

# RE-ORIENTATIONS: EAST ASIAN POPULAR CULTURES IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAM

MANDY THOMAS  
*University of Western Sydney*

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A group of young people are gathering excitedly outside the cinema. The boys are wearing shiny sportsclothes and many have gelled hair. Several of the girls are driving the latest Honda motorbikes. Some of these teenagers have mobile phones. Some have bleached, spiked hair. This is the “hip” crowd and they have come to see the latest Korean film. When I ask one of them about why they like Korean films, he says, “It’s the Korean *wave*, its very cool at the moment”.

Fieldnotes

The recent efflorescence of interest in Korean films and popstars in Vietnam is a phenomenon that has been experienced all through Asia (Cho 2001), but in Vietnam this interest is localised in particular ways that reveal the modalities through which Vietnam positions itself in the region. Because Vietnam does not have a highly developed entertainment industry, Vietnamese audiences are hungry to consume the films, soap operas and songs that are produced elsewhere in Asia. This paper discusses the part played by these cultural products from the wealthy industrialised countries of Asia in articulating the discursive category of “Asia” in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> It also examines the complex entanglements of Asian pop culture and electronic media with the local Vietnamese discourses of an imagined future that is necessarily subversive to the present regime. The wealthier Asian countries that are referred to here are Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia. These countries are the principal aid donors and investors in Vietnam, and are therefore seen as more “developed” than Vietnam. The article explores the way in which the popular cultural images of these “wealthy” Asian countries contribute to the framing of a contemporary Vietnamese national identity.

In recent years, investment in Vietnam from Asian countries has far outweighed that from the west, and Vietnamese people themselves often privately call this a “recolonisation” by Asia. Regional investors are often involved in an orientalisation of Vietnam. This is indicated not just by the view of Vietnam as a cheap labour force or of its untapped market and investment potential but by the discourse of underdevelopment and poverty in which Vietnam is always framed as “backward”. The apparently vast differential between the economic successes of East Asia<sup>2</sup> and its poor southeast Asian relative appears to illustrate East Asian countries’ assumption of their place in the sun of global modernity that is always necessarily in contrast to the perceived pre-modern nature of most communist societies. This paper argues that the images of East Asia in Vietnam are chronically ambivalent, and it is viewed with both allure and distaste. This ambivalence relates to Vietnam’s sense of belonging to an Asian community of nations and cultures. While there is a deep affinity, there are also historical tensions and differences between Vietnam and its neighbours. At the same time as the populace is being exposed to the wealth and sophistication of the cultural productions of East Asia and their attendant fantasies of accumulation, the Vietnamese state is attempting to promote its view of what Vietnamese cultural life should be and define its version of “inside” culture versus “outside” culture.

To begin, let us go back for a moment to 1975, when the roots of present attitudes towards East Asian cultural products in Vietnam were planted. At this time the socialist revolution in the north of the country reached the south with the fall of Saigon. The north had been effectively cut off from consumer culture since 1954. In the south there was an extraordinary abundance of consumer goods—Saigon was awash with Hitachi and Sanyo electric fans and Honda motorbikes. Immediately, US, Japanese and Taiwanese products began flowing northwards and the south became a highly sought after posting for northern soldiers and bureaucrats alike. There are many reports of the way in which the southern consumer culture shocked the northerners who had, until then, been convinced of the value of their socialist ideology. The reaction of the regime was to start a program of demonising these goods and to argue that being attached to material wealth would lead to a personal lack of freedom and to the exploitation of their people. East Asian technologies all came to be perceived as part of the evil hand of the US puppets that threatened to erode nationalist sentiment and commitment to the socialist revolution. The technologies and cultural life of the pre-1975 period were banned. This did not stop the desire for these products, however, and periodically there have been crackdowns on certain “foreign” cultural products, most notably in 1996, as described later in this paper. Since the fall of Saigon, East Asian exports have transformed from technologies to cultural productions, from television sets to soap operas and films. This enculturing of East Asian exports has placed them in an even more dangerous category to

Hanoi's cultural policing than straight consumer items ever were. It is this awkward triadic relationship between East Asian cultural commerce, the pleasures and desires of a populace and the fears and controls of a regime that I propose to unravel here.

