

## 7

# SONG, SOUND, AND REFUGEE AFFECT IN *LIFE OF A FLOWER* AND *SONG LANG*

*Lan Duong*

This chapter seeks to upend the global media's vast visual archive of Vietnamese refugees, an archive that has mostly captured images of refugees fleeing in fear and cowering en masse. Turning away from this archive and the savior narrative underlying it, I look to a different archive altogether—Vietnamese fictional films that narrate the refugee movement within a highly melodramatic register, one marked by an exaltation of sound, color, and emotion. *Kiếp Hoa* [*Life of a Flower*] (1953) and *Song Lang* (2018), I argue, offer a baroque window onto which the landscape of migration is studded with deeply felt sentiments of exile and loss. While *Life of a Flower* previews the story of the North-South migration in 1954 and *Song Lang* of the post-1975 migration, I bring these films together, as both reverberate with a southern Vietnamese affect, born of a historically situated sense of displacement and grounded in one of the most popular theatrical genres in Việt Nam—the *cải lương* opera.

Analyzed in tandem, *Life of a Flower* and *Song Lang* usefully highlight the generation of Vietnamese internal refugees who migrated in 1954 and the profound impact that this move had on their identities and political histories, a subject that few scholars have explored in relation to post-1975 migrations. It also puts pressure on grappling with the various resettlements that the Vietnamese have undergone throughout the twentieth century and underscores the transnational crossings between homeland and diaspora that have occurred with ever-greater constancy in the twenty-first century. In this crucial way, the two films build on a Vietnamese cinematic archive that actively binds the act of *fleeing* with the sense of *feeling* for a culturally vibrant South Việt Nam.

My readings of these films activate the figure of the refugee and performance of *cải lương*, “deemed the soul of Việt Nam,” as Luu Trong Tuan argues.<sup>1</sup> From the 1920s on, *cải lương* “grew out of southern singing traditions,”<sup>2</sup> and as its transliteration suggests, *cải lương*, or “renovated theater,” has been adapted many times over, drawing from its influences of Chinese theatre and “Western light opera or musical drama.”<sup>3</sup> Precisely because of its enduring evolutions, *cải lương* remains controversial and yet is the “traditional art of the nation as it was created by the Vietnamese, with its dynamism and openness [that] still survives,”<sup>4</sup> an openness that has exposed it to state criticism throughout the years.

Building on the emotionalism of *cải lương* and refugee (hi)stories, I use Sara Ahmed’s “model of the sociality of emotions”<sup>5</sup> to map how “emotions move through movement or the circulation of objects,” which then become sticky and “saturated with affect.”<sup>6</sup> Specifically, I read the ways that the grand nature of *cải lương* powerfully binds to the epic narrative of Vietnamese migration. The films *Life of a Flower* and *Song Lang*, in turn, fasten to other sticky objects, like the literary classic *The Tale of Kieu* and the legend of “Mỹ Châu-Trọng Thủy,” two narratives that circulate, to this day, with a film of emotionalism underlying them. Consequently, the films and their themes of valor and loyalty, love for one’s country, and death in wartime resonate even more strongly with Vietnamese audiences.

I also trace the refugee lines of flight outside of the frames of the films, advancing a Critical Refugee Studies (CRS) method of analysis that centralizes refugees in popular culture and ascertains the filaments of joy and loss, of memories and critiques, threaded within *Life of a Flower* and *Song Lang*. This mode of looking, as my co-writers and I arrive to in *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies*, allows for “the worlds of refugees to be evident, on their own terms.”<sup>7</sup> The task of the CRS scholar, then, is to map the fault lines of creativity and criticality in refugee works and explore the epistemological and worldmaking practices that inhere in them. As I contend in the following pages, refugee movements are bound to a queer, feminist, and critical sensibility, one closely twined with *cải lương* itself. Reading through refugee affects and itinerancies lets us probe the relations between objects and the feelings they engender while opening up vital inquiries into other critical archives and models of critique that focus on refugees.

### ***Life of a Flower, Cải Lương, and the Excesses of the Melodrama and the Musical***

Dubbed the first “sound” film made in Việt Nam, *Life of a Flower* featured for the first time post-synchronous dialogue by Vietnamese actors. Captured within a studio, sound is crucial to the film’s narrative and emotive impact. Taking place in Hà Nội during the First Indochina War, the film’s story is set in 1953 (the year the film was made) and begins with the peregrinations of a Catholic family who seek shelter from the chaos of war. To communicate such dramatic events, the film emotes through song the women’s sorrows and joys and uses Foley sounds to cue the sonic memories of wartime Việt Nam.

The film is further marked by its transnational modes of production and serves as one of the early examples of a transnational collaboration between a French director (Claude Bernard) as well as Chinese and Vietnamese industry players. Some scenes were shot in a Hong Kong studio, in which Chinese actors appeared and where Vietnamese performers were flown to, while others were filmed on location in the country’s capital. More locally, the Vietnamese collaboration involves *cải lương* singers and songwriters, an ensemble that brings together the film’s production studio (Kim Chung Film Studio) with the Hà Nội-based Kim Chung Opera House. Its cast of players includes Trần Việt Long, the film’s main investor, promoter, and screenwriter (his pen name was Trần Lang). He was also the real-life husband and stage manager of the main actor in the film, Kim Chung, a beloved opera singer who often headlined the popular theater venue.<sup>8</sup> As the manager of the opera house and film studio, he named both after his wife and wrote into the screenplay that the characters would go to a theater called Kim Chung for a night out on the town.

