

# **Death, Buddhism, and Existentialism in the Songs of Trịnh Công Sơn**

By John C. Schafer

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I taught English in South Vietnam during the war and became a fan of the singer and songwriter Trịnh Công Sơn. In southern cities in the late 1960s and early 1970s everyone, but especially students, were listening to his songs and singing them themselves—songs like “Gia tài của mẹ” [Legacy of the Motherland], “Tình ca của người mất trí” [Love Song of a Mad Person], and “Đại bác ru đêm” [Lullaby of Cannons for the Night].<sup>1</sup> These songs were the anthems of the young people I knew during the war, expressing their yearning for peace and their love for their native land.

Trịnh Công Sơn remained in Vietnam after 1975 and continued to write songs. The communist authorities were wary of him: they didn’t like the fact that he opposed all war, including their revolutionary war. His antiwar songs still cannot be legally performed or distributed in Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> I was in Vietnam when he died on April 1, 2001, and after witnessing the tremendous outpouring of love for this singer and the grief over his passing, I began to

consider reasons for his extraordinary popularity. I survey these reasons elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> In this article I focus more narrowly on Trịnh Công Sơn’s philosophy of life.

Those who know Trịnh Công Sơn’s music may find that term—“philosophy of life”—hard to accept. Many of his songs contain surreal images, strange grammar, and non-canonical word collocations. How can works like these be considered philosophical arguments? you may ask. Although his songs do have these characteristics, I still think a fairly consistent philosophy emerges from them. Trịnh Công Sơn studied philosophy in a French lycée in Saigon and has said that he “always liked philosophy and wanted to put philosophy into [his] songs, a soft kind of philosophy that everyone can understand.”<sup>4</sup> In this article I describe that “soft” philosophy and then attempt to understand it more deeply by relating it primarily to Buddhist ideas—because I believe they were the paramount influence on his work—but also to European existentialism, a philosophy that in the late 1950s and early 1960s fascinated Trịnh Công Sơn and other southern intellectuals.

### **Trịnh Công Sơn’s “Soft Philosophy”**

Trịnh Công Sơn’s philosophy, as revealed in his songs, is based on the recognition that while life has its pleasures it is fraught with sadness. In his song “Gọi tên bốn mùa” [Calling the Names of the Four Seasons], Trịnh Công Sơn says “Tin buồn từ ngày mẹ cho mang nặng kiếp người” [Sad news is there from the time day your mother lets you carry the burden of life]. In this song and some others he portrays youth, especially the twenties, as an especially sad time. In “Nhìn những mùa thu đi” [Watching Autumns Pass], he sings:

*Nhìn những mùa thu đi*  
*Tay trơn buồn ôm nuối tiếc*  
*Nghe gió lạnh về đêm*  
*Hai mươi sáu dâng mắt biếc*  
*Thương cho người rồi lạnh lòng riêng<sup>5</sup>*  
Watching autumns pass,  
Sad, empty hands embrace regrets;  
Listening to the cold wind at night,  
Twenty years of sadness rise in pretty eyes,  
Feeling pity for others, then a private coldness.

Life is sad because nothing lasts. Everything—birds, flowers, happiness, loving relationships, and life itself—is transitory, as ephemeral as mist. In the song “Ở trọ” [The Boarder], he emphasizes that all creatures are only boarders in this world, not permanent residents:

*Con chim ở đậu cành tre*

*Con cá ở trọ trong khe nước nguồn*

*Tôi nay ở trọ trần gian*

*Trăm năm về chốn xa xăm cuối trời*

The bird boards on the bamboo branch,

The fish boards in a crevice of spring water,

I myself am a boarder in this world,

In one hundred years I'll return to the edge of the sky.

In a world of sadness, love is an attractive refuge and is presented as such in some Trịnh Công Sơn songs. But because love, like everything else, doesn't last, it cannot be the safe haven we seek. This theme of love being beautiful but fleeting is found in many Trịnh Công Sơn songs. In “Đóa hoa vô thường” [A Flower of Impermanence], for example, Trịnh Công Sơn sings about the stages of a love relationship—the happy period when love blooms and then the inevitable end:

*Từ đó ta nằm đau*

*Ôi núi cũng như đèo*

*Một chút vô thường theo*

*từng phút cao giờ sâu*

*Từ đó ta ngồi mê*

*Để thấy trên đường xa*

*Một chuyến xe tựa như*

*Vừa đến nơi chia lìa*

From then I lay in pain,

And in the mountains and the passes,

Impermanence followed

Each high time and low time;

From then I sat dazed

And watched on the distant road  
A carriage that seemed  
To have just arrived at a place  
We would part.

Trịnh Công Sơn's love songs are, as his friend Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường points out, metaphysical statements in the sense that the breakup of love relationships that they describe are not bumps along the road of a life that is fundamentally happy. They are, in Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường's words, "prayers at the edge of the abyss."<sup>6</sup> The poet Xuân Diệu said, "Yêu là chết ở trong lòng một ít" [To love is to die a little in the heart], a line every university student I taught during the war knew.<sup>7</sup> The inevitable separations in Trịnh Công Sơn's love songs are little deaths, preparation for the final departure—of one's lover and oneself—from this world. They are reminders of impermanence. Death, this final departure, is never far away in a Trịnh Công Sơn song. In several songs he refers explicitly to his own death,<sup>8</sup> as he does in "Bên đời hiu quạnh" [Next to a Desolate Life]:

*Một lần nằm mơ tôi thấy tôi qua đời*  
*Dù thật lệ rơi lòng không buồn mấy*  
*Giật mình tỉnh ra ồ nắng lên rồi*  
Once I dreamed I saw myself die,  
Though it's true tears fell, I wasn't so sad,  
Suddenly I awakened and the sun was rising.

In other songs he refers to death in vaguer terms—as a trip to the "edge of the sky."<sup>9</sup> Whatever the image, eternity is always calling in Trịnh Công Sơn's music, as it is in a song appropriately titled "Lời thiên thu gọi" [The Call of Eternity]:

*Về chân núi thăm nấm mồ*  
*Giữa đường trưa có tôi bơ phờ*  
*Chợt tôi thấy thiên thu*  
*Là một đường không bến bờ*  
Returning to the foot of the mountains to visit a grave,  
There was I, worn out at noon in the middle of the road;  
Suddenly I saw eternity,  
A road with no end.

And in “Còn có bao ngày” [How Many Days Left?] he sings:

*Đêm ta nằm nghe tiếng trăm năm*

*Gọi thì thầm, gọi thì thầm, gọi thì thầm*

At night I lie and listen to the sound of a lifetime passing [literally: the sound of one hundred years],

Whispering, whispering, whispering.

Trịnh Công Sơn’s soft philosophy includes a cosmology. There are two worlds: a real world, referred to as *trần gian* [this earth] or *nhân gian* [the human world], and an unreal world, referred to as *thiên thu* or *đất muôn đời* [eternity] or *thiên đàng* or *vườn địa đàng* [paradise]. But the real world is always dissolving into the unreal, and so the world of Trịnh Công Sơn’s music is what Bùi Vĩnh Phúc calls a “nhòe nhạt” [blurred] or “lai” [hybrid] world,<sup>10</sup> a world that lies between the real and the surreal, a world that, as Trịnh Công Sơn sings in “Đời cho ta thế” [Life Gives Us These Things], is “Không xa trời và cũng không xa phận người” [Not far from the heavens but also not far from the fate of humans]. This blurring of the real and the unreal, which also can be seen as a blurring of life and death, of earthly existence and eternity, is the overarching and most important blending of opposites found in Trịnh Công Sơn songs.

But other blurrings occur, often within a single line. As Cao Huy Thuần points out, there’s frequently a little bit of this in that and a little bit of that in this in a Trịnh Công Sơn song, “a little downstream in upstream, a little death in the springtime of life, a little eternal truth in tears.”<sup>11</sup> Many lines feature grammatical parallelism, a structure generally used to balance opposites, but often Trịnh Công Sơn uses this structure not to distinguish and oppose qualities and categories but to blur and confuse them, an effect Cao Huy Thuần calls “đổi hợp,” or “harmonious opposition.”<sup>12</sup> For example, “Tình không xa nhưng không thật gần” [Love’s not far but not real near], “Không xa đời và cũng không xa mộ người” [Not far from life and also not far from the grave], “Một phố hồng, một phố hư không” [A town that’s pink, a town of nothingness].<sup>13</sup>

In other lines the grammar is less parallel, but a refusal to sharply distinguish qualities and categories is still evident: “Có chút lệ nhòa trong phút hôn nhau” [A few tears blur the moment of kissing], “Tình ngỡ đã phai pha nhưng tình vẫn còn đầy” [Love one thought had faded is still complete].<sup>14</sup>

Across Trịnh Công Sơn's part-real, part-miraculous world a human figure travels. Frequently this person is described as tired and sad. Though appreciative of what life has to offer—especially love—he<sup>15</sup> doesn't feel completely at home in the earthly world; in several songs he refers to himself as an exile.<sup>16</sup> Where is this human figure traveling to? And is he leaving, or returning? Is he departing from this world, or returning from another? This traveler himself seems unable to answer these questions. In “Có một ngày như thế” [There'll Be a Day Like This] he sings:

*Có một ngày . . . có một ngày như thế*

*Anh đi . . . Anh đi đâu? . . . về đâu?*

There'll be a day . . . there'll be a day like this,

I'll go . . . I'll go where? . . . Return to where?

And in “Tiến thoái lưỡng nan” [To Advance or Retreat] he sings:

*Tiến thoái lưỡng nan*

*Đi về lặn đạn*

*Ngày xưa lặn đạn*

*Không biết về đâu*

*Về đâu cuối ngõ?*

*Về đâu cuối trời?*

*Xa xăm tôi ngồi*

*Tôi tìm lại tôi.*

To advance or retreat,

Returning with hardship,

Long ago there was hardship,

Don't know where to return to.

Return to the end of the lane?

Return to the edge of the sky?

I search for a dream,

In the distance I sit,

I search again for myself.

In many songs he says he misses his home:

*Nhiều đêm muốn quay về ngôi yên dưới mái nhà*

Many nights I want to return and sit peacefully under  
the roof of my home  
(from “Lời thiên thu gọi” [The Call of Eternity])

*Một lần chợt nghe quê quán tôi xưa*  
*Giọng người gọi tôi nghe tiếng rất nhu mì*  
Once I suddenly heard my old native place  
The voice of the person calling sounded very gentle  
(from “Bên đời hiu quạnh” [Next to a Desolate Life])

*Nhiều khi bỗng như trẻ nhớ nhà*  
*Từ những phố kia tôi về*  
Often I'm like a youth who misses home  
From other towns I return  
(from “Đêm thấy ta là thác đổ” [At Night I Feel Like a Waterfall])

But by “home” [*nhà*] and “native place” [*quê nhà*] and “home village” [*quê quán*] does the songwriter mean his earthly home, or his final resting place—death, eternity? He seems uncertain on this point—not sure, as he says in “Tiền thoái lưỡng nan,” whether he is headed for the “end of the lane” of his home village or the “edge of the sky” of eternity. “Chẳng biết nơi nao là chôn quê nhà” [One doesn't know which place is home], Trịnh Công Sơn says in one of his most famous songs, “Một cõi đi về” [A Place for Leaving and Returning],<sup>17</sup> and so the songwriter travels in circles:

*Bao nhiêu năm rồi còn mãi ra đi*  
*Đi đâu loanh quanh cho đời mỏi mệt*  
*Trên hai vai ta đôi vầng nhật nguyệt*  
*Rọi suốt trăm năm một cõi đi về*  
Many years I've wandered,  
Going in circles, growing tired,  
On my shoulders the sun and the moon,  
Lighting a lifetime, a place for leaving and returning.