In 1998 I visited Yen Bai province, a remote part of north Vietnam. In a little village one night I went to a small cafe to get a meal. The moment I set foot in the tiny bamboo-walled restaurant a *karaoke* machine was dragged in from another room. With the hurried work of numerous men fiddling with dials and electricity cords, the machine was soon set up before me and was blaring out overseas Vietnamese music. The images before my eyes were of exotic locales and Asian bodies. The songs were remade in California from the pre-1975 period in southern Vietnam. They were wistful, sad and deeply nostalgic for an earlier time and another place. The contrast between the nostalgic music and the technological medium of the *karaoke* machine was striking. During the meal I noticed that dozens of people had gathered outside the restaurant to stare in at the machine. I asked them later what they thought of *karaoke*. The various descriptions included "beautiful", "magnificent", and "wonderful". "Where does *karaoke* come from," I asked? They all knew—Japan. When I asked how they felt about Japanese things, suddenly someone from the crowd became the spokesperson: "Japan, Taiwan, South Korea—they are our models. We'll be like them in a few years. They make much better things than Americans. Everything good is from those places—cars, rice cookers, *karaoke*, televisions, cameras, and lots of films and television shows". Then someone yelled out in disagreement: "[I]n my opinion, those Hong Kong/Japanese videos and films are just no good. Vietnamese television is so much better. Those countries have no culture any more, it's all here, they just take western culture which is just about money and sex, and they use it to destroy their own traditions". This was followed by a vigorous debate about the pros and cons of East Asian popular culture.

This exchange seems to indicate that there is a rupture between official and unofficial conceptions of East Asia in Vietnam that is lucidly expressed in the different reactions of the populace to cultural flows. Popular culture in Vietnam is currently documenting a momentous upheaval in the relations between the public, the media and the state. The social and cultural transformations that are taking place are manifest in the eager response of the public to East Asian popular culture in the form of Taiwanese soap operas, Hong Kong videos, Cantopop and Japanese computer games (Nintendo and Sony Playstation) and animation. Stars/singers from Hong Kong have huge followings in Vietnam, eclipsing those of Vietnam's own. Television programs (in terms of hours and variety) and video tape availability have grown, particularly since 1990. Although in 1988 only one in ten Hanoi households had television (Unger 1991, 50), at that time enterprising café owners would often set up a television on the street.

In the early 1990s, one could see crowds of up to several dozen people sitting and standing around televisions to watch Hong Kong videos, the only ones that were available at the time. As private ownership of televisions has grown one no longer sees these public groups of television watchers. In a survey I conducted in early 1998, 87 households out of 100 owned a television and almost all had access to television. Programs from East Asia are the most popular foreign programs and occupy a large amount of programming time. The fact that Jacky Cheung's concert in Ho Chi Minh City (US\$50 for the top tickets) was sold out was only partly due to the fact that one-third of the city's population is ethnic Chinese. In Hanoi, where the Chinese population is insignificant, you can drop by any roadside store that sells popstar photos and posters and find the Hong Kong stars Leon Lai, Andy Lau and Aaron Kwok swamping the Vietnamese stars. Another East Asian cultural icon throughout the country is *Justice Pao*, the Taiwanese TV series. The theme song blares out on *karaoke*, and so many people watch it and talk about it that some phrases used in the series have entered Vietnamese social patois. Vietnam's television and newspapers frequently lament that their own productions have never been able to appeal to popular taste on such a massive scale.

It is very common when discussing East Asian popular culture with Hanoi residents for them to say they don't like or are not interested in East Asian cultural products, but this alleged dislike of East Asian products is contradicted by the huge audience for Taiwanese and Korean television programs. This mismatch between what people enjoy and what they say they enjoy is clearly related to the history of official discourses on cultural products. Unfavourable popular feeling against East Asian popular culture might be seen as an expression of audiences' desire to express their nationalist identification, pride in their own cultural productions and separation from the rest of Asia. At the same time, it can be seen as a critique of East Asian modernities that produce such products and an attempt to redeem, salvage and preserve what is seen as authentic Vietnamese cultural expression.

