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## Viet Beauty Queen's Miss World Recital Reawakens War Debate

Nearly a half century later still there are reverberations

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The repercussions from the US's defeat in Vietnam have found their way 48 years later into a beauty contest in Puerto Rico at the hands of Đỗ Thị Hà, who was chosen to represent her country as Miss Vietnam at the 70th edition of the Miss World Competition. She chose to play a revolutionary war song that months later is still stirring controversy, with her performances widely reported in the Vietnamese mainstream media.

The 21-year-old from Thanh Hoá province was expected to surpass her Vietnamese predecessors' achievement in this competition and "bring glory to the country." During the talent portion of the contest, the Gen-Z Miss Vietnam chose to perform the song "A woman who

sharpening bamboo spikes” on the T-rung, a traditional bamboo xylophone used by the Jarai and Bahnar people in the country’s Central Highlands.

Even though no lyrics were sung, the choice of the “red” song about an indigenous woman sharpening bamboo spikes to kill or maim US GIs during the war has sparked a heated debate on social media on the beauty queen’s political insensitivity to perform a strongly anti-American song on American soil.

Many commentators have pointed out that the beauty queen, who was later nicknamed by netizens as “the spike sharpener”, was not entirely to blame although many described her performance of a wartime song which features a fast tempo and flamboyant music and which is often sung at patriotic or party-worshipping events, in a competition meant to promote peace and integration as “inappropriate.” Above all, social media netizens criticized her for a lack of consciousness of positive trends in US-Vietnam relations, which were normalized in 1995 and upgraded to comprehensive partnership in 2013.

The 2001-born Hà, who made it to the top 13 of the overall competition, might not have even been familiar with the violent lyrics of the song, which was composed in 1965, when the US started bombing what was then North Vietnam. The pejorative words in the lyrics in Vietnamese are hard to be rendered in English language:

*“... Who is sharpening them [bamboo spikes] as quickly as I do?*

*Birds singing is not as beautiful as my singing*

*Every sharp spike is filled with hatred*

*Slashing any approaching bandits.*

*As long as American aggressors, the American leopards and tigers, are still here,*

*I will not stop sharpening the spikes and fence my farm*

*I let go of the fields*

*But tomorrow when the enemy is gone,*

*The bamboo forest will be used to build a house or a high hut...”*

While Hà was named as Vietnam’s representative in such a glamorous contest, her choice of on-stage anti-Americanism hardly represents Vietnamese people’s perceptions towards the former foe, which is now Vietnam’s second largest trading partner. One Facebook user commented on the BBC’s post that: “The song is doubtless a tool of propaganda and a weapon of hatred and violence. It is hard to believe that this song was chosen or approved when Vietnam preaches its willingness to make friends with the world.”

A 2015 survey carried out by the Pew Research Center, a Washington DC-based think tank, shows that 76 percent of Vietnamese respondents had a positive opinion of the US, despite being taught otherwise at school. The figure was even higher, at 89 percent, among more educated respondents, mostly youth between 18 and 29. Even among those above 50 who had lived through the war, more than 60 percent viewed “the imperialists” favorably, with Vietnam arguably the only Communist country with such a strong affinity with the US. Also, according to The State of Southeast Asia (SSEA) 2021 survey conducted by the Asean Studies Center of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, which examines the trust and distrust ratings of

major powers in the region since 2019, Vietnamese hold the most favorable views towards Washington, far ahead of Southeast Asia's average.

The red song belongs to what state media refers to as *nhạc chính thống*, or official music, which glorifies patriotism and revolutionary spirit, and which was composed during the First Indochina war (1946- 1954), Vietnam War (1954 - 1975) culminating with the Fall of Saigon, known respectively in Vietnam as anti-French resistance, anti - American war and unification of the country.

The beauty queen can be forgiven for bringing a red song onstage, if we have a closer look at Vietnam's subtle and sophisticated propaganda system, in which revolutionary songs are put on a pedestal as advanced music and are sung as tenor and soprano chamber songs. Learning and mastering red songs is mandatory at music schools and also taught even at ordinary schools. A few red songs are unavoidable throughout the year at schools of any level and on state-owned TV channels as part of major national and party celebrations: Founding of the Communist Party of Vietnam (February 3rd), Victory of the Điện Biên Phủ battle (May 7th), Birthday of late President Ho Chi Minh (May 19th), National Independence day (September 02nd), Liberation of the capital (October 10th), Founding of the Vietnamese People's Army (December 22nd), etc.

The majority of participants in national singing competitions often choose red songs to flaunt their command of high notes, vast range, and vocal strength. Red music even co-opt chamber music and academic music at official functions, to be distinguished from "yellow" songs, sentimental pre-war music and blue music, which refers to contemporary western-influenced music and often sung by younger generations. Domestic outlets have also reported on the decline of official music or "clean music, in the face of marketization and Westernization in the country that is now one of the fastest growing in the world.

### **The state has a role to play**

Yet the target of the public criticism might be the invisible force above that dictated Hà's choice. Her stage performance was sure to be regulated by Decree 144/2020/NĐ-CP, which is applicable to Vietnamese citizens delivering artistic performances overseas. Hà's agent, the organizers of the Miss Vietnam competition, is quoted as saying that Hà wished to introduce to international friends little-known cultural characteristics of the central highlands through her performance, thus expressing national pride. In response to the online outcry, state-owned domestic media outlets voiced support for her, while not elaborating on the social media debate.

For example, one article on the People's Police outlet entitled "[The instrumental is not guilty](#)" wrote: "The performance was purely musical notes and did not carry any political message." The article also questioned why critics of Hà's performance have been silent when many American films about the Vietnam war have been released, with many distorted images of Vietnam.

It has been widely argued that Hà's song choice must have been recommended and/or approved by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. Hà performed "Despacito", a global hit by Puerto Rican rapper Luis Fonsi, at the next round of the competition, to be on the safe side.

Some expressed pity for Hà for being "brainwashed" during her 12 years of education in Vietnam and thus unable to practice critical thinking or acquire knowledge of international diplomacy. Her performance drew online flak at the time when the US became the largest donor

of vaccines to Vietnam. Pfizer was the most coveted vaccine in the country due to common perceptions of its superior quality. Some scholars also speculate that a strategic relationship may be on the horizon.

The public is no stranger to the Communist state's attempts to politicize every nook and cranny of life. Despite a steep increase in beauty pageants, which domestic media refer to as beauty contest inflation, the national competition that she won is considered the oldest and most prestigious one, held by Tiền Phong newspaper, a party mouthpiece. The person who announced her as a winner was the Editor-in-chief, a senior Party member.

Ha's agent didn't respond to requests for comment.

In addition, some netizens questioned whether the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism would approve such a wartime anti-China song if the competition were held in mainland China. For musician Tuấn Khanh in his [blog post](#), the choice of the song speaks volumes about the paradoxes: Vietnam wishes to get closer to the US, but still makes continuous efforts to peddle an anti-American narrative and remind the public of the war.

For Tuấn Khanh, the incident is not accidental and similar to a top-down move in 2014 when the late US Senator John McCain visited and Phạm Quang Nghị, the secretary general of the Hanoi Party Committee, presented him with a photograph of the plane McCain was shot down in 1967, which is still on display on Trúc Bạch Lake in Hanoi. The gift to one of the most prominent contributors to the normalization of relations between the two countries, according to Tuấn Khanh, was well calculated.

“The Vietnamese did not miss any opportunity to show the Americans who were actually the winners,” read the blogpost.