## **Buddhist Influences**

This “soft philosophy” of Trịnh Công Sơn seems to leave us with many questions, as most philosophies do. Trịnh Công Sơn’s philosophy and his songs are not, however, as obscure as they might appear on first hearing, and they become much clearer when one considers them in light of Buddhist ideas. Of course, knowing something about the singer’s life is helpful also.

Trịnh Công Sơn was a young boy during the First Indochina War and came to maturity during the Second Indochina War, an experience that surely helped convince him that the world is full of suffering and that life is fragile. His father, active in the resistance, was imprisoned in Buôn Ma Thuột, and Trịnh Công Sơn lived with him in Thừa Phủ Prison for a year in 1949 when he was ten years old. Five years later his father was killed when he crashed his Vespa while returning from Quảng Trị to the family’s home in Huế.<sup>18</sup> In an interview Trịnh Công Sơn once said that from an early age until the present (1998), death had been his “biggest obsession,” adding that he believed “the border between death and life [was] as thin as a strand of hair.”<sup>19</sup> Others, however, have discussed Trịnh Công Sơn’s early life and his experiences during the war,<sup>20</sup> and so here I would like to focus on the influence of Buddhism and existentialism.

In the many articles about, and tributes to, Trịnh Công Sơn written by Vietnamese after his death, Buddhist influences on his work are frequently mentioned, but usually only in passing.<sup>21</sup> Trịnh Công Sơn’s admirers don’t explore these influences in depth, I believe, because the Buddhist ideas expressed in his songs are for them, as they were for Trịnh Công Sơn, such an integral part of who they are and how they view the world that they feel no need to dwell on them. In interviews, however, Trịnh Công Sơn has spoken briefly about how he has been influenced by his hometown of Huế and by Buddhism. “Huế and Buddhism deeply influenced my emotions when I was young,” he told one interviewer.<sup>22</sup> Huế and Buddhism were linked in Trịnh Công Sơn’s mind, as they are for many Vietnamese. Huế is a very Buddhist city with dozens of pagodas. When in May 1963 representatives of the Catholic President Ngô Đình Diệm refused to let Buddhists display their multicolored flag to celebrate the 2,527th birthday of the Buddha, many people gathered for a peaceful protest near the Huế radio station. A Catholic police commander ordered his men to fire into the crowd, killing a woman and eight children. This incident intensified Buddhist protests and contributed to Ngô Đình Diệm’s downfall. Huế is also known for its tombs of emperors, which are located in quiet places on the outskirts of the



city. When asked about the influence of Huế, Trịnh Công Sơn mentioned these tombs—and the persistent rain, and the fact that Huế has a street named “Âm Hồn” (soul of the dead)! “Every song I’ve written is about Huế,” he said, implying that his hometown is partially responsible for the sadness and attention to death that one finds in his songs.<sup>23</sup>

Trịnh Công Sơn talked most directly about how Buddhism affected his life and work in remarks written in 2001 for the monthly review *Giác Ngộ* [Enlightenment]:

I am a Buddhist from a family whose primary religion was Buddhism. From my youth I studied and memorized Buddhist prayers. When I was a child I often went to the pagoda because I liked quietness. When I was sick, every night my mother would ask a monk to come to our house and chant prayers and I would fall asleep listening to these prayers. Perhaps because when I was young I passed by the gates of the house of Buddhism, there still remains in my unconscious, along with fragments of Eastern and Western culture that I have accumulated, the words of Buddhist prayers.<sup>24</sup>

But the best evidence for Buddhist influences comes from his songs. The first of the Four Noble Truths on which Buddhism is based is “Life is suffering.”<sup>25</sup> Another key idea is impermanence, an idea expressed clearly and poetically in the Diamond Sutra, one of the most important sutras:

*Tất cả các pháp hữu vi  
Như cơn mộng, như ảo ảnh, như bọt nước, như bóng  
Như sương mai, như ánh chớp  
Nên nhìn nhận chúng như thế.  
All phenomena in this world are  
Like a dream, fantasy, bubbles, shadows;  
They are also like dew, thunder and lightning;  
One must understand life like that.<sup>26</sup>*

Both these ideas—that life is suffering and that all things are impermanent—are, as we have seen, found again and again in Trịnh Công Sơn’s songs. These two ideas are related: we suffer because nothing lasts. Peter Harvey says that Buddhism “does not deny the existence of happiness in the world—it provides ways of increasing it—but it does emphasize that all forms of happiness (bar that of Nirvana) do not last. Sooner or later, they slip through one’s fingers and leave an aftertaste of loss and longing.”<sup>27</sup> That “aftertaste of loss and longing” is very strong in

Trịnh Công Sơn's music, evidence probably that he was still struggling to accept another of the Noble Truths, namely that the way to stop suffering is to decrease one's desires, to let go of the world. This Trịnh Công Sơn found hard to do for, as he says in a song called "Mỗi ngày tôi chọn một niềm vui" [Each Day I Choose a Piece of Happiness]: "Đã yêu cuộc đời này bằng trái tim của tôi" [I have loved this life with all my heart]. This is not to say that Trịnh Công Sơn felt any contradiction between his Buddhism and his love of life. "For me," Trịnh Công Sơn has said, "Buddhism is a philosophy that makes us love life more; it doesn't make us forget life."<sup>28</sup> But Buddhism does teach the importance of nonattachment, of not clinging to life's joys. In some songs we see Trịnh Công Sơn struggling toward but not quite achieving nonattachment; in later songs—"Như một lời chia tay [Like Words of Good-by],"<sup>29</sup> written in 1991, and "Tôi ơi đừng tuyệt vọng" [I Must Not Despair], written in 1992, for example—he seems more ready to let go of the world.

Life is suffering. All things are impermanent. These Buddhist themes pervade Trịnh Công Sơn's work. Another Buddhist theme present in his songs, but less emphasized, is the idea of rebirth, the idea that all beings are reborn as other beings through a process governed by the laws of karma. In his songs Trịnh Công Sơn appears to accept the Buddhist saying "The present is a shadow of the past, the future is a shadow of the present."<sup>30</sup> "Trịnh Công Sơn," says Cao Huy Thuần, "is like a person who is in the present but through premonition is in touch with the past and the future. He hears his previous life calling his name and sees death beckoning him."<sup>31</sup>

In "Cát bụi" [Sand and Dust], the songwriter asks:

*Hạt bụi nào hóa kiếp thân tôi  
Để một mai tôi về làm cát bụi?*

What speck of dust have I been reincarnated from  
So that one day I can return to dust?

In other songs the references to rebirth are somewhat more oblique:

*Những ngày ngồi rũ tóc âm u  
Nghe tiền thân về chào tiếng lạ*

Some days I sit sadly, hair falling down,  
I hear a previous life [*tiền thân*] return and greet me in a strange voice.

(from "Cỏ xót xa đưa" [Troubled Grass Swaying])

*Ta thấy em trong tiền kiếp với cọng buồn cỏ khô  
Ta thấy em đang ngồi khóc khi rừng chiều đổ mưa.*

I see you in a previous life [*tiền kiếp*] with sad dried stalks of plants,  
I see you sitting crying in the afternoon when rain pours down in the forest.

(from “Rừng xưa đã khép” [The Old Forest Closes]).

*Có những ai xa đời quay về lại  
Về lại nơi cuối trời  
Làm mây trôi.*

There are people far from life who return,  
Return to the edge of the sky,  
And make the clouds drift.

(from “Phôi pha” [Fading])

The Buddhist idea of a cycle of rebirths helps explain the songwriter’s tendency to never mention leaving without mentioning returning and to persistently blur differences between these two actions, as he does in the lines from “Fading” I’ve just quoted.<sup>32</sup> If death precipitates rebirth, then when one is leaving one is also at the same time returning. Looking at life or death from this perspective is like looking at water in a river and wondering whether one should describe it as arriving or departing, a predicament Trịnh Công Sơn captures in “Gần như niềm tuyệt vọng” [Close to Despair]:

*Những ngàn xưa trôi đến bây giờ  
Sông ra đi hay mới bước về*

The years from the past drift to the present,  
Is the river leaving or has it just returned?

Trịnh Công Sơn may continually blur coming and going when he speaks of death because in Buddhism the journey from life into death resembles the flow of a river; it is a more continuous process than it is in the West, where, as René Muller says, “life into death is a discontinuity with a hard edge.” And this is true, he adds, even for “the Christian who believes in an afterlife and eternity.”<sup>33</sup> Buddhism teaches a different attitude toward dying. Buddhists believe “there is no permanent self, soul, or ego behind the ever changing flux of mental and physical processes that comprise our being.”<sup>34</sup> But, according to Buddhist teaching, something of the being that dies does continue into the being that is reborn. Harvey puts it this way:

Of a person in two consecutive rebirths, it is said, “He is not the same and he is not different”.<sup>35</sup> “he” neither retains any unchanging essence, nor is wholly different. No unchanging “being” passes over from one life to another, but the death of a being leads to the continuation of the life process in another context, like the lighting of one lamp from another.<sup>36</sup> . . . They [The “earlier” person and “later” person] are linked by the flux of consciousness and the accompanying seeds of karmic results, so that the character of one is a development of the character of the “other.”<sup>37</sup>

If people traveling from life to death to rebirth retain some aspects of their previous selves when they are reborn, then the process is both a departure and a return—“một cõi đi về” [a place for leaving and returning,] as Trịnh Công Sơn describes it in his famous song with that title.<sup>38</sup>

Trịnh Công Sơn also suggests the impossibility of separating going from returning in “Ngẫu nhiên” [The Unexpected], though here we perhaps also see the Buddhist idea that one cannot know when the cycle of rebirths began or when it will end:

*Không có đâu em này, không có cái chết đầu tiên*

*Và có đâu bao giờ, đâu có cái chết sau cùng.*

There isn't a first death, my love,

And there is never a last death.

Because there is no clear beginning or end to the cycle of rebirths it is difficult to distinguish coming from going. This was recognized by the Buddhist king Trần Nhân Tông (1279–1293) in a poem he left for his followers at his death:

*Hết thấy pháp không sinh*

*Hết thấy pháp không diệt*

*Nếu hay hiểu như vậy*

*Chư Phật thường trước mặt*

*Đến đi sao có đây*

All things have no beginning;

All things are without cessation;

If you understand this,

All the Buddhas are there.

