũ: Tình Yêu và Sự Nghiệp* [Xuân Quỳnh—Luu Quang Vũ: Love and Career], ed. Luu Khánh Thơ (Ha Noi: Văn Hoá Thông Tin, 2001).

Reprinted in Luu Khánh Thơ, *Artistic Talent*, 213.

to dramatize the nationalist ethic—the nostalgia and hope for home, the difficult but noble fight of soldiers, and a faith and hope of eventual victory.<sup>15</sup> In “To My Older Brothers,” a young girl watches soldiers pass her and promise to work as hard as they do (“*my hands hold the rifle*”) and to welcome them back when they return: *Tomorrow the American soldiers will perish/ You will come to my village/ The plants grow, the leaves will jostle/ To welcome the heroes...*<sup>16</sup> Vũ expresses the nobility and promise of the war in the enraptured and innocent spirit of a youth. He idealizes “home,” or motherland, in the poem “Garden in City,” where the garden of warmth, beauty and fertility, associated with woman or “little sister” (*em*), gives the soldier who must journey to war a source of home and meaning: “*In the city there is a cool garden/ In millions of people there is my lover/ Bees search for honey in a warm afternoon/ Entering the garden, they forget how to leave... Your piece of garden is still green/ Where I picked the first bunches of youth/ Where autumn comes and the white clouds will still return...*”<sup>17</sup> Lư Quang Vũ’s early

<sup>15</sup> Even at this time, Vũ’s poetry was a complex mixture of the personal and political, of optimism and moral ambiguity. Anh Ngọc provocatively argues that the traces of Vũ’s later poetry are already present in his early, more “nationalistic” poetry. Even in an early poem like “Vườn Trong Phố” [Garden in the City], according to Ngọc, Vũ already surpasses the contemporary poetry that “serviced the needs of the time,” revealing a personal, universal life quality that goes beyond the contingencies of the war situation. Vũ uses the pronoun *ta* (we) but is really talking in the *tôi* (I) form, Anh Ngọc, “Vườn Trong Phố của Lư Quang Vũ” [Lư Quang Vũ’s Garden in the City], *Thế Giới Phụ Nữ*, November 1999. Reprinted *Artistic Talent*, ed. Lư Khánh Thơ, 110.

<sup>16</sup> Lư Quang Vũ, “Gửi Tới Các Anh” [To My Older Brothers], *Artistic Talent*, ed. Lư Khánh Thơ, 309-311.

... Các anh đi nhiều chốn quê hương  
 Đừng quên nơi này nhé!  
 Ngày mai tan giặc Mỹ  
 Các anh về quê em  
 Xoan xưa đã lớn, lá biếc cành chen  
 Đón mừng chiến sĩ...  
 Bên sông rì rào bãi mía  
 Như muôn lời em gửi các anh...

<sup>17</sup> Lư Quang Vũ, “Vườn Trong Phố” [Garden in the City], in *Artistic Talent*, ed. Lư Khánh Thơ, 314-315.

Trong thành phố có một vườn cây mát  
 Trong triệu người có em của ta  
 Buổi trưa nắng bày ong đi kiếm mật  
 Vào vườn rồi ong chẳng nhớ lối ra

Vườn em là nơi động gió trời xa  
 Hoa tím chim kêu bàng thưa lá nắng  
 Con nhện đi về giăng tơ trắng  
 Trái tròn căng mạp nhựa sinh sôi...

Mảnh vườn em vẫn là mảnh vườn xanh

work gives an intimate, personal expression of socialist realist values of love of nation/woman, optimism, and faith in the revolutionary cause.

Luu Quang Vũ's poems from the 1970-1975 period, however, represent a significant rupture from his nationalistic style of the early to mid-sixties. Vũ grouped these poems in a collection he entitled *The Book of Disordered Pages* (*Cuốn Sách Xếp Lầm Trang*), which were poems not printed at the time but only read to closest friends.<sup>18</sup> These poems seemed indeed “disordered” in that they did not fit in with the canon of contemporary published works that affirmed values of war and nation.<sup>19</sup> They instead painted a picture of a dark, pessimistic, desperate world of lost hope, innocence, and meaning.

These Luu Quang Vũ poems alter the optimistic central images of socialist realism, casting darkness on the nostalgic images of the feminized home/land and the determined soldier-hero. In the poem “Swarm of Bees in the Deep Night” (“Bầy Ong Trong Đêm Sâu”), the “bees” from “Garden in the City” reappear, but this time, rather than gaining sweetness from a garden where they find home, they discover an “empty nest.” The home/land, the girl, and the honey they search for are “scent[s] long lost.”

*...In a dream life awakens  
The small yellow bee looks for you<sup>20</sup>  
The green bee with black eyes  
The white bee helpless in the empty nest  
The red bee is already wandering lost  
Flying in search of a scent long lost...*

*Where are you, where are you sleeping  
What soft words do your lips breathe...*

*How could I know that your ship was a pirate's ship  
You robbed my whole life, you took everything  
Tied me to the sad pole of love  
The storm stirs, lightning bolts, the boat tips  
You stand there trembling, dazed and lost...<sup>21</sup>*

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*Nơi ban đầu lòng ta wòm tổ mật  
Nơi ta hái những chùm thơ thứ nhất  
Nơi thu sang mây trắng vẫn bay về...*

<sup>18</sup> Vương Trí Nhàn, “Những Bài Thơ ‘Viễn Vong Cay Đắng U Buồn’ Viết Trong Những Năm Chiến Tranh” [The Poems ‘Bitter and Sad Improbability’ Written in the War Years], in *Bầy Ong Trong Đêm Sâu* [Swarm of Bees in the Deep Night], 1993, Reprinted in *Artistic Talent*, ed. Luu Khánh Thơ, 64; Lê Minh Khuê, “Luu Quang Vũ Nhà Thơ” [The Poet Luu Quang Vũ], *Thế Thao Văn Hoá*, May 7, 1997; Vũ Thị Khánh, “Luu Quang Vũ Cuộc Đời và Năm Tháng” [Luu Quang Vũ: Life and Time], 211.

<sup>19</sup> Phạm Khải, *Sự Sống Thật: Bình Thơ* [Real Life: Poetry Criticism] (Ha Noi: Thanh Niên, 1992), 28.

<sup>20</sup> This pronoun is *em*, meaning “little girl,” “younger sister,” or “lover.”

The images representing the country and homeland in “Garden in City,” girl and honey, are beyond reach. The heroes that search for her, both the dreaming man and the bees seeking fulfillment, are abandoned and confused. They realize that the girl who had represented home, meaning, and fertility is actually a “pirate” who has robbed the speaker of his whole life. As the boat tips over, the girl, who had once been a source of all meaning, loses all intention and understanding, becoming inactive and powerless. In the poem “Youth” (“Những Tuổi Thơ”), Vũ furthermore portrays a new generation in a bleak world deplete of old narratives of hope or meaning: “*You don’t know how to love or to dream/ You never read the pretty books/ You don’t believe in those songs.*” The old world grounded in an order that gave it hope, collapses before a world of “devious, shifty eyes” and “flowers that never blossomed.”<sup>22</sup> In his 1970-1975 poetry Luu Quang Vũ deviates from fundamental values of socialist realism and nationalist thought using pathos and “sadness,” exposing how the belief and dream of sacrifice for the nation has led instead to the loss of confidence in oneself, and the withering of a nation once deemed fertile and life-giving.

While it often goes unmentioned in writings, friends and family tell of a period of strife that Luu Quang Vũ experienced in his military service for the DRV as a result of political conflicts. “No one was allowed to write anything personal in the military,” according to a family member of Vũ, “but [he] kept writing and sent his works home with a friend who had to sneak it out so that it would not be confiscated.”<sup>23</sup> According to Vũ’s mother in a memoir, Luu Quang Vũ was formally rebuked several times for his writing and made to promise before his troupe that he would not continue to write. Though it remains unclear whether Vũ was formally removed from the military or whether he himself left prematurely, Vũ terminated his service and entered a period of economic

<sup>21</sup> Luu Quang Vũ, “Bầy Ong Trong Đêm Sâu” [Swarm of Bees in the Deep Night], in *Artistic Talent*, ed. Lru Khánh Thơ, 318-319.

*...Trong cơn mơ là cuộc đời thức dậy  
Con ong vàng bé nhỏ đến tìm em  
Con ong xanh có đôi mắt đen  
Con ong trắng bơ vơ trong tổ vắng  
Con ong đỏ là con ong thơ thần  
Bay đi tìm hương nhụy mất từ lâu...*

*Em ở đâu em ngủ ở phương nào  
Môi em thở những điều gì khe khẽ...*

*Ai ngờ tàu em lại là tàu cướp biển  
Em cướp hết cuộc đời anh, em lấy hết  
Trói anh vào cột buồm của tình yêu  
Bão táp nổi lên, chớp giạt, tàu xiêu  
Em đứng đó hãi hùng ngơ ngác...*

<sup>22</sup> Luu Quang Vũ, “Những Tuổi Thơ” [Youth], in *Artistic Talent*, ed. Lru Khánh Thơ, 329-330.

<sup>23</sup> Luu Quang Vũ’s family member, interview with author, Hanoi, July 14, 2008.



hardship and isolation. It is not recorded that he was formally excluded from civil service; however, according to such friends as member of the Association of Theater Quách, and playwright Minh, because of his poor military record, he could not find employment.<sup>24</sup> To literary critic Huy, this was his “prodigal” period when he defied his father—the state—and lived in social and civil isolation.<sup>25</sup>

Most writings about Vũ in the contemporary period elide his period of controversial questioning to protect the nationalist view of the poet. In Kiều Văn’s introduction to the 2004 anthology of Vũ’s poetry, for example, she concentrates on his love poems and nationalist poetry, only mentioning his “sad” poetry in a short paragraph by contextualizing it within the struggles of the war. Biographical material also project an unambiguously nation-loving Lư Quang Vĩ; a selection of his printed diary entries, for example, include excerpts that show his youthful excitement entering the war and stops there.

One of very few to acknowledge Lư Quang Vĩ’s political deviance but empathize with him, literary and drama critic Vương Trí Nhàn politicizes Vĩ’s poetry by arguing that it is an expression of a commonly shared experience of his generation in his essay “The Poems... Written in the War Years.” As a friend of Lư Quang Vĩ, Nhàn read these unpublished poems during the Vietnam/American war, and looks back to see that they represent a part of their lives that they “because of some reason... had to deny, forget,” but that they did not have to for the same reason “deny forever.”<sup>26</sup> Nhàn experienced a great contradiction when reading Vĩ’s poetry; on the one hand he was uncomfortable, felt that it was the “converse of the shared psychology of the times, that it contradicted the shared optimism people experienced.” Yet on the other hand “I was interested, felt in it a part of the happiness and sadness in me and looked for it, allowed myself to hoard it, long and want to return to it, like I desired to see a picture of myself.”<sup>27</sup> Nhàn contextualizes Vĩ’s poetry within the historical setting of Ha Noi in the 1970s that reflected Vĩ’s poems:

Ha Noi was like a sick patient. Every time the cautionary signals rang, we saw the orphans appear. Even in times of peace, our glorious city was dilapidated and dirty... From all sides, suspicion surrounded...<sup>28</sup>

While he and his friends tried to resist the poems, “deep down... we knew that... our hearts, or situation, were in those torn pages of poetry.”<sup>29</sup>

Yet, Nhàn’s historical admission of the link between generational experience and Lư Quang Vĩ’s poetry interestingly exists in tension with melodrama; Nhàn’s discussion is filled with discourse that personalizes and moralizes Vĩ’s behavior, interpreting Vĩ’s poetry to be a result of his moral and emotional weaknesses, which he

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<sup>24</sup> Quách, interview with author, Ha Noi, July 15-16, 2007; Minh, interview with author, Ho Chi Minh City, November 21, 2006; Fieldnotes, July 20, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Huy, interview with author, Hanoi, July 13, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> Vương Trí Nhàn, “The Poems... Written in the War Years,” 64.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-70.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

disparages: “Isn’t it possible that sometimes, [Vũ] displayed arrogance?...Exaggerated his own personal suffering? Lamented more than showing endurance and patience, or controlling his own pain? We all recognized that.”<sup>30</sup> The emphasis on Vũ’s suffering suggests that his poetry results purely from his own excesses rather than a shared experience reflective of larger social or political problems. The interspersing of historical contextualization, and melodramatic criticism—the evaluation of Lư Quang Vũ through the view of his personal and moral life (and the melodrama of his life)—shows the operation of melodrama as a critical mode that facilitates the articulation of controversial political views as it personalizes and sentimentalizes them.

Though Vương Trí Nhàn is the only one to make such a bold connection between Vũ’s questions and a generational experience, he also shows just as strongly how a melodramatic mode of criticism also reshapes Lư Quang Vũ’s ideological questioning as personal turmoil and moral ambivalence to weaken its political critique. In the 1999 article “Forever Forty Years-Old,” written six years later than “The Poems... Written in the War Years,” Nhàn also outlines a typical narrative that displaces Vũ’s political and ideological questioning with a personal story of moral questioning and recovery, in which his break-up with his first wife, the gorgeous Tô Uyên, stands in as the cause of his depoliticized “sadness” while domestic bliss with his second wife represents his moral recovery from wayward hopelessness. Born of a good family of good culture and politics, Vũ was one of the youngest in the generation of “anti-American” poets treated with affection, but he became a “rotten son.”<sup>31</sup> Nhàn tells the story of Vũ’s life as the story of the “return of the prodigal son”<sup>32</sup> who had gone astray and found his way back through the assistance of—no one other than his second dutiful wife—who returned hope to his life and rescued him from a period of lost hope and broken-heartedness.<sup>33</sup>

The romance, and ellipses of political issues, in this personal melodrama is best demonstrated by Nguyễn Thụy Kha’s article “Lư Quang Vũ’s First Love:”

*The Russian girl in The Passerine Bird has become a shining myth in the last three decades of our time. And young Vũ of fourteen years of age had then to write letters to get to know this young star-argentea. But like an unconscious force creating the devotion between these two people in countless letters that would be torn into shreds, the letter on April 2, 1962 from Vũ to Uyên was respectfully saved until this very day. They truly had one another in the devastating war against Americans. That was April 1967...*

*Because of stringent beliefs of the period, Vũ could not stay in the military for long. He left in not so ‘illustrious’ a state. But regardless, their marriage was celebrated in 1970...*

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Vương Trí Nhàn, “*Sóng Mãi Tuổi 40*” [Forever Forty Years-Old], in *Cánh Bướm Và Đóa Hướng Dương* [Butterfly Wings and Sunflower]: *Tiểu Luận Phê Bình* (Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Nghệ T.P. Hồ Chí Minh, 1999), 270.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 271.