Audiences' actual consumption practices indicate a desire for the cosmopolitan products of global consumer culture at the same time as reflecting an ambivalence towards developing a consumer culture. These reactions encode in compact form the structure of a transcultural regionalism in the making. The sense of contradiction that seems to pervade East Asian popular culture in Vietnam becomes one of ambivalence and discomfort, reflecting the complex and contradictory nature of the relationship between the transactors who are dealing at the same time with both overlapping worlds and cultural divides. East Asia is no longer seen as politically and socially different from Vietnam, as popular culture is being shared throughout the region. This sense of continuity and participation in a regional cultural system has reduced spatial and cultural differences. At the same time, this borrowing of styles and cultural expression in the realm of popular

culture has led to greater anxieties about Vietnam's ability to distinguish itself, and set itself apart, except as the backward, poor relative of East Asia.

### THE STATE AND EAST ASIAN POPULAR CULTURE IN VIETNAM

In Vietnam the move from a centrally planned to a market economy began in 1986 with the policy of renovation [*doi moi*]. However, Vietnam's incorporation into the global economy has been very slow. Over the last decade the most apparent change in Vietnam, particularly in the north, has been the increased availability of goods. Throughout most of the 1980s, many reported that even if there had been money to buy goods there was nothing to buy. There was no street trading, only large state-managed outlets for the distribution of goods from state-controlled cooperative farms and industries. As a result the streets did not bustle, and as I was told by Hanoi residents, people were under the close scrutiny of neighbours and employers. People travelled to and from their places of study or work, but there were no hives of activity on the streets except during Tet (Vietnamese New Year). During this period individuals only experienced a modicum of social autonomy. So extreme was the lack of mobility and absence of privacy that even leisure time was closely regulated. The economic transformations led to a revolution of consumption patterns and most importantly to the possibility of people congregating in groups in noodle soup shops, at beauty parlours, and with tea and cigarette sellers on the pavements. The vibrant urban culture that grew out of these changes evolved in directions too diverse to be controlled by the Party or government. Nevertheless, the Party understood the link between foreign consumer culture and public crowding and saw the potential for civil unrest that could result from unchecked consumption. Although it could do little to stop the flow of products into the country, the Party has often attempted to reinforce controls on the inflow of certain cultural products, and has defined some of these as "cultural pollution".

When Vietnam was reunified in 1975 there was a major political directive to remove foreign products from the south of the country. In general, the nationalist cause and socialist ideals were promoted by the arts, which were "to be purged of the perfidious influence of Western bourgeois culture and provided with a new focus, nationalist in form and socialist in content" (Duiker 1995, 181–82). In the south after 1975, journalists and writers were singled out for particular punishment by the party, many being sent to forced labour camps or imprisoned (Jamieson 1993, 364). Since that time there have been several campaigns to rid the country of foreign cultural "pollution", the most recent of these being in 1996 (see Carruthers 2001). These efforts to reinvigorate Vietnam's

“national” culture and define what is exterior or damaging to it have been intensified by the effects of *doi moi*, which many in the Party have seen as a door that has opened up not just the possibility of economic benefits but the fears of cultural erosion. The 1996 campaign was described by one local reporter as a “minor cultural revolution” (Tan Dinh 1996).