So how can there be any coming and going?<sup>39</sup>

A final Buddhist quality of Trịnh Công Sơn's songs is the obscurity and illogic of his lyrics. Songs are not, of course, rational arguments; they are appeals to the heart, not the intellect. By refusing to announce simple meanings Trịnh Công Sơn lets listeners interpret his songs for themselves and thereby become partners with him in the creation of meaning. This willful incoherence also reflects a modernistic tendency to defamiliarize language in order to make one's art appear fresh and new. But Trịnh Công Sơn's intentional obscurity is also, I believe, a way to convey the Buddhist idea that one cannot reason one's way to mental peace, a way to suggest that enlightenment lies beyond language and logic, an idea expressed in this special message that Bodhidharma, an Indian monk, brought to China in the sixth century CE:

A special transmission outside the scriptures;  
No dependence upon words and letters;  
Direct pointing at the mind of man;  
Seeing into one's nature and the attainment of Buddhahood.<sup>40</sup>

This goal to move beyond language could explain Trịnh Công Sơn's blurring of antitheses like leaving and returning, near and far, coldness and passion—his insistence that there's a little bit of this in that and vice versa. Trịnh Công Sơn resembles the Zen master who may deny that snow is white and the raven is black but only to make the point that to become enlightened one must “escape the antithesis of ‘yes’ and ‘no’” and find a way to harmonize opposites.<sup>41</sup> According to Buddhist teaching, to reach enlightenment one must resist a tendency to be satisfied with simple dualisms. Our intellect wants to oppose, discriminate, and categorize but we must transcend this tendency and strive to reach *sunyata*, or emptiness [Việt, *tánh không*]. To assist others reach this state Zen masters “illustrate through negating,” a method found in many Buddhist sutras, treatises, and koans.<sup>42</sup> Nagarjuna [Việt, Long Thọ], a leading exponent of early Mahayana Buddhism, uses it in his *Treatise of the Middle* (ca. 200 CE) [Sanskrit: *Madhyamika Shastra*; Việt, *Trung Luận*], a key Mahayana text, which begins: “No production, no extinction, no annihilation, no permanence, no unity, no diversity, no coming, no going.”<sup>43</sup>

Chang Chen-chi explains that the majority of Zen koans [Việt, *công án*] were based on the “illustrate through negating” approach.<sup>44</sup> Take the famous koan about listening for the sound of one hand clapping, for example—for a sound that is not a sound but also not (completely) not a sound. Trịnh Công Sơn's songs have a koan-like quality in part because they reveal the influence of this “illustrate through negating” or “neither-nor technique.” In many songs we see

this technique applied in one or two isolated lines; in “Đời cho ta thế” [Life Gives Us These Things] and “Bay đi thầm lặng” [Fly Away Quietly], however, over half the lines are designed to deconstruct easy oppositions. Each of the three verses of “Đời cho ta thế” begins and ends with lines that illustrate by negating. Here are those lines from the second verse:

*Không xa người và cũng không xa mặt trời*

*Không xa tình đầy và cũng không xa lạc loài . . .*

*Không xa tình và cũng không xa thù hận*

*Không xa nồng nàn và cũng không xa lạnh lùng*

Not far from people but also not far from the sun,

Not far from complete love but also not far from being lost . . .

Not far from love and also not far from hatred,

Not far from passion and also not far from coldness.

### **Existentialism**

Another possible influence on Trịnh Công Sơn is existentialism, a philosophy that young intellectuals in the cities of South Vietnam in the late 1950s and early 1960s, including Trịnh Công Sơn, found fascinating. Thái Kim Lan, who grew up in Huế and was a close friend of Trịnh Công Sơn’s, says terms like “angst,” “nothingness,” “nausea,” and “the wasted effort of Sisyphus” were “mysterious knocks on the doors of our young souls, invitations to wander in strange regions of the intellect.”<sup>45</sup> In friendly discussions about existentialism, she says, Trịnh Công Sơn would say little but then later would compose a song and “sing philosophy,” thereby helping them understand some difficult philosophical concepts.<sup>46</sup> Another close friend, Sâm Thương, confirms that Trịnh Công Sơn was intrigued by existentialism, adding that he read works by existentialists on his own, not in school. As he worked for his second baccalaureate at the Lycée Chasseloup-Laubat in Saigon, he was in Section C, the philosophy [*triết*] section, not Section A (natural science) or Section B (math and physics). Teachers in Section C, however, Sâm Thương says: “didn’t teach one philosopher or one theory in a concrete way; they only covered general ideas from the fields of psychology, logic, and morality. For example, one studied about consciousness and unconsciousness, the emotions, happiness, suffering, etc. from the point of view of certain philosophers. That was all. As for philosophers like Nietzsche, Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre, Heidegger, and Merleau Ponty—these were people that Sơn explored on his own; they weren’t taught in school.”<sup>47</sup>

Trịnh Công Sơn read on his own but certainly benefited from the intellectual atmosphere of Huế and from conversations with a well-educated and talented group of friends. Already well-known as a center of culture and learning, Huế became a university town when Huế University opened in 1957. In 1958 the first issue of *Đại Học: Tạp Chí Nghiên Cứu Viện Đại Học Huế* [University: A Research Journal of the University of Huế] was published, edited by a northerner named Nguyễn Văn Trung who had recently returned from study in Belgium. Well-read, passionate about philosophy, and a skillful writer, Nguyễn Văn Trung became, says Trịnh Công Sơn's friend Bửu Ý, the “nòng cốt” [core, nucleus], the leader of philosophical discussions in Huế.<sup>48</sup> *Đại Học* under his editorship included many articles on existential philosophy, many written by Nguyễn Văn Trung himself. His article on human liberation [*giải thoát con người*] in Buddhism and J.P. Sartre appeared in the second issue.<sup>49</sup> An article entitled “Vài cảm nghĩ về tình cảnh phi lý của kẻ lưu đày [Some Reflections on the Absurd Condition of the Exile],” primarily a discussion of Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, appeared two years later in an issue memorializing the Nobel-prize winning author, who died in an auto accident on January 4, 1960.<sup>50</sup> The November 1960 issue included articles, written by other scholars, on Merleau Ponty, Gabriel Marcel, Karl Jaspers, and Martin Heidegger.<sup>51</sup>

Many of Trịnh Công Sơn's close friends were studying at the University of Huế in the early 1960s. These included Bửu Ý (later head of the French Department at the Faculty of Pedagogy), the poet Ngô Kha, Thái Kim Lan, and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, later a philosophy teacher at the girls' secondary school, Đồng Khánh. Before returning to Huế to teach at Đồng Khánh, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường had written his thesis under Nguyễn Văn Trung's direction at the University of Saigon.<sup>52</sup>

Through his own reading and conversations with friends, Trịnh Công Sơn clearly became intrigued by existential philosophy. But what did he find appealing in it? What, if any, influence did his fascination with existentialism have on his songs? European existentialism, a product of the disillusion that followed two world wars, no doubt appealed to South Vietnamese intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s because they, like postwar Europeans, felt they were living in an absurd world in which injustice prevailed and innocents were killed. Was this its appeal to Trịnh Công Sơn? The existentialist who called the condition of modern humanity absurd was Albert Camus, winner of the Nobel Prize in 1957. According to his friends, Trịnh Công Sơn liked Camus' work, particularly his *The Myth of Sisyphus*.<sup>53</sup> When he was at the School of

Education in Qui Nhon, he wrote a song called “Dã tràng ca [Song of the Sand Crab],” which was performed chorally at an event to publicize this new school that had been recently built with US aid. This song seems clearly to have been inspired by Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which Nguyễn Đắc Xuân says the songwriter was reading while at Qui Nhon.<sup>54</sup>

In his *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus says that in an absurd world we are tempted by both illusory hope (such as provided by Christianity, the prospect of eternal life in heaven) and suicide. He argues against both, preferring instead defiance. Like Sisyphus in the Greek myth, the absurd man, writes Camus, “can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself. The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance.”<sup>55</sup> In “Dã tràng ca,” Trịnh Công Sơn compares his sad life to that of the sand crab, which, because it is believed to work endlessly to fill the Eastern Sea with sand, is Vietnam’s Sisyphus, its symbol of ceaseless and useless toil. In the first section of the song the sand crab speaks, expressing this lament:

*Khi mưa lên, khi nắng về*  
*Khi sương rơi, khi thu buồn*  
*Khi chim én bay vào mùa xuân*  
*Mình tôi đi, triền núi đến*  
*Tôi xe cát nghe thân lưu đày*  
*Mình tôi đi, làn sóng đến*  
*Nghe công vỡ cho thân ru mềm*  
*Trùng dương ơi đã mấy ngàn năm*  
*Gọi miên man cho sóng triều lên*  
*Quên dã tràng đêm ngày xe cát*  
*Trùng dương ơi sao nỡ bỏ quên*  
*Gọi cơn đau khi sóng triều lên*  
*Công dã tràng muôn đời vỡ tan*  
When the rain comes, when the sun returns,  
When the mist falls, when autumn’s sad,  
When the swallow flies in spring,  
Alone I go, the mountain side appears,



I carry sand and feel my exile self;  
Alone I go, the wave comes,  
I hear my labor destroyed, my body softly rocked.  
Oh, oceans who for thousands of years  
Call continually for the tides to rise,  
Forgetting the sand crab night and day carrying sand,  
Oh, oceans how could you forget  
And evoke pain when the tides rise,  
And smash forever the sand crab's labor?

In the second section of the song a youth takes center stage. He describes reaching the twenties as a movement from the paradise of childhood to a lonely existence that resembles that of the poor sand crab. It contains these lines:

*Ôi! thiên đàng thuở nhỏ, ngai vàng từ thuở*  
*Thuở mới sinh ra trời đất là nhà*  
*Nay đã mất rồi trong tuổi đôi mươi*  
*Ngai vàng đã mất lâu rồi*  
*Thân đầy dấu trong môi cười*  
Oh, the paradise of childhood, the golden throne;  
When first born the earth's your home,  
But now it's lost in the twenties,  
The throne's been lost for a long time,  
This exiled body hides behind a smile.

“*Dã tràng ca*” is a song, not a philosophical treatise like *The Myth of Sisyphus*. It resembles Camus' *Myth* in expressing the loss of comforting illusions, but Trịnh Công Sơn's concerns seem more personal than metaphysical. He seems to be responding more to events in his own life than to those in his country or the world. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, who interviewed some members of the chorus who performed the song in 1962, says that in “*Dã tràng ca*” Trịnh Công Sơn was reacting to the economic decline of his family that followed his father's death, worries about being drafted, the “coarse” [*thô bạo*] treatment he received from some young people in Qui Nhon, and some experiences of hopeless love.<sup>56</sup> However, Sâm Thương, a close friend of Trịnh Công Sơn's, says that the singer and his family were doing fine economically at the time and that

although he was worried about being drafted and wasn't too enthusiastic about being a teacher, he had only fond memories of his time in Qui Nhon.<sup>57</sup>

Perhaps being unlucky in love had the deepest impact on Trịnh Công Sơn's state of mind in 1962. In Huế in the late 1950s and early 1960s young men with no clear prospects, especially singers with long hair, could fall in love with beautiful girls from well-to-do families, but social barriers usually kept these loves unrequited and secret. Parents wanted to marry their daughters to promising young men with academic degrees. Trịnh Công Sơn fell in love with a girl named Phương Thảo, the sister of a friend, only to see her marry an older man who was a dean at the University of Huế. Based on his own account and those by his friends,<sup>58</sup> we can conclude that this experience pierced certain illusions that he had about love. It was, Trịnh Công Sơn says, "a great disappointment, something that was hard for me to fathom."<sup>59</sup> It is very possible that "Dã tràng ca" is a response to this and other rejections that he experienced in Huế before going to Qui Nhon.