*In his last letter to Uyên, Vũ had written, “These days, I have been so sad remembering everything... We can’t live with one another anymore. Please forgive me, forgive me for all of my mistakes. Forgive me because even I am unhappy, my heart is crushed, and I am in grief...”*

*They had loved one another. They had wedded. And they parted. The truth is that this love has seeped into the pages of Lư Quang Vũ’s writing...<sup>34</sup>*

Sadness from the loss of love, as Nguyễn Thị Minh Thái argues, therefore becomes the main cause of his ‘black poetry,’ which she melodramatizes as his ‘sad’ poetry: “Everyone knows that Lư Quang Vũ’s poetry is sad, a sadness profoundly deep and ever present, seeping into all of his poetry, occupying a place that reveals what is distinct and personal about Vũ’s sadness.”<sup>35</sup>

These emotional narratives in the post-war also function to reform ruptures of the past. Melodramas about Vũ attempt to reconcile his contestation with official ideology. For example, a strange 1998 article entitled “An Original Reprimand” (“Bản Kiểm Điểm Có Một Không Hai”) uses melodrama to stage healing between young Vũ and the military facility where he supposedly did not serve for long. Dương Duy Ngũ tells the story of an incident involving Lư Quang Vũ during his service as a soldier of group B71 in the Red Star air-force. According to the article, one day, Vũ went out to spend time with his “lover” overnight. Past curfew, the guards worried that Vũ had an accident. When Vũ returned he was reprimanded and forced to write himself up. Vũ locked himself up in a room for two hours and came out with a report entitled “My Love!... To my Tố Uyên” (“Em!... Tặng Tố Uyên”), nothing less than a love poem to his girlfriend. Astonished at first, his captain could only “smile in amusement before a talent that had such a special way of admitting his error... Of course, the censure against Vũ for leaving his troop to ‘sleep’ overnight outside the camp was erased.”<sup>36</sup>

As the only article (besides that of his mother) that I found to talk directly about Vũ’s reprimands in the military, this article offers a light-hearted rendition of the supposed incident in almost a fictional tone, even adding a poem which does not sound like it belongs to Lư Quang Vũ, from the memory of the captain. The article personalizes Vũ’s conflicts in the military as a conflict between youthful irresponsible love, and caring and forgiving authority, creating satisfaction and enjoyment in the reader while excising any ideological sources of conflict. For the tenth anniversary of Vũ’s death, the article stages a reconciliation between Lư Quang Vũ and the military, laughing both the infringement and the censure off.

The emphasis on the personal and ethical in Vũ’s life story and works is reminiscent of a renovation narrative of the Sixth National Congress in 1986 that also

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<sup>34</sup> Nguyễn Thụy Kha, “Mối Tình Đầu Tiên Của Lư Quang Vũ” [Lư Quang Vũ’s First Love], *Tạp Chí Truyền Hình 13* (1997): 10-11.

<sup>35</sup> Nguyễn Thị Minh Thái, “Thơ Tình Lư Quang Vũ” [Lư Quang Vũ’s Love Poetry], in *Artistic Talent*, ed. Lư Khánh Thơ, 93.

<sup>36</sup> Dương Duy Ngũ, “Bản Kiểm Điểm Có Một Không Hai” [An Original Reprimand], *Văn Nghệ*, August 1, 1998.

focuses on transcending national challenges through self critique, moral reform, and the preservation of (market) socialism. The discourse of self-critique, according to Philip Taylor, is an “indispensable ritual aiding [the party’s] passage through modernity’s narrow gate...those who most energetically demonstrated their past errors could reclaim leadership as facilitators of the new truth.”<sup>37</sup> The “confessional mode” of *đổi mới* is also demonstrated by Nguyễn Văn Linh’s call to the press to “expose bad examples and practices,”<sup>38</sup> extending the objective and “truth-telling” orientation to the realms of journalism, art and literature in the declaration of “creative freedom” in Resolution 8 of December 1987 by Trần Độ. Secretary-General Đỗ Mười, for example, shows the predilection for the public admission of error that reaches dramatic self-castigation: “We realize that we have many shortcomings in dealing with cadres, workers and civil servants. These shortcomings are quite clear. Your criticisms are valid...We won’t try to avoid taking responsibility. I also know my responsibility. You can blame me. You can shoot me for this. I will voluntarily accept discipline—self-conscious discipline.”<sup>39</sup>

Melodramatization calls upon emotional registers and places blame on moral rather than structural failings, even diverting focus from the values of socialism to those of capitalism. A focus on ethical failures is the source of such concepts as “crimes against the party and socialism through theft, smuggling and coercion and repression of the masses,”<sup>40</sup> in which the party simultaneously admits personal faults and detaches itself (and socialism) from failings.<sup>41</sup> “The view that economic crimes against the state result from the moral failings rather than the often perverse incentives of a socialist economy is one way of explaining economic failure and denying that the socialist system is at fault,” argues Elliot. The movement of emphasis from structural and ideological problems to personal and ethical struggles of corruption, greed, selfishness, and lust, etc., even easily displaces the focus from socialism to its historical foe, an imperialistic, capitalist ethic embodied in the profit motive.<sup>42</sup> The *đổi mới* discourse of change wraps itself around Lư Quang Vũ as its symbol, as it anxiously disciplines his life story, personal questions, and body of work. As Vietnam joins a world capitalist economy while embracing socialism, melodrama attempts to restore moral legibility in a historical moment of ideological ambivalence. But this moral legibility is always strained and unstable, as it depends on a melodramatic mode that also facilitates subversion.

### **Melodramatizing Dissent through the Gates of Censorship**

An emphasis on melodramatic discourse that depoliticizes Vũ’s message misses the ways that the author himself crafts his image of reform through melodrama. Vũ’s plays show that dissent within official, nationalist theater in post-war Vietnam cloaks itself in multiple costumes to perform change in the restraints of the ideologically permissible.

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<sup>37</sup> Philip Taylor, *Fragments of the Present*, 61.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 65.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 60-61.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in David Elliot, “Dilemmas of Reform in Vietnam,” 67.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

Luu Quang Vũ began writing spoken drama for the stage in 1979 with his spoken drama debut *Forever Seventeen* (*Sống Mãi Tuổi 17*) at the Youth Theater (Nhà Hát Tuổi Trẻ).<sup>43</sup> He continued as a playwright through the 1980s to gain success particularly at the 1985 national theater festivals before the official declaration of market reforms in 1986. While *đổi mới* market policies and the decrease of state subsidies in the arts sector have pushed theater into a period of crisis during renovation, another line of argument emphasizes the heroic nature of the theater's participation in the *đổi mới* movement of social criticism. If the 1985 national theater festival, funded and organized by the Ministry of Culture, served to rehabilitate, if only temporarily, a crisis in theater by performing the meaning of renovation to a mobilized audience, Luu Quang Vũ played one of the key roles in these tasks. The 1985 festivals were jokingly called "Luu Quang Vũ's festival," and displayed what people began to call the "Luu Quang Vũ event," or "Luu Quang Vũ phenomenon."<sup>44</sup> The playwright won the most awards out of any playwright in the festival, taking home six gold medals for plays *Light of Life*, *The good man of House #5*, *People in Memory*, *Love Story of the Thu River*, *The Initiator*; and two silvers for plays *The Female Journalist* and *The Hot Stone Wall*.<sup>45</sup> Vũ also won a gold medal for *I and We* at the 1985 National festival in Ho Chi Minh City.<sup>46</sup>

The playwright is most famous for his two plays *I and We* (*Tôi và Chúng Ta*) and *Truong Ba's Soul in the Butcher's Skin* (*Hồn Trương Ba Da Hàng Thịt*). Directed by Hoàng Quân Tạo and performed by the Ha Noi Dramatic Theater (Đoàn Kịch Nói Hà Nội) for the Theater Festival in 1985 in Ho Chi Minh City, *I and We* helped articulate the rationale for major economic reforms of *đổi mới*, including the end of subsidization and a more individualistic market orientation, by dramatizing how government subsidization suppresses both individual and collective development. The play advocates for a new conceptualization of individualism that preserves individual freedom while ensuring

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<sup>43</sup> Though Vu worked during a time of transition into a market system, the northern theater structure in which he worked was still entirely under national management, with dwindling subsidization. The national management of culture follows a top-down model in which the Party lays down policies and guidelines to be administered by the policies of government and the National Assembly. The Ministry of Culture and Information carries out these dictates by developing specific strategies, regulations, and plans. The Performing Arts office (*cục nghệ thuật biểu diễn*) manages the performing arts at the central level, while the city ministry of culture (*sở văn hóa- thông tin*) implement these cultural policies at local levels. These administrative offices and their decisions are overseen by the National Ideology and Culture Committee, which has the most direct influence over final decisions and the selection of cadres.

<sup>44</sup> "sự kiện Luu Quang Vũ" or also, "hiện tượng Luu Quang Vũ," from Phong Lê, "Sự Kiện Luu Quang Vũ" [The Luu Quang Vu Phenomenon], *Tuổi Trẻ Chủ Nhật*, April 19, 1998; Cao Minh, "Kịch Luu Quang Vũ Và Những Vấn Đề Của Đời Sống" [Luu Quang Vu's Drama and the Problems of Life], *Người Hà Nội* (November 1989). Reprinted in *Artistic Talent*, ed. Luu Khánh Thơ, 170-176.

<sup>45</sup> *Nguồn Sáng Trong Đời, Người Tốt Nhà Số Năm, Người Trong Cõi Nhớ, Chuyện Tình Bên Dòng Sông Thu, Người Đi Trước; Nữ Ký Giả, Vách Đá Nóng Bỏng*

<sup>46</sup> Tất Thắng, "Luu Quang Vũ: Anh Đã Là 'Người Trong Cõi Nhớ'" [A Person in Memory], 257.

collective welfare, merging “We” and “I,” socialism and neoliberalism. *Truong Ba’s Soul in the Butcher’s Skin*, the play for which Vũ is remembered,<sup>47</sup> dramatizes a conflict between the soul and the body—a soul that strives towards the highest spiritual fulfillment, trapped within a corrupt and degenerate body. That the “body of the butcher” gradually corrodes the spirit of the kindhearted farmer Truong Ba (who must borrow the butcher’s body in order to live), reveals the ways that an impoverished and corrupted environment (government) damages the integrity of the individuals or citizens living in it,<sup>48</sup> and the way that the realization of socialism in present society contradicts its true ideals.<sup>49</sup> The success of such plays reflects the strong influence of Luu Quang Vũ’s theater as a site in *đổi mới* society where public sentiment was voiced and received in a community space at a time of “crisis of faith.”<sup>50</sup> “Luu Quang Vũ’s theater had tremendous effect,” explained a Ha Noi resident, “[we did not live in] a democracy, where if we were against something we could strike...at that time, this author managed to use the form of literature and arts to speak.”<sup>51</sup>

That Luu Quang Vũ was able to make piercing critiques of Vietnamese social and political foundations points to multiple subversive strategies in his plays, including the use and resurgence of folk motifs and narratives,<sup>52</sup> the application of parody and comedy in highly effective plays such as *Bệnh Sĩ (Pretense)*, and the use of sentimentality that displaces political conflicts onto moral, personal and domestic realms. Directed in 1988 by director Xuân Huyền for the Military Performance Troupe and the Youth Theater (Nhà Hát Tuổi Trẻ), Luu Quang Vũ’s play *The Ninth Pledge*, which earned him the Ho Chi Minh prize after his death, best demonstrates how his use of melodrama opens up avenues of dissent while framing dissent within narratives of the possible.

Operating on multiple levels of the personal and political, the internally contradicting play defies readers’, audiences’, and officials’ abilities to pinpoint its central claim, making it a slippery work inviting a mixture of both condemnation and support. The play faced a number of mixed reviews from audiences and officials,

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<sup>47</sup> The play was directed by Nguyễn Đình Nghi for the Central Dramatic Theater Company (Nhà Hát Kịch Việt Nam), and is known as one of the most powerful plays of Vietnam as it went on to represent the country in Moscow in 1990, and in the United States through Vietnamese American Theater Exchange in 1998.

<sup>48</sup> Nguyễn Đình Nghi, “Những Ngày Cùng Làm Việc” [Days of Working Together], in *Artistic Talent*, ed. Luu Khánh Thơ, 243; Cao Minh, “Kịch Luu Quang Vũ Và Những Vấn Đề Của Đời Sống” [Luu Quang Vu’s Drama and the Problems of Life], 175; Luu Khánh Thơ, “Sự Khai Thác Mô-típ Dân Gian Trong Kịch Luu Quang Vũ” [The Development of the Motif of Folk in Luu Quang Vu Drama], in *Artistic Talent*, ed. Luu Khánh Thơ, 167.