In yet another collapsing of text and context, the real-life family dynamics on set paralleled the real-life drama that structured the film’s production. As his wife’s manager, Trần Việt Long worked with her brother, Tiểu Lang, and his wife, Kim Xuân, to make the film. In real life, the two women were sisters-in-law and performed as sisters onscreen. The family’s popularity as a renowned family of singers and artists lends the film an additional layer of celebrity and authenticity that the film (and Trần) harnessed to make what was then a “blockbuster” movie for its time. It was also the first movie to have been promoted through an extensive marketing plan. Flying a plane, Trần littered parts of Hà Nội with movie posters to advertise the film. Newspapers reported that spectators flocked to the movie theaters in the three regions of the country—Hà Nội, Huế, and Sài Gòn—when it debuted in 1954. The film was so popular that when it was doubled-billed at two different theatres, its canisters were transported by motorbike to accommodate viewer demand.<sup>9</sup>

Mirroring the story of a displaced family onscreen, the family of singers behind the film was forced to break up and leave for the South in 1954. Trần and Kim were among those who participated in the North-South migration after having shot the film in 1953, the year that internally displaced refugees began moving to the South to flee communist persecution. Once *Life of a Flower* was released, writer/producer Trần acquired some wealth and wanted to make another film, but he was never able to do so because of the First and Second Indochinese Wars; he and his actress-wife migrated southward and

then abroad during these wars and their aftermath. In 1954, the family decided to divide the film reels among themselves: Trần's brother-in-law and sister-in-law stayed in Hà Nội and kept one copy, while Trần and Kim kept the other, moving first to Sài Gòn in 1954 and then to France in the 1970s after the war ended. Trần tried to finance another film in 1985 but could not, as the Vietnamese state did not recognize *Việt Kiều* (overseas Vietnamese) capital and disallowed any Vietnamese diasporic film from being made in the country.<sup>10</sup> Having never produced a film again, Trần died in 2003 in Sài Gòn. His wife donated the film to the state, which has since restored and archived it at the Film Archives (Viện Phim) in Hà Nội. Kim died in Sài Gòn in 2008.<sup>11</sup>

In articles on *Life of a Flower* and its recent screenings in Việt Nam, none of them discuss the other reason why Trần and Kim's family may have had to flee to the South: it was because *cải lương* singers were persecuted in the North. As Barley Norton notes, after the August Revolution, the Party began to aggressively manage and censor certain cultural expressions, deeming, for example, that "*Tuồng* was too feudal; *Cải lương* was too sentimental and romantic; but *Chèo* was favored because of its credential as popular folk art and potential as vehicle for mass propaganda."<sup>12</sup> Thus, *cải lương*'s demise in this region of the country strongly figures into the story. With its colonial roots and melodramatic expressiveness, *cải lương* was intensely critiqued by the Vietnamese Communist Party in the latter half of the twentieth century.

By virtue of its openness to change, as Philip Taylor details, *cải lương* has always courted controversy from the early twentieth century on, specifically in its borrowings from Chinese opera and French colonial culture. For some colonial-era singers it was a means, for example, to collaborate with the French and critique communism as a political way of life. Taylor further argues that *cải lương* was suspect for other reasons: "its moral value in the form of popular entertainment, unacceptable mixing of disparate influences, degree of foreign-ness, class status and political tendency, and finally, dubious sponsorship by a succession of states, both colonial and post-colonial."<sup>13</sup> The gendered nature of the genre was problematic as well: its feminized, melodramatic overtones ran counter to the masculinist images of socialist realism that the Party wanted to espouse for the nation following the First Indochina War. Despite its provocations, or because of them, *cải lương*, Taylor writes, "became one of the major cultural and artistic movements in the urban areas of southern Vietnam in the twentieth century and its following and influence [has] spread elsewhere in the nation and overseas."<sup>14</sup>

*Life of a Flower's* narrative culminates in the tumult of the 1940s and 1950s. In 1945, the First Indochinese War began when Vietnamese communists led a mass movement that toppled the Japanese-installed government in Hà Nội. The following year, France went to war with its former colony but later lost a major battle at Điện Biên Phủ against the Việt Minh in 1954, resulting in a withdrawal of all French troops from the country soon after. The Geneva Accords decreed that Việt Nam would be divided at the seventeenth parallel, with the communists receiving control only of the North and pending nationwide elections that were never held in the country. Against this chaotic backdrop, "nearly a million refugees sought refuge in the territory of what would become the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), a US-supported regime headed by Catholic leader Ngô Đình Diệm."<sup>15</sup> During the 304-day grace period that the UN allowed for people to transfer across regions, "the mass movement from the North to the South became known as *Cuộc Di cư Vĩ đại* [Great Transmigration] and the refugees became known as the *Bắc di cư năm mươi tư* [Northern Refugees from Fifty-Four], or *Bắc di cư*."<sup>16</sup> The mode of travel for this group (who are still colloquially known as *Bắc di cư*) or Bắc 54 was aided by the U.S., the French, and other private voluntary agencies like the U.S. National Catholic Welfare Conference.<sup>17</sup> Most of the displaced were Catholic Kinh but also included economic migrants in search of a new life.<sup>18</sup>