"Dã tràng ca" is the subject of some controversy. Trịnh Công Sơn never performed or recorded this song and never published it in any of his collections. Few people knew it existed until Nguyễn Đắc Xuân talked with the original members of the chorus and began to write about it.<sup>60</sup> The chorus members told Nguyễn Đắc Xuân that they had kept quiet about this song because they believed Trịnh Công Sơn didn't like to talk about his time in Qui Nhon. Later, after Trịnh Công Sơn became famous, they didn't bring it up because they feared people would think they were bragging about their association with the famous singer.<sup>61</sup> Nguyễn Đắc Xuân suggests that Trịnh Công Sơn wanted to suppress this song, hinting that the singer feared it reflected too specifically his own psychological situation when he was in Qui Nhon. "Only people who understand Trịnh Công Sơn's sad and hopeless situation at this time," he says, "can understand his 'Song of the Sand Crab.' People who don't understand won't like it, and might find it pessimistic [*bi quan*], weak [*yếu đuối*]."<sup>62</sup> But Nguyễn Đắc Xuân himself says that it was performed in 1973 in a university graduation ceremony in Nha Trang with Trịnh Công Sơn in attendance.<sup>63</sup> Both Sâm Thương and Đinh Cường, another close friend of Trịnh Công Sơn's who now lives in the United States, say this song was never lost. Sâm Thương says he remembers seeing it among Trịnh Công Sơn's papers, adding that Trịnh Công Sơn never performed it because he "had some technical reservations concerning it."<sup>64</sup> Đinh Cường says it was rarely sung because it was a special song meant to be performed chorally.<sup>65</sup>

One thing people seem to agree on is that “*Dã tràng ca*” is an “archival warehouse” [*kho lưu trữ*] in which Trịnh Công Sơn stored material for future use.<sup>66</sup> It is chock full of phrases, images, and themes that would appear again and again in later songs. Other songs could be considered just as “existential” as “*Dã tràng ca*,” but I discuss it because it has this quality and because it reveals the composer’s state of mind when he was at the threshold of his career.

In “Some Reflections on the Absurd Condition of the Exile,” the Nguyễn Văn Trung article that appeared in *Đại Học* in 1961,<sup>67</sup> the author emphasizes Camus’ decision not to cling to false hopes or commit suicide but instead to face an absurd world as a lonely but defiant exile. By “false hope” Camus means belief in an afterlife that will make up for our earthly suffering. But notice how Nguyễn Văn Trung refers to Camus’ false hope:

To hope for another life, to long for one’s *quê nhà* after being exiled, is another way to deny an absurd existence but [such a denial] won’t bring an end to absurdity. Camus calls this way of escape philosophical suicide.

Therefore one must wake up and cry out about the absurdity of life, but then, in order to be willing to remain in that life, accept this fact: *Exile is one’s quê nhà*.<sup>68</sup>

In Nguyễn Văn Trung’s analysis, hope for another life is elided with longing for one’s *quê nhà*.<sup>69</sup> In paraphrasing a passage from Camus’ *Myth* a few paragraphs later, Nguyễn Văn Trung leaves out any reference to another life: Camus’ leap of faith in divine grace becomes nostalgia for one’s “*quê hương*” [native region]: “I [i.e., Camus] choose to stay in a place of exile because in that place there are truths more certain than a *quê hương* that is only a promise, a dream.”<sup>70</sup>

It is easy to see how Camus’ *Myth*, particularly Nguyễn Văn Trung’s “Vietnamized” version, would be appealing to Trịnh Công Sơn. In Huế in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the figure of the lonely exile who rebels against conventional society was in vogue. Hollywood films, a new and popular entertainment in Huế at this time, played a key role in promoting this figure. According to his friends, Trịnh Công Sơn admired James Dean, who starred in the films *East of Eden* (1955), *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), and *Giant* (1956). He placed a large photo of Dean on his stairway.<sup>71</sup> Trịnh Công Sơn’s friend Bửu Ý calls Dean “an incarnation of Western existential philosophy,”<sup>72</sup> indicating that those in Trịnh Công Sơn’s circle of friends saw a connection between Dean, the Hollywood rebel, and existential rebels like Camus, a connection enhanced by the fact that both men died in automobile accidents. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường calls

Dean “a hero of loneliness” and says he “became a ‘model’ for the fate of people that Trịnh Công Sơn greatly admired.”<sup>73</sup> Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and Bửu Ý speak of the influence of other Hollywood film stars—Clark Gable, Robert Taylor, Montgomery Clift, for example—but they agree that “the most prominent of all was the star James Dean, who was a new and unique image of youth: a laconic youth, not interested in anything in particular, always impulsive, who found it difficult to live with those around him and had trouble fitting into society.”<sup>74</sup> Film settings as well as film actors affected Trịnh Công Sơn and his circle. “The vast open spaces of the American West [as seen in films] captivated the youth of Huế,” Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường says, “and changed their aesthetic sensibilities.”<sup>75</sup>

If James Dean was the hero of loneliness, Trịnh Công Sơn became its spokesperson for Vietnamese. The words *một mình* [alone] and *cô đơn* or *cô liêu* [loneliness] appear in many songs. “Lời buồn thánh” [Sad Sacred Words], one of his saddest songs, begins:

*Chiều chủ nhật buồn*  
*Nằm trong căn gác đìu hiu*  
*Ôi tiếng hát xanh xao của một buổi chiều*  
*Trời mưa, trời mưa không dứt*  
*Ô hay mình vẫn cô liêu.*  
A sad Sunday evening,  
Lying in a lonely room,  
Oh, the pale, sad singing of an afternoon,  
Rain, rain without end,  
Oh how lonely I still am.

This song ends with a plea to his lover to pierce his loneliness with the five fingers of her angel hand.

In a James Dean Western film and in a short story like Camus’ “The Guest”<sup>76</sup> the hero figure travels through sparsely populated arid regions. Usually in a Trịnh Công Sơn song he finds himself in strange towns [*phố lạ*]. Clearly Trịnh Công Sơn felt the pull of both poles that Nguyễn Văn Trung sets up in his analysis of Camus’ *Myth*: the pull of exile and the pull of home. “Many nights I want to return to faraway towns / Many nights I want to return and sit peacefully under the roof of my home,”<sup>77</sup> he sings in “Lời thiên thu gọi” [The Call of Eternity]. “Each day my feet stay put, I miss wandering to another town,”<sup>78</sup> he sings in “Tình xót xa vừa”

[Painful Love]. But the winner of this tug of war is never really in doubt. For Trịnh Công Sơn, “The feet go far but the heart stays home.”<sup>79</sup> Shaped by a culture in which love of one’s *quê nhà* is perhaps the most powerful motif, Trịnh Công Sơn could never do what Nguyễn Văn Trung says Camus is arguing for, namely, to make exile one’s home.

For Vietnamese, *quê nhà* is the place where you were born and where your umbilical cord is buried [*nơi chôn nhau cắt rốn*]. It is the place where your ancestors are buried and where you hope to be buried when you die (which is why Trịnh Công Sơn can speak of a life as “một cõi đi về,” one long journey home). In the Vietnamese imagination *quê nhà* evokes the lost paradise of childhood, particularly the comforts of a mother’s love. As Thích Nhất Hạnh, the internationally known Buddhist teacher who, like Trịnh Công Sơn, is from Huế, points out: “In the Vietnamese language the word for uterus is ‘the palace of the child [*tử cung*].’ Paradise was inside of our mother’s womb.”<sup>80</sup> Trịnh Công Sơn once told an interviewer, “At times when we’re sad and don’t know why, perhaps it’s because we miss our *quê nhà*, and the *quê nhà* nearest to us is our mother’s womb.”<sup>81</sup> At the beginning of this article I quoted Trịnh Công Sơn as saying he wanted to put a “soft philosophy” [*triết học nhẹ nhàng*] into his songs. By “soft,” Trịnh Công Sơn explains, he means “like a folk poem or a mother’s lullaby. Vietnamese philosophy is there but it’s not systemized because it permeates the life of the people.”<sup>82</sup> Trịnh Công Sơn’s soft philosophy is a philosophy of *quê nhà*, which is why references to it and to *quê hương* appear often in his songs, in lines like these:

*Tiếng ru mẹ hát những năm xưa*

*Mãi là lời ca dao bốn mùa*

*Tìm thấy nỗi nhớ từ mỗi chiếc lá*

*Góc phố nào cũng thấy quê nhà.*

A lullaby Mother sang in years gone by,

Folk poems forever for all the four seasons;

I find a memory on every leaf,

In the corner of every town I see my native place.

(from “Tình yêu tìm thấy” [Love Found])

*Rồi một lần kia khăn gói đi xa*

*Tưởng rằng được quên thương nhớ quê nhà*

Then one time I packed my bags and traveled far,

I thought I could forget but remembered my native place

(from “Bên đời hiu quạnh” [Next to a Desolate Life])

*Chiều trên quê hương tôi*

*Nắng khép cánh chia tay một ngày*

*Vết son vàng cuối mây*

*Tiếng chân về đó đây*

*Chiều đi nhưng nắng vẫn cho đời*

*Lửa bếp hồng khơi.*

Evening in my native land,  
Sun rays fold like wings at end of day,  
Red and gold traces at the edge of clouds,  
Homeward footsteps here and there,  
Evening fades but some light remains,  
As cooking fires start to glow.

(from “Chiều trên quê hương tôi” [Evening in My Native Land])

Trịnh Công Sơn could never accept the perpetual revolt against the world that Camus advocated in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. “Dã tràng ca” ends not in defiance but in a plaintive prayer for the angel of love to save him from loneliness. Considered in the context of all his songs, the exile of which Trịnh Công Sơn speaks is not existential revolt but Buddhist recognition—of life’s suffering, its impermanence, and the laws of karma and rebirth. It is recognition that we are all temporary residents, all “exiles” from our true home:

*Người còn đứng như tượng đá trong rừng cây già*

*Người còn đứng như trăm năm vết thương chưa mờ*

*Từng đêm về, từng đêm về mang đời ngẩn ngơ*

*Còn bao lâu cho thân thôi lưu đây chốn đây*

*Còn bao lâu cho thiên thu xuống trên thân này*

A person still stands like a stone statue in the old forest,  
A person still stands, for one hundred years the wound not yet gone;  
Each night comes, each night comes, leaving one bewildered.  
How much longer will this body be exiled in this place?  
How much longer before eternity descends on this body?

(from “Phúc âm buồn” [Sad Tidings])

Trịnh Công Sơn is more a searcher than a rebel. His exile resembles the homelessness of a *Bhikṣu* [Việt, *Tỳ kheo*], a religious mendicant who leaves home [*xuất gia*] to discover his true home, i. e., the way of Buddha. Like any *Bhikṣu* he has to learn not to attach too much importance to the body and not to be overly concerned about matters of birth and death, lessons we see the singer struggling with in the lines from “Phúc âm buồn” quoted in the previous paragraph. In Buddhist texts the experience of becoming enlightened and perceiving the highest reality is compared to returning to one’s native land. In the Diamond and Lankavatara sutras the object of the Buddhist quest is to arrive at an “unattached abode” [Sanskrit, *apratiṣṭhita*; Việt, *vô trụ xứ*], a mental space “beyond the confines of discriminating intellect,” and to take up residence there.<sup>83</sup> I believe that in some songs—in “Một cõi đi về” [A Place for Leaving and Returning], for example—the singer intends references to “native place” [*quê nhà*] or “native region” [*quê hương*] to have a double meaning—to evoke both his home region and also an arrival at/return to his Buddhist nature. “I don’t believe one searches after Buddhism but rather that one returns to the Buddhist nature that is within oneself,” Trịnh Công Sơn says in his article for the journal *Giác Ngộ* [Enlightenment]. “That is one’s native region, the throne of Buddha.”<sup>84</sup>

Trịnh Công Sơn may be more searcher than rebel but this is not to say he did not benefit from his exposure to Camus’ writing. It enabled him to oppose exile [*lưu đày*] to *quê nhà* and *quê hương* and to make his songs relevant to current philosophical debates occurring in Vietnam in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Wanderers who led adventurous lives [*kiếp giang hồ*] but missed home appear in prewar songs [*nhạc tiền chiến*]<sup>85</sup> and novels that predate Trịnh Công Sơn,<sup>86</sup> but his lonely exile is a more metaphysical figure than the travelers in these earlier works. For Trịnh Công Sơn exile is the condition of human beings, not a romantic choice. The *quê nhà* or *quê hương* that he evokes in his songs is evoked continually in folk poetry [*ca dao*] and prewar music but Trịnh Công Sơn gave new life to traditional images of home by opposing them to images of the world as a lonely place, devoid of hope or comfort—images that his contemporaries were encountering in works by and about the existentialists.

