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Profiles , Vietnam

## The singing dissident

Nguyen Qui Duc

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Photograph: Morgan Ommer

**T**here's the trademark dimple, a coy, sometimes mischievous smile, a look of innocence and an expression of wonder in the eyes. Mai Khoi's face hasn't changed much since I first met her some fifteen years ago.

She'd just released her first CD. Love, losses and a fragile heart were the obligatory things she and countless other lounge singers in Ho Chi Minh City gave to their fans in search of clichés and other familiar tunes. Over the years, Mai Khoi gained a good measure of popularity, and for a while became more daring: the Lady Gaga look, the pink hair, the bra-less stage appearances, the sexy and provocative stage persona.

But her statements have now changed. In a recent concert in Hanoi, her adoptive city, the provocative outfits had been discarded, replaced by a

traditional Vietnamese tunic. But she wears it with punk-era boots. It's now the words in her songs that are provocative:

*Let's speak our voice*

*Step out from the fear*

*Step out from the silence*

*Speak the voice from our hearts*

*An awareness that erases all doubts*

*Step out of our exile*

*We have the rights to step out from ignorance*

*After the years of silence*

*Our voice,*

*Let's speak our voice*

*Our strength ... raise our voice, speak, sing, scream*

*Even as someone oppresses us*

*We still raise our voice.*

Today, the concerts have become “secret” affairs with an invited audience of about fifty, which, until recently, had escaped the attention of the authorities. Only 23 July, however, dozens of police turned up at one of these concerts, which they had requested Mai cancel. The concert went ahead after it was discovered the police didn't have any “written orders”.

Mai Khoi is now a protest singer, but mostly promoting her songs and views on Facebook and YouTube. To be sure, protest singers aren't unknown in Vietnam. During the Vietnam War, the most notable was Trinh Cong Son, who lamented the human losses and the destruction of a nation in a civil war. Millions of Vietnamese in the south grieved through his pained lyrics, and his denunciation of the insanity and cruelty of war. In the 1970s, Trinh's songs were banned by the South Vietnamese government. The current Communist regime has allowed his love songs to be played in recent years,

but his famous “Girl with yellow skin” continues to be banned. In the same decade, the movement of the Du Ca (Nomadic Troubadours) also garnered support from young folks, mostly in the central coast area. Meanwhile some rappers and hip-hop artists, such as the popular Suboi, are also raising their voices. Theirs are younger and more limited audiences, and — perhaps because their songs are more social than political commentaries — they have enjoyed relative safety from the authorities.

Mai Khoi’s notoriety comes from her decision to stand as an independent, or self-nominated, candidate for the National Assembly in 2016. Although the country’s constitution allows anyone over twenty-one to stand for election, this was the first time some 100 people ran as independent candidates. Up until then, all candidates had come from the ranks of the sole, Communist, party. Eleven self-nominated candidates were finally allowed to run; the rest, including a prominent dissident, a taxi driver and Mai Khoi, were disqualified.

“It was a waste of time,” said Mai Khoi in the aftermath.

While campaigning, she wasn’t allowed to put up posters in public, so only advertised herself on Facebook. She did have a few meetings with voters in her hometown of Cam Ranh, where she was born in the early 1980s — her father a music teacher who influenced her early career. He taught her the piano and guitar early on, and she says by the age of twelve she was writing and performing her own songs.

Mai Khoi’s failed campaign ended with her issuing a public request to meet with US President Barack Obama during his visit to Vietnam. Around that time, the police raided one of her concerts in retribution, and within a week all her booked shows were cancelled. Mai Khoi has not appeared on television or in a public concert since.

“At the time I was under constant surveillance,” she says, claiming she had to go into hiding in the days before she was able to meet Obama. Other known dissidents were kept under house arrest, driven around for hours or otherwise prevented from meeting him.

When they met in a public forum, Obama and Mai Khoi raised the need to protect the right to freedom of assembly, electoral reform and freedom of expression.