<sup>49</sup> Thúy, interview with author, Hanoi, July, 2007; Trần Việt “Nghĩ về Luu Quang Vũ Nhân Xem vở *Hồn Truong Ba Da Hàng Thịt*” [Thinking of Luu Quang Vu after Viewing *Truong Ba’s Soul in the Butcher’s Skin*], *Nghiên Cứu Nghệ Thuật* 1 (1998).

<sup>50</sup> Stage designer Lâm, interview with author, Ha Noi, July 13, 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Ha Noi resident, interview with author, Ha Noi, July 16, 2008.

<sup>52</sup> For more discussion of folk motifs in Luu Quang Vũ’s plays, see Luu Khánh Thơ, “Sự Khai Thác Mô-típ Dân Gian Trong Kịch Luu Quang Vũ” [The Development of the Motif of Folk in Luu Quang Vu Drama], 164-169.

acquiring acceptance through a series of mishaps and coincidences. The first performance of the play for official censorship at the performance hall of the central ministry sparked opposing reactions. Some praised the author for his “daringness to look directly at the truth” in his addressing of the loss of democracy in the countryside. The opposition, which included a high-ranked official, felt that this play could not be staged because it had images of lawless soldiers who attacked local administration and acted against their official military duties.<sup>53</sup> Production member Kiệt retells that the play’s content was *so* threatening to officials that “they scrutinized every word and revised the content over and over.” The topic is on the military, so they [the officials] were really scared, after we staged it they scrutinized it, and I had to change a lot for it to pass censor.”<sup>54</sup> When the play went to Ho Chi Minh City, he retells, because of unrest in the city due to strikes over the issue of land rights, officials did not formally halt the play, but informally prohibited it by limiting its performances. They were anxious of the play’s potential to “provoke” unrest, according to the director.<sup>55</sup>

Named after the “ninth pledge” of communist soldiers to “respect, help and protect the people,” the play conversely stages the corruption of military and state officers at multiple levels. In the plot of *The Ninth Pledge (Lời Thề Thứ Chín)*, Ông Hà, a communist veteran and leader of “Town X” journeys to visit his son. He walks the familiar path alongside the forest where he had once fought and reminisces, when a group of communist soldiers in torn and tattered clothing accosts him and collects his bag of gifts for his son as fraudulent material. At the end of the first scene, the soldiers discover that they have confiscated the bag of not just their friend’s father, but also the town leader. Ông Hà reports the soldier’s infringement to the heads of the regiment, and they give orders to capture the soldiers. But these soldiers are not merely irresponsible or selfish youths. In fact, avoiding capture, the young soldiers have an adventure of their own and plot to return to a small village to rescue their comrade’s father, Thịnh, who has been locked up for twenty days by an administrator of a small village who profits on illegal transactions with other officials. Set out to liberate a small town from the chaotic and despotic rule of the local town leader, the young soldiers leave without permission from their commanding officers and successfully free their friend’s father from capture. In the resolution, leaders must decide the fate of the young soldiers who have robbed Ông Hà and gone on their mission against orders.

The play’s power to provoke comes from a bold staging of dissent and conflict onstage. The young soldiers first defy the ninth pledge in their exploitation of the civil member of society, resist capture, and then, abandon their service to capture a local village officer. As production member Kiệt emphasizes, the play stages conflict and contradiction within the state, within a system that often “denies contradiction.”<sup>56</sup> Adding a scene not in the script, the director opens the play with precisely an image of conflict: on the right side of the stage, military officers line up and safeguard the borders

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<sup>53</sup> Đặng Ngọc Tĩnh, “Quyết Định Về Một Đêm Diễn Vở ‘Lời Thề Thứ 9’” [A Decision on One Night’s Performance of *The Ninth Pledge*], in *Artistic Talent*, ed. Lưu Khánh Thơ, 193-194.

<sup>54</sup> Kiệt, interview with author, Hanoi, July 15, 2008.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

of the nation, while on the left side of the stage Xuyên's father Thịnh is trapped in a cave and cries out for help. As the play progresses it is clear that the very people who have trapped Thịnh in the cave are part of the government that the officers guard. The final scene of the play furthermore stages open conflict as the young soldiers who have captured the village leader Tuan hide themselves in a village traditional house and refuse to come out while their officers surround the house holding weapons. The dramatization of the threat of dissension against the government occurs repeatedly in the play. It is boldly hinted at when Xuyên's mother and her daughter enter the administrative office of "Town X," where a sign that hangs at the doorway reads, "The government is the servant of its people." When Cúc, the daughter, is treated poorly by an officer who refuses to host them, she leaves with the line "be careful, if a servant is too domineering, a day will come when we will replace him!"<sup>57</sup> Audience member Phước remembers that particular lines such as these receive raucous laughter from the audience.<sup>58</sup>

Not only does the play openly stage a confrontation between dissenting soldiers against their own government in a highly visual picture of opposition before the audience, the melodramatic emphasis on the restoration of virtue and return to an idyllic past ironically make dissent reasonable and even legitimate. The shape of the plot redeems the integrity and virtue of the soldiers as they undergo a melodramatic journey that transforms and purifies them through suffering. The play in one way serves as a story of renovation of the party, as these young heroes embody the mistakes of the government against the people in their transgressions against the ninth pledge but also reveal the possibility of redemption.

But the key displacement in this melodrama is that while acting as representatives of the party's mistakes and potential for moral redemption, the young soldiers also serve as figures of dissent. Their transformation and purification of earlier transgressions against Ông Hà come through their very disobedience against orders so that they can rescue Thịnh. While the play does not go as far as boldly justifying their act of dissension as correct, it legitimates their actions through their rescue of honest Think.

The legitimating of dissent furthermore occurs through a central melodramatic scene that also reinstates a central socialist realist narrative of the mother/nation to affirm the ideological status quo. The final resolution provided by the mother's speech, represents the melodramatic climax where resolution is brought about through a domestication of conflicts as in the end, "a family affair." At the height of the confrontation between the soldiers and armed officers, the mother wipes her feet clean and gets up on a stool that she first wipes off carefully—to the maddening applause and laughter of the audience—who immediately understands that she represents transparency and integrity, recalls production member Kiệt.

I'm their mother, the mother of Xuyên in there...I am the mother of the soldier...In the past I saw my husband off, saw my son go off to fight the Americans and now also sent my youngest to work for the country, giving him to

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<sup>57</sup> Lưu Quang Vũ, *Lời Thề Thứ 9* [The Ninth Pledge], in *Tác Phẩm Được Giải Thưởng Hồ Chí Minh* [Luu Quang Vu: Ho Chi Minh Prize Awarded Works], ed. Thế Ngọc. (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Sân Khấu, 2003), 267.

<sup>58</sup> Phước, interview with author, Hanoi July 14, 2008.



you brothers, to the Party...Now they are in there...What did this comrade say before? The people have become corrupt? How?...Now I've finally found Ông Hà. I've searched for him and now I've finally been able to see him. It turns out he is in the same situation as me, he has a son in there. That's the way it is, they are...young and naïve! They want everything to become good right away...*(She shivers as she approaches the house. Everyone is in silence, as the quivering voice of the mother resounds)*- Xuyên, my children, my children! Why would you children do such a thing? How did we get to this?...Who are you hiding from? From your uncles your brothers your sisters? For what?...Through all the suffering it will be over, everything will work itself out, but if you don't return than who are you leaving the nation to? Come out my children, mother begs you...On behalf of all the mothers I beg you.<sup>59</sup>

Kiệt explains that only the love of the mother could bring together the different sides in this internal conflict, as she calls all forces to return to protecting their nation. "The whole audience was in tears," he recalls. After she makes the speech, the mother holds her three children in her arms tenderly, "like a flock of chicks protected by the hen," according to Kiệt.<sup>60</sup> Bà Xuyên's speech homogenizes different forces, clumping all the young soldiers with the young higher officers (Đình and Hạnh) as "her children." Similarly, Ông Hà and Xuyên's father are linked as people in the "same situation" regardless of their power differences. A universalizing and emotional logic provides the final resolution that also reaffirms nationalistic foundations through the familiar figure of the sacrificial mother who advocates most importantly submission to the law and masculine authority.

The play operates within socialist realist norms while staging images of contestation, conflict, and potential political transformation, avoiding being reduced down to one message through its melodramatic structure. Indeed, censors and spectators recognized the contradictory impulses of the play. The play met with challenges as it underwent the required censorship preview for a performance permit. While the "Artistic committee" of the Military Dramatic Troupe approved the playscript enthusiastically, when the script was read at the Art Office (phòng văn nghệ), the education bureau that passed the play suggested many changes that would be like rewriting the play itself.<sup>61</sup> The performance at the Vietnamese-Soviet Cultural Center, according to Đặng Ngọc Tĩnh, was the fragile birth of the play with a life that was decided through one performance.<sup>62</sup> That night, politburo members Nguyễn Quyết and Nguyễn Thanh Bình allowed the play to "pass," commenting "If you perform it that way it's fine; why were there claims that the play was about a military coup headed by soldiers?"<sup>63</sup>

The reactions to the play varied as to who was watching, and indeed, who wanted to see what. To some, the melodramatic aspects of the play helped ameliorate suspicions

<sup>59</sup> Lưu Quang Vũ, *Lời Thề Thứ 9* [The Ninth Pledge], 296-298.

<sup>60</sup> Kiệt, interview with author, Hanoi, July 15, 2008.

<sup>61</sup> Quý Hải, "Nhớ Về Vở Diễn *Lời Thề Thứ Chín*" [Remembering the Play *The Ninth Pledge*], *Tạp Chí Sân Khấu* (June 2004): 27.

<sup>62</sup> Đặng Ngọc Tĩnh, 193-196.

<sup>63</sup> Quý Hải, 28.

about its shocking suggestions about dissent. To Huy Liên “Even if comedic elements explain their exploitative actions as a ‘misunderstanding’ it is still hard to make those actions compatible with the character of heroic, patriotic soldiers.”<sup>64</sup> He articulates, however, the strong effect of the resolution involving the mother:

The actress stood on a high platform, directing her words directly at the audience, her voice full of pain, sadness—woeful, majestic, and sacred. The artistic arrangement raises the mother into a symbol of patriotism, humanism and justice. Perhaps we can say that the ending encapsulates fully the meaning of the play and deeply delivers to the hearts of audiences the message that we should all participate in the struggle to fight against all the poor conditions opposing our socialist ideal.<sup>65</sup>

Others, however, would argue that the melodramatic mode and the symbol of the mother are weaknesses of the play since they hinder its ability directly to address the “injustices in society.” According to Hồ Thị, “In the play the mother and father advise the children to wait and to believe. But how long should they wait, until when, when the rest of the world is rising. That type of resolution is premature and weak.”<sup>66</sup>

The responses of critics reveal that they recognize the function of melodrama in coping with ideological conflict in contemporary Vietnamese society. When writing in Vietnam there is an “art of avoidance,” or “art of indirect writing,” that helps writers pass through the gates of censorship, says journalist and theater researcher Hiền.<sup>67</sup> He and *chèo* researcher Triết acknowledge that domestic, moralistic, and sentimental qualities in melodrama are “regular ways” in the “art of avoidance.”<sup>68</sup> “If one wants to make a critique of society one needs to do it within a certain emotional story...all writers and artists know this,” explains Hiền.<sup>69</sup> Triết, moreover, recalls the types of advice he and other seniors to Lưu Quang Vũ gave to the playwright to help him make his critiques within the limits of what to their knowledge was permissible.<sup>70</sup> *Nôm* language scholar Đát points out that “moralistic discourse” is “one of the last weapons of the intellectual,” who perfects “using official morality to fight present reality.”<sup>71</sup>

Triết summarizes the unique responsibility of the audience as he explains that in watching a Vietnamese play, one must understand what is being said as much as what is not being said: “Vietnamese drama sometimes says one thing but means another...a viewer with lots of experience will understand right away... that deep down underneath there are many other ideas...”<sup>72</sup> Indeed despite the melodramatic mode that affirms

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<sup>64</sup> Huy Liên, “The Play *The Ninth Pledge*,” *Unknown Newspaper*, November 1988.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Reporter, “Vỡ Diễn Lời Thề Thứ Chín” [A workshop on the play *The Ninth Pledge*], *Tạp Chí Sân Khấu* 97 (1988): 34-35.

<sup>67</sup> Hiền, interview with author, Ho Chi Minh City, June 22, 2008.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Triết, interview with author, Ha Noi, July 15, 2008.

<sup>71</sup> Đát, interview with author, Ho Chi Minh City, July 2008.

<sup>72</sup> Triết, interview with author, Ha Noi, July 15, 2008.

dissent as it often seems to domesticate it, audience members show the ability to process the play in part and respond to quotes and actions that they want while tolerating the presence of other parts that may contradict with the part before. According to audience member Nga, Luru Quang Vũ audiences often respond to decontextualized quotations that resist domestication within the melodramatic frame.<sup>73</sup> When the girl in the warns the civic officer, “be careful, if a servant is too domineering, a day will come when we will replace him!”<sup>74</sup> the audience responds with loud laughter, revealing that melodrama might serve as a package that facilitates the passage of the play through censorship, but does not limit audiences’ reception of the play only within its already multivalent frame.

Luru Quang Vũ demonstrates how within the context of late socialist Vietnam, melodrama has a particular political currency and efficacy as it functions to facilitate the passage of political material through the gates of censorship while directing itself to an audience that knows how to read political material within the registers of the domestic, sentimental, and moral. This resistant potential of melodrama is also what allows for subversive material to be ingested into a state discourse that appropriates dissent within its very narrative of reform. The play shows contradictions of renovation ethic in its agenda of “criticism and self criticism”<sup>75</sup> that accepts limited critique, situates the problems of the government and the party as moral transgression capable of ethical reform, and legitimates dissension as it even ingests it as something of its own.