Though Trịnh Công Sơn was not defiant in “Dã tràng ca,” in this and many other songs he was clearly troubled by the suffering he saw in the world and by life’s impermanence. In his antiwar songs he opposed a civil war [*nội chiến*] that was turning the mother land into “a forest of dry bones” and “a mountain of graves” (“Gia tài của mẹ” [A Mother’s Legacy]). After the Tet

Offensive in 1968 he composed “Hát trên những xác người” [Singing on the Corpses] and “Bài ca dành cho những xác người” [A Song for the Corpses], two songs which, as their titles suggest, are graphic and moving reactions to the horrors of war. According to Buddhist teaching, one is not required to accept suffering; in fact, one is encouraged to do all one can to relieve it—both one’s own suffering and that of others. But to do so one must recognize that suffering exists. Since suffering is caused by a craving for things, to relieve it we must eliminate desires: We must cultivate nonattachment.

Nonattachment is not easy to achieve. When Trịnh Công Sơn talks about the pleasures of life, chief among them being love, and when he urges others to be happy, he sometimes adds a clause beginning with “though.” In a song called “Hãy yêu nhau đi” [Love Each Other] he urges us to

Hãy yêu nhau đi bên đời nguy khốn  
Hãy yêu nhau đi bù đắp cho trăm năm  
*Hãy yêu nhau đi cho ngày quên tháng*  
*Dù đêm súng đạn*  
*Dù sáng mưa bom*

Love each other though life’s filled with disaster  
Love each other to make up for life’s passing  
Love each other so days forget months  
Though the night brings bullets  
Though the morning brings bombs

And in “Đề gió cuốn đi” [Let the Wind Blow It Away] he sings:

*Hãy yêu ngày tới dù quá mệt kiếp người*  
*Còn cuộc đời ta cứ vui*  
*Dù vắng bóng ai, dù vắng bóng ai*  
Love the day that’s coming, though tired of life  
As long as life remains, be happy  
Though someone is gone, though someone is gone

In songs containing these “though” clauses<sup>87</sup> the impermanence of life is accepted, but somewhat grudgingly. I say “grudgingly” because in the main clauses attached to these “though” clauses, the pull of love in this world is expressed so poignantly it tends to overpower Trịnh



Công Sơn's acknowledgment of impermanence in the dependent "though" clauses. Here, for example, is how "Tạ ơn" [Thanks] ends:

*Dù đến rồi đi tôi cũng xin tạ ơn người*

*Tạ ơn đời, tạ ơn ai đã cho tôi*

*Tình sáng ngời như sao xuống từ trời.*

Though you come, then go, I still thank people,

Thank life, thank whoever gave me

Love bright like a star that's fallen from the sky.

While Vietnam during the war was certainly an absurd world, Trịnh Công Sơn was forever mindful of the attractions of this world, chief among them being love, and so he rejected Camus-like defiance and struggled to accept Buddhist nonattachment.

But Camus was not the only existential philosopher. One can also imagine Trịnh Công Sơn being strongly attracted to the existential concepts of "dread" and "authentic living," concepts associated with Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger. "I love life with a heart filled with despair," he said in an introduction to a song collection published in 1972.<sup>88</sup> This despair [*tuyệt vọng*] that Trịnh Công Sơn talked about in his prose and his songs resembles existential "dread," the mood which, according to Martin Heidegger and other existentialists, overcomes one when one faces the inevitability of one's own death. For Heidegger, as for Trịnh Công Sơn, this dread, this intuition of one's own death, is the basis for authentic living; it is what gives life its meaning and its value. Caught up in "everydayness," Heidegger says, most people do not see death this way, except perhaps when faced with a terminal illness. This is unfortunate because living one's life in anticipation of death means one approaches life's choices with earnestness and passion.<sup>89</sup>

In many Trịnh Công Sơn's songs, as we have seen, death constantly interpenetrates life and vice versa, often in a single line: "Dưới vòng nôi mọc từng năm mộ" [Under the cradle graves], "Trong xuân thì thấy bóng trăm năm" [In one's springtime one sees the shadow of a hundred years (end of life)], and "Từng lời tà dương là lời mộ địa" [Each sunset's call is also the grave's].<sup>90</sup> What some see as morbidity in Trịnh Công Sơn's songs could simply be his attempt to capture the following existential paradox: To live life fully one has to live with death in mind. Muller, who compares existentialism and Buddhism, says this is a paradox "worthy of Zen" because in Zen "the true meaning of the world . . . comes only after achieving *sunyata* [emptiness]."<sup>91</sup> In both Buddhism and existentialism one must face the possibility of emptiness

or nothingness in order to realize life's possibilities. The notion of dread, therefore, may have appealed to Trịnh Công Sơn because it seemed to confirm his own Buddhist beliefs.

The existential notion of dread, however, is not really compatible with Buddhism. Buddhism teaches that one should approach death not with dread but with “absolute wholeheartedness.” Death has no terrors, Suzuki says, for the follower of Zen: “He is one with his dying as he is one with his living, and in some ineffable way he is beyond birth and death even as he is born and as he dies. Eternity, for Zen, is not a posthumous state of affairs. To live in eternity is to tap the infinity of the moment.”<sup>92</sup> Though Trịnh Công Sơn spoke about despair in some songs, I believe he strove to “tap the infinity of the moment” and to regard death not with dread but with calmness and peace. In later songs like “Tôi ơi đừng tuyệt vọng” [I Must Not Despair] and “Như một lời chia tay” [Like Words of Good-by], both written in the early 1990s, the dominant tone is one of quiet acceptance. In “Tôi ơi đừng tuyệt vọng,” for example, Trịnh Công Sơn appears to chide first himself and then his lover for their attachment to this world. Addressing himself first, he asks:

*Tôi là ai mà còn trần gian thế?*

*Tôi là ai, là ai, là ai,*

*Mà yêu quá đời này.*

Who am I to be still so of this world?

Who am I, am I, am I,

Who loves this life so much?

This song contains images of autumn leaves falling in winter and of golden sunlight fading “như một đời riêng” [like a private life], but the prospect of a new dawn is also mentioned. Trịnh Công Sơn seems to be reminding himself and his lover that their private lives are part of a larger process of decay, death, and rebirth. In “Như một lời chia tay,” memories of love—footsteps, a rose, whispers in the night—make detachment from the world achingly difficult, but in this song, too, he seems ready to bid it good-by.

Buddhism and existentialism are similar in some respects, but these similarities can obscure essential differences. Take, for example, a similarity that Trịnh Công Sơn himself brought up in an interview and in his remarks for the journal *Giác Ngộ* [Enlightenment]. When the interviewer informed him that he had detected a strong current of existentialism in his work, Trịnh Công Sơn replied: “[T]he supreme master of existentialism was the Buddha because he

taught us that we must be mindful of each moment of our lives.”<sup>93</sup> And in his remarks for *Giác Ngộ*, he said that “in recent years I have begun to think of Buddhism as the religion that has the most existential character. You begin with the word ‘moment’ [*sát na*], a small unit of time. You must know how to live completely in each moment of reality. Eating, drinking, walking, standing, lying down, sitting. Don’t do one thing and think of something else. To me that is Zen,<sup>94</sup> a way to live authentically. I zealously practice this way of living every day.”<sup>95</sup>

In its concentration on existence in this world and not the next, and in its insistence on the power of thinking—on mindfulness and meditating—Buddhism does have an “existential character.” “All that we are is the result of what we have thought,” is one of the Buddha’s most famous sayings, a dictum that Walter Kaufmann says is “nothing less than the quintessence of Sartre’s thought.”<sup>96</sup> Kaufmann has in mind Sartre’s insistence that “existence precedes essence,” that what we do, the decisions we make in life, determine our nature.<sup>97</sup> But in Buddhism the disciplined practice that Trịnh Công Sơn describes is designed to enable one ultimately to perceive Samsara, the earthly world of suffering and impermanence, as identical with Nirvana, the ultimate reality. “Nirvana is Samsara; Samsara is Nirvana” is a well-known Buddhist saying. In Buddhist teaching, Samsara, the earthly world, is not radically deficient in comparison to the ultimate reality; it only appears so to the unenlightened. If one believes this, then there is no need for existential defiance—no need for the metaphysical revolt against an absurd world that existentialists like Camus recommend.<sup>98</sup>

Existentialism’s emphasis on the individual also makes it incompatible with Buddhism. Existentialism encourages the individual to stand alone against existing societies and cultures. Buddhism, in contrast, teaches “selflessness,” that “there is no permanent self, soul, or ego behind the ever changing flux of mental and physical processes that comprise our being.”<sup>99</sup> “For Zen,” says George Rupp, “the individual is in the last analysis not an independent entity. Whatever reality individuals have is derivative from their union with the whole.”<sup>100</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, says that true self is nonself—“the awareness that the self is made only of non-self elements,” that “there’s no separation between self and others, and everything is interconnected.”<sup>101</sup> Nonself, Thích Nhất Hạnh says, can be cultivated: “When you love, if your love is true, you begin to see that the other person is a part of you and you are a part of her or him. In that realization there is already non-self. . . . When people love each other, the distinction, the limits, the frontier between them begins to dissolve, and they become one with

the person they love. There's no longer any jealousy or anger, because if they are angry at the other person, they are angry at themselves.”<sup>102</sup>

I believe we see Trịnh Công Sơn cultivating nonself in many of his songs. He and his friends have said that many of his love songs were inspired by a particular woman. Sometimes these women have betrayed him, and typically the love relationship has ended in separation and sadness. But in his love songs Trịnh Công Sơn typically moved from the personal to the general, making his personal love sickness also a lament for the human condition. In other words, many “love songs” [*bài hát tình yêu*] are also “songs about the human condition” [*bài ca về thân phận con người*]. For example, in “Nhìn những mùa thu đi” [Watching Autumns Pass], the song I quoted above which is about a love that has faded, his own “private sadness” merges with a “feeling for people.” And in “Ru em” [Lullaby for You], also about a broken relationship, one that apparently involved betrayal, he sings:

*Yêu em yêu thêm tình phụ*

*Yêu em lòng chợt từ bi bất ngờ.*

Loving you, I love also betrayal

Loving you, suddenly loving-kindness/compassion fills my heart.

*Từ bi*, the phrase Trịnh Công Sơn uses in the second line above, refers to loving-kindness [*từ tâm*; Sanskrit: *maitrī*] and compassion [*tâm bi*; Sanskrit: *karuna*], two virtues that Buddhists believe are important in “undercutting the attachment to ‘I’.”<sup>103</sup> Trịnh Công Sơn also appears to be cultivating nonself in “Tôi ơi đừng tuyệt vọng” [I Must Not Despair], in this case by reminding his loved one that there is no frontier between them; they are, as Thích Nhất Hạnh says, interconnected:

*Đừng tuyệt vọng, em ơi đừng tuyệt vọng*

*Em là tôi và tôi cũng là em.*

Don't despair, my love, don't despair,

You are me and I am you.

