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Bird play: raising red-whiskered bulbuls and (re)inventing urban 'nature' in contemporary Vietnam*

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ABSTRACT

A socially recognisable signifier for wealth and class in Southeast Asian consciousness, ornamental birdkeeping often focuses on exotic avian species to enhance the status symbolism of this practice. For the past five years, contemporary Vietnamese urbanites have renewed interest in and refocused birdkeeping on a non-exotic avian native to the region: the red-whiskered bulbuls, widely considered a 'bird of the people' (chim bình dân) in the words of participants. Popular media have recognised the return of ornamental birdkeeping as a healthy cultural practice that encourages mental stimulation, yet the favouring of a native, non-exotic species quite amenable to a variety of living and economic situations (để nuôi), I argue, is remarkable in its reimagination of the high society associations of this tradition. Further, this article will demonstrate that the increased popularity of raising red-whiskered bulbuls reflects a rapidly urbanising Vietnam wherein holistic ideals of nature, characteristic of and integral to Vietnamese consciousness, underline human-nonhuman interactions from city to country, and are caught amid a transition from industrial modernity, with its nature-culture binarism, to a postmodern period fraught with uncertainties.

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As I took my seat next to a slightly nervous black lab – a rescue from Tijuana, now on her way back from celebrating at her humans' Vancouver wedding, other passengers' unquestioning of her presence, and the flight attendants' attentiveness to her as if she were a human guest, evoke marvel in my mind about the way companion animals have become a *de facto* part of everyday life. The continuing prosperity of a dedicated petkeeping industry testifies to the ubiquity of companion animals and the standards of care expected of their human caretakers. Not only has the desire for nonhuman companionship developed into a remarkably complex social phenomenon, so has the inclination towards exoticism. As lagomorphs, reptilian, amphibian and avian species rise in demand, so has the global pet trade responded in kind (cf. Nijman, 2010).

The following article focuses on the politics of raising one such unconventional 'pet': the red-whiskered bulbuls (scientific name: *Pycnonotus jocosus*; Vietnamese: chào mào,

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hereafter *bulbuls* following local vernacular). A Southeast Asian native member of the order *Passeriformes*, bulbuls are avid consumers of farmed fruits and simultaneously, insect pests of rice (Yap & Sodhi, 2004, p. 61), becoming dually useful and harmful to farmers. This duality extends to the return of birdkeeping over the past five years in Vietnam, for the practice now centres on this commonplace avian, yet encompasses many status symbolism from earlier times. Too familiar to be truly 'exotic', yet more unfamiliar than household canines or felines; preferred for their trainability, yet acknowledged as non-domestic, wilful nonhumans that will eventually return to nature in a perpetual circle of life, bulbuls embody a liminality characteristic of contemporary urban Vietnam, where cultural ideals are constantly reinvented to adapt to emergent socioeconomic situations.

1. Companionship and urban animals: the pet that is no pet

This article results from a series of semi-structured interviews¹ with bulbul-keepers in northern and central Vietnam for three summer months of 2016. Interviews often took place in bird cafés, lasted between half an hour to two hours, and conducted conversationally for a preliminary ethnography of renewed interest in ornamental birdkeeping, mostly from middle-class urbanites. While bulbul-keeping has appealed to participants from all walks of life, Vietnam's oral history hints at a more exotic preference from upper-class feudal elites, from which ideals of affluence originated. *Giàu chơi cá, khá chơi chim*, (lit., 'The rich entertains with fishes, the middle-class has bird play'),² bulbuls seem to be the latest, fashionable avian in ornamental birdkeeping traditions, richly documented in folk tales, songs and poetry as a symbol of prestige. Considered less companions and more objectified as 'beautiful-to-behold possessions' (Hirschman, 1994, pp. 617–618), bulbuls are 'to keep the house lively' (Interview 16.05.08), by sight and by song. In this sense, the nonhumans are conceptualised functionally, whether their usefulness is practical or more abstract as cultural signifiers of wealth and status. Colloquially termed 'bird play', ornamental birdkeeping deviates from elitism in the recent preference for bulbuls, widely regarded as an avian of the common peoples for their close ties to farming. An intentionally literal translation of general birdkeeping practices, bird play (*chơi chim*, or *thú chơi chim*) derives from *thú vui*, most closely translated as 'leisurely activity – something accomplished for pleasure' and often prefaces portrayals of upper-class recreations. 'A purely hedonic/hedonistic activity characteristic by a lightness of behaviour, a non-serious suspension of consequences, a temporary creation of its own world of meaning with expressive and intrinsic motives' (Kelly, 1990, p. 28), bulbul-keeping is considered 'chicken soup for the soul' by its participants. In a temporary suspension of real-world responsibilities, it presents a mental exercise to clear the mind of banal obligations, contributing to the cultivation of mental elevation thought characteristic of high society.

