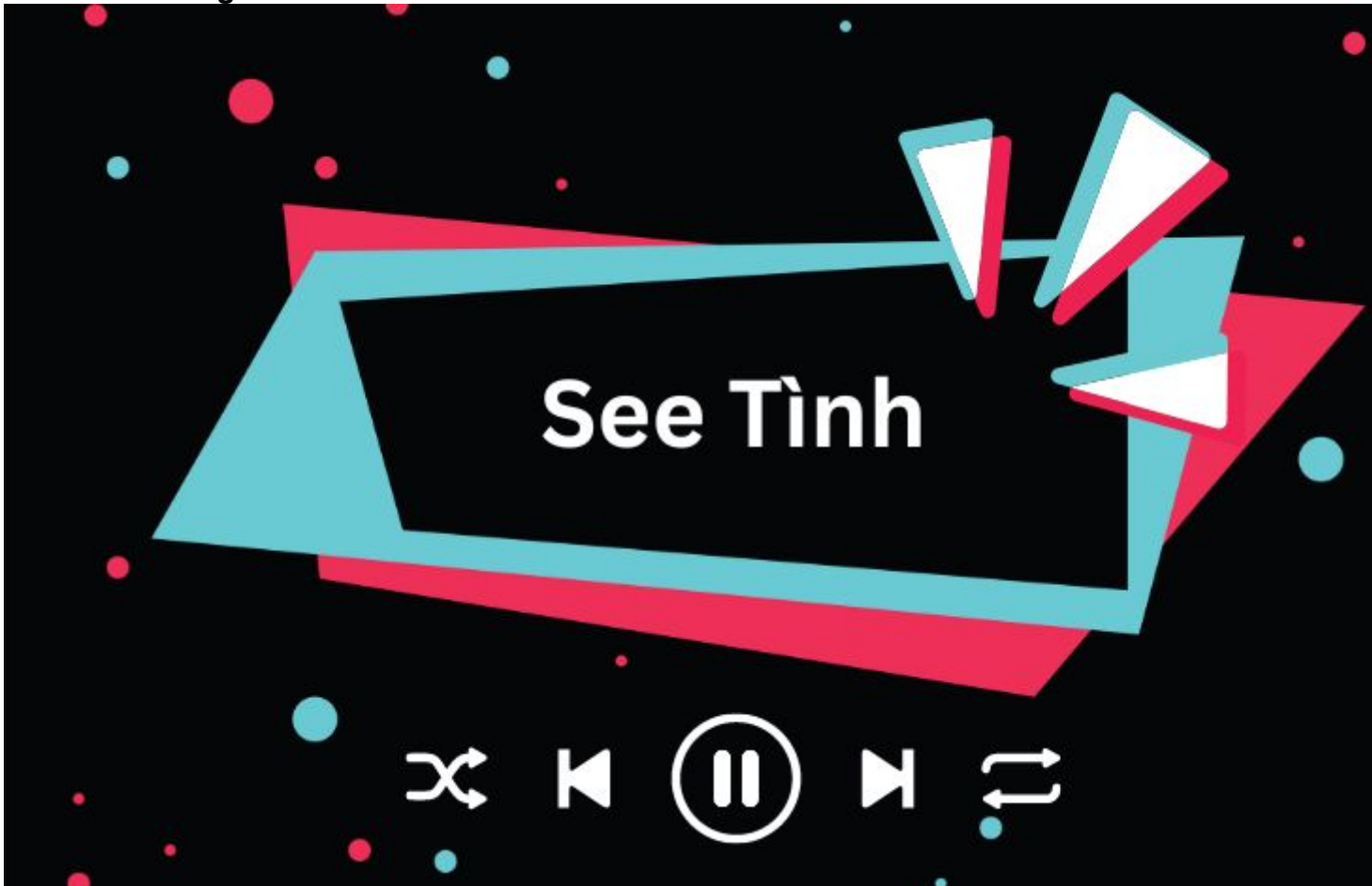


Thumbnail Image:



Mar 04, 2023 by [Nguyen Le](#)

“See Tình” Sparks a Potential Path for Vietnam to Charm the World ^[1]

Simple hip swinging in an upbeat tune with unknown-yet-easy-to-pronounce lyrics is a song titled “See Tình” by a Vietnamese singer, Hoang Thuy Linh. “See Tình” quickly spread across TikTok through dance covers, making it one of the most viral hits on the platform with the sound being used more than 1 million times within 4 months of its release. The hit has been recently “reheated” in early 2023 on TikTok and Douyin, in Korea and China respectively, thanks to a video originally shared on KBS Sport’s TikTok account capturing a volleyball player dancing to “See Tình.” This recurring wave of virality has caught widespread media attention, including Vietnam’s national television for the first time, triggering discussions on how Vietnamese pop music, or V-pop for short, helps to project a positive national image of Vietnam to the world. The quest for careful evaluation is imminent as Vietnam is facing an emerging tool to diversify its public diplomacy strategy in the years to come.