While the U.S. campaign was touted as successful by the U.S. in relocating one million refugees transregionally, for the refugees themselves, there remained a sorrowful feeling of grief and a great deal of ambivalence in leaving. As Lien Hang Nguyen writes, these migrants formed the "double diaspora of Việt Nam's Catholics," to reuse the title of her essay. She describes the excruciating decision to move and the sense of betrayal they felt when exiled from their ancestral homes at the hands of the Vietnamese government.<sup>19</sup> As Nguyen argues, these refugees became ensconced in a swirl of events and emotions

before and after resettlement, observing that “eight hundred thousand Catholics who fled the North, left primarily out of fear,” all the while being encouraged by Washington who “enticed people to rally to the South” with the promise of money and stability.<sup>20</sup> Phi Nguyen further notes that “what began as a temporary sojourn for northerners traveling South became permanent, one that was rife with the psychological pain of separation and expulsion.”<sup>21</sup> Refugee-sojourners eventually invested their political energies into the region to support the Catholic leadership of Ngô Đình Diệm, the synergies of which would help shape the Republic of South Việt Nam and its ideological formations from thereon.

The dual themes of political exile and forced migration reverberate in the storyline and sound design of *Life of a Flower*. The film’s opening scene uses acoustic and mnemonic reminders of a shared traumatic past to tell a story of refugee loss. Announcing the historical frame of the film (the migration from Hà Nội to Thái Bình), the intertitle is underlined by the percussive sounds of warfare and scenes of refugees fleeing on foot by land. While the camera lingers on the migrants, the film’s focalization eventually settles on a family of women (of two sisters and their mother) and their migration southward.

In the film, Ngọc Lan (played by Kim Chung), her sister Ngọc Thủy (played by Xuân Kim), and their mother escape the war and communist persecution, as they are part of an educated class of Catholics displaced by the Franco-Indochinese conflict. When the matriarch can no longer walk, they stop at a large manor and ask the owner if they can stay to rest. A love story quickly unfolds between the property owner’s son, Thiện, and Ngọc Lan, but theirs is a chaste romance that will be thwarted throughout by men who try to exploit her naïveté and tarnish her reputation. Viewers soon apprehend that the “flower” of the title refers to the tragic life and death of the eldest sister. In her prettified temperament and prodigious talent, she bears resemblance to the (in)famous character of Kiều in Nguyễn Du’s *Truyện Kiều*, or *Tale of Kieu*, a literary allusion in the film that appends another sheen of emotionalism surrounding Ngọc Lan.

Originally published in 1820, *The Tale of Kieu* still stands as the epitome of classic Vietnamese literature. In the epic poem, Kiều and her travels and travails begin immediately: a highly educated woman who marries for money (so that she can pay her father’s debts and have him released from prison), she is soon kidnapped and sex-trafficked, forced to become a prostitute several times in the story. When she and her lover Kim Trọng finally reunite, he is married to her younger sister, but he and Kiều agree to live together as husband and second wife. Even as the narrative portrays a prostitute and her misfortunes, for the Vietnamese, as George Boudarel argues, “Kiều has remained for [them], the image of their own misfortunes, the mirror that reflects their own suffering transfigured.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in Nathalie Nguyen’s reading of Kiều, the bourgeois Vietnamese woman’s “fate, beauty and talent lead to misery,”<sup>23</sup> but she is treasured as such by the Vietnamese, who see not only themselves in the literary character but also their country and the hardships it has undergone.

Indeed, *Life of a Flower*’s narrative is contoured by the waywardness of the beautiful and talented Ngọc Lan who follows the same path of errantry as Kiều, though her trajectory is marked with some distinctions. While she does not become a prostitute, she is always in danger of becoming one or being seen as one. When she walks the street, she recognizes that her presence in the urbanscape marks her as sexually available. Alone in the city, she and her sister become prey to men and their malintents. Hungry and destitute, they are invited to work and stay with their childhood friend, Tam. When told that her lover Thiện has died from a gunshot wound, Ngọc Lan drinks to excess with Tam, only to discover the next morning that he raped her. When he makes sexual overtures toward the younger sister, the two women leave his apartment and become displaced again.

A film about wandering women, it tells a moral story about the tragedies that befall them, anchoring itself in the notion of female refugeehood and the dangers of women’s sexuality. Such melodramatic themes are orchestrated through the genre of the musical so that the film’s many excesses—its tragic sentimentality, song and dance numbers, and intertextual allusions—offer a non-normative reading of what is excessive to the narrative and cannot be resolved: the women’s errant desires, even as the narrative prioritizes the idea of women’s propriety. Featuring expressive songs and dances by the two sisters, which disrupt the film’s linear narrative, *Life of a Flower* sets up a precedent for the viewing of



Figure 7.1 Screenshot by author. Singing sisters Ngọc Lan and Ngọc Thủy, played by sisters-in-law Kim Chung and Kim Xuân, director Claude Bernard, *Life of a Flower*, 1954.