Sought after for their intrinsic functions as trainable singers, fighters or lively décor, bulbuls appear as a conventional 'pet' in their dependence on human caretakers for subsistence and avian companionship, for same-species socialisation occurs at humans' behest. Simultaneously, they defy 'petness' (Emirbayer, 1997; Wrye, 2009, pp. 1035–1037), first in their non-domestic species classification, second in the extent of social interaction with human caretakers (cf. Messent & Serpell, 1981), and thirdly, in their perceived exertion of independence (section C). The more recent substitution for 'pets', 'companion

animals', intended to minimise submissive implications and highlight the 'depth, value and emotionality of the relationship' (Overall, 2017, p. 9), also suffers from anthropocentrism. Defined as a pet with 'significant social interaction with its owner and would voluntarily choose to stay [...] in part for the sake of the companionship' (Hirschman, 1994, p. 616; Varner, 2017, pp. 75–76), the designation of 'companion' misleadingly implies 'a kind of equality between human being and animal that does not exist' (Overall, 2017, p. 8). This socially entrenched companionship, whether voluntary or reluctant, has inspired a permeating sense of 'animal kinship' (Kuzniar, 2013) that recognises the intertwined lives of human and nonhuman living organisms (Helmreich & Eben Kirksey, 2010; Olson & Hulser, 2003; Wolch & Emel, 1998). Implicit here, however, is the troubling anthropomorphic assumption of symmetrical reciprocity, undoubtedly beneficial to animal rights advocacy, yet somewhat naïve. The number of roaming nonhumans also testifies to a wanderlust that does not necessarily invalidate the voluntary aspect of companionship.³ The sheer number of strays, additionally, is a bleak reminder that it is 'at best [...] painfully naïve to call animals [...] who are abandoned, neglected, or otherwise mistreated "companion animals," given that they have been denied companionship'⁴ (Overall, 2017, p. 8). Further, this interpretation implies an exclusively human bond, yet one cannot ignore the inter- and intra-species companionship among domestic pets of the same household.

It is beyond the scope of this article to ponder further the complexities of animal companionship; however, I propose the term 'obligate companionship' to describe those individual members of non-domesticated species that have established companionship with humans through relatively involuntary channels. Relocated into primarily human households with existing relationships with other nonhumans, bulbuls are a prime example. Other examples can include orphaned wildlife needing specialised rehabilitation; or habituated by well-meaning citizens (e.g. Stockton, 2009), and those captured for anthropocentric entertainment (cf. Zeder, 2012). The defining characteristics of 'obligate companionship' is that the nonhuman comes to maintain regular human contact, tolerate and even enjoy such companionship *out of necessity*. Put another way, a potentially anthropogenic, external factor forces the nonhuman to depend on humans for basic sustenance. 'Obligate companionship' acknowledges that the nonhuman possesses and can exert some independence, and while they come to bond with humans due to circumstances, at least initially, the relationship may develop symbiotic (for example, rehabilitated, orphaned wildlife helps with animal rights advocacy) or even emotion-based elements. Bulbuls exemplify the wilful aspect of this category in interesting ways that enhances their liminality (section C).