The melodrama of Luru Quang Vũ’s death—the sensationalizing of his death as an assassination to silence a dissident voice—reflects assumptions about imminent and current change created by renovation discourse, both by revealing a belief about the potential for that change, and by articulating a critique of the limits of that very change. Such melodrama and sensationalizing about Luru Quang Vũ’s death heighten his political opposition to the regime as they also uphold renovation discourse by imagining the possibility of such dissidence. For the cyclo drivers and motorbike cabbies (*xe ôm*) who would often passionately voice such street myths to me, these stories strike at a chord by allowing both the imagination of possibilities of heroism and transformation, and accusations about the limits of change in a totalitarian regime. Melodrama operates within the ideological ambivalence of renovation Vietnam as both a form that mimics such ambivalence and performs actions within its constraints. Its ability to harbor and generate contradictory and excess meaning makes it an especially effective political mode to negotiate the ambivalences of Vietnamese post-war market reform. Its ability to suggest multiple ideologies at once allows its elusive relationship to (in)official culture and ultimately returns authority to producers and spectators who make interpretative decisions in their performances and receptions of melodrama, both in the aesthetic sphere and in everyday life.

In such contexts as postcolonial and post-socialist Vietnam, melodramatic action defines the grammar of dissent for both dissidents and conservatives, structuring stability that is always also under threat of rupture, or the possibility of renewal. As both national

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<sup>73</sup> Nga, interview with author, Berkeley, California, October 25, 2007.

<sup>74</sup> Luru Quang Vũ, *Lời Thề Thứ 9* [The Ninth Pledge], 267.

<sup>75</sup> Socialist Republic of Vietnam, *Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam Documents* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1987), 167.

and dissident discourses borrow one another's voices through the melodramatic mode, Vietnamese melodrama itself transforms from a more didactic, morally-Manichean form demonstrated in socialist realist works during the war-time era and its immediate aftermath (as shown in Chapter 2), to a form that thrives in post-war market reform by harnessing its ability to absorb multiply contradicting and contesting ideologies of the period. Melodrama's ability to absorb the voice of the other has allowed the mutual development, interweaving, and neutralization of dissident and official discourse. As neoliberal reforms develop more firmly in the contemporary era, the state develops more sophisticated strategies of using melodrama to enact "differentiated sovereignty"<sup>76</sup> to produce a variegated citizenry to fit the needs of global capital. As Vietnamese melodrama from the 1990s is put next to American melodrama from the same period in the next chapter, one can see the global work of melodrama in constructing multiple desires around the Vietnamese American to structure neoliberal order.

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<sup>76</sup> Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*, 216-217.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Yearning for Home: Melodrama, the Abjection of Vietnamese Americans, and Neoliberalism in Vietnam and America**

In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey defines neoliberalism as:

a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.... But beyond these tasks the state should not venture. State interventions in markets (once created) must be kept to a bare minimum because, according to the theory, the state cannot possibly possess enough information to second-guess market signals (prices) and because powerful interest groups will inevitably distort and bias state interventions (particularly in democracies) for their own benefit.<sup>1</sup>

Neoliberalism is characterized by an emphasis on fundamental political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom. It principally assumes that individual freedoms are ensured by the guarantee to market freedom, and therefore (dis)places the freedom of the individual with the interest of private property owners, businesses, transnational corporations, and capital. This chapter will not only examine the pervasive move towards the “deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision”<sup>2</sup> occurring in the United States and globally since the 1970s, but also a strain of neoliberalism Harvey calls “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics” in sites such as China and Vietnam, where the formulation of a market economy adopts neoliberal elements with “authoritarian centralized control.”<sup>3</sup> This type of partial neoliberalism in Vietnam incorporates free market principles along with strong nationalism and the authoritarian control of the state.

Performing close readings of melodrama in Vietnam and the United States in the 1990s, I seek to explore how melodrama is a mode or grammar of neoliberalism in both Vietnam and America. Even with their differences, neoliberalism in Vietnam and America both create differential (racialized, gendered) subjects for the service of global capital. While scholars have conceived that globalization has transferred the power of the nation-state to transnational networks, Aihwa Ong points out that the nation-state has shifted to a flexible mode of governance, exercising “graduated sovereignty,”<sup>4</sup> to produce a differentiated citizenry to serve global economic needs. This differential production of

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<sup>1</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>4</sup> See Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*, 216-217.

citizenship also depends on the construction of differential desire. This chapter argues that after the neoliberal turn, melodramatic stagings of the abjection of Vietnamese Americans helps in the construction of differential citizenry appropriate for labor in Vietnam and America. Thanh Hoàng's Vietnamese melodrama *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* (*Yearning for her husband at the sound of the midnight drum*),<sup>5</sup> for example, generates the contradictory emotions of identification and abhorrence towards Vietnamese Americans to make Vietnamese trans/national identity more coherent, while producing desires for "traditional" Vietnamese femininity and modern transnational masculinity. The Vietnamese American film *Catfish in Black Bean Sauce*,<sup>6</sup> written, directed, and produced by Chi Muoi Lo, affirms the value of tolerance at the core of American multiculturalism that promotes sentimental reparation while deflecting the further racialization of Asian American citizens. Such melodramas as *Yearnings* and *Catfish in Black Bean Sauce* work together to create the right feelings to produce a feminized and racialized workforce for the service of global capital, even when they operate in different cultural sites to produce affect. These works suggest that melodrama is a global mode that produces and reflects desires structuring the contemporary neoliberal order.

### Melodrama and Neoliberalism in Vietnam

Introducing *Yearning* to a television audience in 1995, the presenter narrates,

This play is about people who, for a number of reasons, had to leave their homes to live in the home of others. They are not missing anything material, but they are still missing a sky, a homeland, a place with bamboos, a river, and a song called *Yearning* that is intimate to them. The elderly cannot return home. They are sad because their kids live in freedom and chaos because their parents only know how to search for money. They stay forever in the other's land, forever drowned in the melodies of the song *Yearning*.

The melodrama introduced has drawn an audience that comes to see their homeland through the eyes of Vietnamese American characters who had lost them, who spend their days longing for home in the image of its geographical shape, its rivers and bamboos, and the reverberations of the lamenting melodies of *vọng cổ*, a central melody in the Vietnamese opera *cải lương*. Running for over 15 years in contemporary Vietnam, *Yearning* serves an audience that comes to feel longings towards home. What are they searching for? How do these sentiments shape the imaginaries of nation and identity in contemporary Vietnam?

*Yearning* produces contradictory sentiments towards the diaspora that work to affirm traditional Confucian femininity and transnational masculinity to create differential subjects in contemporary Vietnam. The play emerged in the aftermath of market reforms, officially declared in 1986 by the Sixth National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Market reforms have led to improvements in rural incomes and alleviation of poverty, but also a widening absolute gap between rural and

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<sup>5</sup> I will call the play *Yearning* for short.

<sup>6</sup> Chi Muoi Lo, *Catfish in Black Bean Sauce*, DVD, Directed by Chi Muoi Lo (Hollywood, CA: First Look Media, 2001).

urban incomes, and increasing inequality between top and bottom income levels.<sup>7</sup> At the same time as reforms have led to dramatic income inequality and a growth of a capitalist elite class, Vietnam has leveraged its cheap labor for competitive advantage, opening its cheap labor supply to the foreign market. This balancing of a stratified citizenry relies on differential modes of governance based on “choice” and “coercion,” as Nguyễn Võ Thu Hương argues, to shape and discipline labor.<sup>8</sup> She notes that there is “an international division of labor taking advantage of ‘traditional’ femininity [that] translated into worker attributes of docility, dexterity, and the tolerance for tedious work on the global assembly line.”<sup>9</sup> Her argument builds on the work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who has argued that there are “racial and gendered dimensions” of low-wage labor that builds on “stereotypes which infantilize Third-World women and initiates a nativist discourse of ‘tedium’ and ‘tolerance’ as characteristics of non-Western, primarily agricultural, premodern (Asian) cultures.”<sup>10</sup> *Yearning*’s production of multiple emotions towards the diaspora reaffirms the attributes of “traditional” femininity as the site of the nation that undergirds the production of a new transnational and modern masculinity, a class with wealth and status that depends precisely on the labor and diligence of “traditional” femininity. The play preserves the *masculine* privileges of mobility and choice, while building longings towards an idealized “traditional” femininity that maintain gender difference in the bourgeois home, and produce a feminized labor force exhibiting “diligence” for global capital.

Set in an unspecified but snowy city in the United States, *Yearning* dramatizes the experience of Ông Tư, a Vietnamese American immigrant of 65-70 years of age who cannot adjust to the life he regularly describes as “cold” in the United States. Alienated from his Americanized teenage granddaughter who misinterprets his closeness to her as sexual abuse, he spends his days in an insane asylum where he is forced to stay because his “Vietnamese” behavior of ancestral worship and remembrance of the past are interpreted as insanity. The play begins as Ông Tư sneaks out of the asylum to celebrate his wife’s death anniversary at home and struggles with his granddaughter, who is not concerned with the death anniversary, but rather her boyfriend’s birthday. He shares his memories of his homeland with his friend Ông Nam, talks to his granddaughter’s boyfriend (Young Man) about his observations of Vietnam after the Young Man’s visit, and dies on the rooftop of his house while looking down on a forest with the shape of an “S,” resembling Vietnam. Before his death, however, his grand-daughter is finally able to understand him better by reading her father’s diary retelling the story of his traumatic journey from Vietnam by boat. Concluding that her “grandfather is [her] homeland,” she vows to journey back to Vietnam with him. Though he dies before she can, the play suggests a transnational Vietnamese family of shared trauma and suffering.

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<sup>7</sup> Brian Van Arkadie and Raymond Mallon, *Vietnam: A Transition Tiger?* (Canberra, Australia: Asia Pacific Press, 2003), 232.

<sup>8</sup> Nguyễn Võ Thu Hương, *The Ironies of Freedom*, 140-141.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>10</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Women Workers and Capitalist Scripts: Ideologies of Domination, Common Interests, and the Politics of Solidarity,” in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997), 16.

Playwright Hóá argues that *Yearning* stands out as a play that addresses the “sensitive topic” about the relationship between Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans.<sup>11</sup> The ambivalent rehabilitation of the relationship between Vietnam and the United States involves a radical transformation from the ideology of the Vietnam/American war era that ended only about a decade before the initiation of market reforms. During the Vietnam/American war the Vietnamese Communist Party would build nationalist sentiment to drive forces of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam against villainized American colonialists and their Southern “lackeys.” In the neoliberal era, Vietnam would perform a new global and integrative identity through renewal and normalization of relations with the United States with the end of the economic embargo in 1994 and the courting of investments from diasporic Vietnamese.

The relationship between Vietnam and its diaspora is historically one of ambivalence, involving both strain and identification. As refugees who were affiliated with the South Vietnamese regime or fled Vietnam because of the policies of the State, many Vietnamese Americans, especially in the older generation, shared an “anti-communist” sentiment and hostility to the Vietnamese regime. These communities organized early support of the embargo against Vietnam and resisted diplomatic normalization between the two nations. The Vietnamese regime, too, was anxious about Vietnamese diasporic anti-communist organizations, often warning about the dangers of *việt kiều*<sup>12</sup> terrorism in its media and cultural portrayals of diasporic Vietnamese. Reforms during *đổi mới* and normalization of Vietnamese-American relations has led to growth of remittances from Vietnamese Americans to Vietnamese family members, and increasing numbers of diasporic returns to Vietnam. Yet meetings between *việt kiều* and Vietnamese are sweet reunions and also stark reminders of the wide differences in financial power, mobility, and cultural perceptions. Since *đổi mới*, Vietnam has continued to court returning diasporic Vietnamese by easing immigration regulations and adopting rules streamlining investment and the buying of property for overseas Vietnamese, opening the way for successful *việt kiều* entrepreneurship.<sup>13</sup>

*Yearning* emerged in the aftermath of market reforms in Vietnam and amidst conflicts between market reform and socialism, between globalization and nationalism. In December 1986, the Sixth National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) responded to Vietnam’s socio-economic crisis by announcing the policy of *đổi mới* (renovation). Systematizing a series of informal innovations by laborers in agriculture and industry in the early 1970s-80s, the *đổi mới* reforms aimed at transforming the Vietnamese economy from a centralized planning to a market system. Concurrent with Soviet *glasnost*, reforms called for recognition of private ownership in some areas, removal of binding plan targets, reduction or abolishment of most state subsidies, price

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<sup>11</sup> Hoá, phone interview with the author, January 15, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> This term literally translates to “Vietnamese sojourner” and refers to Vietnamese people living outside of Vietnam. It used predominantly by the Vietnamese to refer to overseas Vietnamese.

<sup>13</sup> Emma-Kate Symons, “Coming Home, Look Who’s Making Vietnam Hip,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 12, 2008.



and credit reforms, and encouragement of foreign investment.<sup>14</sup> Neoliberalism in Vietnam is particular with the continuation of reforms under socialism. Like in China, communism and state power within Vietnam has a historical legitimacy built from the communist party's legacy of revolution and resistance to colonization. The collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, combined with economic and social struggles since the reunification of Vietnam 1975, created the urgent need both for preservation of party power under socialism and economic reform.

The unstable negotiation between state power (socialism) and market reform becomes manifest, for example, in the transformations to the structure of theater after market reform within the process of *socialization* (*xã hội hóa*), the privatization of the public sector in the 1990s. As a euphemism for neoliberal reform, *socialization*, according to state discourse, mobilized production from all avenues of social life, including private citizens. The state's use of the term *socialization* reflects how capitalistic transformation is still roped within a discourse of collectivity and Marxist humanism. The contradictions in this system surface in the transformations of theater since *xã hội hóa* from the 1990s to the present day. Happening most fervently in Ho Chi Minh City, the country's capitalist center, *xã hội hóa* has facilitated the emergence and success of a handful of small private theater companies. At the government funded National Conference on Socialized Theater held in November 2006 that I attended, theater entrepreneurs pleaded to their "father and mother" (by which they meant the state) to provide them funding. They pointed to a contradiction that while much of public theater lost funding from the state (and in some ways, all theater was to become private from loss of state funding), the content of theater productions were still controlled by strict engines of government censorship. While theaters would no longer benefit from funding provided by the government and had to support themselves, they must continue to be broadcasters of state ideology.<sup>15</sup> The contradictions of *socialization* in theater reform reveal the nation-state's active participation in directing neoliberal reform as well as its control over the production of meaning in the private sector.