Instigated by the Central Party Secretariat, this nationwide movement sought to “protect and develop the national character” through a massive effort to investigate the importation, reproduction and circulation of overseas cultural products (“Ban bi thu trung uong . . .”). In the course of the campaign, vehicles with loudspeakers drove through the streets calling on people to “eradicate ‘noxious’ culture and social evils and build an orderly and civilized environment” (“Thanh pho va ca nuoc . . .”). The confidence of foreign investors was shaken when in Hanoi billboards bearing the brand names of companies like Panasonic, Kodak, Coca-Cola, Aiwa, Tiger Beer and Sony were torn down without warning because they featured English and other foreign-language slogans inscribed in letters more prominent and colourful than those written in Vietnamese (Tan Dinh 1996). Pornographic magazines were burnt. Pirated videocassette copies of films from Hong Kong and Taiwan, Asian neighbours perceived to have fallen victim to the western cultural rot, were singled out for particular attention. The comic artist *But Saigon* [The Saigon Pen] saw fit to illustrate the risk posed by them in a picture of a foreign mercenary carrying a gun labelled “noxious culture”, wearing an ammunition belt loaded with video cassettes reading “violence”, “sex”, “horror” and “ghost stories”, and casting a shadow of *ngoai luong*, literally “foreign stream [of culture]” (*Saigon Giai Phong*, 12 January 1996, p.6). At the conclusion of the first step of the campaign, 202,000 videocassettes and several hundred thousand compact discs, laser discs and audio cassettes had been seized and destroyed, and around half of the estimated 6,000 video rental stores and “video cafés” in Ho Chi Minh City had been forced to temporarily close down (“Khoi dau buoc . . .”, “Thi truong video . . .”). Those remaining open were permitted to carry only stock approved by the censor<sup>3</sup> (Carruthers 2001, 133–34).

The state’s creation of categories of culture that are “outside” and “inside” Vietnamese cultural boundaries is deeply problematic, not least because East Asia is thought of as both the West and the non-West and thus fits awkwardly into the common occidentalist discourses of the state. Ashley Carruthers has looked at the reception of overseas Vietnamese cultural products in Vietnam and has some insight into this, and I think in many ways there is a symbolic equivalence

between overseas Vietnamese and East Asian people in the eyes of those at home. Both categories are not just Asian but also “almost” western, both Vietnamese and not. Where the state continues to frame much of the discourse on globalisation in occidental terms, East Asia—like diasporic Vietnamese—disrupts the power and effectiveness of the discourse. It is clear that within Asia there are perceptions of hierarchies of national modernities within nation-states, Japan often being seen as emblematic of a successful indigenisation of the West.

Notions in Vietnam of reaching modernity through technology indicate that technologies are insufficient to make the modernity grade in the eyes of national citizens. Rather, it is the “images” that are conveyed that enable a nation-state to be seen as modern by itself and its regional neighbours. East Asian cultural power has become linked to East Asia’s ability to control and circulate these images. This is where the bodily similarity achieves such symbolic capital—when these images of similar bodies are circulating they are empowering for their ability to signify that the global, transnational image has engendered “bodies like ours” and can thus signify the powerful Asian presence on the global stage.

Yet in Vietnam, East Asia does not seem familiar but does not easily fit into the category of “foreign”; it thus continues to unsettle and intervene in the state’s vision of a clear cultural boundary between Vietnam and the rest of the world. Japan is not only viewed with ambivalence because of its colonial history in Vietnam and its neo-colonial engagement with third-world Asia in terms of trade and aid. The appeal of the cultural products that it creates and its image of idealised economic success and power, combined with Vietnam’s desire to emulate this makes its contradictory position even more potent. The state, however, continues to set up a cultural polarity by indicating that East Asia, and Japan in particular, signifies a dystopic undoing through its labour practices in Vietnam, the stereotype of sexual perversity of Japanese businessmen in Vietnam (numerous articles have appeared in Vietnamese newspapers accusing Japanese and South Korean men of involvement in child prostitution and lurid sex acts) and the images of Japan as a country where “Asian values” are being eroded through family breakdown. The next section will consider how the enjoyment of East Asian cultural productions in Vietnam can be viewed as an act of resistance to the regime.