2. Birds of a feather: when bulbuls go urban

In this article, the term 'urban' specifically refers to 'habitats undergoing intense human development for purposes of human residency' (Ryan & Partan, 2014, p. 149), and here I acknowledge its shortcoming of equating urban space with geographical space.⁵ A significant component in urban spatiality, space is deeply social, tied to the politics of everyday life, constructed and excised as 'a means of control, and hence of domination, of power' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 26). Space, in this sense, is not a passive locus of social relations, strictly regulated in maintenance of the status quo: the Lefebvre space (1991) is neither

philosophically or mathematically absolute, nor purely physical. A site of constant struggle that sustains the capitalist mode of production, urban space is capitalism's primary extension, and culture its instrument of internalisation of nature. Modernity thrives on a categorical separation between nature and culture (Latour, 1993), and this constitutive opposition manifests in a purification process that designates urban spaces as exclusively anthropogenic and anthropocentric. Allowing a façade of symmetry simultaneously with a masculinised dominance over nature (Harvey, 1996, p. 154), this nature-culture binary also conceives nonhumans as detachable from their habitat and thus commodifiable.

In practice, the modern city is a thriving hybrid of naturecultural entanglements, 'a naturalized background against which the "artifice" of human inventiveness can take shape' (Adams, 2014, p. 15). 'The urbanization of social life thus do not negate the idea of cities as distinct spatial formations or imaginaries' (Amin & Thrift, 2002, p. 2); inversely, the vibrancy of the city is its sociocultural infrastructure, exemplifying its function as a locus for social activities. Further, there exists a popular animal geography that 'links a conceptual "othering" (setting them apart from us in terms of character traits) to a geographical "othering" (fixing them in worldly places and spaces different from those that we humans tend to occupy)' (Philo & Wilbert, 2000, pp. 10–11). Decontextualised, then re-contextualized into socioeconomic consciousness, these nonhumans are imagined as not so intimately connected with wildness that they cannot serve a humanist purpose: embodied, compact wilderness in urban spaces. 'Ironically, to displace is to situate' (Feldman, 2011, p. 391): to displace urban nonhumans from their own autonomous sphere is to situate them in our modern, consumption-driven imagination, and subsequently priming them for cultural reproduction as a 'fictitious commodity' (Polanyi, 1957, p. 75).

Within the past five years, especially after the H5N1 epidemic (Brooks-Moizer, Robertson, Edmunds, & Bell, 2009), songbird-rearing has gradually regained popularity. Hanoi's bird market has the most species diversity, followed by Ho Chi Minh City – the most populated city in Vietnam, and thirdly, Thanh Hoa Province's Tinh Gia market, next to a major national artery (Edmunds et al., 2011, pp. 68–69). Arguably, the closer proximity of these sites to major Vietnamese highways also contributes to pricing. On average, young birds can cost anywhere between 50,000 and 70,000 VND (\$2–3 USD). Considered a significant determinant of trainability, age and appearance are major factors in price fluctuations (Interview 16.05.17; 16.09.02): a new captive is usually 200,000–300,000 VND (\$8–10 USD), and fluctuates from 400,000 to 500,000 VND (\$16–20 USD) once they can tolerate human presence. At Bac Ha market, one of the major hubs for bird trading in northern Vietnam, prices start around 200,000 VND (\$8 USD), whereas Hue and Quang Nam begin at about 250,000–800,000 per bird (\$10–32 USD), which some explained to be the results of ideas about climate: everyday exposure to hotter and dryer weather is thought to help stoke bulbul's competitive passion. Moreover, if a bulbul is full-grown and aesthetically pleasing at capture, the price can increase to 1–1.5 million VND (\$ 45–60 USD) (Cam Anh, 2011)⁶ (Figure 1).

