

## **Vietnamese Audience Reception of Fairy Tale Music Videos - A Case Study of Hoàng Thùy Linh's "See Tình"**

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### **Introduction**

Since 2019, Vietnam has witnessed a "reincarnation movement" characterized by the creation of new cultural products infused with folklore, encompassing various mediums like photography, cinema, and music. This trend aims to engage local audiences with traditional values and foster cultural heritage promotion. Hoàng Thùy Linh emerges as a prominent figure in this movement, recognized internationally for her song "See Tình" (<https://youtu.be/gJHSDZfJrRY>), and garnering immense domestic success through albums like "Hoàng" and "LINK," which impressed audiences with their modern interpretations of folk elements (Luu Ly, 2022). Her music videos on YouTube have garnered millions of views and positive audience feedback. She then confessed to VNexpress: "I want to bring cultural beauty that is both historical and resonates with the quintessence of contemporary times in my songs" (Hà Thu, 2019). These efforts have earned her recognition as the "queen of Vietnamese contemporary folk music" with numerous awards (Luu Ly, 2022), and frequent mentions on social media (YouNetMedia, 2022). While her efforts are commendable, concerns regarding potential exploitation of certain elements and deviations from authentic folklore identities have been raised by the public (Lý An, n.d.). This study explores these concerns by investigating how audiences perceive and make sense of the folklore representations in Linh's music videos, contributing to audience studies, contemporary Vietnamese studies, cultural studies, and research on Vietnamese cultural and creative industries. It sheds light on how audiences actively engage with and interpret folklore representations in contemporary media, specifically within the Vietnamese context.

### **Literature Review**

Folklore, a repository of tangible and intangible values passed down through generations (Nguyễn, 2018), plays a crucial role in preserving cultural identity. Fairy tales, as a subset of folklore, with their vivid narratives and artistic expressions, act as a repository of cultural understanding, serving as a "cultural museum" (Nguyễn, 2018). These narratives not only express fundamental concepts about the human world and society (Nguyễn, 2018), but

also function as coping mechanisms for everyday social difficulties (Tatar, 1999). The universality of themes within fairy tales allows them to transcend boundaries, potentially representing a nation's identity (Dundes, 1965; Kahnke, 2013). Additionally, the emphasis on intertextual resonance and interdisciplinary research (Warner, 2014; Zipes, 2012; Haase, 1999; Rudy, 2018) underscores the rich potential for studying fairy tales through various lenses.

Fairy tales are frequently used in music videos to supplement the themes of songs from various genres. These tales emerge here by depicting features, symbols, or endings that convey the song's and/or video's main ideological themes (Hutton & Whatman, 2018, p. 549). This type of media text operates in dialogue with the prevailing system of popularization and representation of customs, through a music video format (Watson & Railton, 2011). The context of the texts is not necessarily a physical location (Nunes & Greenhill, 2018), but rather a familiar fictitious setting in which to resist or subvert hegemony (Hutton & Whatman, 2018). Such stories frequently negate reality, though a complete negation can make the story incomplete (Rudy, 2018). The process of creating these media products requires a compromise between reality and fantasy (Rudy, 2018). This means continuing the “form and tradition” of fairy tales while reflecting the “socio-cultural conditions in which each work of adaptation is produced and circulated” (Magnus-Johnston, 2016) for people to cope with various problems in daily life (Tatar, 1999). In fact, they direct viewers to new ideological positions through both combining and redeploying familiar motifs and scripts in unidentified fairy contexts (Hutton & Whatman, 2018).

In Vietnam, the academic landscape primarily focuses on analyzing the spiritual and religious realms through written texts (e.g., Vuong et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2021). This research gap highlights the potential for delving into Vietnamese folklore represented within contemporary mediums like music videos. Significantly, the spectrum of the folklore adaptation trend acknowledges the potential for engaging Vietnamese audiences with their traditional values (Thùy Du, 2020) and establishing a platform for heritage promotion. This raises critical questions about the accuracy of music video representations, audience recognition of these discrepancies, and their overall reception of folkloric elements depicted on screen. These questions remain largely unexplored within academic research. Therefore, this present study addresses this gap by investigating how Vietnamese audiences make sense of and engage with folklore representations in Hoàng Thùy Linh's music videos through the

lens of "fairy tale music videos". By examining audience reception and perceptions, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of both the evolving nature of Vietnamese folklore in contemporary media and its impact on cultural heritage engagement.