Vietnamese film in terms of aural and visual excesses, an extravagance related to the musical film genre (*loại phim ca nhạc*) and which has rarely been replicated since.<sup>24</sup>

I mobilize a study of the melodrama and the musical to argue that *Life of a Flower* displays “the hallmarks of melodrama (heightened emotional display, spectacle and excess) [and] give[s] way to a stylization that provides an aesthetic distance, an irony, that cannot be ignored.”<sup>25</sup> Operating in a similar vein is the musical genre in film, which showcases the eruptions of self-expression within the narrative’s propulsive movement to the end. Such displays of emotionalism evince a “‘queer’ libidinal heterogeneity—something that far exceeds the parameters of the domestic, oedipalized heterosexuality promoted by the narrative.”<sup>26</sup> Here, the excess of that “something,” which “cannot be ignored,” is the positioning of the women in the film.

Certainly, the two sisters and their wholesome goodness, performed in service to a heteropatriarchal narrative, are integral to the film’s tale about the virtues of settling down, even though the women’s forced nomadism—and the problem attendant to this condition—remains the movie’s emotive pulse. But the women’s star presence on and offscreen as singers and actors also direct the film’s energy, as they sign into being a wholly different way of seeing Vietnamese women perform as songstresses who dominate the frames of the film. As such, the women serve as markers of tragic femininity, while their performances offer up the high emotionalism that the film affectionately traffics in, producing an extratextual frame for the reading of its ironic aestheticism and theatricality.

Related to these registers, *Life of a Flower* exhibits a love shared between the two sisters (again, sisters-in-law in real life) that becomes a more compelling spectacle to watch for viewers than the tragedy of heterosexual love that drives the narrative. As with *The Tale of Kieu*, in *Life of a Flower*, the younger

sister replaces the love object for the male subject—in grieving over the body of the dead woman, they become a newly configured couple, one that suggests a queer triangulation that, again, exceeds the narrative's genteel, heteronormative planes. Ultimately, the film comes alive most when its text and context collide, as the factual details of the film's main players and their extradiegetic migration are critical for locating the film's emotional force and potential sites for spectatorial pleasure. Its intertextual qualities may have produced an extra frisson of pleasure for viewers in hearing for the first time a musical featuring popular *cải lương* actors and witnessing the film's self-reflexive moments play out.

This homage to excess is embedded in the seams of the film *Song Long* as well. In the following section, I advance a reading of the state's domination of the South, which aimed to “erase the loss of southern society and facilitate an imaginary of a united nation.”<sup>27</sup> In post-war Sài Gòn, the setting for *Song Lang*, the state also censored and censured the beloved art form that was once flourishing and privatized in the 1960s and 1970s, another moment of *cải lương*'s golden era. Leon Lê's queer staging of 1980s Sài Gòn hinges on the state's cannibalization of the genre in nationalizing and masculinizing the theme of communist uplift. Intertwined with this recent history of *cải lương* is my analysis of the refugee figure—the director himself. As a returning refugee, Lê's presence limns the film and foregrounds how the refugee narrative may be full of errant narrative possibilities.

### Sài Gòn in the 1980s: *Song Lang* and the Look of Nostalgia

When *Life of a Flower* was screened to audiences in Việt Nam in 2012, newspaper articles discussed its affecting portrayal of womanhood and quaint archive of imagery, waxing nostalgic about its scenes of a vintage Hà Nội and women in white *áo dài*.<sup>28</sup> Here, I examine this retroactive, introspective mode of looking at Vietnamese film, as more and more contemporary films appear to take a honeyed perspective on the country's recent past.<sup>29</sup> My point is that for a young generation of Vietnamese—many of whom have not experienced the war in the ways that their parents and grandparents had—the past functions as a site to be mined for pastiche and nostalgia. According to Rey Chow, however, nostalgia is not simply a regressive mode of looking back; it can be both critical and complex, at times “constituting a cultural politics of self-nativizing” of local cultures and customs while proffering rebukes of a hypercapitalist present by providing “an alternative temporality” and the “fantasy of communal formations.”<sup>30</sup>

This complexity surrounding the past, I contend, shapes a different way of looking in Vietnamese cinema, a signpost that marks a shift in how the Vietnamese view their past and grapple with the country's contemporaneity. The nostalgia in these films shows the modes by which a prewar Sài Gòn, “reformed” by Communists after the Vietnam War ended, is remembered by its inhabitants and by the diaspora as (and continues to be) a vital site of urbane cosmopolitanism. As an example, *Song Lang* serves as a love letter to Sài Gòn's past in its retro look and story about love and loss. Unlike other recent Vietnamese films that dwell on the past, however, director Leon Lê puts into a play a darker postwar story about a gangster (Dũng) and an artist (Linh) and their unlikely queer romance.

Against the backdrop of this romance is 1980s Sài Gòn (renamed Hồ Chí Minh City in 1975), revisualized in oversaturated colors and with onscreen displays of queer masculinity. *Song Lang*'s bleakness alludes to the darkness of this time period in relation to the city's postwar poverty and its privations in terms of culture. As Khai Thu Nguyen argues, when *cải lương* was eventually banished to the South after the Vietnam War, the art form became “superimposed on the body of the southerner,” so that its excesses came to “represent the excesses and aberrations of an ideology that was in need of purification.”<sup>31</sup> In purifying the South, the state meted out punishment of “the southerner's excessively feminized body” through the processes of reeducation and economic displacement.<sup>32</sup> Mapping the body of the southerner onto the body politic of South Việt Nam, the Communist North accused the region of sheltering, through *cải lương*, the embrace of romance and sentimentality.