Most bulbuls undergo an extensive process of socialisation through 'forcible association' (Baker & Manwell, 1983), wherein 'the process of domestication begins anew with each animal tamed' (Zeder, 2012, p. 177). My interviewees observe that these birds prefer less industrialised areas: trapping and transport thus contributes to a steady rural-to-urban flow of bulbuls, revenue and avian foodstuff. Being a native species,



Figure 1. Bac Ha bird market.

Source: PLVN (2015).

bulbuls do not require more extensive measures for comfort, and their keepers attest to a 'frugal' diet: 'outside of rice bran and locusts, they prefer red fruits such as tomatoes, ghost peppers, bananas, oranges, carrots' (Interview 16.06.18). Most keepers, especially novices, rely on ready-made commercial feed, but some forage for natural preys such as insects to be frozen and served daily, or as a special treat. A good example is a keeper known playfully as Anthill, for he spends lots of time to harvest ant eggs for his bulbuls even as his body welts up from ant bites, or when the acid from anthills corrodes his fingertips. Further, participants stress that developing a good diet for bulbuls is a process of trial and error, for it involves understanding their behaviours through individualised habituation (Interview 16.06.17; 16.08.05; 16.06.29).

Interestingly, after dedicating plenty of time and effort to learn about each bird individually, experienced keepers develop and use a generalised diet,⁷ except for certain bulbuls that consistently win contests. Put differently, bulbuls usually need to earn preferential treatments with their performances and are otherwise restricted to a simple diet deemed sufficient by human caretakers. Only regarded as individuals insofar as they are beneficial, this aspect of bulbul-keeping certainly fosters a power imbalance reminiscent of the paternalistic attitude towards pets that Tuan (1984) considers characteristic of domestication practices. Interestingly, the low-maintenance frugality (*dễ nuôi*) that appeals to participants, which cements bulbuls' reputation as a 'bird of the people' (*chim bình dân*), is a rather arbitrary, anthropocentric assessment that accounts less for their individual taste

and caters more to human caretakers. Indeed, the extra care that bulbul-keeper Anthill dedicates to his birds, whether out of concern for them as nonhuman companions, or in a competitive effort to win more contests, is deemed unusual enough for a nickname. There appears to be an invisible line for keepers' behaviours, wherein too little or too much care is both considered unusual.

Despite Vietnam being their natural habitat, captive bulbuls are very susceptible to communicable diseases such as shaky feet, red eyes, diarrhea, most of which relate to living conditions, and thus easily preventable. Cages must be placed in spacious areas: most interviewees devote a whole room, even a whole floor, to house different cages, with a great deal of natural light and fresh air. Cages themselves must be large enough for birds to walk across, even jump and fly when confined. Many players have at least two cages, one for daily living and a larger one, jokingly called the 'gym', which birds are transferred to at least twice a day to 'work out the kinks in their muscles' (Vietnamese: *giãn gân giãn cốt*—a playful reference to the elderly's daily exercising; Interview 16.05.23). In the meantime, their regular cages are washed and aired out so that the smell does not irritate their avian occupants. Safety is a central concern: they are often easy preys for vermin that crawls onto steel wires on their cages. Rather than using poisoned bait that small children and other pets can accidentally ingest, the smell of which can also make bulbuls ill, most owners use a reflective surface, such as the side of a CD, threaded onto the hanging wire to the cages to confuse vermin with their own reflection (Interview 16.08.01). Bulbuls are also pampered with 'spa' treatments: brushing, removal of less luscious feathers, and nail trims to remove overgrown sheaths.