### **Methodology and Analysis**

Employing the Free Association Narrative Interview (FANI) method, which encourages the natural flow of participants' subconscious thoughts rather than following a rigid structure (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000), I gathered data in spring 2023 from audiences residing in southwestern Vietnam (or *miền Tây*<sup>1</sup>). Interpreting the findings through Stuart Hall's reception theory, my analysis revealed three distinct audience reading positions: favorable, oppositional, and negotiated (O'Donnell, 2020). These diverse reactions highlight the influence of various factors, including personal experiences, interests, and prevailing media-driven gender discourses.

### **Findings**

#### **Worlding unique folklore universe by creative practices**

Although few participants could name the fairy tales that influenced the music video (hereafter MV), most of them agreed that Linh's MV appeared magically and colorfully as inviting them to her fairy world. However, many familiar fairy tales archetypes (e.g. dragons, mermaid, village festivals, anthropomorphization of animals) were pointed out when they talked about their feelings or what they see in the MV.

Tuấn: I only saw the journey of a girl to conquer the love of a man. I felt that it's kind of like the tale... of Little Mermaid.

Đan: I've seen a lot of folklore used, but I don't know exactly which fairy tale (laughs).

Đỗ: The way of developing the lyrics [into MV] is also very modern and still has a high sense of folk tale. I don't even know how to describe it. But hearing the lyrics is similar to listening to a fairy tale.

Representations of folklore in the MV were diverse, colorful, modernized with many contemporary implications about gender issues. In additions, the MVs created and mediated

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<sup>1</sup> *Miền Tây*, also known as *Tây Nam Bộ*, is an area in southwestern Vietnam where the Mekong River flows into the sea via a network of distributaries. This term in Vietnamese can be used as an adjective, adverb or noun.

meaning for viewers through their audiovisual nature (Filardo Llamas, 2017), as some indicated:

Nhã: It's so colorful. It's kind of like being lost on a planet, a world. That universe shares the same color.

Đỗ: The way of dressing, and deploying the dragon and phoenix images is very typical. This alternately creates a folk vibe, like in some old fairy tales...It kinda has a bit of a modern mix of cyberpunk.

Tuấn: I see that Hoàng Thùy Linh wants to convey Vietnamese folklore to young people in her own way...mixing folk and modern. Folk is the imagery, and the modern is the sound. It then helps young people to satisfy both listening and seeing Vietnamese folklore.

Some participants seem to accept some limitations in the presented MV, such as sacrificing reality, logic, and believability for the sake of enjoyment.

Dan: I highly appreciate her creativity because the colors used in the clip show Vietnamese folk, but creative with unique characteristics. Vibrant color without being cheesy or rustic. For me, I still find it highly innovative in the use of folk materials.

Đỗ: Hoàng Thùy Linh suddenly appeared to tell folklore stories, sang folk-influenced songs, played folk-influenced music; but it's similar to USUK, it's also futuristic. It was catchy, so people enjoyed it.

La: They use a lot of national culture and folklore materials. They all show me that there is something new everytime I rewatch.

### **Worlding *miền Tây* Culture in “See Tình”**

"If in the eyes of the mermaid, the boy selling mats is like "a rare ray of light right into the heart", then the image of *miền Tây* in the eyes of Hoàng Thùy Linh is special too. The aqua world of "See Tình" is not in the sea but in the river. The mermaids there are all *linh* fish, *basa* fish, snakehead fish, or *ba khía*. Green melaleuca forests are turning a warm color. The rows of coconut trees are swaying to the music, and the rice paper drying yard could also become a dance floor. Those witty things are also the mood of people when in love: everything becomes unbounded. *Miền Tây* in "See Tình" is young, attractive, and modern, developing perfectly when the traditional cultural features are preserved and transformed in the flow of the digital 4.0 era (Hoàng Thùy Linh, 2022)."