From its opening frames, we see Dũng (“Thunderbolt”) terrorizing people who owe money to his boss, a female loan shark. His aggressive streak is attributed to his mother's abandonment of him and his father after the Vietnam War ended. A *cải lương* performer, she leaves for the U.S. to escape the

communist regime's encroachment of the southern city and appropriation of the cultural form. Dũng's father was also part of the troupe, in which he played the *đàn nguyệt*, an ancient instrument that features stirringly in the opera's orchestral sounds and serves a role in deepening Dũng and Linh's attraction for one another. Dũng has become a cold and ruthless criminal in the present day, spurning his love for *cải lương* because of its association with his mother's leave-taking and father's death. When the film begins, then, Dũng's sense of betrayal fuels both his attachment and antipathy to *cải lương*.

The betrayal that Dũng feels for having been forsaken by his mother and, to some extent, the motherland is understandable within the historical context and political climate that the film points to. After the country's "reunification" in 1975, and amid wars with China and Cambodia in the late 1970s, the newly unified government put into place a centrally planned economy throughout the country, based on an economic structure that had already been impacted by French colonialism's extractive nature and the absolute ecological devastation that resulted from the many wars fought on Vietnamese soil. The postwar economy thus "staggered from one economic crisis to another."<sup>33</sup> In the wake of the state's massive reconstructive efforts after 1975, increased poverty and widespread hunger were made worse since foreign aid to Việt Nam had ceased. The U.S. also instituted a trade embargo on the country, which would not be lifted until 1994. During such desperate times, the state established a policy to distribute food and goods via coupons in what is known as the subsidy period (*thời bao cấp*), which took place from 1975 to 1986. This period ended when the Fifth Party Congress officially implemented the economic reforms called *Đổi Mới*, or Renovation, in 1987.

In the South, the government inaugurated other disastrous policies that profoundly changed the constitution of the region's economics and demographics, for example, establishing reeducation camps that detained and tortured those who had worked for or collaborated with the U.S. government during the war. Those incarcerated included a range of high- and low-level military officers as well as translators, police officers, and sex workers. Also punished were middle-class urbanites, many of whom were ethnic Chinese, as they were sent to New Economic Zones (NEZs) in the rural areas to live and work the land. In the process of being "socialized" by Hà Nội, as Ngo Vinh Long argues, southern Việt Nam found itself "in an even worse social and economic situation. In addition to the unemployed and hungry mentioned above, one must add the several million Saigon soldiers and police, as well as the more than 300,000 prostitutes, who suddenly found themselves out of work. There were also several hundred thousand war invalids and 800,000 orphans."<sup>34</sup>

Because of these collateral effects of the war, the North's retributive "national reprogramming" of the South, to use Long Bui's exacting term, factored heavily into the exodus of southern Vietnamese refugees from Việt Nam to countries like the U.S., France, Australia, and others, from the 1970s to the late 1980s.<sup>35</sup> The successive waves of out-migration during this period would later form the expansive geographical and cultural borders that makeup today's Vietnamese diaspora. As part of this diaspora, Leon Lê's refugee history is woven into the making of the film and outlines *Song Lang's* critique of the postwar communist state and its amorality.

### **Song Lang and the Sounds of Propaganda**

In articles detailing *Song Lang's* mode of production and reception in Việt Nam and the U.S., director Lê traces his trajectory out of Việt Nam as a young child and back to the country to make a film about *cải lương* as an adult.<sup>36</sup> In 1992, he was 13 years old when he left Sài Gòn and arrived in Orange County, California. Lê recalls how he came without his parents (who were to come later) but arrived with distinct memories of his love for *cải lương*, which formed the impetus for *Song Lang's* script. In 2016, he returned to Việt Nam to shoot the film. It was there that the film was well received, and consequently, Lê truly felt Vietnamese in his identity and roots, stating: "Hearing the responses after the film came out, and having people understanding and sharing my point of view and emotions that I put into the film, I feel like I'm not alone anymore. In the end, I'm still Vietnamese at heart. It's in my blood."<sup>37</sup>

Aligning himself as “Vietnamese” in his passion for *cải lương*, Lê’s claimed that the film is “just a drama,” even while it was momentarily released during the one-hundredth year anniversary of *cải lương* in the country.<sup>38</sup> Lê’s assertion is pragmatic, given that the subjects of postwar Sài Gòn and *cải lương* have been provocative topics for the Vietnamese state. Nevertheless, this genre’s popularity in the postwar South and overseas communities informs the political subtext underlying Lê’s sumptuous drama (co-written with veteran woman writer and theater performer Nguyễn Thị Minh Ngọc) about opera and queer love during a time of extreme hardship for the city’s inhabitants. As much as the politics of the film are tamped down in its surrounding discourses, *Song Lang*’s criticism of the postwar Vietnamese government and its “feminization” of the South is clear due to the folk opera’s Indigenous southern roots and its solicitation of sympathy for a queer gangster, based on real-life mobster and devoted supporter of *cải lương*, Năm Cam. Absent from these extratextual details is the way that *Song Lang* faults the state for the mother’s leaving, the impoverished conditions and criminal elements of the city, and finally, the privations of a once-vibrant cultural form. In no uncertain terms, the film shows that the state created the conditions for the precaritization of its own people, namely southerners, in the postwar era.