Though Trịnh Công Sơn was clearly interested in existentialism, I think it only influenced the content of his work in a general way. Its popularity within his circle of friends and acquaintances no doubt encouraged him in his desire to put philosophy into his songs—to “sing philosophy” as Thái Kim Lan says. When he sang what Thái Kim Lan refers to as his “course in metaphysics,” his friends who were deeply into Western philosophy understood his songs to be

about existential ideas. And because he presented these ideas in a simple language—like a mother from Huế telling a folk tale, Thái Kim Lan says—his songs helped them understand them. Many years later, however, Thái Kim Lan came to a startling conclusion: “Now as I reflect,” she wrote in 2001, “I realize we were dumb, because none of those new ideas were new, they all could be found in Buddhism.”<sup>104</sup>

There are many similarities between Buddhism and existentialism, as we have seen: Both Heidegger and Buddhists, for example, believe one must face death and nothingness before the truth of the world is revealed and authentic living is possible. So it is not surprising that Thái Kim Lan and her friends, immersed in Western existentialism, thought Trịnh Công Sơn was addressing existential problems. More likely, however, he was expressing Buddhist themes or themes common to both Buddhism and existentialism. Trịnh Công Sơn first became popular in part because he responded to what was *au courant*, European philosophy, but also to something much older, the teachings of Buddhism. “Sơn understood Buddhism better than Western philosophy,” Thái Kim Lan says, “but he created a ‘singing philosophy’ that harmonized East and West. Western thought in Trịnh Công Sơn songs lies in the area of external form, but the essence is Eastern. That was the unique creation of Trịnh Công Sơn: He caught the rhythm of thought of the era and of the young generation of Vietnam.”<sup>105</sup>

That “young generation” of which Thái Kim Lan speaks is no longer young. A big reason for the continuing popularity of Trịnh Công Sơn’s songs is, I believe, the Buddhist messages they convey. When Trịnh Công Sơn first introduced his songs in the late 1950s, their unconventional syntax and images made them appear new—different from the prewar songs [*nhạc tiền chiến*]<sup>106</sup> that young people in southern cities were tiring of. His evocation of very ancient Buddhist notions, however, ensured that they would at the same time be appreciated as expressions of traditional Vietnamese beliefs. “The influence of Buddhism in the lives of the Vietnamese,” says Thích Thiên Ân, “is so thoroughly an inner experience that much remains inexpressible.”<sup>107</sup> Perhaps Trịnh Công Sơn’s greatest contribution is that he has given Vietnamese a way to express this inner experience. Listening to many of his songs is for Vietnamese like visiting a pagoda and listening to monks chanting prayers. Like these prayers, Trịnh Công Sơn’s songs are hard to understand, but they have the same power to soothe troubled minds. And the songs, like all Buddhist teachings, are only “a finger pointing at the moon,” which, as the Perfect Awakening Sutra warns, should never be confused with the moon itself.

JOHN C. SCHAFER is Professor Emeritus, Department of English, Humboldt State University. He taught English in Vietnam with International Voluntary Services (1968–1970) and the Fulbright Program (1971–1973, 2001).

## ABSTRACT

*Various explanations have been offered for the extraordinary popularity of the composer and singer Trịnh Công Sơn: his poetic lyrics, his avoidance of the clichés of prewar music, his antiwar themes, his ability to choose talented female singers, and the like. But little has been said about the Buddhist themes in his songs, perhaps because Vietnamese scholars take them for granted. This article points out these themes and argues that they help explain the Trịnh Công Sơn phenomenon. It also discusses European existentialism, which the author argues fascinated Trịnh Công Sơn but was ultimately not a major influence on his work.*

## Notes

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1. See appendix 1 for a list of all the songs cited in this article with dates of publication. To find the lyrics for other Trịnh Công Sơn songs and information about them (date of publication, collection they were published in, and so on) see these websites: the website of tcs-forum.org, <http://tcs-home.org/songs> (accessed August 5, 2006); Kho Sưu Tập Tư Liệu Về Nhạc Sĩ Trịnh Công Sơn [A Collection of Materials on the Musician Trịnh Công Sơn], under “Kho Sưu Tập,” <http://www.hoiquanhoingo.com.vn/dstulieuui.asp> (accessed May 20, 2006); and the website of VNEnterprise.com, <http://www.vnenterprise.com> (accessed August 5, 2006). For musical scores as well as lyrics to many of his songs see *Trịnh Công Sơn: Tuyển tập những bài ca không năm tháng* [Trịnh Công Sơn: A Selection of Songs Not Tied to Years and Months] (HCMC: Âm Nhạc, 1998).

2. The authorities have had a difficult time, however, in determining which of Trịnh Công Sơn’s pre-1975 songs were antiwar. When interviewed in 2003, Lê Nam, manager of the tape and record/CD section of the Hồ Chí Minh City Office of Performing Arts, a division of the Ministry of Culture and Information, said the problem rested primarily with songs in the collection *Ca khúc da vàng* [Songs of Golden Skin] (1966/1967) because in these works “the antiwar content is raised in a very general way, with no distinction made between a non-righteous [*phi nghĩa*] and righteous [*chính nghĩa*] war.” See Thu Hà, “Cái gì đã thuộc về nguyên tắc thì không có ngoại lệ” [There Are No Exceptions to Matters of Principle], *Tuổi trẻ* [Youth] website, April 18, 2003, <http://www.tuoitre.com.vn> (accessed May 11, 2004). Indeed, the question which of Trịnh Công Sơn’s songs can be performed and which cannot is very murky. The authorities are often confused about which songs were composed before 1975 and of these, which are from the *Ca khúc da vàng* collection. Also unclear is whether all or only some songs from this collection are banned. “In regard to the songs from *Ca khúc da vàng* by Trịnh Công Sơn,” say Cao Minh Hiền and Dạ Ly, “the situation is still murky in terms of whether singers can or cannot sing them.” See “Chuyện ca khúc . . . duyệt và không duyệt!”

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[The Problem of Songs Being Censored . . . and Not Censored!], website of *Thanh Niên Online* [The Young Online], May 7, 2004, <http://www2.thanhnien.com.vn> (accessed August 5, 2004).

3. See “The Trịnh Công Sơn Phenomenon,” *Journal of Asian Studies* (forthcoming).

4. Trịnh Công Sơn, “Để bắt đầu một hồi ức” [To Begin a Recollection], *Âm Nhạc* [Music] (January 1997); reprinted in Nguyễn Trọng Tạo, Nguyễn Thụy Kha, and Đoàn Tử Huyền, eds. *Trịnh Công Sơn: Một người thơ ca một cõi đi về* [Trịnh Công Sơn: A Singer-Poet, a Place for Leaving and Returning (Hà Nội: Âm Nhạc, 2001), 201–202.

<sup>5</sup> All translations are by Cao Thị Như-Quỳnh and John C. Schafer unless otherwise indicated.

6. *Trịnh Công Sơn và cây đàn lya của hoàng tử bé* [Trịnh Công Sơn and the Lyre of the Little Prince] (HCMC: Trẻ, 2004), 84.

7. This line is from a poem called “Yêu” [Love], first published in *Thơ Thơ* [Poems] in 1938. See *Tuyển tập Xuân Diệu: Thơ* [A Selection of Poems by Xuân Diệu] (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 1986), 72.

8. Other songs, besides “Bên đời hiu quạnh,” in which Trịnh Công Sơn refers to his own death, include “Ngẫu nhiên” [The Unexpected] and “Phúc âm buồn” [Sad Tidings].

9. See, for example: “Cỏ xót xa đưa” [Troubled Grass Swaying], “Như một lời chia tay” [Like Words of Good-by], “Ổ trợ” [To Board], and “Phôi pha” [Fading].

10. Bùi Vĩnh Phúc, *Trịnh Công Sơn: Ngôn ngữ và những ám ảnh nghệ thuật* [Trịnh Công Sơn: Language and Artistic Obsessions] (Gardena, CA: Văn Mới, 2005), 131. Others agree. “For Trịnh Công Sơn,” says Cao Huy Thuần, “the other world and this world were not so clearly separated.” Cao Huy Thuần, remarks made when introducing Trịnh Công Sơn’s songs at *Đêm hoài niệm Trịnh Công Sơn* [An Evening to Remember Trịnh Công Sơn], Paris, May 26, 2001.

11. Cao Huy Thuần, “Buồn bã với những môi hôn” [Sadness with Kisses], in *Trịnh Công Sơn cát bụi lộng lẫy* [Trịnh Công Sơn: Resplendent Sand and Dust], eds. Trần Thùy Mai, Dương Phước Thu, and Ngô Minh (Huế: Thuận Hóa, 2001), 102.

12. *Ibid.*

13. From “Như một lời chia tay” [Like Words of Good-by], “Đời cho ta thế” [Life Gives Us These Things], and “Có nghe đời nghiêng” [Do You hear Life Tilting?], respectively.

14. From “Bay đi thầm lặng” [Fly Away Quietly] and “Tình nhớ” [Remembered Love], respectively.

15. I use the masculine pronoun because I believe Trịnh Công Sơn’s songs are personal statements. Typically, however, sadness for his own fate and sadness for the human condition are closely related: one is always turning into the other.

16. See, for example, “Dã tràng ca” [Song of the Sand Crab], “Phúc âm buồn” [Sad Tidings], “Tình xót xa vừa” [Painful Love], and “Vết lăn trầm” [Quiet Imprint].