More ornamental than secure, cages vary according to keepers' aesthetics and financial situations. Parallel to prevalent Feng Shui ideas about prosperity, a square cage is often preferred (Interview 16.07.23; 16.08.13), with a centre bridge for perching and two small teacups, often clipped on the opposite side of the door, for food and water. Made from locally available, durable wood, living cages tend to cost three quarters of an average bird's price. As for travel cages, some pick a dressier one to showcase at socialisation events, but most opt for a smaller or equal-in-size one for convenience. However, more battle-hardened birds, having proven their merit in keepers' eyes, command more elaborate setting, for *người nào của nấy* (lit., 'your possessions reflect yourself').⁸ Similarly, bulbuls' names are often derived from characteristics unique to each bird's appearance, to highlight their past victories: *Canon*, *Fat Dragon*, *Hair-whorled Back*, *Temüjin* (Genghis Khan's birth name), *Condor Hero*,⁹ etc. Pertaining less to avian individuality than a point of distinction between different captives and a testimony to keepers' skills, a bird is apparently only as talented as its trainer (Interview 16.06.23) (Figure 2).

Interestingly, once deemed too old to fight, or the voice too hoarse to sing, a bulbul retires to the status of lively décor, bringing the idea of ornamental birdkeeping full circle. Their passion considered dulled, some are delegated to live out their days in an ornate cage, contributing to their keepers' social status quite similarly to a trophy. More than half of my interviewees observe, however, that such retirees are released 'back to nature', in line with an old axiom: *chim trời cá nước* (lit., *birds are of the sky, fish are of water*) (Interview 16.06.28). In other words, the meeting of a talented bulbul and an experienced keeper is considered *có duyên* (lit. *fated to be*), a fortuitous coincidence where



Figure 2. Different types of cages and their intricate carvings.

Source: Field photograph, collated.

companionship is appreciated with full acceptance of its evanescence – and to complete the circle of life, the keeper releases his charge back to Mother Nature at the perceived end of term. One can infer from there a reverence for the workings of an omniscient universe where everyone has a designated place. To return a bulbul one has meticulously trained and cared for back into its environment of origin, is to complete a circle of life that contributes to, in interviewees' minds, a holistic relationship with the outside world. Conversely, this aspect also hints at a sense of expendability antithetical to meaningful human-nonhuman relationships (see Townley, 2017), though such interpretation is negated somewhat in consideration of the extensive efforts in bulbul-keeping. It would appear that participants are content to keep bulbuls in categorical liminality: not truly 'wild', yet not quite a family pet to socialise with the rest of the household, nor in possession of a unique name that denotes their perceived personality, or taken care of until, and mourned in death. In fact, these birds seem more aptly described as an investment – of time, money, and effort

in pursuit of socialisation opportunities with like-minded individuals, effectively contributing to social cohesion.

3. Bird cafés & the politics of play

Quite early on, I observe that bulbul-keepers are predominantly men of varying age, who are quite curious and genuinely fascinated that a young female researcher is intrigued by bulbul-keeping. When inquired conversely if there are female keepers, some recall there having heard of one, who ‘fell off the map because of *familial obligations*’ (Interview 16.05.10; emphasis added). Unsuccessful in locating an active female participant, I find that other keepers are also uninterested in discussing possibilities of female participation, evidently content with an implicit gender-based exclusivity. In the same vein, when asked of balancing work, family life and bulbul-keeping, participants half-joked that ‘Bird’s sick, I’m up all night; son isn’t feeling well, leave it to the wife’ (Interview 16.06.15). The social cohesion fostered through this practice, then, is more a brotherhood that does not transcend, but further reinforces social assumptions about genders.