The state’s presence-as-a-problem in Sài Gòn’s postwar society is positioned at several moments in the film, made manifest through the sound design and musical score. In the film’s beginning, we hear militarist propaganda broadcast through a loudspeaker, its tangled cables snaking throughout the city. But reaction shots of the people who wake up to these sounds show they are unfazed by the pronouncements of national unity and military strength. Rather, people’s everyday rhythms are syncopated to the beats of a familial sociality. Thus, while the radio host drones on about the “People’s Army of Vietnam” that is “always ready to fight for the country’s independence and for freedom,” we also see in the following sequence a series of shots empty of people, pillow shots of communist flags festooned across apartment buildings, and canted (and thus derealized) images of the famous sights of Sài Gòn, namely, the Notre Dame Cathedral and Turtle Lake. As the movie emphasizes, in an era during which the state has imprisoned and displaced so many southerners, what provides the people with a moral compass by which to live their lives is made internally.

That moral compass is symbolized by the “song lang” of the film’s title, a percussive instrument used in *cải lương* to regulate a song’s tempo. In the film’s opening, Dũng holds in his hands the musical instrument bequeathed to him by his dead father, and intones his father’s words about how its regulating function in music also provides a “moral framework for the artist.” These lessons about morality are imparted through two important figurations in the film—that of the suffering father and the performance of *cải lương* itself—both of which come together most resoundingly in a scene that uses seamless editing to convey the strains of an artistic and erotic communion. Having disliked each other from the start—Dũng threatens to shut down Linh’s mother’s opera house because it is in debt to his boss—Dũng and Linh later discover their shared passion for *cải lương* by way of their performing together. Precipitating this is the moment when Dũng reveals that his father had once penned songs for the family’s opera troupe. Urging Linh to sing his father’s dirge, Dũng picks up his lute to play alongside Linh, in what is emotively staged as a visual and aural commemoration of his late father, orchestrated to link the ties between past and present.

This scene explains two facets of Dũng’s past. It melds father and son across time and space through their love for music. As it also features a flashback, viewers see the mother preparing to leave while her only child (Dũng) watches her go. Overlaid onto this moment of erotic intensity between Dũng and Linh is the primordial loss of the maternal figure. The lyrics address this loss while alluding as well to the metacinematic framing of the film: “Only through this song can I express the pain/I’m missing you throughout these sleepless nights ... Only the sounds of my lute echoing in the night/as if it’s crying for the end of a love story.” Again, the sequence is notable for its high emotionalism in triangulating the three men and strengthening the bonds between them in response to the mother, the loss of whom was motivated by the postwar state’s misappropriation of the opera form.

By the film’s penultimate conclusion, in which Dũng goes to meet Linh at the opera theater only to be slain by a man whose wife had killed herself and two young daughters when she wasn’t able to pay





Figure 7.2 Screenshot by author. Dững and Linh meet for the first time in *Song Lang*, director Leon Lê, *Song Lang*, 2018.

her debts, viewers connect the opening with the final scenes of Dững’s death and redemption. In a continuation of the beginning frames, in which he cradles the song lang in his hands and pays his respects to his dead father, Dững visits his loan shark boss to pay back the debt that the suicide victim/mother had once owed her. Coming full circle—that is, in returning to a love for *cải lương* that once nourished him—he then opens a trunk full of his family’s mementos of the opera and explores his family’s illustrious past as performers by the film’s end. A “reformed” man in the next scenes, he wears a clean white shirt, dons his lute, and approaches the opera house to meet with Linh with renewed vigor but is ultimately knifed in the back by an avenging patriarch.

The high drama accompanying these scenes is piped into the opera songs as well, songs Lê recomposed specifically for the film. At the same time, Dững meets his unfortunate fate, the opera of “Mỹ Châu-Trọng Thủy,” which relays the story of two ill-fated lovers of times past, unfolds contrapuntally on the stage, signaling that the songs and their lyrics play an important allegorical role in the film. The legend of “Mỹ Châu-Trọng Thủy” is set in ancient wartime Việt Nam, an epic story that spans decades of war and strife and involves familial treachery and filicide. The opera’s lyrics evoke the Romeo and Juliet-like themes of the story—of the lovers’ enforced separation because of familial ties, a daughter’s betrayal to her father, and finally, the father’s beheading of his daughter when he finds out she has provided her lover with wartime secrets. As Trọng Thủy holds the body of his dead lover on the proscenium and mourns the loss of Mỹ Châu, we see Dững’s murder and his lifeless body being hauled away by the police, his blood washed away by the rain. Later, Linh comes out to meet Dững outside the opera house and finds no one there.

The film’s nesting of stories about star-crossed love across time and space is most forcefully understood through the frames of refugee history. The legend and opera of Mỹ Châu and Trọng Thủy replay the drama of a separation between two families, between North and South, during both the First and Second Indochinese Wars, and most energetically, retells the story of an amoral patriarch that breaks up and destroys both families in war’s aftermath. The ruthless king kills his daughter when he finds out that she has betrayed him. While *Song Lang* (melo)dramatizes and heightens the loving relationships between men, the haunting essence of trauma remains the vengeful politics of a communist regime,

the politics of which made way for a paternalistic, violent domination of the South in the post-1975 era, which sought to remasculinize this region via reeducation and ideological indoctrination. The film's extravagance, its storyline, style, music, costume, and color, becomes a celebration of *cải lương's* excessive form and a criticism of the state's appropriation of it. Lê's refugee memory informs the film's critique of the punishing conditions that the state created in the South following Viet Nam's history of war and imperial conquest.