17. A translation of the lyrics for this entire song appears in appendix B.

18. Bửu Ý, *Trịnh Công Sơn: Một nhạc sĩ thiên tài* [Trịnh Công Sơn: A Genius of a Musician] (HCMC: Trẻ, 2003), 16–17.

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19. This interview, which was with Văn Cẩm Hải, took place in 1998. It is reprinted as “Kiếp sau tôi vẫn là người nghệ sĩ” [I’ll Still Be an Artist/Writer in My Next Reincarnation] in Nguyễn Trọng Tạo, Nguyễn Thụy Kha, and Đoàn Tử Huyền, eds., *Một người thơ ca* (see note 4), 207–208.
20. See Bửu Ý, *Trịnh Công Sơn: Một nhạc sĩ thiên tài*; Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, *Trịnh Công Sơn và cây đàn lya*; Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Có một thời như thế* [There Was Such a Time] (HCMC: Văn Học, 2003); Nguyễn Thanh Ty, *Về một quãng đời Trịnh Công Sơn* [On a Stretch of Trịnh Công Sơn’s Life] (n.d., n.p.). I also discuss the war years and Sơn’s antiwar songs in “The Trịnh Công Sơn Phenomenon,” *Journal of Asian Studies* (forthcoming).
21. These articles and tributes appear in many collections. See, for example, Trần Thùy Mai, Dương Phước Thu, and Ngô Minh, eds., *Cát bụi lộng lẫy*; Bửu Ý, *Nhạc sĩ thiên tài*; Nguyễn Trọng Tạo, Nguyễn Thụy Kha, and Đoàn Tử Huyền, eds., *Một người thơ ca* (see note 4).
22. This undated interview is reprinted as “Chữ tài chữ mệnh cũng là bề dâu” [Talent and Destiny Both Lead to Disaster] in Nguyễn Trọng Tạo, Nguyễn Thụy Kha, and Đoàn Tử Huyền, eds., *Một người thơ ca* (see note 4), 221.
23. Văn Cẩm Hải, “Kiếp sau tôi vẫn là người nghệ sĩ,” in Nguyễn Trọng Tạo, Nguyễn Thụy Kha, and Đoàn Tử Huyền, eds., *Một người thơ ca* (see note 4), 206–207.
24. Trịnh Công Sơn, *Nguyệt San Giác Ngộ* [Monthly Review Enlightenment], April 2001. Reprinted with the title “Nhạc sĩ Trịnh Công Sơn: ‘Phải biết sống hết mình trong mỗi sát na của hiện tại’” [The Musician Trịnh Công Sơn: “You Must Know How to Live Completely in Each Moment of Reality”], in Lê Minh Quốc, ed., *Trịnh Công Sơn: Roi lệ ru người* [Trịnh Công Sơn: Shedding Tears, Singing Lullabies] (Hà Nội: Phụ Nữ, 2004), 202–204.
25. The Sanskrit word is *duhkha*, which Thích Thiên Ân translates as “suffering, pain, sorrow, discontent; the state of the world of Samsara.” (Samsara is the “ocean of birth and death; the wheel of becoming; the phenomenal universe.”) See Thích Thiên Ân, *Zen Philosophy, Zen Practice* (Emeryville, CA: Dharma Publishing, 1975), 175, 177.
26. Translated by Thích Thiên Ân, *Zen Philosophy*, 137.
27. Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 48.
28. Trịnh Công Sơn, “Phải biết sống hết mình,” in *Roi lệ, ru người* (see note 24), 203.
29. A translation of the lyrics for this entire song appears in appendix C.
30. See Thích Thiên Ân, *Zen Philosophy*, 54.
31. Cao Huy Thuần, “Remarks” (see note 10).
32. Trịnh Công Sơn discusses leaving and returning in many songs, including “Biển nhớ” [The Sea Remembers], “Có nghe đời nghiêng” [Do You Hear Life Tilting?], “Cỏ xốt xa đưa” [Troubled Grass Swaying], “Lặng lẽ nơi này” [Silent Place], “Lời thiên thu gọi” [The Call of Eternity], “Rừng xưa đã khép” [The Old Forest Has Closed], and “Một cõi đi về” [A Place for Leaving and Returning].
33. René Muller, *Beyond Marginality: Constructing a Self in the Twilight of Western Culture* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 121.
34. Thích Thiên Ân, *Zen Philosophy*, 84.
35. Harvey quotes from the *Milindapanha* [The Questions of King Melinda; Việt, Di Lan Đà Vấn Đạo], a dialogue between King Milinda (Menander; Việt, Di Lan Đà), a Greek ruler of an Indo-Greek empire in the late second



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century BCE, and a Buddhist monk named Nagasena [Việt, Na Tiên]. The *Milindapanha* is an important book of Buddhist doctrine, especially of Theravada Buddhism. For a discussion of Buddhist teaching related to rebirth, see also Thích Thiên Ân, “The Matter of Soul in Buddhism,” in *Zen Philosophy*, 165–170. In explaining rebirth, Thích Thiên Ân also discusses the *Milindapanha* and the image of the lamp.

36. Harvey cites the *Milindapanha*, section 71, as the source for this image (58).

37. Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism*, 58.

38. In appreciating this song it helps to know that the Vietnamese word *cõi*, which I’ve translated as “place,” has more metaphysical connotations than the English word “place.” It is used, for example, in phrases like *cõi chiêm bao* (see Trịnh Công Sơn’s song “Có một ngày như thế” [There’ll Be a Day Like This]) and *cõi mộng* to refer to the dream world; and in the phrase *cõi âm* to refer to the underworld. In conversation about everyday matters Vietnamese would be more likely to use the words *chốn* or *chỗ* to refer to a place.

39. Translated by Thích Thiên Ân, *Zen Philosophy*, 108.

40. Thích Thiên Ân, *Zen Philosophy*, 17.

41. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 52, 69.

42. See Chang Chen-chi, *The Practice of Zen* (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1959), 128. Thích Thiên Ân also discusses this technique, which he refers to as the “neither-nor technique,” in *Buddhism and Zen in Vietnam* (Rutland, VT: Charles Tuttle, 1975), 34, 219 (note 6); 257-258 (note 6).

43. The Vietnamese reads:

Không sanh cũng không diệt

Không thường cũng không đoạn

Không nhất cũng không dị

Không lai cũng không khứ

This translation appears on the webpage Thư Viện Hoa Sen [The Lotus Library],

<http://www.thuvienhoasen.org/trungluan-chonhien-01.htm> (accessed October 24, 2006). The English translation is by Thích Thiên Ân, *Buddhism and Zen in Vietnam*, 219 (note 6).

44. *The Practice of Zen*, 128.

45. “Trịnh Công Sơn, Nơi vùng ưu tư thành tiếng du ca” [Trịnh Công Sơn: Where Sorrow Becomes a Folk Song], in *Trịnh Công Sơn: Cuộc đời, âm nhạc, thơ, hội họa, suy tưởng* [Trịnh Công Sơn: Life, Music, Poetry, Painting, Reflections], eds. Trịnh Cung and Nguyễn Quốc Thái (HCMC: Văn Nghệ, 2001), 84.

46. *Ibid.*, 85.

47. Email message from Sâm Thương to the author, December 26, 2005.

48. Bửu Ý, *Nhạc sĩ thiên tài*, 19. For more information on the role of Nguyễn Văn Trung at this time see Nguyễn Trọng Văn, “Những người con hoang của Nguyễn Văn Trung” [The Illegitimate Offspring of Nguyễn Văn Trung], *Bách Khoa* [Encyclopedic] 264 (Jan. 1, 1968), 51–61; and Nguyễn Văn Lục, “20 năm triết học Tây phương ở miền Nam Việt Nam 1955–1975” [Twenty Years of Western Philosophy in South Vietnam, 1955–1975], *Hợp Lưu* [Convergence] 89 (June/July, 2006), 90–119.

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49. Nguyễn Văn Trung, “Vấn đề giải thoát con người trong Phật Giáo và tư tưởng J.P. Sartre” [The Problem of Human Liberation in Buddhism and the Thought of J.P. Sartre], *Đại Học* 2 (May, 1958): 35–61.
50. Nguyễn Văn Trung, “Vài cảm nghĩ về tình cảnh phi lý của kẻ lưu đày” [Some Reflections on the Absurd Condition of the Exile], *Đại Học* 14 (March, 1960): 7–23.
51. *Đại Học* 18 (1960).
52. Đinh Cường, “Tình bạn, hồi sinh con hôn mê” [Friendship Restores Consciousness], in *Cuộc đời, âm nhạc* (see note 39), 57–58.
53. See Bửu Ý, *Nhạc sĩ thiên tài*, 19; Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, *Trịnh Công Sơn và cây đàn lya*, 25; Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Có một thời như thế*, 32, 45.
54. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Có một thời như thế*, 32.
55. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays by Albert Camus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1955), 55.
56. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Có một thời như thế*, 45–51.
57. Email message from Sâm Thương to the author, August 6, 2006.
58. Trịnh Công Sơn, “Nhật ký ở tuổi 30” [Diary Written at 30], in Nguyễn Trọng Tạo, Nguyễn Thụy Kha, and Đoàn Tử Huyền, eds., *Một người thơ ca* (see note 4), 164–165; Bửu Ý, *Nhạc sĩ thiên tài*, 21; Đinh Cường, “Tình bạn,” in *Cuộc đời, âm nhạc*, eds. Trịnh Cung and Nguyễn Quốc Thái (see note 45), 54–55; Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Có một thời như thế*, 45.
59. “Nhật ký,” in Nguyễn Trọng Tạo, Nguyễn Thụy Kha, and Đoàn Tử Huyền, eds., *Một người thơ ca* (see note 4), 164–165.
60. Nguyễn Thanh Ty, who studied with Sơn in Qui Nhơn, also discusses “Dã tràng ca” in *Về một quãng đời Trịnh Công Sơn* (see note 20), 16–17.
61. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Có một thời như thế*, 43.
62. *Ibid.*, 51.
63. *Ibid.*, 41.
64. Sâm Thương, email to author, August 6, 2006.
65. Đinh Cường, email to author, August 3, 2006.
66. The label “archival warehouse” is Phan Văn Bình’s. He is a musician who studied with Trịnh Công Sơn at the School of Education in Qui Nhơn. See Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, *Trịnh Công Sơn và cây đàn lya*, 74. In an email message to the author (March 12, 2005), Cao Huy Thuận makes a similar observation, pointing out that language and topics in “Song of the Sand Crab” reappear often in later songs.
67. Nguyễn Văn Trung, “Vài cảm nghĩ về tình cảnh phi lý của kẻ lưu đày” [Some Reflections on the Absurd Condition of the Exile], *Đại Học* 14 (March, 1960): 7–23.
68. *Ibid.*, 20. Italics in original.
69. It’s not clear why Nguyễn Văn Trung uses “*quê nhà*” to refer to Camus’ leap of faith. He uses this same construction for “*le Royaume*” [the Kingdom] when he translates the title of Camus’ collection of short stories *L’exil et le Royaume* as *Lưu đày và quê nhà* [Exile and Native Place], another odd choice. Nguyễn Văn Trung was a

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Catholic intellectual teaching in a very Buddhist town. He may have avoided terms with Christian connotations to broaden the appeal of the Western ideas he was promoting.

70. Nguyễn Văn Trung, “Vài cảm nghĩ,” 20.

71. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, *Trịnh Công Sơn và cây đàn lya*, 24.

72. Bửu Ý, *Nhạc sĩ thiên tài*, 17.

73. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, *Trịnh Công Sơn và cây đàn lya*, 24.

74. Bửu Ý, *Nhạc sĩ thiên tài*, 17.

75. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, *Trịnh Công Sơn và cây đàn lya*, 24.

76. A translation of this story appeared in *Đại Học* 14 (March, 1960): 41–56.

77. “Nhiều đêm muốn đi về con phố xa / Nhiều đêm muốn quay về ngôi yên dưới mái nhà.”

78. “Từng ngày chôn chân nhớ phố lang thang.”

79. “Chân đi xa trái tim bên nhà,” a line from “Có nghe đời nghiêng” [Do You Hear Life Tilting?].

80. Thích Nhất Hạnh, “Returning Home,” *Shambhala Sun* (March 2006): 59.

81. Interview with Văn Cẩm Hải, reprinted in Nguyễn Trọng Tạo, Nguyễn Thụy Kha, and Đoàn Tử Huyền, eds., *Một người thơ ca* (see note 4), 210.

82. Trịnh Công Sơn, “Để bắt đầu một hồi ức,” in Nguyễn Trọng Tạo, Nguyễn Thụy Kha, and Đoàn Tử Huyền, eds., *Một người thơ ca* (see note 4), 202.

83. This description of the unattached abode comes from Thích Thiên Ân, *Buddhism and Zen in Vietnam*, 117. See also D. T. Suzuki’s introduction to his translation of the Lankavatara Sutra, *The Lankavatara Sutra: A Mahayana Text* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1932), xxvii.

84. Trịnh Công Sơn, “Phải biết sống hết mình,” in *Roi lệ, ru người* (see note 24), 203.

85. On prewar songs, see note 106.

86. The figure of the lonely wanderer can be found, for example, in prewar songs like Trọng Khương’s “Bánh xe lãng tử” [A Wandering Car] and Hoàng Trọng’s “Dừng bước giang hồ” [Stopping One’s Travels]. See Lê Quốc Thắng’s *Tuyển tập 100 ca khúc tiền chiến* [A Selection of 100 Pre-war Songs] (HCMC: Mũi Cà Mau, 2004), 12–13; 82–83. One finds a similar figure in novels. See, for example, the character Dũng in Nhất Linh’s *Đoạn tuyệt* [Severance] (1935) and *Đôi bạn* [Two Friends] (1936); and the character Hải Vân in Vũ Trọng Phụng’s *Giông tố* [The Storm] (1936). These characters are, however, more romantic and political than the figure of the exile in Trịnh Công Sơn’s songs.