Another contributor to the lack of female presence in bulbul-keeping correlates with the social assumptions of bird cafés as loci for socialisation. Essentially branching off sidewalk cafés (Lloyd, 2003), these are highly gendered social spaces (Koh, 2006) that caters to middle-class men’s desire to socialise after work (Earl, 2013). Often owner-operated out of house fronts, with a simple menu of iced or hot coffee, tea and small snacks (roasted peanuts being a favourite), such cafés are known by word-of-mouth advertising, for the owner is usually also an enthusiastic birdkeeper. Consisted of a few stools and small plastic tables on a quieter side street, bird cafés are more socially oriented than financially motivated, aiming to provide a relaxing experience for humans and nonhumans alike. Bird socialise where and when their keepers do, often before work in early mornings, or at sundown, both of which are deemed temperate weather for sensitive avians. Like-minded regulars at the same café often graduate to a grassroots, small-scale association of birdkeepers with a small membership fee that contributes to a common fund for special occasions such as birthdays, weddings, funerals, and prizes for in-house contests. The spirit of brotherhood is forged in their common interest and sustained through a sharing of birdkeeping experiences, of after-hours conversations, as well as continued support through life-changing events. In addition to local associations, each region has separate bulbul associations, though the structure itself remains localised: a citywide association does not govern, nor necessarily comprise of all keepers in its vicinity. That is not to say that the practice has not caught national attention: in 2014, the first singing competition took place in Hanoi, where the top prize was a motorcycle donated by sponsors.

With its potential to transition to a professional endeavour, bird play meets the criteria for serious leisure, being ‘sufficiently substantial, interesting and fulfilling for the participants to find a career there, acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge and experience’ (Stebbins, 2015, p. 17). Highly successful participants can and often do turn their knowledge into a marketable commodity: the ‘sufficiently substantial, interesting and fulfilling’ (Stebbins, 2015, p. 17) qualities of serious leisure here arise less from vocational successes than from an immaterial sense of accomplishments. The basis of training for fights and singing lie in socialisation: on average, a new captive can

be trained to participate in socialisation events and contests in 6–8 months. Experienced keepers caution against letting new birds into contact with battle-wizened adults immediately, as hastened exposure is thought to cause permanent mental scarring (Appendix I). The socialisation first happens at home: as bulbuls are kept together, red cloth is draped over individual cages to prevent overexposure without keepers' supervision. Socialisation increases as proximities decrease: from full coverage, the cloth is pulled back a quarter, then halfway, leading up to full exposure, until younger bulbuls have become accustomed to the voices and postures of more seasoned individuals in its immediate surrounding (Interview 16.04.28) – only then, friendly competition will begin at bird cafés.

More fascinatingly, the training process implicitly acknowledges a measure of agency, an understanding, however rudimentary, of their independence, and their ability to exert it, however limited. *Chim là chim trời, có phải chim mình đâu* (lit., 'Birds are of the sky, not of mine', Interview 16.06.28), lamented an interviewee after one of his prized trainees flew off from an unlatched cage. Of note here is that the blame is placed less on the human's forgetfulness, than on an irresistible call of the wild innate to the nonhuman. Most common in interpretations of the notion of agency is the definition of it as 'the capacity for self-willed action' (Irvine, 2004, p. 128), which is foremost problematic in its focus on intentionality and by extension, an assumption of agential sentience—specifically, wilful consciousness, which in turn isolates the agent as a self-contained unit rather than part of a social (infra)structure. With nonhumans, 'the capacities of different animals for changing their situations are expressed only through their common possession of agency rather than by how they are positioned in social relations of power' (Carter & Charles, 2013, p. 328; see also Jerolmack, 2005). Partly to address the normative anthropocentrism in the above interpretation, there have been a paradigm shift to avoid a commitment to 'the presence of conscious intentionality' (Philo & Wilbert, 2000, p. 15). Most prominent in this perspective is actor-network theory that weaves a sense of reciprocal relationism between humans and nonhumans (Latour, 2005), effectively defining both based on their effects and networks.

Furthermore, temporariness and temporality are implied by acknowledging that social agents are engaged in a contingent web of entanglements, potentially extendable through continuous network-building. In this account, agency is not a static, innate set of characteristics, but an amalgam of 'capacities (or the constraints) generated when something or someone occupying a determinate social nexus [that] *depends partly on the reflexive deliberations* of the person, their choices and the roles available to them' (Carter & Charles, 2013, p. 331; emphasis added). Participants freely acknowledge that bulbuls can *not* socialise, not only with keepers, but also one another: if a bird fails to perform at a café or competition, the explanation primarily defers to their temperament, e.g. 'he doesn't feel like singing today' (Interview 16.08.14). While seemingly a throwaway comment, the lack of protest in response, and a noticeable absence of any assertion of 'making it perform', indicate an acknowledgement of bulbuls' agency, and reaffirm existing relationships with them as a symbiotic arrangement respectful of an independent, external Nature.