This is a short description from the MV “See Tinh” of Hoàng Thùy Linh. For her, the music video is set in *miền Tây* with many traditional cultural features. The unique features that are familiar to *miền Tây* people’s lives such as mats, local fishes, rows of coconut, and rice paper making seem to be attractive to young audiences. However, not all of them responded the same way. This section thus adopted reception theory to categorize the MV “See Tinh” reading experience of audiences into three positions (favorable, negotiated, and oppositional) in order to reveal their reception.

### ***Favorable Readings***

When asked, Đỗ immediately expressed his joyful feelings towards the Mekong vibe of the video.

Đỗ: From beginning it immediately has the vibe. [I] acknowledge its *miền Tây* vibe. It uses images of boats, fish, rafts, a few rows of water jars (*hàng lu nước*), crabs, then some rice paper rolls (*ràng bánh tráng*) to dry outside, and coconut trees only appearing in *miền Tây*.

To him, what makes the MV so *miền Tây* are images of boats, fishes, rafts, water jars, coconut trees, rice paper rolls, etc. His reception exactly fits in with Hoàng Thùy Linh’s references, reminding us of Barker’s theorisation of cultural hegemony. This hegemony “occurs when a strand of meanings tends to be dominant, producing, maintaining, and reproducing authoritative sets of meanings and practices” (Barker, 2008, p. 319). In other words, there is a power shaping how things looked and meant. Within this concept, what Đỗ decoded from the MV is exactly the same as what Hoàng Thùy Linh intended her viewers to understand.

***Figure 1. The actors standing under the moon surrounded by water jars, coconut trees, banana trees and rice paper rolls***



Source: Hoàng Thùy Linh, 2022, 1:30.

Another favorable viewer, Đan, stated that the lyrics are clearer in terms of *miền Tây* culture representation. For her, the sound/terms “*tình tình tình tang tang tính*” is close to *cải lương*<sup>2</sup> music. Any *cải lương* performances have its own stories or narrative, but Đan wonder if there are any myths in the song of “See Tình.”

Đan: That “*tình tình tình tang tang tính*”, is kind of like *cải lương*, isn't it? The instrument that is used to play in *cải lương*, very similar rhythms.

Also, while talking about her favor for “See Tình,” Đan mentioned the *Đờn ca tài tử*<sup>3</sup> piece of music (see Hoàng Thùy Linh, 2022, 0:02-0:12) as a reason why this MV did not receive too much support when it was released. I then asked her if this *Đờn ca tài tử* music match the whole MV.

Đan: It doesn't fit, but I think it should be there to introduce people to *miền Tây* [context]. And if you just start with the animation, many people won't be led to that

<sup>2</sup> is a type of renewing theater originating from the Southern Vietnam, formed on the basis of the music of *Đờn ca tài tử* and folk songs of the Mekong Delta.

<sup>3</sup> a type of musical performance with a band consisting of four types: pliers, stork, zither and monochord, that appeared in Southern Vietnam more than 100 years ago.

story. So I think if it doesn't include that part, it won't be clear about its *miền Tây* context.

Her opinion demonstrates that the part of *Đờn ca tài tử* music as introduction made the MV context clearer and easier for audience to understand the storytelling.

### ***Negotiated Readings***

Ngọc expressed that she did not really like the MV “See Tình” due to its misrepresentation of her hometown. However, she admitted it somehow gave her a feeling of *miền Tây* vibe.

Ngọc: There are mats, fortunately it still takes the traditional mat that people are still using a lot in *miền Tây* now. And pots of rice (*cái hũ gạo*). These two are common in *miền Tây*. The scene of eating hotpot (*cái lẩu*) is not the same [commonly appearing in *miền Tây*]. Which *miền Tây* people eat that hotpot, do you eat that hotpot at home?