**W**ith all the popular and governmental attention, Mai Khoi has been somewhat rattled. It didn't help that she went abroad to perform among Vietnamese communities in the United States and Europe, only to be accused of being a Communist due to her ability to travel. While abroad, she held a series of “live performances” on Facebook and gained new followers.

That Mai Khoi was able to return home safely is perhaps a sign of a softening of Hanoi's authoritarian tendencies, or that they don't consider her too much of a threat yet.

It's perhaps a “wait and see” attitude — one, ironically, adopted by her producer and music adviser. Both have been producing CDs and organising small performances that are risky both for their political content and for their refusal to seek official permission.

Mai Khoi has now formed a new band consisting of a percussionist and a saxophone player, while she sings and plays the guitar. As she expresses appreciation for her producer and band, she says her husband Ben (an Australian) plays an equally important role. “He's transferred his belief in my musical abilities into me and sustains me, and I rely a lot on him.”

Following one of her concerts, she asked that I translate her lyrics, which I have done, with the same hope her producer and adviser have expressed, that she will be go beyond the more obvious political topics.

Some people here have questioned Mai Khoi's new political direction, suggesting she's merely seeking publicity and popularity. Others say she is on a right and refreshing path but must prove herself further.

"I always stay calm about such comments about myself," Mai Khoi says. "In some ways, I have something in common with Lady Gaga — we are encouraging women to liberate ourselves more."

Mai Khoi says she is unconventional, isn't afraid to express opinions contrary to popular ones and thus continues to be seen as an anomaly.

"It's not easy to have a dozen cops stopping my performances. It's lonely to be a social activist, and if I wanted to simply seek popularity, I'd continue singing pop songs."

Faced with the difficulties in standing for election, and recognising the "pretensions of a democratic process", she is determined to further a political as well as an experimental music career.

"Only modern and experimental music can express all my varying emotions," she says.

I question her about the name she and her companions have chosen, "Mai Khoi and the Dissidents" She flashes her coy smile and sidesteps the issue. "But we've already printed up some T-shirts."

The directness in Mai Khoi's lyrics is not often heard in a country where songs are so clichéd — or "regurgitated over and over", as she puts it. Some of Mai Khoi's lyrics are forceful, deliberately unsubtle.

*She doesn't need to sit inside them.*

*Only you who invented the re-education camps need to sit inside.*

*Inside, you'll have time to think*

*To repent, slap yourself on the face ...*

*For being so cruel*

*For being traitors to the people*

*For suppressing the truth*

I didn't tell her that of all her songs, which have both blues and folk elements, I like the parts where she plays with her voice, her timing, and often holds the audience in suspense. There are also the exquisite moments when she doesn't so much sing as breathe the words.

*You stretch me like a canvas bleeding with colours*

*Bodies entwined, melted into some memories*

*Shackle me to your freedom*

*Draw me into your anger*

*On the other side of my heart*

*There is you ... as if.*

*You stretch the clouds and rain to cover this territory*

*Bring your love too, to cover all the suffering*

*Your finger, like a withered branch,*

*Draws yesterday's sadness unto me.*

Mai Khoi says she will now concentrate on her musical career, and hopes for defiant supporters who will ask her to perform. Meanwhile she says she has started a Facebook movement to ask for "a million self-nominated candidates" for the National Assembly. "I'll run again next time around," she says. "I'm not worried, I don't hesitate. With my instincts, I've believed in all that I do from the beginning."

During her first secret performances, the audience was stunned into silence with her opening song and seemed to stop breathing. It was obvious enough that Mai Khoi had to ask the people to “Breathe and relax. There’s nothing to be tense about.”

An hour later, she raised her voice over the drumbeat and a lone sustained note of the saxophone.

*We don’t want to be beaten up  
But we won’t be silent.*

**Nguyen Qui Duc** is a former journalist who has lived in Hanoi for ten years where he runs the art, bar, and event space Tadioto.

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