Despite the income potential, participants concur that contests are 'for fun more than anything', emphasising that bulbul-keeping should retain its non-materialistic focus (Interview 16.07.15; 16.08.05; 16.08.23). This attitude is reflected also in mass media portrayals, one notable example of which is the lavish praise for Yen Phi bird range at the eponymous

park in Nha Trang City, Khanh Hoa Province, with its focus on songbird-rearing and socialisation, rather than gambling and related monetary gains. More than a few keepers treat the earnings as supplementary, and fewer still manage to turn it into a primary source of income, for ‘no one started *because* they want to make money’ (Interview 16.07.13; emphasis added). Participants unequivocally express aversion to overvaluing finance, preferring to ‘stay true’ to its cultural association with class and prestige. Reintroducing economic concerns, hyper-focusing on maximising profits, and prioritising that over the more abstract ideals, in this way, seem to defeat its very purpose of release, however temporary, from the exhausting mundanities of everyday life. Interestingly, one can trap bulbuls for a living, devote considerable financial resources to furnish them with good food, nice cages, and quality treats, without social judgement, yet, using them as means to an end is frowned upon. Effectively, the income is socially acceptable insofar as it is a *byproduct* of birdkeeping. This approximates what Haraway (2003, p. 61) refers to as ‘passionate avocations’ – ‘that which problematises the interface between public/private and work/leisure’, in this case a leisure activity with potential to generate income, but without a supportive social interpretation for practicing it as such. Characterised by these contradictions, bulbul-keeping provides a unique insight into contemporary urban Vietnam, where traditions of idealising a holistic nature are caught between crumbling modern dichotomies and resurfacing postmodern naturecultural hybrids, exemplified in obligate companions that are neither strictly ‘wild’ nor completely ‘domesticated’.

4. Reinventing urban ‘nature’

Nature is synonymous with an autonomous, maternal force in Vietnamese folk culture, and to regard bulbuls as ‘of the sky’—of nature, is thus to defer to the authority of a universe more expansive than oneself. By being ‘too social and sagacious to be objects; too strange to be human; too captive to be wild, but too wild to be domesticated’, as Lorimer (2010, p. 492) muses of Sri Lankan elephants, bulbuls become cultural actants and harbingers of a rapidly urbanising Vietnam, at the crossroads of receding modernity and reimagined traditions. Themselves cultural products, traditions exert a certain reciprocal agency on the populace, re-forming to accommodate changing sociocultural circumstances and reaffirm the legitimacy of mainstream ideologies. Not simply unchanging moulds to standardise sociocultural practices, traditions need to be recognised as living phenomena in constant flux (Hosbawm & Ranger, 1992) – what I have termed elsewhere as a type of ‘cultural clay’ (Nguyen, 2013), an immaterial social substance that is very malleable, constantly moulding and being moulded to strengthen ideals of Vietnam as ‘of the people, for the people’. By devoting time and resources to turn an ordinary avian into an extraordinary performer, bulbul-keeping is lauded as an extended reconnection to the nation’s myths of origin, where patience equals success.

