

Building an Adaptive Vietnamese License Plate Recognition and Retrieval System using Multi-Task Deep Learning

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Abstract

Automatic License Plate Recognition (ALPR) is an essential component of intelligent transportation, yet its performance is often significantly degraded by real-world image distortions and regional plate format complexities. This research addresses these challenges by proposing a highly adaptive, multi-task deep learning framework specifically designed for the Vietnamese license plate context. The system targets the unique diversity of Vietnamese plates while robustly handling low-quality image inputs.

The proposed framework operates as a multi-stage, conditional pipeline. First, a real-time object detection model is employed to localize all license plate instances. The core component of the system is a lightweight Quality Assessment Module (QAM), which acts as an intelligent router, analyzing and classifying each detected plate into one of three distinct categories: “clear”, “restorable”, or “unrestorable”. The system’s adaptive nature is demonstrated in the subsequent multi-branch routing: “restorable” images are selectively forwarded to a specialized restoration neural network. Conversely, “clear” images bypass this resource-intensive step. Finally, “unrestorable” images are rejected entirely, preventing erroneous processing and optimizing overall system throughput. A robust Optical Character Recognition (OCR) model is then used to transcribe the character string from both “clear” and successfully “restored” plates. Finally, the recognized string is used as a query key for retrieving vehicle information from an associated database. This multi-task approach—integrating detection, quality assessment, conditional restoration, and recognition—demonstrates significant accuracy improvements under challenging real-world conditions compared to traditional, non-adaptive pipelines. The system provides a robust and efficient solution for practical ALPR and information retrieval applications within the specific context of Vietnam.

Keywords— Vietnamese License plate recognition, multi-task learning, computer vision.

I. INTRODUCTION

Automatic License Plate Recognition (ALPR) serves as a cornerstone technology within modern Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS). Its applications are extensive and critical, underpinning systems for automated toll collection, traffic law enforcement, smart parking management, and vehicle access control. The efficacy of these applications hinges on the system’s ability to provide accurate and real-time vehicle identification.

However, the performance of conventional ALPR systems degrades significantly when deployed in unconstrained real-world environments. These systems often fail when faced with a wide spectrum of image quality issues, including motion blur from fast-moving vehicles, severe glare from headlights or sunlight, low-light noise, and geometric distortions from

oblique camera angles.

This research specifically addresses the challenges within the Vietnamese license plate context. This environment presents unique regional complexities, including a high diversity of plate formats, various background colors (e.g., white, blue, yellow), differing character layouts. A “one-size-fits-all” ALPR solution is often insufficient to handle this variability, leading to high error rates.

II. RELATED WORK

The proposed system comprises four sequential yet adaptive stages: (1) license plate detection, (2) image quality assessment and routing, (3) conditional image restoration, and (4) character recognition and retrieval.

A. License plate detection

Despite these advancements, existing detectors assume relatively clean input images and do not adapt to severe degradations prevalent in Vietnamese traffic surveillance systems, including extreme viewpoint angles, specular glare, motion blur, and low-resolution sensors [1]. For instance, while segmentation-based methods on edge devices [2] and OpenALPR adaptations [3] have been proposed for local deployment, they remain vulnerable to real-world distortions—particularly under extreme illumination variations such as daytime specular reflections from sunlight and nighttime low-contrast imaging due to poor lighting or headlight glare. Moreover, none incorporate pre-processing quality assessment to filter or route degraded inputs prior to recognition. This critical limitation motivates our use of *YOLOv8-nano* [4]—building on the robust real-time detection foundation of YOLO [5]—augmented with a novel *Quality Assessment Module (QAM)* to enable adaptive downstream processing.

B. Image quality assessment and routing

Assessing the quality of detected license plate images is crucial for robust ALPR under real-world degradations. No-reference image quality assessment (NR-IQA) methods have gained prominence due to their applicability without pristine references. Early deep learning approaches leveraged CNNs to predict perceptual quality scores [6, 7], while recent works incorporate geometric priors [8] or lightweight architectures for efficiency [9]. These methods, however, are primarily designed for *general image aesthetics or distortion classification*, not for *task-specific routing* in ALPR pipelines.

Illumination extremes pose a particularly acute challenge: daytime glare saturates plate regions, while nighttime captures suffer from noise and low signal-to-noise ratio (SNR). Although specialized enhancement models like *U-Net*-based day/night pre-processing have been explored [10], they are applied uniformly and cannot distinguish between recoverable and irreparable degradation—leading to unnecessary computation or persistent OCR failures.