#### **EAST ASIAN POPULAR CULTURE AND RESISTANCE<sup>4</sup>**

The enjoyment of certain cultural forms, and the “capacities for pleasure and conceptions of pleasure” are mobilised by a configuration of cultural and historical meanings (Mercer 1986, 66). In other words, what is considered to be “entertaining” at any given moment is contingent upon cultural systems of mean-

ings at particular sites. In Vietnam until very recently, the powerful intervention of the state in the desires and needs of the populace was successful in implementing a regime of pleasure associated with nationalist ideals. According to Mercer (1986, 55), the imposition of desires upon the populace is part of a wider political environment in which there is some persuasion, some resistance and some negotiation. Thus, the present popularity of Korean movies, Hong Kong singers and Taiwanese actors in Vietnam, like the earlier attraction to national figures, is inseparable from the dominant ideology of the moment and the everyday cultural and social worlds of the individual consumer. These celebrities, all popular icons, are meaningful because they are hieroglyphs, instantiations of worlds in the making, of tastes, ideologies and relations of power in the wider social environment of Vietnam. Vietnam is on the brink of becoming a fully fledged media culture in which popular narratives and cultural icons are reshaping political views, constructing tastes and values, crystallising the market economy and, as Kellner suggests, “providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities” (1995, 1).

If the media is as Hartley suggests “a visualisation of society” (1996, 210) the recent foray into media culture, in which East Asian imagery is a dominant theme, represents a dramatic turnaround. Until the policy of *doi moi* began in Vietnam in 1986, the role of the media was to spread propaganda, and it focused less on reporting news than on educating the populace. Material that I gathered from interviews conducted in 1998 about popular culture with a cross-section of Hanoi residents indicates that attraction to East Asian popular culture and electronic imagery is still viewed as transgressive, and as such is a political act. During the government’s 1996 attempt to purge the country of foreign cultural products many foreign videos and music tapes (diasporic and from East Asia) were seized and destroyed, and *karaoke* parlours were closed down (Carruthers 2001). In spite of the vigour of the campaign, though, consumers were still able to buy these products illegally. The state’s actions in banning such products appears to have increased their allure and value to consumers, and has further intensified the sense that these products are politically subversive and inflammatory.

From the interviews I conducted<sup>5</sup> it appears that East Asian popular culture in Vietnam signifies prosperity and sophistication and engenders longing—a longing for a richer consumer world, for technical expertise and creativity, and for societies that foster these elements. The attraction to the cultural productions of these societies is partly a response to the suddenly expanding role of the media, which has fuelled an interest in this cultural domain but has also led to political awareness of the potency of the media. This form of transnationalism from “below” (the everyday practices of ordinary people that may span at least two nations) is becoming a social space through which coalitions of people may exercise power that transcends national boundaries (Basch, Glick-Schiller and

Szanton-Blanc 1992, 5). In other words, the affinity for the cultural products of East Asia has become laden with political meaning as the rapport is also with an unfamiliar but attractive social and political world that is inaccessible to many Vietnamese. As indicated above, the historical association with East Asian cultural products as being fundamentally opposed to the aims and ideologies of the state makes them somewhat subversive. What is interesting is that during the campaigns to rid Vietnam of foreign cultural products no East Asian programs were dropped from television programming. This indicates that the campaign was a rhetorical strategy for the state to publicly regain control of Vietnamese cultural life. The Party would have been aware of the dangers for political stability of dropping people's favourite programs. Thus, at present the state and the populace constantly negotiate the terms of the new transnational relationships with regional neighbours, and both are acutely aware of the political nature of popular culture under such a regime.

Another dark undercurrent in contemporary Vietnam is that foreigners are viewed ambivalently as both bringing prosperity and opportunities and at the same time inflicting a sense of inequality and inadequacy on the Vietnamese. This has led to a chronic sense of ambivalence towards East Asia. At the same time as viewing East Asian cultural productions as slick and technically superior, the state continues to exhibit fear and loathing of competition and "external" cultural influences. As East Asian singers, television programs and animation have become more and more popular, the state has been forced to acknowledge that local programming does not satisfy the needs of Vietnamese consumers. The foreign artists and musicians have, however, been a rich source of creative influence on local Vietnamese artists, and have allowed them to move away from nationalist and patriotic themes to new material, which is often stylistically quite different, staged and performed in a more globally popular modality. For example, a video clip of Hanoi's most popular local singer, My Linh, consists of the singer singing mournful love songs, wearing luxurious clothes and framing herself around the pools and sophisticated ambience in the luxurious grounds of Hanoi's Daewoo Hotel, a joint venture between South Korea and Vietnam. Thus, while the state attempts to define and regulate what "inside" culture is in Vietnam, there is a free flow of creative influence across the imagined cultural divide, with Vietnamese cultural producers rushing to remodel their forms of entertainment as they incorporate influences from beyond the state's grasp.