87. Besides the songs mentioned here, other songs with “though” clauses are: “Còn có bao ngày” [How Many Days Left?], “Hãy cứ vui như mọi ngày” [Be Happy Like Every Day], and “Vẫn nhớ cuộc đời” [I Still Remember Life].

88. Trịnh Công Sơn, “Thay lời tựa” [In Lieu of an Introduction], in *Tự tình khúc* [Songs from the Heart] (Sài Gòn: Nhân Bản, 1972).

89. Heidegger’s masterpiece is *Being and Time* [Sein und Zeit] published in 1927. See Joan Stambaugh’s *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

90. From “Cỏ xốt xa đưa” [Troubled Grass Swaying], “Gần như niềm tuyệt vọng” [Close to Despair], and “Một cõi đi về” [A Place for Leaving and Returning], respectively.

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91. René Muller, *Beyond Marginality*, 33.
92. D.T. Suzuki, *The Essentials of Zen Buddhism*, ed. Bernard Phillips (New York: Dutton, 1962), xvi.
93. Văn Cẩm Hải, “Kiếp sau tôi vẫn là người nghệ sĩ,” in Nguyễn Trọng Tạo, Nguyễn Thụy Kha, and Đoàn Tử Huyền, eds., *Một người thơ ca* (see note 4), 211.
94. The fusion of meditation with daily activities, as opposed to meditating only when sitting in the lotus position, is indeed a part of Zen and has been since the eighth century. Huệ Năng (Pinyin: Hui Neng) (638–713), the sixth patriarch of Zen Buddhism in China, is considered the founder of this practice. See Thích Thiên Ân, *Zen Philosophy*, 33–35.
95. Trịnh Công Sơn, “Phải biết sống,” in *Roi lệ ru người* (see note 24), 203.
96. Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: New American Library, 1975), 46.
97. Kaufmann, “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 349.
98. See George Rupp, *Beyond Existentialism and Zen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 38–39.
99. Thích Thiên Ân, *Zen Philosophy*, 84.
100. Rupp, *Beyond Existentialism*, 39.
101. Thích Nhất Hạnh, “This Is the Buddha’s Love,” *Shambhala Sun* (March, 2006): 52. Thích Nhất Hạnh explains elsewhere that Mahayana Buddhists believe that we are connected to nonliving as well as living beings. This “spurious” opposition is “dissolved,” Thích Nhất Hạnh says, as it is in the following famous line, which he quotes, from Trịnh Công Sơn’s “Diễm xưa” [Diễm of the Past]: “Ngày sau sỏi đá cũng cần có nhau” [“Tomorrow even rocks and pebbles will need each other”]. See Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love: The Practice of Looking Deeply in the Mahayana Buddhist Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1996), 40.
102. *Ibid.*, 53.
103. Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism*, 208.
104. Thái Kim Lan, “Nơi vùng ưu tư thành tiếng du ca,” in *Cuộc đời, âm nhạc*, eds. Trịnh Cung and Nguyễn Quốc Thái (see note 45), 84.
105. Email message from Thái Kim Lan to the author, December 15, 2005.
106. Typically *tiền chiến* [pre-war] means before the first Indochina War against the French, but the term *nhạc tiền chiến* [pre-war music] is misleading. It can refer to music composed during and soon after the first Indochina War as well as before it.
107. Thích Thiên Ân, *Zen Philosophy*, 185.

## Appendix A: List of Songs Cited with Dates They Were Composed

These dates are based on information compiled by Phạm Văn Đình. See the Trịnh Công Sơn Forum website at <http://tcs-home.org/songs>.

“Bài ca dành cho những xác người” [A Song for the Corpses], 1968

“Bay đi thầm lặng” [Fly Away Quietly], 1973

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“Bên đời hiu quạnh” [Next to a Desolate Life], 1970–1971  
“Biển nhớ” [The Sea Remembers], 1962  
“Cát bụi” [Sand and Dust], 1965  
“Chiều trên quê hương tôi” [Evening in My Native Land], 1980  
“Có một ngày như thế” [There'll Be a Day Like This], 1995  
“Có nghe đời nghiêng” [Do You Hear Life Tilting?], 1973–1974  
“Cỏ xót xa đưa” [Troubled Grass Swaying], 1969  
“Còn có bao ngày” [How Many Days Left?], 1969  
“Dã tràng ca” [The Song of the Sand Crab], 1962  
“Đại bác ru đêm” [Lullaby of Cannons for the Night], 1967  
“Để gió cuốn đi” [Let the Wind Blow It Away], 1971  
“Đêm thấy ta là thác đổ” [At Night I Feel Like a Waterfall], 1968  
“Đóa hoa vô thường” [A Flower of Impermanence], 1972  
“Đời cho ta thế” [Life Gives Us These Things], 1973  
“Gần như niềm tuyệt vọng” [Close to Despair], 1973  
“Gia tài của mẹ” [A Mother’s Legacy], 1965  
“Gọi tên bốn mùa” [Calling the Names of the Four Seasons], 1963–1964  
“Hát trên những xác người” [Singing on the Corpses], 1968  
“Hãy cứ vui như mọi ngày” [Be Happy Like Every Day], 1969  
“Hãy yêu nhau đi” [Love Each Other], 1970  
“Lặng lẽ nơi này” [Silent Place], 1987  
“Lời buồn thánh” [Sad Sacred Words], 1959  
“Lời thiên thu gọi” [The Call of Eternity], 1972  
“Mỗi ngày tôi chọn một niềm vui” [Each Day I Choose a Piece of Happiness], 1977  
“Một cõi đi về” [A Place for Leaving and Returning], 1974  
“Ngẫu nhiên” [The Unexpected], 1972  
“Nhìn những mùa thu đi” [Watching Autumns Pass], 1961  
“Như một lời chia tay” [Like Words of Good-by], 1991  
“Ở trọ” [To Board], 1973  
“Phôi pha” [Fading], 1960  
“Phúc âm buồn” [Sad Tidings], 1965

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“Ru em” [Lullaby for You], 1965  
“Rừng xưa đã khép” [The Old Forest Has Closed], 1972  
“Tạ ơn” [Thanks], 1964  
“Tiến thoái lưỡng nan” [To Advance or Retreat], 2000  
“Tình ca của người mất trí” [Love Song of a Mad Person], 1967  
“Tình nhớ” [Remembered Love], 1966  
“Tình xót xa vù” [Painful Love], 1970  
“Tình yêu tìm thấy” [Love Found], 1982  
“Tôi ở đừng tuyệt vọng” [I Must Not Despair], 1992  
“Vẫn nhớ cuộc đời” [I Still Remember Life], 1972  
“Vết lăn trầm” [Quiet Imprint], 1963

**Appendix B: “Một cõi đi về” [A Place for Leaving and Returning]**

<p><i>Bao nhiêu năm rồi còn mãi ra đi Đi đâu loanh quanh cho đời mỗi một Trên hai vai ta đôi vầng nhật nguyệt Rọi suốt trăm năm một cõi đi về</i></p> <p><i>Lời nào của cây lời nào cỏ lạ Một chiều ngồi say một đời thật nhẹ ngày qua . . . Vừa tàn mùa xuân rồi tàn mùa hạ Một ngày đầu thu nghe chân ngựa về chốn xa . . .</i></p> <p><i>Mây che trên đầu và nắng trên vai Đôi chân ta đi sông còn ở lại Con tinh yêu thương vô tình chợt gọi Lại thấy trong ta hiện bóng con người</i></p> <p><i>Nghe mưa nơi này lại nhớ mưa xa Mưa bay trong ta bay từng hạt nhỏ Trăm năm vô biên chưa từng hội ngộ Chẳng biết nơi nao là chốn quê nhà</i></p> <p><i>Đường chạy vòng quanh một vòng tiêu tụy Một bờ cỏ non một bờ mộng mị ngày xưa . . . Từng lời tà dương là lời mộ địa Từng lời bể sông nghe ra từ độ suối khe</i></p> <p><i>Trong khi ta về lại nhớ ta đi Đi lên non cao đi về biển rộng Đôi tay nhân gian chưa từng độ lượng Ngọn gió hoang vu thổi suốt xuân thì Hôm nay ta say ôm đời ngủ muộn Để sớm mai đây lại tiếc xuân thì</i></p>	<p>Many years I've wandered Going in circles, growing tired On my shoulders the sun and the moon Lighting a lifetime, a place for leaving and returning</p> <p>What word from the trees, what word from the grass An afternoon of pleasure, a life that is light A day passes First spring is gone, then summer as well In early fall one hears horses returning To a place far away</p> <p>Clouds overhead and sun on the shoulders I walk away, the river stays From the spirit of love comes an unbidden call And within myself a human shadow appears</p> <p>This rain reminds me of rain long ago It falls within me, drop by small drop Years without end and never a meeting One doesn't know which place is home</p> <p>The road goes in circles miserable and sad On one side new grass, on the other dreams Of the past Each sunset's call is also the grave's In the stream one hears the call Of the sea</p> <p>When I return I remember leaving I climb the high mountain, go down to the wide sea My arms have not yet covered the world In the spring of life a desolate wind blows Today I drink and wake up late Tomorrow I regret the springtime I've lost</p>
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Words and music by Trịnh Công Sơn; translated by Cao Thị Như-Quỳnh and John C. Schafer

Appendix C: “Như một lời chia tay” [Like Words of Good-by]

<p><i>Những hẹn hò từ nay khép lại Thân nhẹ nhàng như mây Chút nắng vàng giờ đây cũng vội Khép lại từng đêm vui</i></p> <p><i>Đường quen lối từng sớm chiều mong Bàn chân xưa qua đây ngại ngần Làm sao biết từng nỗi đời riêng Để yêu thêm yêu cho nồng nàn</i></p> <p><i>Có nụ hồng ngày xưa rớt lại Bên cạnh đời tôi đây Có chút tình thoảng như gió vội Tôi chợt nhìn ra tôi</i></p> <p><i>Muốn một lần tạ ơn với đời Chút mặn nồng cho tôi Có những lần nằm nghe tiếng cười Nhưng chỉ là mơ thôi</i></p> <p><i>Tình như nắng vội tắt chiều hôm Tình không xa nhưng không thật gần Tình như đá hoai nổi chờ mong Tình vu vơ sao ta muộn phiền</i></p> <p><i>Tiếng thì thầm từng đêm nhớ lại Ngỡ chỉ là cơn say Đóa hoa vàng mỏng manh cuối trời Như một lời chia tay</i></p>	<p>All my rendezvous now closed, I'm light as a cloud; A shaft of light's just hurried off, Closing each happy night.</p> <p>Well trodden streets wait all day For feet from old times that pass uncertain; How can you know each private life To love more and with more passion?</p> <p>A rose from the past falls again Next to my life here, A little love leaves like a hurried breeze, I suddenly recognize myself.</p> <p>I want one time to thank life That's given me some passion; At times I lie down and hear laughter, But it's just a dream.</p> <p>Love's like light that at sunset rushes off, Love's not far but not real near; Loves like a rock full of endless longing, Love's unsure, so why be sad and worried?</p> <p>I remember each night of whispering, It seems only drunkenness now, Delicate golden flowers at the edge of the sky, Like words of good-by.</p>
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Words and music by Trịnh Công Sơn; translated by Cao Thị Như-Quỳnh and John C. Schafer