As one of the most popular and long-playing spoken dramas in the South, *Yearning* was the state's emblem of the supposed success of *socialization* and spoken drama in Ho Chi Minh City, even though it was produce by a hybrid private-public theater at its birth.<sup>16</sup> According to a playwright and director Hoá, the play was one of the few to pass political and emotional requirements to gain both the approval of the State and an enthusiastic audience, satisfying the three mandates of "aesthetic quality," "profitability," and "conforming to official policy" that she argues as virtually impossible to achieve in theater after market reform—theater in the contemporary period was either too ideologically conventional, and thus lacked an audience, or too radical and therefore

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<sup>14</sup> From David Elliot, "Dilemmas of Reform in Vietnam," 71; David Wurfel, "*Doi Moi* in Comparative Perspective," 26.

<sup>15</sup> Fieldnotes, November 1-15, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> The "Small Stage Theater" is partially funded by the state, and partially pulls in its own profits from sales of tickets and private contributions of citizens and organizations under the *xã hội hoá*, or "socialization" policies.

never allowed to be performed, or conceptualized.<sup>17</sup> Author Thanh Hoàng<sup>18</sup> wrote the play in 1994 at a government sponsored “creative camp,” at first receiving lukewarm feedback. The play, however, went on to win the Gold Medal at the government-sponsored National Professional Theater Festival in 1995.<sup>19</sup> From 1995 through 2007, the play performed over 500 times at the 200-seat “5B Small Stage Theatre,” one of the first theaters that, using a hybrid private-public model of management, helped give birth to several other wholly private theaters in the city. The play was instrumental to the careers of several Southern actors, including famous actors Thành Lộc and Hồng Vân, who later became artistic director and director of IDECAF and Phú Nhuận Theater, respectively. The success of the play both in negotiating state ideology and gaining popularity allowed it to be promoted by the Ministry of Culture and Information to perform for the “50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of National Independence” in 1995, to become one of the only Southern plays to tour and gain general acclaim in Hanoi. Members boasted having the attendance of high-level officials of the Party, including Prime Minister Võ Văn Kiệt, at their performance at the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum. In the recent 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Vietnamese theater under the Vietnamese Communist Party in 2007, it was one of two plays representing spoken drama and *socialization* in the South.

*Yearning* demonstrates the process of abjection in the formation of national identity in post-war Vietnam, in which the Vietnamese American plays an abject that is both jettisoned and constitutive of Vietnamese identity (and therefore becomes an easy subject of identification). As abjection involves an anxious repetitive process where the abject is perpetually rejected but never quite separated from the subject, the Vietnamese American is repeatedly jettisoned and re-incorporated, radically excluded and elevated, in the building of the (globally integrating) nation.

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<sup>17</sup> Thanh Hoàng reiterates this point when he mentions that the play succeeds by balancing “education,” “entertainment,” and “aesthetic quality.” See “Thanh Hoàng: ‘Tôi Là Người Sống Hướng Nội’” [Thanh Hoàng: ‘I Am An Introspective Person’], *Vietnam Express*, July 21, 2003. <http://www.vnexpress.net/GL/Van-hoa/San-khau-Dien-anh/2003/07/3B9C9DB3/> (accessed November 20, 2008). Originally published in *Thanh Niên* newspaper.

<sup>18</sup> Thanh Hoàng graduated from the College of Theater and Film in Ho Chi Minh City in 1984 and wrote his first spoken drama called *The Dream of the Prisoner* in 1989. He is currently working on a sequel to *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* that stages the main character (Ông Tư) bringing the body of a friend (Ông Nam) back to the “homeland.” Ông Nam’s son Nguyễn emerges as a character that forgets past conflicts, returns to Vietnam, and arranges a marriage between his daughter and a Vietnamese “born in America but who loves his homeland with all his heart.” The author is from Bạc Liêu, where the songwriter Hà Văn Cầu wrote the base song for the “renovated opera” *cải lương* of the same title, *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang*. See “Thanh Hoàng Viết Kịch Bản *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* Tập 2” [Thanh Hoàng Writes The Sequel to *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang*], *Việt Báo*, February 26, 2007, <http://vietbao.vn/Van-hoa/Thanh-Hoang-viet-kich-ban-Da-co-hoai-lang-tap-2/40188657/181/> (accessed November 15, 2008). Originally published in *Người Lao Động* Newspaper.

<sup>19</sup> Along with the playwright, these actors also received individual Gold Medals for their performance.

The process of abjection is reflected in and structured by a melodrama that generates the conflicting emotions of identification and abhorrence so integral to the demarcation of trans/national identity in contemporary Vietnam. According to Julia Kristeva, abjection is a process where the subject comes to being through the repetitive delineation of borders around the self, and the “jettison[ing]”<sup>20</sup> of that which is deemed horrific and sickening. The abject is not an object but “simply a frontier,”<sup>21</sup> simultaneously a constituent element and radical other that defines and continually challenges the boundaries of the subject. To Kristeva, one of the best examples of the abject is in the body: “as in true theatre...refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live...My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border...If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything.”<sup>22</sup> Extending the process of abjection to analysis of subject formation in social contexts, Judith Butler defines “the abject” as something that “designates here precisely those ‘unlivable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject.”<sup>23</sup> As Karen Shimakawa has pointed out, Kristeva suggests the psychic process of abjection as integral to the way that we can conceive and experience nation and nationalism on a social level.<sup>24</sup> I use Shimakawa’s definition of abjection as a process of othering that forms the national body as a means of, according to her, “linking the psychic, symbolic, legal, and aesthetic dimensions of national identity as they are performed (theatrically and otherwise).”<sup>25</sup>

*Yearning* moves audiences in mixed ways to shape the contradictory feelings of abhorrence and identification in the process of national abjection. The melodrama’s emphasis on the familial ties between the Vietnamese and its diaspora, its structuring of events around family relations, encourages Vietnamese audiences first to identify with the struggles of Vietnamese American communities and recognize Vietnamese American stories of displacement as their own. As one journalist empathizes,

In the 80s and 90s, the circumstances of Ho Chi Minh residents truly resembled the situation in the play, many families had to leave the country and separate, so the story on the stage reached deeply into the hearts of the spectators. It is also

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<sup>20</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 4; See Julia Kristeva, *Nations without Nationalism*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>25</sup> Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection*, 4.

the story of the loss of culture, the sadness and struggle of the Vietnamese in a foreign land, which shook the spirit of the audience.<sup>26</sup>

The audience is encouraged to feel great sympathy for the lonely Vietnamese American Ông Tư, the main character played by comedic actor Thành Lộc, a well-known actor who already has loyal followings in the city.

While identification closes the gap between Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans, the experience of loss simultaneously becomes displaced onto Vietnamese American identity. Author Thanh Hoàng expresses the dual motive of the play to articulate Vietnam's openness to global integration while building Vietnamese nationalism: "When our country opened its door, I saw that people were so oriented towards the outside, so I decided to write a play to remind people about the banyan tree and the ferry dock."<sup>27</sup> Melodrama in this play builds audiences' sympathies for Vietnamese Americans simultaneously to build a bridge between Vietnamese and Vietnamese American identity, and to create abject victims through and against which to define a coherent and superior Vietnamese identity. Author Thanh Hoàng confesses he has never been to the United States but has heard many stories about the experience from narratives of Vietnamese Americans. Audience members watch the suffering of Vietnamese Americans who play tragic figures. The loss of home results in mental and physical sickness that Ông Tư and his friends experience collectively. According to Ông Nam, the "old geezers" who come to America "miss home so much they become a little mad."<sup>28</sup> To compensate, they seek to retrieve their homelands in symbolic ways. Ông Tư and Ông Nam climb to the rooftop of his house, a place where "I can see my country" by looking down at the forest in the shape of an "S." Ông Tư transforms his son's living room and the stage into his homeland with drawings of "rooftops made of leaves," and "bamboo bushes" representing idyllic landscapes of the Vietnamese countryside.<sup>29</sup> When he lets Ông Nam see the paintings that he has created on old bed sheets hung throughout the stage, the audience too enjoys a pastoral image of the traditional Vietnamese countryside with a small road, a river, and a banana leaf house. A memory of a coherent Vietnam in the shape of an "S" is projected onto a diasporic subject who, having left a colonized, divided, or war-torn Vietnam, may have never known such unity. Dying on the rooftop while looking longingly at the image of his homeland, the Vietnamese American is constructed as a stranded and immobile character, missing a coherent and authentic nation.

Audiences' comments about the meaning of the play reveal how empathy for Vietnamese Americans consolidates a sense of Vietnamese identity that is distinct and

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<sup>26</sup> Hoàng Kim, "Thành Lộc và *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang*" [Thành Lộc and *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang*], *Thanh Niên*, July 26, 2006, <http://www.thanhnien.com.vn/2006/Pages/200630/156878.aspx> (accessed November 15, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> Cát Vũ, "*Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* Trước Giờ Cát Cánh Ra Thủ Đô" [*Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* Before The Flight to the Capital], *Người Lao Động*, August 26, 1995.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

incompatible from American identity. A theater instructor at the University of Literature and Culture (Đại Học Văn Hoá TP. HCM) in Ho Chi Minh City comments,

I feel very touched when watching this play. I feel a great love for the elderly abroad. Even though their material needs are more than sufficient, even plentiful, they are still very lonely. We can generally speak of the difference between American and Vietnamese culture....Briefly we can say that the Vietnamese are oriented towards sentiment, feeling. Relating to family, different generations live together in one home, taking care of each other through every meal...grandfather kissing grand-daughter, grandmother kissing granddaughter, is a matter of course...people are close to nature, living with the river, the water, the stream...And these very normal things seep deep into us, taking root deep inside each of us, turning into our very blood and skin—something called *homeland*....That is why the two old men were “shocked” when they had to live in such a new atmosphere. Why they had to die!<sup>30</sup>

The play relies on binaries between America and Vietnam to emphasize fundamental difference and consolidate Vietnamese identity as sentimental, empathetic, and connected to heritage. As the author describes, the play occurs “in a place where life is most modern—America,” where the mixing of Vietnamese and American culture leads to the juxtaposition of “a birthday celebration with a death anniversary,” of “prayer, and love making.” Through *The Girl*, who lacks compassion and reads her grandfather’s paternal affection as sexual perversion and abuse, the play dramatizes *tình cảm* (sentiment) as a source of collectivity and community in Vietnamese society. The characterization of the identity of the nation as *sentimental* as opposed to the “cold” West allows a claim of moral superiority for Vietnamese at the face of economic and social challenges, even to cope with realities of transnational (im)mobility. The melodrama builds contradicting emotions of identification and rejection to sentimentalize and distinguish Vietnamese identity.

The abjection of Vietnamese American identity is particularly gendered to use feelings of abhorrence towards the feminized Vietnamese American to confirm traditional feminine identity as the foundation of Vietnamese national coherence. *Yearning* confirms Confucian morality through the image of *The Girl*, who serves as the antithesis of “traditional” Vietnamese femininity that, contrastingly, Ông Tư’s yearning and enduring lover symbolizes. Scholars have observed the resurgence of Confucianism in such sites as China as an ideology working with the state to service the needs of global capitalism. Aihwa Ong argues that reaffirmation of ideologies such as Confucianism by the state in the neoliberal era facilitates the creation of a differentiated citizenship—a female population servicing the economies of low-wage labor, and a middle class female population that perform their traditional gender roles:

The romance of the invented Confucian family is an ideological expression of the state’s promotion of extended family formation through its housing, educational, and savings schemes. These themes, which integrate the family romance with

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<sup>30</sup> Phụng, E-mail message to author, December 14, 2008.

state policy, are further developed in profamily campaigns that encourage marriage and reproduction among professional women; these women are urged to return home, almost as a patriotic duty, to make babies who are deemed to be of a higher ‘quality’ than those of lower class women...the state restores faith that the moral power of Confucian ideology can forge a successful alliance with capitalism so that fraternal power can flourish in the public sphere without the threat of bad mothers undoing gender difference and hierarchy in the home.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, Nguyễn-Võ Thu-Hương has noted the use of Confucian and “traditional” morality in Vietnamese neoliberal governance to produce a feminine labor class based on values of “feminine patience, dexterity, and docility,” and a feminine bourgeois class still trained to privilege the sexual needs of bourgeois men.<sup>32</sup>

In *Yearning*, the feminized and hypersexualized figure of the Vietnamese American mobilizes feelings of abhorrence towards the Vietnamese diaspora to construct “traditional” femininity as the site of coherent Vietnamese identity. As the antithesis of the “traditional” Vietnamese woman, the assimilated Vietnamese American, The Girl, fully embodies “America,” and its excess, sexual promiscuity, materialism, disconnection from tradition, and hyper-rationality. Making kites out of pictures of sexy photographs that disgust her grandfather, The Girl responds to her boyfriend’s suggestion “shall we make love” with “OK!” turning off the lights in the living room and on the audience and filling the dark stage with “noises that denote love-making.” She provokes grandfather’s indignation as he articulates his view of Americans: “so much freedom it’s total chaos! If they want to have sex, they have sex...!”<sup>33</sup> Such a picture of sexual promiscuity and lack of respect for tradition has once caused an audience member to stand up and slap Phương Linh, the actor playing The Girl, retells author Thanh Hoàng.<sup>34</sup>

As the Girl’s antithesis, Ông Tư wife grounds the nation in the image of “traditional” femininity built on a mix of Confucian and nationalist ideals. In Confucianism, women followed the code of the “Three Obediences,” which called her to obey her father as a child, her husband after marriage, and her eldest son after her husband’s death. Ông Tư’s wife acts as the yearning and loyal Confucian wife. Along the bank of the river, Ông Tư retells, he wins over the woman he and Ông Nam both love with the song *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* (“She yearns for her husband upon hearing the sound of the midnight drum”), written by Cao Văn Lầu in 1918. Also symbolizing the nation, the lover acts as the source of longing for both men, while never severing her ties from the nation’s geographic space. Ông Nam recalls, “She got to die in the soil of the country.