### Nostalgia and Sentimentality in Vietnamese Cinema

The films analyzed in this chapter operate within a maximalist key, abounding with dramatic energy, nostalgia, and sentimentality. According to Rey Chow, the "sentimental is an affective orientation and tendency, one that is often characterized by apparent emotional excess, in the form of exaggerated grief or dejection or a propensity towards the shedding of tears."<sup>39</sup> Looking at "feminized" film genres in East Asian cinemas that are often derided as such, Chow defines the word "sentimental" in Chinese is marked by a "disposition toward making compromises and toward making-do with even—and especially—that which is oppressive and unbearable."<sup>40</sup>

The sentiment embroidering the films *Life of a Flower* and *Song Lang* is influenced by their scaffolding but also crystallizes around acts of "making do" with the material remains of the South and cultural vestiges of Sài Gòn. This sentimentality also helps to deflect the films' critique of the North Vietnamese regime's forced displacement of Vietnamese refugees: those who fled to the South in 1954 and then, in many cases, fled again in the years after 1975. These critiques knit their way into the modes by which they were made, whereby the actors' and directors' stories of refugee migration structure the politics and aesthetics of their work. Highlighting the refugee at the fulcrum of these films, I underscore the volatility of this gendered figuration, as it is queerly wedded to the genres of the musical and melodrama and the themes of exile and errantry. My reading highlights how Vietnamese refugee creatives work through their refugee memories, musical passions, and queer desires to realize them in film; accordingly, these filmic representations undo the dominant imagery of refugees as those defined by trauma and tragedy. In their visual and aural excesses, refugee narratives brim with sticky affect, one that affords refugees in the diaspora to feel ever more affectionately toward the cultural products of pre- and postwar South Việt Nam.

Through the lens of CRS and its methodology of centering refugees as social actors and potent critics of the state, an illuminating study of the two films becomes visible. An emergent field, CRS reformulates the ways in which refugees might be viewed from their own perspectives. Most useful to me, CRS asks what this reorientation would look like if a hegemonic visual archive was supplanted by a refugee's own archive of imagery, sound, and affect. Based on this method, I have advanced a reading of the popular generic forms of the musical and melodrama—upon which *Life of a Flower* and *Song Lang* are based and lovingly delineated—and provided a deep contextual analysis of the films' texts and paratexts to show the ways that refugee histories and memories are sewn into the works' ontological form and critique, while also revealing how other archives are possible.

### Notes

- 1 Luu, "Cai Luong (Renovated Theatre)," 92.
- 2 Brandon, *Theatre in Southeast Asia*, 75.
- 3 Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 167.
- 4 Luu, "Cai Luong (Renovated Theatre)," 93.
- 5 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 10.
- 6 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 111.
- 7 Espiritu et al., *Departures*, 18.
- 8 "Kiếp Hoa: Một thời Hà Nội."
- 9 Seeshelloc, "Kiếp Hoa: Nét Sơn của Hà Nội Ngày Tháng Cũ."

- 10 “Chiêm ngưỡng tài tử, giai nhân điện ảnh một thời trong *Kiếp Hoa*.”
- 11 Trần, “*Kiếp Hoa* Ngày Ấy.”
- 12 Norton, *Songs for the Spirits*, 33.
- 13 Taylor, “Digesting Reform,” 138–9.
- 14 Taylor, “Digesting Reform,” 139.
- 15 Hansen, “*Bắc Di Cư*,” 174.
- 16 Hansen, “*Bắc Di Cư*,” 174–5.
- 17 Weisner, *Victims and Survivors*, 9.
- 18 Weisner, *Victims and Survivors*, 9.
- 19 Nguyen, “The Double Diaspora of Vietnam’s Catholics,” 494.
- 20 Nguyen, “The Double Diaspora of Vietnam’s Catholics,” 494.
- 21 Nguyen, “Fighting the First Indochina War Again?,” 209–10.
- 22 Boudarel, “Kiều or the Misfortunes of Virtue in Vietnamese,” 47.
- 23 Nguyen, “A Classical Heroine and Her Modern Manifestation,” 456.
- 24 There are very few musicals in the Vietnamese film canon. However, recent films like *Brilliant Kisses* (2010) and *Long-Legged Girls* (2006) use popular music as part of their MTV-style aesthetic.
- 25 Marchetti, “Excess and Understatement,” 52.
- 26 Farmer, *Spectacular Passions*, 86.
- 27 Nguyen, “A Personal Sorrow,” 268.
- 28 Nguyễn, “*Kiếp Hoa*.”
- 29 Such recent films have been *Cô Ba Sài Gòn* [*The Tailor*] (2017) and *Tháng Năm Rực Rỡ* [*The Go-Go Sisters*] (2018).
- 30 Chow, “A Souvenir of Love,” 210.
- 31 Nguyen, “A Personal Sorrow,” 264.
- 32 Nguyen, “A Personal Sorrow,” 264.
- 33 White and Marr, “Introduction: Postwar Vietnam,” 2.
- 34 Long, “The Socialization of South Vietnam,” 133.
- 35 Bui, *Returns of War*, 178.
- 36 See articles by Kaye, “*Song Lang*”; Tseng, “How a Broadway Dancer”; and Chu, “LAAPFF Interview.”
- 37 Chu, “LAAPFF Interview.”
- 38 Kaye, “*Song Lang*.”
- 39 Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations*, 15.
- 40 Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations*, 18.

## Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Bernard, Claude. *Kiếp Hoa* [*Life of a Flower*]. Kim Chung Film Studio, 1953.
- Boudarel, George. “Kiều or the Misfortunes of Virtue in Vietnamese.” *Vietnamese Studies* 3 (1999): 35–51.
- Bui, Long. *Returns of War: South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory*. New York: New York University Press, 2018.
- “Chiêm ngưỡng tài tử, giai nhân điện ảnh một thời trong ‘*Kiếp Hoa*.’” *Tuổi Trẻ*. May 25, 2018. <https://tuoitre.vn/chiem-nguong-tai-tu-giai-nhan-dien-anh-mot-thoi-trong-kiep-hoa-20180524092401955.htm>.
- Chow, Rey. “A Souvenir of Love.” In *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, edited by Esther Yau, 209–229. Minneapolis, MN; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
- Chow, Rey. *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Chu, Li-wei. “LAAPFF Interview: Director Leon Lê on *Song Lang*.” *From the Intercom*. 2019. <https://fromtheintercom.com/laapff-interview-director-leon-le-on-song-lang/>.
- Espiritu, Yến Lê et al. *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2022.
- Farmer, Brett. *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorships*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Hansen, Peter. “*Bắc Di Cư*: Catholic Refugees from the North of Vietnam and Their Role in the Southern Republic, 1954–1959.” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4, no. 3 (2009): 173–211.
- Kaye, David. “*Song Lang* by Leon Lê is a Film about Cassette Tapes, Cai Luong, and Love.” *Vietcetera*. August 22, 2018. <https://vietcetera.com/en/song-lang-by-leon-le-is-a-film-about-cassette-tapes-cai-luong-and-love>.
- “*Kiếp Hoa*: Một thời Hà Nội.” *Tiền Phong*, October 07, 2010. <https://tienphong.vn/kiep-hoa-mot-thoi-ha-noi-post514618.tpo>.

- Lê, Leon. *Song Lang*. Créa Television, 2018.
- Long, Ngo Vinh. "The Socialization of South Vietnam." In *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972–79*, edited by Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge, 127–51. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Marchetti, Gina. "Excess and Understatement: War, Romance, and the Melodrama in Contemporary Vietnamese Cinema." *Genders* 10 (1991): 47–74.
- Nguyen, Khai Thu. "A Personal Sorrow: 'Cải Lương' and the Politics of North and South." *Asian Theatre Journal* 29, no. 1 (2012): 255–75.
- Nguyen, Lien-Hang. "The Double Diaspora of Vietnam's Catholics." *Orbis: Journal of World Affairs* 4 (1995): 491–501.
- Nguyen, Nathalie. "A Classical Heroine and Her Modern Manifestation: *The Tale of Kiều* and Its Modern Parallels in *Printemps Inachevé*." *The French Review* 73, no. 3 (2000): 454–62.
- Nguyễn, Như Quỳnh. "Kiếp Hoa." *Tin Vắn Online*. December 07, 2008. <https://tinvanonline.org/2008/12/07/kiiep-hoa/>.
- Nguyen, Phi. "Fighting the First Indochina War Again?: Catholic Refugees in South Vietnam, 1954–59." *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 31, no. 1 (2016): 207–46.
- Norton, Barley. *Songs for the Spirits: Music and Mediums in Modern Vietnam*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009.
- Seeshelloc, "Kiếp Hoa: Nét Sơn của Hà Nội Ngày Tháng Cũ." *Thân Tri*. November 02, 2015. <https://thantrinhomhue.com/2015/02/11/kiiep-hoa-net-son-cua-ha-noi-ngay-thang-cu/>.
- Taylor, Philip. "Digesting Reform: Opera and Cultural Identity in Ho Chi Minh City." In *Consuming Urban Culture in Contemporary Vietnam*, edited by Mandy Tomas and Lisa Drummond, 170–88. London; New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Trần, Trung Sáng. "Kiếp Hoa ngày ấy." *Báo Mới*. March 10, 2014. [http://cadn.com.vn/news/71\\_111010\\_-kie-p-hoa-nga-y-a-y.aspx](http://cadn.com.vn/news/71_111010_-kie-p-hoa-nga-y-a-y.aspx).
- Tseng, Ada. "How a Broadway Dancer Tapped into His Childhood Love for Folk Opera and Became One of Vietnam's Most Promising New Directors." *Los Angeles Times*. June 11, 2019. <https://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/entertainment/tn-wknd-et-leon-le-song-lang-vietnamese-opera-20190611-story.html>.
- Weisner, Louis. *Victims and Survivors: Displaced Persons and Other War Victims in Viet-Nam, 1954–1975*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988.
- White, Christine Pelzer, and David Marr. "Introduction: Postwar Vietnam." In *Postwar Vietnam: Dilemmas in Socialist Development*, edited by Christine Pelzer White and David Marr, 1–11. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988.