Liminal in their non-categorization, bulbuls exemplify the intricacies of nonhuman companionship, for much as we have accepted companion animals as a *de facto* presence in everyday life, the current consciousness still thrives on boundary-making acts that perceive human-nonhuman relationships in degrees of separation. Situated in urban spaces that are ‘an amalgam of often disjointed processes and social heterogeneity, a place of near and far connections, a concatenation of rhythms; always edging in new directions’ (Amin & Thrift, 2002, p. 31), bulbuls add a note of complexity in their obligate

companionship to human caretakers, which in turn opens up possibilities for gendered social cohesion, a culturally unique embodiment of prosperity, as well as contributor to a continuous cycle of revenue and ideas between urban and other regions. As agential nonhumans, these avian evoke a reconsideration of assumptions of 'urban nature', traversing the borders between a reductive vessel of anthropocentric ideas, and an individual capable of fulfilling, disrupting, rejecting, or ignoring caretakers' idealizations. Through this ethnographic overview of bulbul-keeping in contemporary urban Vietnam, I have sought to demonstrate these liminalities in all their complexities, in hope that future research can expand on their uniqueness.

Notes

1. See Nguyen (2015) for a discussion of the challenges of formally structured fieldwork in Vietnam.
2. All Vietnamese-to-English translations and any error are mine.
3. Speaking from personal experience, one of my cats adores being leashed and walked, yet never fails to cuddle and sleep next to his humans at any given opportunity.
4. Of course, there are non-feral, semi-domesticated, i.e. without a home and owner(s), yet are domestic pets by classification that appear to enjoy their freedom, such as the Moscow subway dogs (Lemon, 2015).
5. deStefano and deGraaf (2003, p. 98) argue that suburban and urban environments should be regarded and researched separately. In addition, McCleery, Moorman, and Peterson (2014, pp. 2–3) critique the rather liberal and uncritical use of 'urban' in urban wildlife research: they argue that not only do scientists employ it under the assumption that their audience share the same understanding of it, but names given to human-altered landscapes are also non-specifying regarding the manner of alteration itself, and standard designations for such areas do not exist by default.
6. If the goal is to train for singing contests, buyers should choose birds with svelte bodies, a richly colored yellow coat, and a loud, clear voice, without frequent stops in their songs. If one seeks a fighter, on the other hand, the red-whiskered bulbul needs to be aggressive, with an intimidating appearance, comprised of larger feet and a prominent beak, as well as a fierce-looking face. It is believed that these ones will not cower, but instead rear up, spreading their wings and immediately start a taunting song whenever another is near. In general, any that perches solemnly and royally, its feathered tail expanded, or curved onto the bridge is a decent choice (Minh Van, 2013).
7. One can argue that all pets start out with a generalized diet until human caretakers learn their preferences through trial and error, however, the efficiency in developing a suitable diet for most bulbuls appears more impersonal than affectionate.
8. The owner of a rare red-whiskered bulbul in Nha Trang City (Khanh Hoa Province), for instance, ordered his cage custom made of all bamboo materials in Hue City, with the hanging hook hand-carved into a phoenix, all cage sides featuring eight deities playing chess, and three horizontal perches, etched with the images of Sanxing deities *Fu* (Prosperity)-*Lu* (Status)-*Chou* (Longevity) often used to denote defining qualities of a good life in Chinese Han folk religion (Minh Van, 2013).
9. A prominent character in a series of martial heroic tales by Hong Kong-based Chinese writer Jin Yong, popularized in Vietnam through their many live-action TV enactments.

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Appendix I: Bulbul-Keeping Terminology

- (1) A newly captured young bulbul is referred to as *chim bồi* (no English equivalent), denoting young birds with no human contact and a blank slate for socialisation. On the flip side, a bulbul that has been well-socialized prior to any bird cafés exposure, is referred to capable of *đứng lông*.
- (2) Hastened socialisation is thought to cause inexperienced bulbuls to be *lỏ*, or *bông gòn* (lit., 'cottonballed'), referencing how bulbuls puff up their feathers when scared. This translation is inadequate, however: this is a semi-permanent trauma caused by being rushed into socialisation with other birds. When rendered *lỏ*, or *bông gòn*, bulbuls become fully objectified as lively ornaments: deemed unable to compete, they are either released or kept only as living décor.