<sup>31</sup> Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*, 152.

<sup>32</sup> Nguyễn-Võ Thu-Hương, *The Ironies of Freedom*, 140-141.

<sup>33</sup> Thanh Hoàng, *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* [Yearning for Her Husband Upon Hearing the Sound of the Midnight Drum], c.1994, Manuscript from “5B Little Theater” Archive, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Reporter, “*Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang: Cổ Mà Không Cổ*” [*Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang: Old but Not Old*], *Việt Báo*, December 31, 2004, <http://vietbao.vn/Van-hoa/Da-co-hoai-lang-co-ma-khong-co/10893528/181/> (accessed November 13, 2008). Originally published in *Thế Giới Mới*.

But you [Ông Tư] and I die over here, who knows how it will be?"<sup>35</sup> The song that he uses to woo his wife is the original song giving birth to the *vọng cổ* melody of the renovated opera form *cải lương*.<sup>36</sup> The play references the circumstances in which the songwriter wrote the song: he was forced to part with his wife he loved because she could not bear him a child. Writing the song from the perspective of his wife, Cao Văn Lầu projects the voice of a wife yearning for her departed husband:

*Since the day, husband, you  
Left on duty  
I am consciously looking forward to hearing from you.  
I can't sleep well at night  
Just because I have not heard anything from you  
My heart saddens;  
Suppose you fall into promiscuity  
Husband, don't ever forget of our connubial love.  
All night waiting to hear from you,  
All day standing like the Waiting-for-Husband Rock.  
You don't know that  
I can't sleep well any night.  
Every night, I am musing deeply with my sadness  
And wonder when will we be together  
In a marital life again.  
I pray from my heart for you:  
Safekeeping—  
And return  
To join me.<sup>37</sup>*

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<sup>35</sup> Thanh Hoàng, *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* [*Yearning for Her Husband Upon Hearing the Sound of the Midnight Drum*], 15.

<sup>36</sup> For a history of *cải lương*, see Chapter 2.

<sup>37</sup> *Từ là từ phu tướng  
Bảo kiếm sắc phong lên đàn  
Vào ra luống trông tin chàng  
Năm canh mơ màng  
Em luống trông tin chàng  
Ôi gan vàng quận đau í a*

*Đường dù xa ong bướm  
Xin đó đừng phụ nghĩa tào khang  
Đêm luống trông tin bạn  
Ngày mỗi mòn như đá vọng phu  
Vọng phu vọng luống trông tin chàng  
Lòng xin chó phũ phàng*

*Chàng là chàng có hay  
Đêm thiếp nằm luống những sầu tây*

The play places the yearning, faithful woman as the center of the nation in contrast to the transnational feminine figure The Girl, whose transgressions move beyond the limits of “Vietnamese” identity. The recovery of *cải lương* as central to Vietnamese identity furthermore negates the historic abjection of Southerners and *cải lương* through the Vietnam/American war and its aftermath (see Chapter 2). The play recovers Southern identity and its traditions as central to the nation, as it imagines a state that had always been united.

The reaffirmation of “traditional” femininity erases past national strife and undergirds the ideal of a global masculine modernity arising from the very enforcement of tradition. If The Girl represents the perversion of Vietnamese culture by embodying American excess, sexual promiscuity, and heartless pragmatism, her boyfriend, the Vietnamese American Young Man, is a masculine embodiment of a new nation with international links. He demonstrates a respect for traditional Vietnamese culture, and the new identity of the nation as modern and transnational. The Vietnamese American Young Man appreciates and desires to understand his cultural background, journeying back to Vietnam and returning to America to retell of his experience. Like an ideal Vietnamese American, he desires to give back to his country by returning after he has finished his education.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, he acquires his modern and masculine identity through his enforcement of proper behavior in his interactions with The Girl. When the Girl chastises her grandfather for hanging up the sheets of pictures of the Vietnamese countryside, her boyfriend holds her back; and when she insults her homeland by comparing it to the “crazy and muddled brained” old men, he enforces respect of Vietnam by slapping her. His opposition to The Girl creates a positive masculine international identity in contrast to a feminine identity embodying cultural contamination and submission.

If the old men Ông Tư and Ông Nam can only dream of a Vietnam in their memories, The Young Man’s international travel allows him to gain the perspective to affirm the growth and renovation of the nation, acknowledging that it is “still very poor...but these times are a lot better than the past... people are beginning to be more comfortable.” He describes a progressive and international Vietnam that strives for education, economic development, and the acquisition of foreign languages, since “without studying languages, it would be impossible to talk to foreigners.”<sup>39</sup> The Vietnamese American becomes the new transnational citizen empowered to speak for and

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*Bao thuở đó đây sum vầy  
Duyên sắc cầm đờng lạt phai í a"*

*Thiếu phụ nhìn tôi rưng rưng đôi mắt lệ  
Ôi cô gái năm xưa tay bé tay bông  
Nhìn con đò trên sông nước mệnh mông  
Tôi nghe dao cắt những mảnh tình tan vỡ*  
From Pham Duy, *Musics of Vietnam*, 142.

<sup>38</sup> Thanh Hoàng, *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* [*Yearning for Her Husband Upon Hearing the Sound of the Midnight Drum*], 20.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.



legitimate the value of a global Vietnam. He acts as an ideal *việt kiều* (Vietnamese sojourner) who is not pompous or distancing like those that “newspapers in America have written about,” but “appears just like common folk,”<sup>40</sup> merging easily into common society to see “real” Vietnamese life. The Young Man declares Vietnamese identity as performable and capable of re-incorporating diasporic Vietnamese, in a new performance of openness and global integration. The play invokes the idealized woman that situates a geographically and culturally distinct nation, to replace her with a new, masculine figure of transnational exchange and mobility. This vision of modernity is linked to a masculinity that depends on the preservation of the timeless and geographically situated traditional woman. Melodramas such as *Yearning* produce contradictory sentiments towards the diaspora that works to affirm traditional Confucian femininity and transnational masculinity to create differential subjects necessary for the needs of global capital. They both deny, and demand resilience from, a feminine labor force whose physical (and sexual) labor is sold to the global market. These multiple feelings simultaneously produce, discipline, and reward gendered identities and behaviors, yet, as I will show in my conclusion, they do not always necessarily discipline the subjects they intend to discipline.

### **Melodrama and Neoliberalism in America**

If melodrama in Vietnam generates conflicting emotions towards the Vietnamese American simultaneously to construct images of tradition and modernity in the creation of a variegated source of labor, melodramas staging Vietnamese Americans in America generate feelings of racial harmony in the multicultural home to contribute to what Wendy Brown calls “tolerance talk,” which promotes right feelings and values of liberalism while at the same time building racialized labor for global capital. While the Vietnamese American experience has yet to be portrayed in American mainstream films, Chi Muoi Lo’s *Catfish in Black Bean Sauce* is a unique film that portrays the relationship of Vietnamese Americans to their original home, Vietnam, and the new multicultural home, America. The melodrama generates harmonious racial feelings among Asian Americans and African Americans while still estranging the Vietnamese American and depoliticizing the process of his racialization. It puts the burden of interracial conflict (and harmony) on the shoulders of the Vietnamese American, who is individually responsible for his choice of letting go of his past and assimilating to his new harmonious home. The film builds affect around the warm hearth of the multicultural home that putatively welcomes the Asian American who perpetually turns his back against it, while carrying out his systemic racialization and abjection.

I find it useful to analyze this film against Wendy Brown’s discussion of the effects of the pervasive discourse of “tolerance” in *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*. Assessing why and how “tolerance” has become a “beacon for multicultural justice and civic peace at the turn of the twenty-first century,” Brown argues that the discourse of tolerance and acceptance of difference taught in schools and religious institutions, and used by such politicians as George W. Bush to withhold rights to gays and lesbians, or to justify privacy infringements to Arab-American citizens,

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<sup>40</sup> Thanh Hoàng, *Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang* [*Yearning for Her Husband Upon Hearing the Sound of the Midnight Drum*], 19.

operates in a number of ways to bolster neoliberal governance. Moral talk and promotion of harmonious feelings fortifies liberal values of individualism and the rights to private belief. At the same time, tolerance grants power to the majority that decides what to tolerate, normalizes the “bearer [of tolerance] with virtue”<sup>41</sup> while abjecting those that must be tolerated. Tolerance furthermore, according to Brown, has two central modes of depoliticization. First, in its advocacy that all differences should be accepted, tolerance essentializes difference and disavows the historical construction of difference in such processes as racialization. Secondly, it uses the discourse of the right feelings to act in the place of political action.<sup>42</sup> Tolerance constructs the myth of the rational, individualized, and equal subject who gets to choose to participate in tolerating others, while it affirms normative identities by privileging the subject position of those who tolerate. The double operation of “tolerance talk” and abjection constructs racialized subjects who are offered not political but sentimental justice, subjects that are given a place in a multicultural home that reinforces the myth of equality and individuality, while deflecting his repeated denial from the nation to bolster neoliberal development.

In *Catfish in Black Bean Sauce*, “tolerance-talk” emerges in the construction of multiculturalism that Lisa Lowe critiques as,

central to the maintenance of a consensus that permits the present hegemony, a hegemony that relies on a premature reconciliation of contradiction and persistent distractions away from the historically established incommensurability of the economic, political, and cultural spheres...in this sense, the production of multiculturalism at once ‘forgets’ history and, in this forgetting, exacerbates a contradiction between the concentration of capital within a dominant class group and the unattended conditions of a working class increasingly made up of heterogeneous immigrant, racial, and ethnic groups.<sup>43</sup>

Multiculturalism entwines with “tolerance talk” to uphold the values of moral pluralism and individualism in liberal discourse while erasing or “forgetting” the processes of abjection, gendering, and racialization that at the same time serves the needs of capital. If in Vietnam, the Vietnamese American helps add coherence to Vietnamese trans/national identity, in America through such films as *Catfish in Black Bean Sauce*, the Vietnamese American affirms a reconciliatory attitude between America and its former enemies, and helps efforts to repair domestic racial strife without compromising the economic benefits of racialization inside and outside of the nation.

*Catfish in Black Bean Sauce*, written, directed, produced by Vietnam-born Chi Muoi Lo, was produced in America in 1999. As Linda Williams writes that the melodramatic mode is the “fundamental mode” in the American Hollywood film,<sup>44</sup> *Catfish in Black Bean Sauce* is a dramatic journey of emotional scenes surrounding issues

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<sup>41</sup> Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 24.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>43</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 86.

<sup>44</sup> Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 13.

of assimilation, clash-of-cultures, and multiculturalism. The film stages the drama of multiculturalism in the nation through melodrama's central image—the home. As a central characteristic of melodrama, according to Linda Williams, the film begins with the restive and coherent site of the (multicultural) home that becomes threatened or lost, and seeks to restore such a site of coherence in its narrative.<sup>45</sup> In the film, Dwayne (played by Chi Muoi Lo) and Mai are siblings; Dwayne is about to propose to Nina, and Mai is married to Vinh. Both siblings were refugees from Vietnam who had been adopted as children by Harold and Dolores Williams, an African American couple from Los Angeles who could not have their own children. The drama/comedy unfolds when Mai finds their Vietnamese mother and flies her to Los Angeles to live with them. Dolores feels replaced and fights with Mai, Dwayne has problems with Nina, and Harold has a mild heart attack from the stress. The wild and inscrutable Vietnamese culture, represented by the Vietnamese mother Thanh, threatens the American multicultural family; but in the end a harmony between all the characters reside and there is hope that a peaceful home can be rebuilt.

*Catfish in Black Bean Sauce* is one of few films to portray the experience of Vietnamese American immigrants, especially their relationship to the African American community, in mainstream American culture. It features acclaimed actors Paul Winfield (*Sounder*, *Presumed Innocent*) and Lauren Tom (*Joy Luck Club*). The film received the Best Screenplay Award at the Newport Beach Film Festival, and the Grand Jury Award at the 1999 Florida Film Festival, but somewhat lukewarm reception from film critics. Actor, producer, director, and writer Chi Muoi Lo was born in Phan Rang, Vietnam, to Chinese parents. His family fled Vietnam when he was six years old. After spending time in a refugee camp, his family was sponsored by the Jewish League of America and relocated to Philadelphia. Lo spent time acting in school plays and studied at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theatre. His credits include roles in *The Relic*, *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, the mini-series *Vanishing Son*, *NYPD Blue*, and *Law and Order*.

Lo's experience speaks to the challenges of making films about the Vietnamese American experience in the mainstream. He describes the difficulty of funding for *Catfish in Black Bean Sauce*, which two investors and his brothers provided, because according to him, "none of the studios wanted to make a movie like this."<sup>46</sup> The dearth of mainstream films on the Vietnamese American or Asian American experience leaves only a small number of roles for Asian American actors. According to Lo,

You find that anyone of us who had made it or who got some wonderful roles have a hard time finding a second role to back it up to maintain our careers out there from Jason Scott Lee to John Lone to Russell Wong. Even I got a wonderful role in *Vanishing Son*, but we have a hard time. In a strange way, people have to produce their own things to fulfill their creativity or to continue their artistry.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 28-29; 36-37.