For her, traditional mats and pots of rice were close to *miền Tây* culture, which caused her surprise, as she used the word “fortunately”. But the other representation was not really true to reality. She argued that the hotpot scene was not as one people eating in the region by asking back our experience (because she knew we are both born as *miền Tây* individuals). With Ngọc, the purpose of Hoàng Thùy Linh is not to honor *miền Tây* folk culture but to commercially perform on stages. She illustrated two reasons: the market needs of *miền Tây* materials under a futuristic theme, and the EDM musical tactics using *đờn ca tài tử* music as an attention hook for the MV.

Ngọc: I don't know what the purpose of Hoàng Thùy Linh is, but for me, this song is not to honor folklore, or *miền Tây* culture. Because firstly, it was ‘under the futuristic theme’ [she used that English term], it used *miền Tây* materials for marketing, like delicious vermicelli to lure the cat. Linh’s works are always futuristic, modern, holograms of all kinds. The second one, the introduction music was *đờn ca tài tử* but the next part was loudly electronic loud. I don't know if the next part uses flute or erhu<sup>4</sup>,

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<sup>4</sup> two instruments usually performs folk music

but with my normal ears, I can't recognize. And the nature of this song is to perform on stage, that EDM music is mainly for concerts. It is very commercial.

Another Vietnamese Western-born participant, Tuấn, found it *miền Tây* by looking at images of water lilies, floating markets and drinking on floating houses. He said that these images were really universal in the West, but with a modern stylized approach.

Tuấn: I feel not very impressed with the MV "See Tình." But I still find it Western, from the image of water lilies, floating markets, etc. Well, the image of guys drinking on floating houses or houses on the river. It looks pretty universal. Overall, in this MV, I see that Linh uses the *miền Tây* background more and is stylized in a modern approach.

Interviewer: So usually *miền Tây* is not modern?

Tuấn: But with this one, the color and material of the music is more modern than what we usually hear. What do we usually listen to when we go to *miền Tây*? We listen to *vọng cổ*<sup>5</sup> than these types of music.

He added that if people come to *miền Tây*, they would choose to listen *vọng cổ* rather than this kind of music like See Tình.

### ***Oppositional Readings***

Extending the scene of hotpot that Ngọc mentioned, Nhã claimed it was too fake and unreal due to its way of drinking, the hotpot itself, and other dishes. The hotpot in the MV tried to visualize Vietnamese *cù lao*<sup>6</sup>, but it turned into something else.

Nhã: The way they drink is too fake, too unreal. People do not drink like this. Then this hotpot is not like the one in the countryside. In the countryside [people] eat *cù lao* hotpot.

Interviewer: Is this (pointing at the screen) not the same as a *cù lao*?

Nhã: Yeah, this is like another hotpot. Moreover, when drinking, *miền Tây* men don't eat hotpot. They eat easy-making and dried things on dishes. The hotpot easily runs out

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<sup>5</sup> one of the primary versions of *Cải Lương* theater, originating from the song "Dạ Cổ Hoài Lang" by musician Cao Văn Lầu, that is very popular in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam.

<sup>6</sup> a kind of Vietnamese hotpot was named after its similar look to islet (*cù lao*) in reality



because people focus on drinking too much. And people usually don't sit like this [on screen] but on the ground, always on the floor, and on the mat.

**Figure 2. The boys were drinking together with a hot pot on the table vs. the real 'củ lao' hot pot in Western Vietnam**



Source: Hoàng Thùy Linh, 2022, 1:15; Saigon Food Reviewer, 2021.

According to her, the *miền Tây* way of drinking usually started with easy-making dried food on dishes. And if people drank together, they would sit on mats on the ground, not on chairs. Thúy shared the same experience with Nhã through comparison with other media texts. She added everyone was drinking on mats, not tables and chairs, and even on boats. For her, this whole MV looked like a Western/Disney's mermaid story with just a familiar water lily of Southwestern region.

Thúy: It's very Western/Disney's mermaid then. It only has a familiar water lily, but its background is not very *miền Tây*. When watching [some shows about] *miền Tây* lives

on the river with my mother, [I see] now everyone is sitting on the mats and drinking, not the table. Tables are only somewhere in the restaurant. Plus, some people drink on boats (*ghe/xuông*).