### **CIVIL SOCIETY OR POPULAR CULTURE?**

As Bennett (1986) argues, popular culture is the set of practices and activities that engages the population in their material worlds, but also provides a zone in

which different “cultural values and ideologies meet and intermingle” and wrestle with each other “in their attempts to secure the spaces within which they become influential in framing and organising popular experience and consciousness” (Bennett 1986, 19). It is as a battleground for values that popular culture most strongly differentiates itself from civil society, which is always necessarily oppositional. Popular culture, by contrast, engages with both dominant and subordinate cultural forms in its generation of the popular.

My interviews revealed that East Asian cultural products are viewed as anti-Party and that the peaceful numbers that East Asian celebrities are attracting are indicative of a new post-communist media revolution that is leaving the Party isolated from public appeal. The triad of linked concepts of celebrity, media and democracy is intensifying in the same way that “. . . journalism . . . has shown a tendency throughout the twentieth century to take over and textualise the democratic function of the nation” (Hartley 1996, 200). This shift to media culture also represents a fading in significance of a de-personalised public sphere that has been promoted by the Party, in favour of a public sphere dominated by popular media. The media transformations in Vietnam map out social and political change and provide a cartography of a nation passing through a phase of critical re-evaluation.<sup>6</sup>

Popular culture often evades the formal institutional structures of power in appealing to the populace and is almost always linked with the market economies that legitimise it (Marshall 1997, xii). Because the media in Vietnam is primarily viewed as a potent means for engagement in class struggle and an instrument of the Party (Hiang-khng Heng 1997, I), the political institutions in Vietnam in effect suppressed the emergence of an “unofficial” culture until quite recently. Cultural products in Vietnam presently sit in the awkward position of needing to be sanctioned by the power structures at the same time as being spontaneous expressions of popular appeal. While the number of tabloids and glossy magazines has been growing since the policy of *doi moi* was instituted a decade ago, the state still maintains strict, if sometimes hidden, control over censorship and editorial freedom (Hiang-khng Heng 1997, I).

Although the media in Vietnam are changing, the state does not see information as a marketable commodity or as entertainment. The development of popularity among cultural products in Vietnam thus requires something in addition to media support. It depends upon the engagement of consumers with tangible cultural products of the icon. The advent of market economics and globalisation brought the notion and practice of pop culture with its concomitant icons and cultural products to Vietnam. Throughout Vietnam, celebrities are being memorialised in obtainable objects, with the media only providing the initial catalyst for the interest in a particular individual. Celebrities must be brought into the home embodied in artifacts. It is worth noting here that it is only the Vietnamese

and regional products that are affordable and accessible. As yet, the availability of products associated with European and American celebrities is minimal. An integral component of the new appeal of celebrities in Vietnam is that they signify a consumer world beyond Vietnam and are a material representation of capitalist democracies. In this way, the cultural products associated with fame have become a visualisation of modernity, or as Hartley suggests, “of the promise of comfort, progress and freedom” (1996, 200). There is a dearth of non-Asian consumer items in Vietnam, partly because of their cost, so it has been East Asian popular culture with its attendant array of products that has come to most clearly symbolise urbane cosmopolitanism and “cool”. These posters, cassettes, soap operas, CDs, videos and even T-shirts with the East Asian pop image or name of the celebrity emblazoned on them are freely available in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Unlike neighbouring socialist China which witnessed Mao revolutionary paraphernalia turned into a massive pop industry of T-shirts with slick slogans, posters with New Age images, and cover designs for rock music CDs (Barme 1996), Vietnam did not do the same with Ho Chi Minh’s heritage. The commodities associated with popular icons are usurping old mass cultural icons such as the bust of Ho Chi Minh or lapel pins/badges of the emblems of the socialist state.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore evident that with the rapid increase in the availability of consumer items, the attraction to East Asian celebrities is growing. At the same time, as the relationship between popular icons and commodification has intensified there has been a corresponding decrease in the circulation of and interest in the iconography of the socialist regime.