<sup>46</sup> Michelle Caswell, "'Catfish in Black Bean Sauce' An Interview with Chi Muoi Lo," Asia Society Arts and Culture, August 14, 1999, <http://www.asiasociety.org/arts-culture/film/catfish-black-sauce-an-interview-chi-muoi-lo> (accessed April 26, 2010).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

Lo aims to promote increasing portrayals of the Asian American experience in the film industry:

What you are seeing is that the studios are importing international stars like Jet Li and Chow Yun Fat. I am very thrilled about Chow Yun Fat, but I'm a bit worried about Jet Li and Jackie Chan. As much as we're fans and it's great they are out there, we don't want them to be the only voice because then it's just martial arts. We're still stuck back in the '70s, where we're associated only with martial arts. We can go beyond that. I would love to get Asian Americans aware that we need to go out and support these projects. If we don't, you're going to have this perpetuation of the cycle of studios saying that they can't sell, that no one is interested in these stories. And then they just import these international stars that really have nothing to do with Asian Americans. They produce the things that they think sell, which is martial arts.<sup>48</sup>

Lo urges Asian American and African American audiences to become active in promoting movies about their experiences:

I would just like to encourage Asian Americans to come out and see this movie. There's a group called "the first weekend club" for African Americans. African American films have a very great turnout the first weekend they open. The reason is African Americans are aware the first weekend is very crucial, so they all come out on the first weekend. It establishes how long the film can stay in the theaters. And I just want to encourage Asian Americans to do the same thing. If you want to get your story told more and see others besides martial arts, come out and see the film. You find a lot of Asian American kids are very easy to assimilate with the Caucasian culture. If you go to the movie theaters, there's a lot of Asian Americans at the movies, but they've assimilated so easily that they're fine with seeing the story told... from a white perspective. But I've been in America over two decades and I'm tired of that. *I want to see [the story] from my perspective, or other people's perspective, and I think America is ready for that.*<sup>49</sup>

Lo expresses desires to make movies from outside the “white perspective” even with the confrontations to difficulties of funding and access. Indeed, in order to have roles, Asian American actors and writers would have to “produce their own things,” he advocates.

Yet, as expressed in such plays as Philip Kan Gotanda’s *Yankee Dawg You Die*, Asian American participation in art industries relies on a compromise to existing structures in exchange for greater representation. The tension between gaining visibility and conforming to or reiterating stereotypes is reflected in Lo’s description of his strategies for a successful Asian American actor:

I took acting very seriously at a very young age. I went to all these expensive

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., my emphasis.

schools and I was the only one there. If you do go to these schools, do speak up and demand that they teach you as Asian actors, not as Caucasian actors. This means that when the time comes to learn about dialects, do not follow the system where they teach you Irish dialect and Cockney dialect because you will never use them. We spent three to six months on these accents. Spend that chunk of time to learn the Chinese accent, the Japanese accent, the Vietnamese accent, because those kind of roles you will have to play and there is such a big difference in those accents...<sup>50</sup>

Lo expresses a practical attitude of properly preparing for roles that are available for Asian American actors, even if they are often limited roles that reiterate stereotypes of abject citizenship in America. While he may need to present stereotypical roles of unassimilated Asian Americans or Asians, at the same time he is meticulous about the fact that these accents are indeed different and not the same. His approach reflects the steps that Asian American artists need to take to increase access and visibility, while slowly reforming mainstream perspectives and stereotypes through the versatility of their own performances, and their own critical mimicries of these (stereotypical) identities.

While Chi Muoi Lo successfully presents a film about the Vietnamese American experience (through wonderful ties to African American artists), the film affirms a multicultural picture of America that continues to abject Asian American identity while supporting a discourse of tolerance that, according to Wendy Brown, displaces political action with liberal sentiments. The familiar problems of Asian American representation and stereotyping appear in this film. Samantha, an Asian American character (played by Wing Chen) who dates Dwayne's roommate, reveals herself as a transvestite in a comical scene where she has an awkward conversation with Dwayne, and forgets her wallet that reveals her real name, "Sam Woo." In one of the most comical scenes of the film, Dwayne asks his roommate if he knows Sam Woo's real identity, suspicious of the the deceitful/deceiving Asian American transvestite. Repeating the familiar character of the Asian/American transvestite in such plays and movies as David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, the film uses the transvestite for pure entertainment value and comedic effect, depoliticizing such figures only to reiterate stereotypes of the deceptive and emasculated Asian American.

The emasculation of Asian Americans further occurs to the Vietnamese American protagonist Dwayne. In a running joke in the film, Sam Woo becomes jealous when he suspects that Dwayne is having a homosexual relationship with his roommate. Both Sam Woo and Dwayne's masculinities are questioned in scenes involving the transvestite for comedic effect (with no irony). Dwayne's Vietnamese mother discovers that he wears a wooden heel inside his shoes to give him a boost of height. Dwayne's insecurity about his masculinity surfaces most clearly in his relationship with his African American girlfriend, Nina. In an early scene in the movie, Dwayne plans to ask Nina to marry him, but falters with his poor timing. When he is pulled over by a policeman who realizes that Dwayne plans to propose to Nina, the policeman tells Dwayne, "she's way out of your league...enjoy her while you can...it won't last long." The African American policeman and Nina share a flirtatious look. Suddenly, Nina gets into the back of the policeman's motorcycle and drives away with a shrug. In the next instant, we realize that the scene of

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

her running away is only in Dwayne's imagination. In repeated statements like "I know she can do better but she's the one...she loves me, right?" and "I don't know what she sees in me...she's very independent...she can have what she wants," Dwayne as a character exacerbates audiences' doubts as to whether an Asian American man is masculine enough for an African American woman.

Exacerbating questions about why an Asian American character never gets to "kiss the girl" of a different race in Hollywood films, Nina and Dwayne share quick frigid kisses. Their relationship is strangely cold in the actors' performances, considering the film wants to make us believe they are in love and that Nina accepts his proposal. While a white heterosexual man often no doubt "deserves the girl," in Hollywood films, much of this film dramatizes the question of whether Dwayne is good enough for Nina, or whether Nina loves or wants him enough. It is as if Dwayne gains his masculinity with the plot of the film. He at first tries to win over a somewhat indifferent Nina, preparing a nice dinner for her, for example, only to have her not show up because she is busy working. Only later in the film, after Nina learns that he is insecure about her love, does she cook him a nice meal, finally beginning to play a more "tamed" feminine and domesticated role in their relationship. Dwayne's coming to manhood rests upon his successful domestication, or feminization, of Nina. His success with Nina is symbolic of his own success in gaining acceptance and masculine status in American society.

Indeed the warm African American family represents the hearth of American society in this film. Countering the history of racial strife in Los Angeles from recent events as the 1993 race riots, the film (1999) restages multicultural unity between African Americans and Asian Americans in the same city. Such an image affirms the sentiments of tolerance and acceptance while again framing the history of racial strife (and harmony) as between African Americans and Asian Americans to disavow the participation of dominant white Americans in the historical process of racialization that comes to full display in the race riots. Indeed the dream of American multiculturalism and acceptance is represented in the warmth of the African American family that takes in Dwayne and his sister Mai. Parents Dolores and Harold are played convincingly and affectionately by Mary Alice and Paul Winfield. The parents represent the utmost of compassion when Harold takes in the Vietnamese children so that the siblings would not be forced to separate into different foster homes. Countering the racism of others in the community, who comment, "They couldn't find one black child? He should be with his own...Orientals," the Williams accept the children wholeheartedly as their own. African Americans become the stand-in for white America in the conversion from violent racial conflict to multicultural harmony.

Yet the multicultural hearth and home threatens to implode as it appears that Mai and Dwayne have conflicting attachments to their old home. Dwayne's sister Mai has never truly accepted her American mother and spends most of her young adult life looking for her Vietnamese mother. Their attachments and links to Vietnam disrupt their relationships to their nurturing African American parents, and Dwayne's only burgeoning relationship with Nina. Mai and Dwayne's attachment to the abject culture of Vietnam threatens their abilities fully to assimilate into the American home. Vietnam is portrayed mainly through the representation of Dwayne and Mai's mother (played by Kiều Chinh). The film portrays Vietnam as inherently suspect and primitive. At the news that Mai is bringing her Vietnamese mother to the United States, Dolores expresses

that “people are just dying to get over here, especially from Vietnam. I hope it’s not a scam.” Before her arrival, Dwayne imagines his Vietnamese mother arriving at the airport with an old white man she has picked up on the plane who is “loaded” with money. While the imagined Vietnamese mother is opportunistic and deceptive, the real Vietnamese mother is alien and primitive. Actress Kiều Chinh gives grace to the role that casts her as abject to American identity and modernism. Thanh describes her impression of America as “...very modern, many cars, very different from Vietnam.” She takes with her a history of war, “the years in Vietnam were not easy because the children father's involvement in the war, I was put in the camp after the war...many of my friends died or went mad...I don't know how I was able to survive...only with the hope that one day I could see my children again.” Her story affirms more the regression of Vietnam than reminds the audience of their political ties to the tragedy. The mother has peculiar preferences that show her outdated tastes: she treats Dwayne better than Mai because he is her son, and seems concerned when he helps out in the kitchen. In an uncomfortable scene, the whole family tries fish sauce that the Vietnamese mother brings to the welcome dinner, and the sauce ruins the whole meal, giving Harold diarrhea the whole day following. Most disorienting for Dwayne is his Vietnamese mother’s lack of acceptance for Nina and his ties to the African American community. She frowns upon his name, Dwayne, opting for his Vietnamese name Sập. Her casting of doubt upon his relationship with Nina pushes him finally to break up with her. Indeed, her effect on him disrupts his relationships to his African American parents and girlfriend, and his entrance into the multicultural hearth.

The multicultural home is threatened with the presence of the Vietnamese mother. Dwayne breaks up with Nina, Dolores is hurt and stressed out trying to compete with Thanh, and Harold, a normally relaxed man, is excited to a level where he has a mild heart attack. The conflict introduced to the home culminates in a catfight between the mothers Dolores and Thanh, when the women wrestle as Thanh screams, “how could you make my son marry that girl, she’s black!!” in Vietnamese. These words are not translated in the subtitles but are left just as nonsensical screaming, protecting the ideals of multicultural harmony while estranging the Vietnamese mother as the radical other. The wrestling finally ends as the camera pans towards the Vietnamese mother Thanh, who looks crazed and ghostly as she leans against an armoire to calm herself down. Speaking about the event later, she tells her son she “lost it.” The American multicultural home is torn apart by an alien and crazed intruder.

The wildest representation of Vietnam comes through nothing else than the “reformed opera” *cải lương*. After he breaks up with Nina, Dwayne is seen watching a corrupted version of *cải lương*, which he explains to his roommate as something requiring an “acquired taste.” A couple of seconds of *cải lương* is shown to the audience: of a woman wearing a red dress, with heavy make-up and heavy mascara dripping down her face from sobbing. She half sings and half screams repeatedly, to the accompaniment of traditional *cải lương* instruments, the same crude lyric: “come here, come here.”<sup>51</sup> The putatively sentimental and overwrought quality of *cải lương* appears alien even to a Vietnamese eye. Vietnamese culture is wild, inscrutable, and chilling. This Vietnamese performer, wearing the same red dress, returns again in Dwayne’s nightmare of his own

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<sup>51</sup> “*lại đây, lại đây...*”

wedding ceremony with Nina. The *cải lương* performer disrupts the ceremony with her wild appearance and laughter as she, in the place of Nina, marches down the aisle.

Here, the film deals with a history of mixed feelings amongst Vietnamese Americans towards *cải lương*. Adelaida Reyes writes that *cải lương* was a powerful means for Vietnamese in refugee camps such as Bataan, Philippines to remember their homeland:

[One refugee] showed me a book he had begun to keep in Bataan. In it, he had painstakingly written the text of each song he remembered from Vietnam—he said it was his way of reliving his old life—as well as each new American song addition to his repertory, practicing the pronunciation of unfamiliar English words as he went along.

Another refugee who had walked to Cambodia and from there escaped by boat brought with me a book of *cải lương* songs that he had carefully collected over twenty-five years. Leafing through its pages, deciding on what to sing for me, he handled the book as though it were a sacred object.<sup>52</sup>

While *cải lương* was an affective way for Vietnamese refugees in camps to remember Vietnam, Reyes also argues that its importance “derives more from its roles in the refugee-resettlers’ past, more from a life remembered than from the one here and now.”<sup>53</sup> In America, *cải lương* performance in full is seldom heard, according to Reyes. Only fragments of old plays can be re-performed due to a lack of economic and cultural resources.<sup>54</sup> The form is still often rejected by audiences due to the historical Vietnamese bias against theatrical performance (laid down in such laws as Le Thanh Ton’s 15<sup>th</sup> century legal code that made actors outcasts of society), and from *cải lương*’s sufferings through the Vietnamese Communist Party’s attacks to its quality, and the instabilities of war and exodus. As a result, Vietnamese Americans, like many Vietnamese, also view *cải lương* as impoverished, regressive, and melodramatic. In this film, *cải lương* becomes the epitome of Vietnamese inscrutability and backwardness. Clearly these figments of a wild and aberrant Vietnam threaten to destroy Dwayne’s only newly acquired place in America. This dream of *cải lương* instantly makes Dwayne spring into action to win back Nina.