V-pop's Increasing Representation Abroad

V-pop began in the 1990s as a local phenomenon for the youth walking away from war-themed songs and classical traditional music, which is overall influenced by foreign music genres such as dance, rock 'n' roll and rap. V-pop has been limited to primarily serving the domestic public until recent years, when some V-pop songs penetrated into foreign markets. "See Tinh", for instance, has been seen in several dance covers on Tiktok, featured in sports matches and in reality shows in foreign countries. Prior to "See Tinh", "Hai Phut Hon" by Phao blew up TikTok and Douyin in 2021 with Kaiz's electronic dance music (EDM) remixed version along with the hip-shake dance. Another V-pop hit, "Corona Song," was released in 2020 to encourage anti-COVID-19 preemptive practices such as washing hands and social distancing. It seized attention for its meaningful message as well as its easy-to-dance-along beat, creating a new dance craze and featured on American show. "See Tinh" is thus one of the key contributors in this rising wave "sending V-pop into the ocean of world music," commented by Vietnam's national television report.

V-pop will eventually go through a ride like K-pop's to reach a desirable status and reputation, yet where V-pop should be steered towards is the more compelling question now.

The commonalities of these viral pop music act from Vietnam boil down to three elements: (1) catchy melody heavily influenced by EDM, (2) simple choreography convenient for dance covers and (3) thriving on short video platforms and hashtag networks. The result is that popularity, despite rapid contagion, only centralizes the beat drop or the remixed version of the song. As Vietnamese composer, Khac Hung, observes, "many people who use those songs don't hear the lyrics clearly and don't know it's Vietnamese music ... They only exploit these songs as background music for TikTok videos or use for other purposes and not to listening to the music." In fact, some international fans of "See Tinh" paid the efforts to watch the original music video on YouTube and confessed their profound love for the song in the comment section. Virality should thus be credited with capturing attention and luring more people closer to V-pop; nevertheless, if Vietnam truly hopes to persuade the world to "See Tinh" (homophonic to "si tinh" in Vietnamese or "lovesick" in English) with its musical and cultural charm, more efforts are needed to strategize V-pop as a tool for Vietnam's public diplomacy rather than waiting for audiences to take initiatives.

Learn From Success Models but Not Blindly

The contribution of popular music and the music industry in public diplomacy has become more apparent in Asia in recent decades, mainly thanks to the rise of K-pop as a part of the Korean Wave (Hallyu). Thus, there is no surprise to read Vietnamese commentators, including music experts and journalists, juxtaposing "See Tinh" with "Gangnam Style" and discussing the development of K-pop for comparison and even for role model setting.

It is vital to refer to working models as guidance for development, but not all lessons of K-pop

are transferable to V-pop. K-pop, featured in the bigger Korean Wave (Hallyu), was created to target foreign audiences and has experienced a long journey to seek and form sufficient distinct features to be categorized as a genre in world music, including synchronized dance, upbeat music, attractive artists aligning with beauty standards and idol manufacture assembly. K-pop also benefits from the synergetic influence of K-pop groups rather than soloists like what is observed in V-pop. As for idol groups, expansive fandoms are more achievable and such a network of fans makes an efficient channel for information dissemination. An essence such as K-pop would hardly be replicated in V-pop.

V-pop will eventually go through a ride like K-pop's to reach a desirable status and reputation, yet where V-pop should be steered towards is the more compelling question now.

“See Tinh” Formula for National Image Projection

Clearly stated in the Communist Party of Vietnam's Directive on “Strategy on Cultural Diplomacy: Vision through to 2030” (released in 2021) is the goal of “promoting the image of the country and people of Vietnam in the international.” As the regime recently declared to implement “transformative, flexible and creative cultural diplomacy,” V-pop seems to offer the appropriate tool for the job. V-pop, just like any other music, carries a certain level of flexibility and creativity from the major involvement of non-state actors that state-centric advocacy of Vietnam's national image, such as Vietnam Week in different countries in the world, cannot afford.

Quoc Trung, a seasoned music producer/composer, noticed that Vietnam proudly possesses several cultural heritages and historical traditions which are inadequately exploited by the music industry. Hoang Thuy Linh seems to know the key to this puzzle. Through her music production since 2017, Linh has consistently delivered a modern colorful interpretation of traditional symbols of Vietnamese culture in combination with her storytelling representation to embrace widely relatable messages, such as self-love as the main theme for “See Tinh”. Some cultural relics found in “See Tinh” music video include the traditional melody of “cai luong,” a signature traditional music common in the Mekong Delta area of Vietnam at the start, and Linh's choice of image placement to showcase Vietnamese traditional cuisine, lifestyle and costume in a vibrant tone. A potential formula can be sketched as a guidance to orient V-pop toward cultural diplomacy comprised of pop demonstration of traditional cultural elements shown along upbeat music and simple choreography that firstly targets short video platforms and dance covers in addition to directing audiences to long video platforms like YouTube, and consequent exposure to Vietnamese culture.

Official Recognition Required

It takes more than zeal and talent from Vietnamese artists, but official recognition of the state to hone V-pop as a spearhead for Vietnam's public diplomacy. The most important action point now is not to let the wave pass, but to seriously study this potential formula for mass attraction and integrate this promising tool into the state communication strategy with foreign publics.