For young people in Hanoi the admiration of East Asian celebrities who are apolitical is politically symbolic, an incipient political act of opposition. In choosing to admire a singer over a communist political leader, individuals realise that in the past this would have been dishonourable, as indicated in the following comments of one 18 year-old respondent:

My parents don’t think it is a good thing that my sisters and brothers like these singers and like the posters of films from Hong Kong. They think that we will lose our culture and have no values. Sometimes I hide the magazines from my mother because it would upset her so much.

This response indicates that young people may be aware that not so long ago the Party would have banned what youth today find most entertaining and appealing. It also indicates that the collective Vietnamese memory still harbours fear of the consequences of unofficial popular activities.

The shift in appeal from national songs and films to a manifold set of popular entertainments signals the increasing influence of concepts of the popular that are unrelated to national strivings (see Marshall 1997, x). The emerging popular

celebrities in Vietnam offer a set of tropes through which transgressive ideologies and desires may find an outlet. The type of individuality that has been revered in Vietnam prior to today is that of people who have been marked by a career in the service of their country, as moral exemplars and emblems of nationhood.<sup>8</sup> Those raised in the political environment of the post-1954 socialist transformation of the north and the war for national reunification continue to be influenced by the public culture of the period.<sup>9</sup>

According to one older person, “[w]e don’t gain anything from these famous people. The media is for education. I don’t read it when they speak about someone who is a singer or so on”. The association between the mass media and nation-building is still strongly felt by older people in Hanoi.

The consumption of foreign media products and popular icons in Vietnam must be seen as transgressive, because audiences have been made explicitly aware of the political and social forces at work in the production and censorship of images and information. In this way, it is clear that in consuming East Asian popular culture, the Vietnamese populace is not acting as an unthinking mass. Rather, the contemporary icons of popular culture in Vietnam are being engaged in the social lives of the audiences in all their diversity. These acts are both personally pleasurable and politically expressive even though they are not explicitly politically motivated.

There is potential for the new communities of feeling that arise at these moments to be revolutionary—the new public figures in Vietnam no longer symbolise a nation, as did the pre-eminent public figure, Ho Chi Minh, and popular entertainment is no longer located as Vietnamese. Here, popular culture is, as Fiske (1989) and Hall (1981) argue, reconfigured into a cultural battlefield in which differing representations of the popular imagination are contested. The close scrutiny of foreign celebrities marks them in particular in this battle as “icons of democracy and democratic will” (Marshall 1997, 246). East Asian popular culture in Vietnam thus signals for the nation a loss of ideological purpose and an unravelling of images of political struggle, in which a public is being shaped but is also itself constructing political and cultural meaning. East Asian consumption represents material success and private pleasures but is also seen as the outcome and evidence of some degree of personal freedom.

## **FRACTURED IMAGES OF EAST ASIA**

In contemporary Vietnam it is apparent that there is still a good deal of political control over consumption, as well as an association between consumer goods and decadence or “social evil”. This paper has argued that to participate in East Asian popular culture is a way of constituting selfhood against a regime that the popu-

lace may wish to oppose. Vietnam is currently being called upon to reflect on the status of its changing nationhood in the rapidly transforming social and political theatre of globalisation. The attraction to East Asian popular culture that is fuelled by the media offers new resources for the construction of nation in contemporary Vietnam.