Phuong confessed that if she did not go to a MV analysis session, then she would not notice the *miền Tây* setting of the MV. To her, the glittery outlook made her lose attention to its cultural references.

Phuong: I feel a little pity that [the MV] is too glitter glittery. If we don't pay close attention, we won't know it's Vietnamese culture. For example, when I participated in a session to analyze MV “See Tình,” then I knew it was about the *miền Tây* river culture.

Interviewer: But before that, you didn't know it was about *miền Tây* lives on rivers?

Phuong: I didn't notice it, I just thought it was set in a normal boat, like a boat rowing scene. The background is overly pinky, so I don't recognize the *miền Tây* river setting.

In contrast to Đan's view in Favorable Readings, Phuong argued that the *đờn ca tài tử* part doesn't help audience understand the context. For her, the *đờn ca tài tử* part would be clearer only if there were a stage of people performing this genre of music.

Interviewer: There is a part of Western *đờn ca tài tử* in the very first seconds, isn't it enough to show the setting of the MV?

Phuong: For *đờn ca tài tử*, if you look at the performers, it will be easier to recognize than just playing the music.

After that, Phuong concluded that Hoàng Thùy Linh may not have enough *miền Tây* identity to create musical stories about the Southwestern Vietnam for audiences. She, then, expressed hopeful feelings for future artists to fulfill this gap.

Phuong: Maybe the identity of Hoàng Thùy Linh is Northern [Vietnamese], she better show the Northern culture. For example, the festival of blowing rice (*lễ hội thổi cơm*) in [other MVs like] *Duyên Âm*, *Để Mị Nói Cho Mà Nghe*, or *Tử Phủ* about Mother Goddess worship is quite good. As for *miền Tây*, Hoàng Thùy Linh is not enough Southwestern [identity] to tell stories. I am still waiting for a *miền Tây* artist to tell stories about their culture.

Hoàng Thùy Linh once was criticized by Vietnamese netizens for cultural appropriation in the “See Tình” MV since her identity is of Northern Vietnamese. However, this needs further researchers to examine the hypothesis that her creative practices are damaging the culture of *miền Tây*.

## Conclusion

My study has demonstrated that Vietnamese audiences’ viewing experiences are diverse and linked both with their personal and sociocultural factors, and with lived experiences. There were two participants who showed favor towards the representations of Southwestern cultures in See Tình, equal to negotiated responses, while most participants experienced discomfort towards them. It seems that people with Southwestern living experiences (such as Thúy, Nhã, even Phương and Tuấn) view the MV more strictly than others. They compared what Hoàng Thùy Linh visualized and acted on in the MV to what actually happened in their real life, then they would feel offensive or disapproved with misrepresentations. A remarkable finding here is the musical piece of *đờn ca tài tử* in the beginning. The favorable positions stated that it should be there to introduce viewers to the MV setting, but the rest found it difficult to identify this music or to understand the MV’s purpose. In addition, the representation of *cù lao* hotpot caused the feeling of most discomfort in audiences who had experienced it in real life. While some participants shared the same points of view, most of them still expressed their unique decoding of cultural and folklore representation in MV “See Tình.” The fact that a majority of participants felt “See Tình” representations of *miền Tây* were unreal could open up a debate about whether it was Linh’s failed practises or dominant stereotype of Northern folklore as pure Vietnamese folklore.

Moreover, folklore representations in this fairy tale MV were diverse, colorful, modernized with many familiar archetypes (e.g. dragons, mermaid, village festivals, anthropomorphization of animals, etc.) were pointed out. Also, some showed their ‘suspension of disbelief’ as accepting the MVs’ limitations as untrue reality and different logic (Böcking, 2008). However, those representations of Hoàng Thùy Linh were heavily influenced by Northern Vietnamese folklore. This hegemony or dominance could be because of the cultural policy that identifies rural areas of Northern Vietnam as true and fundamental Vietnamese spirit (Meeker, 2013). Another simple reason for that was Linh’s identity as well as her living experiences as a Northern girl. Despite this, she succeeded in visualizing a unique universe of folklore by her own ways under modernized and futuristic themes.

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