The movie ends with the tentative repair of multiracial harmony in the home. Mai has a heartbreaking reconciliation with her black mother Dolores. Her Vietnamese mother’s mistreatment of her (and her son-in-law) makes Mai finally realize her ties to her black mother. In an emotional hug, she finally gives Dolores the appreciation and acknowledgment she had never given her. As her husband advised her, “you spent all this time looking for your mother...it’s time to stop looking.” The film suggests that the struggles of Asian Americans with other minority communities, and challenges in gaining a place in America comes from their own unwillingness to let go of their transnational attachments to the mother country—their inability to love the mother that had raised

<sup>52</sup> Adelaida Reyes, *Songs of the Caged, Songs of the Free: Music and the Vietnamese Refugee Experience* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 47.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*



them. The film confirms historic associations of Asian Americans as always foreign, and always suspect in their citizenship and affective ties to America. Their acknowledgement of their black mother, thus partially restores the view of multicultural America. Harold comes back healthy from the hospital and all the family members unite. The mothers face each other and smile to begin their reconciliation. The image of the multicultural home is reconstructed, but still with the threat of the Vietnamese mother, who is only beginning her assimilation. As she says to the son-in-law, “your room is bigger,” implying that she might take over his space, she still represents a threat to the multicultural home, a home at the risk of implosion from too much alien-ness, or too much attachment to the transnational other.

Yet if these characters *can* preserve this multicultural home in America, they can uphold individualism and tolerance at the core of liberal values as they undergo processes of racialization that serve global capital. Indeed it is precisely the racialization and alienation of the Vietnamese mother that assists in the transnational use of Asian and Latina immigrant women’s labor in the United States, that serves in the development of what Lisa Lowe calls a “new gendered international division of labor that makes use of third world and racialized immigrant women as a ‘flexible’ work force in the restructuring of capitalism globally.”<sup>55</sup> In *Catfish in Black Bean Sauce*, through the staging of a home of premature racial reconciliation, melodrama offers a myth of racial harmony, national coherence, and individual choice that create the feelings of harmony that disguise and erase the simultaneous abjection of the other. In *Yearning*, the abjection of the Vietnamese American occurs through simultaneous feelings of identification and rejection that allows the recuperation of “traditional” feminine identity that undergirds bourgeois gender normativity and the supply of diligent feminine labor. Such melodramas as *Yearning* and *Catfish in Black Bean Sauce* work together to produce a feminized and racialized global workforce, and legitimate the international demand for the consumption of such labor.

If the examples used in this chapter stress the overdetermined nature of melodrama to shape and reflect desires structuring neoliberalism in the contemporary moment, the generation of excess meanings in melodrama’s resistant history in Vietnam gives agency back to producers and spectators of the form to decide how to interpret works and *live* their values in the everyday. We have seen how playwrights such as Lru Quang Vũ borrow melodramatic structures from socialist realism to make his critique in the language of the personal, sentimental, and moral to escape censorship during market reform. Thanh Hoàng’s *Yearning*, moreover, appeals to the mixed sentiments of audiences that feel the combined effects of anxieties towards the loss of coherent national identity, the longings towards “home,” and new consciousnesses of transnationality. While the play may seek to build citizens who align cleanly to traditional femininity and modern masculinity, an audience that simultaneously longs for home, and possesses a (historical) transnational consciousness, is fulfilled by the play in heterogeneous ways.

Audiences’ ability to empathize with *Yearning* depends on their own experience of the heterogeneity of the nation and their simultaneous desires for a coherent Vietnamese identity. In the narrative entitled “Where is homeland?” for example, author

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<sup>55</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 16.

Thu Nguyệt mentions the power of the play *Yearning* to stir the hearts of audiences, using the play to talk about nationalist sentiment. Yet her ability to identify with the loss of the characters' homeland is built upon her own longing for local origin through her own awareness of the heterogeneity of local identity forming distinct visions of nation. Thu Nguyệt compares her homesickness in her travel from her hometown Đồng Tháp to the city of Ho Chi Minh to the old men's transnational displacement: "You don't need to go all the way to a foreign country like the two old men in the play to miss home, miss the country, miss the nation. Only traveling 150 miles from Đồng Tháp to Sai Gon, only going to the Miền Tây train station, do I already miss home!"<sup>56</sup> She describes her own inability to identify with the folks from the city despite having lived in the city for years; she still chooses friends from the countryside and struggles to understand her "close friend" from the city who knows every nook and corner of Sai Gon, dances on the stage during karaoke without a care, and pragmatically lectures her against giving money to pan-handlers using a logic that merges "the good and the bad like blades of grass growing side by side." To Thu Nguyệt, the "cold" city is a place of transnational flux where one "passes through" but never "lives." Meanwhile, her nieces and nephews long for the city whenever they are far away: "Wherever I go, when I return to the city I feel an inner burning; seeing the lights of the city I feel a strange happiness!" Her narrative emphasizes the heterogeneity of the nation, particularly in the title "What is homeland?" that suggests that home acquires an unstable definition that changes from different points of view. At the same time, her alienation towards city people whose moralities combine the "good and the bad" suggests a nostalgia for a conceptualized authentic past.

Here, Thu Nguyệt makes a reading of *Yearning* that relies on the play's satisfying of her desires for a coherent nation; but she is already aware of the impossibility of such a stable home. As a woman and audience member of *Yearning*, she adopts the transnational consciousness only granted to men in the play, revealing the types of actions and mobilities that a play such as *Yearning* still grants to its audience, whose multiple yearnings are satisfied and generated by the play, but who lives and enacts these emotions in their own way, appropriating roles (not) in melodrama's already multivalent frame. If melodrama in America might operate as a clear mode of depoliticization as critics such as Wendy Brown and Lauren Berlant argue, melodrama in Vietnam, with its fraught history with socialist realism, opens up sites of alterity as it mobilizes audiences that are trained to read inside and outside of its allegorical frames.

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<sup>56</sup> Thu Nguyệt, "Quê Hương Ở Đâu? [Where is Homeland?]," Văn Của Những Người Cùng Thời Trong và Ngoài Nước [Literature of Contemporary Vietnamese and Diaspora], [http://tranxuanan.writer.2.googlepages.com/thu\\_nguyet\\_quehodau.htm](http://tranxuanan.writer.2.googlepages.com/thu_nguyet_quehodau.htm) (accessed January 5, 2009).

## CONCLUSION

Pushing the limits of melodrama studies beyond the Euro-American genealogy, this dissertation examined the actions carried out by the melodramatic mode to perform nation in twentieth-century Vietnam. Melodrama's unique growth in Vietnam comes from the influence of a diversity of sources—the epic poem *Tale of Kieu* that adapted melodramatic Chinese narratives, French Romanticism that entered during French colonialism, socialist realism as a cultural policy of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), and the dominance of Confucian and Buddhist morality, to name a few. It is unique in Vietnam due to its hybrid nature and its entwinement with socialist realism, which served as the “cultural front of resistance”<sup>1</sup> and nationalization for the VCP.

The confrontation between socialist realism and melodramatic aspects of *cải lương* revealed a historical contradiction between socialism and sentimental, melodramatic expression. Socialist realism developed by both negating and borrowing from melodrama to shape the right feelings to interpellate its subjects. The conflict between socialist realism and *cải lương* created a subversive quality of sentimentality in Vietnam. The mutual influence of socialist realism and *cải lương* also established melodrama as an official mode of nation-building. The overamplification and sensationalizing of melodrama and *cải lương* also functioned in the erasure and reshaping of Southern culture, showing how the melodramatic genre can be placed on the body of subjects to make excesses of genre become excesses of identity.

The allegorization of the nation through the personal and sentimental offered the grounding for national construction in the post-war but also empowered a melodramatic form that could harbor conflicting ideologies and potential actions outside of official constructs. Melodrama in public discourse during *đổi mới* mimicked the state's ideologically ambivalent policy of “market socialism.” The melodramatizing of Luu Quang Vũ's personal life story displaced political conflict onto personal struggles, supporting the ideals of “self-criticism” and moral reform at the foundation of *đổi mới* discourse. Yet simultaneously, Luu Quang Vũ's own stage melodrama mimicked the ideological ambivalences of his contemporary society to resist being pinned down to one meaning in order to pass constraints of state censorship. His plays spoke to audiences that knew how to read political content through the language of the personal, moral, and sentimental. Melodramatic action defined the grammar of dissent for both dissidents and conservatives during and after *đổi mới*, who borrowed from and neutralized one another.

Shifting to a global view of melodrama, the dissertation argued that with the entrenchment of the market, Vietnamese state melodrama like *Yearning* would grow sophisticated in capturing the varied emotions of national longing and transnational flux, reaffirming such values as Confucian morality to structure the desires of subjects whose labor would become available for global capital. American and Vietnamese melodrama in the 1990s operated within a global economy that produced racialized subjects for global consumption, at the same time as (in the American case) they affirmed liberal values of individual choice, plurality of ideals, and equality. Such melodramas as *Yearnings* and *Catfish in Black Bean Sauce* worked together to create the right feelings to produce a feminized and racialized workforce for the service of global capital, suggesting

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<sup>1</sup> Trường Chinh, *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*, 273.

that melodrama operated as a global mode that produced and reflected desires structuring the contemporary neoliberal order.

The project revealed that melodrama in Vietnam had a unique formal hybridity and developed within a historical setting that allowed it to generate an “excess” of meaning critical to its survival. It’s own unique growth in Vietnam came from a diversity of sources such as melodramatic Chinese narratives, French Romanticism, socialist realism with roots in the Soviet Union and China, and the dominance of Confucian and Buddhist morality. Its emergence as *cải lương* in the twentieth century is an example of the rich hybridity of melodrama in Vietnam. The *cải lương* form resisted being pinned down to any single form or source. Its formal hybridity challenged the VCP’s efforts to construct a coherent and distinct national identity, and would lead the VCP to reject it as a sign of “colonial” contamination. Melodramas of post-war market reform operated as distinctly multiple in their generation of meaning particularly by absorbing the contradictions in the historical period and borrowing from hegemonic discourse. Stories that dramatized political struggles through the mode of the personal and sentimental, often borrowing from socialist realist narratives, operated as strategies, as artists have noted, in the “art of avoidance,” and “the art of indirect writing,”<sup>2</sup> that worked within the gaps of socialist realist and hegemonic discourse. They performed to audiences trained at reading outside and within melodrama’s already multivalent frame. In these instances, melodrama displaced the political as a means of surviving and gaining political meaning.

The project pointed to the melodramatic actions that were carried out in Vietnam to build the nation: erasing, doubling, mimicking, displacing, deflecting, overamplifying, sensationalizing. These actions connected to melodrama’s mediation of the relationship between the political and the personal in Vietnam—if the State hoped to translate the abstract ideology of socialism to the personal actions and emotions of its socialist subjects through melodrama, subjects would also borrow from this mode to imagine alternative visions of (national) identity. The State’s use of the melodramatic mode as a means of nation building made the mode highly relevant in the contestations of national identity in twentieth century Vietnam. Thus in Vietnam, melodrama can ultimately return authority to the individual—who can become sedated with feeling, or rather claim his or her sensual experience as a site of freedom, recognition, perception, and sense.

\*

Returning to my conversation with Khoa,

*What does talking about love do? How does talking about love shape the nation, its sense of the past, and its imaginings of the future?*<sup>3</sup>

Talking about love, Khoa covered over the political themes present in Luru Quang Vũ’s work at the moment he spoke. Yet he politicized love by borrowing from a socialist realist tradition that used the family, woman, and affect to create *consensus*, shared

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<sup>2</sup> Journalist and theater researcher Hiền, interview with author, Ho Chi Minh City, June 22, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter One: “‘All About Love:’” Melodramatic Action in Vietnam.”

knowledge and feelings, about the nation. This consensus tied personal feelings experienced by each person to a larger ideology made less abstract through each citizen's melodramatic participation—in performances of *đấu tố* (fighting, accusations), of socialist realism, and of the battlefield. Love tied the experience of the individual to the experience of the (official) nation. Like Khoa showed, this love and construction of a coherent nation required moments of silence—gaps like the moment we shared together—where things are left unsaid.

Others have tried to index the kinds of love that were left unspoken. As a music critic tells Philip Taylor, the post-war *cải lương* songs “never...[spoke] of love between two people or for one's family. Neither did it refer to disappointments in love, nor to feelings of sorrow or loneliness.”<sup>4</sup> Phùng Quán's famed poem during the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm affair marked the desire to speak of loves not granted:

A man, sincere and true,  
will laugh when happy, he wants to laugh  
will cry, when, sad, he wants to cry.  
If you love someone, you say you love.  
If you hate someone, say you hate.  
Someone may not talk sweet and flatter you—  
still, don't say you hate when you feel love.  
Someone may grab a knife and threaten you—  
still, don't say love when you feel hate.<sup>5</sup>

Much of Lư Quang Vũ's poetry was not published, and hidden in his “book of *misplaced* [or *disordered*] pages.”<sup>6</sup> Vương Trí Nhàn would find his own life and circumstances “in those torn pages of poetry.”<sup>7</sup> These politicized discourses of love fit into the gaps and torn pages of official ideology. They threatened rather to create a different vision of *consensus* and communalism that would become alternatives to official ideology, an official ideology that insisted on dramatizing the feelings of the community and *not* of the personal, but always through allegorizing the political through the affective economy of the personal.

Thus speaking about love pointed to official and alternate visions of the nation and identity in Vietnam. Khoa's evocation of love pointed to an official narrative of love's place in relationship to the nation, but it also could not help but borrow from or allude to the alternate discourses of love made so relevant in the nation. How would these discourses be uncovered but not overamplified or sentimentalized? This final question points to the power and risks of melodramatic action in Vietnam.

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Philip Taylor, “Opera and Cultural Identity in Ho Chi Minh City,” in *Consuming Urban Culture in Contemporary Vietnam*, eds. Lisa Drummond and Mandy Thomas (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 145.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Zachary Abuza 49; Cited in Georges Boudarel, 164.

<sup>6</sup> my emphasis; *Cuốn Sách Xếp Lầm Trang*

<sup>7</sup> Vương Trí Nhàn, “The Poems...Written in the War Years,” 70.

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