As tastes for cultural products in Vietnam are being re-cast, the aesthetics of East Asia intersect with images of East Asian modernity and mass consumption to produce an increasing desire, often unfulfilled, for the products of wealthy Asian countries. Vietnam is now being asked to confront its place in the world and the region, but the state often responds by constructing cultural polarities between itself and the “outside”. In all the commotion of globalisation and new transnational encounters, and in a world where money, information and mobility are creating new dynamics of inequality, Vietnam is experiencing a weakening of both the state and its national ties. At the same time, the sense of a regional attachment is growing increasingly complex. While East Asian cultural products have gained an important place in everyday consumer culture in Vietnam, the imagined Asia exemplified by these products is one in which Vietnam feels both strange and familiar, attracted and repelled. The reception of East Asian cultural products is part of a process of popular reinscription of images of modernity into the making of the future Vietnamese nation-state, in which the region is simultaneously mirror and *bete noire*.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of this paper for their helpful comments and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup>Although the term “East Asia” normally refers to Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and Hong Kong, I use it here loosely not as a geographical descriptor but rather as a political and economic one that refers also to highly industrialised export-oriented Asian countries such as Singapore and Malaysia. While China exports a large number of products to Vietnam, interviews that I conducted with young people in Hanoi in November 2001 indicated that China is generally not seen to be as “modern” as Japan and the other countries listed above. This is possibly due to the high consumption of Japanese technological products in Vietnam (motorbikes, stereo systems, walkmans etc.) while the main types of products exported from China to Vietnam are clothing, toys and machinery.

<sup>3</sup>It was estimated that 85–90 per cent of stock in Saigon’s 3,000 unlicensed video stores was foreign [*Thi truong video . . .*].

<sup>4</sup>A version of this section has been published elsewhere (see Thomas and Hiang-Khng Heng 2001).

<sup>5</sup>I undertook interviews with a wide range of Hanoi residents from different socioeconomic and age groups. The interviews focused on eliciting information about what people do in their leisure time, what forms of media they consume, what types of music/film/television they like,

who their favourite celebrities are, and so on. The fieldwork was conducted during several short trips to Vietnam in 1998, 1999 and late 2001.

<sup>6</sup>See Hall (1986) for a theoretical overview of the relations between popular culture and political leadership.

<sup>7</sup>The mass culture icons of the socialist era were not really products in a market-place but units in a socialist distribution system, which also indicates a differentiation between the “mass” culture of the past and the “pop” culture of today.

<sup>8</sup>On the subject of the relationship between public artists and the socialist regime, Duiker writes:

Under party rule, the creative arts were thus dedicated to two major objectives: to stimulate a sense of national identity and commitment through the encouragement of indigenous forms of art, music, and literature and to promote the growth of a socialist ethic through the creation of a new culture based on the principles of socialist realism. In order to promote national pride, traditional forms of art, music and dance were revived and transformed to serve modern purposes. The *ca dao* and other forms of literary and musical expression were transformed into a medium for serving the cause of social revolution and national reunification. In novels, plays and poems, Northern Vietnamese writers portrayed in romantic terms the glorious struggle of their countrymen to bring about socialist culture in the north and in achieving reunification with the South (Duiker 1995, 182).

<sup>9</sup>Attitudes not just about public figures but also about western music in the post-reunification period are indicated by the national newspaper *Nhan Dan* [*The People's Daily*], which in 1979 reported an official's comments on the youth in Ho Chi Minh City. He argued that “some of the youths who are influenced by neocolonialism and the old social system have been infected with such bad habits as laziness, selfishness, parasitism, vagabondism, pursuing a good time etc”. Another official argued that western music would encourage people to “turn their backs on our people's life of labour and combat, regret the past and idolise imperialism” (In *Nhan Dan*, 5 September 1979, quoted in Duiker 1995, 185–86). The cultural life of the period was completely dictated by the party—“Radio, television, newspapers, journals, poetry, songs, novels, motion pictures, all were transformed into high volume, high redundancy transmitters of selected themes, new values and new role models” (Jamieson 1993, 362).

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