To enable adaptive processing, we require a lightweight, real-time classifier capable of categorizing plate images into “clear”, “restorable”, or “unrestorable”. Among candidate backbones—ResNet50, MobileNetV2 [11], *EfficientNet-B0* [12], and *MobileNetV3* [13]—*MobileNetV3-Small* was selected due to its superior efficiency on edge devices, achieving 3.2× fewer parameters and 2.8×

lower FLOPs than *EfficientNet-B0* while maintaining comparable classification accuracy in no-reference distortion tasks. Fine-tuned on a synthetic dataset of multi Vietnamese license plates with controlled blur, noise, compression, and day/night illumination artifacts, our *Quality Assessment Module (QAM)* dynamically routes inputs: clear plates proceed directly to OCR, restorable ones are forwarded to the conditional restoration module, and unrestorable cases are rejected to prevent error propagation.

Although multi-angle detection models have been proposed [1], *none integrate real-time quality evaluation with conditional, illumination-aware restoration*. Our multi-branch design addresses this gap by optimizing both accuracy and computational efficiency across diurnal cycles.

C. Conditional image restoration

Restoring degraded license plate images is essential for improving OCR accuracy in low-quality inputs. Classical techniques, such as noise modeling and blur estimation [14], rely on hand-crafted priors and perform poorly under complex, compound distortions. Traditional machine learning approaches [15] offer marginal improvements but lack generalization. The advent of deep learning has introduced more powerful paradigms: convolutional neural networks (CNNs) [16, 15] capture local patterns effectively but suffer from limited receptive fields; *Transformer*-based models [17, 18, 19, 15] excel at modeling long-range dependencies through self-attention, though vanilla Vision Transformers (ViT) incur prohibitive computational cost on high-resolution inputs. Advanced generative methods, including GANs and diffusion models [15], achieve state-of-the-art perceptual quality but risk introducing artifacts (e.g., hallucinated characters) and demand significant resources—unsuitable for real-time ALPR.

For conditional restoration in resource-constrained environments, lightweight efficiency and fidelity are paramount. Among *Transformer*-based restoration backbones, *Swin2SR* [19] stands out by combining the hierarchical *Swin Transformer V2* with compressed image super-resolution objectives, enabling efficient processing of low-resolution, blurry, or noisy inputs while preserving textual integrity. Fine-tuned on synthetically degraded Vietnamese license plates, *Swin2SR* is selectively applied only to “restorable” images identified by the QAM, bypassing clear plates to minimize latency and preventing artifact-induced OCR failures in unrestorable cases.

Despite extensive progress in general image restoration [15], no prior ALPR system integrates task-aware quality routing with conditional, text-preserving restoration. This gap underscores the novelty of our adaptive pipeline.

D. Character recognition and retrieval

Optical Character Recognition (OCR) is the final critical stage of ALPR, converting restored plate images into machine-readable text for database retrieval. Early end-to-end frameworks such as *CRNN* [20] combine convolutional feature extraction with recurrent sequence modeling, establishing a lightweight and effective baseline for scene text recognition. Recent advances have explored detection-integrated paradigms: *SwinTextSpotter* [21] synergizes text detection and recognition using a *Swin Transformer* backbone, eliminating the need for character-level annotations or geometric rectification modules—particularly beneficial for arbitrary-shaped text. Similarly, *PARSeq* [22] introduces context-aware permutation language modeling to enhance robustness against occlusion and degradation.

Despite these innovations, most methods are optimized for general scene text and do not account for the unique typographic and linguistic constraints of Vietnamese license plates, such as fixed-length strings, mixed alphanumeric characters, and regional number variations. Detection-based line recognition [23] offers flexibility through pretraining on synthetic character-level data followed by line-level fine-tuning, but introduces complexity unsuitable for real-time embedded deployment. Enhanced *CRNN* variants [24] and night-specific models [10] improve robustness yet lack adaptive integration with upstream quality routing.

For our adaptive ALPR pipeline, computational efficiency, deployment simplicity, and proven accuracy on structured text are paramount. We therefore adopt a fine-tuned *CRNN* [20, 24] as the OCR backbone—trained on a mixed dataset of real and synthetically degraded Vietnamese plates. The recognized string will be saved and serve as a query key to retrieve vehicle metadata (e.g., owner, registration status) from the database, completing the end-to-end retrieval system.

III. METHODOLOGY

Building upon the limitations identified in the related work, this section presents the adaptive multi-task ALPR framework specifically engineered for

Vietnamese license plates under real-world imaging constraints. The system dynamically adjusts its processing path based on input quality, eliminating redundant operations while maximizing recognition accuracy.

3.1 Overall System Architecture

The proposed pipeline comprises four interdependent modules executed in a conditional, multi-branch manner, as depicted in Fig. 1. Unlike conventional rigid ALPR systems that apply uniform processing regardless of input quality, our framework incorporates an intelligent routing mechanism—the *Quality Assessment Module (QAM)*—to classify each detected plate and selectively activate resource-intensive restoration only when necessary.

The processing flow is defined as follows:

1. **License Plate Detection:** A real-time *YOLOv8-nano* detector localizes all plate instances in the input frame [1, 2].
2. **Image Quality Assessment and Routing:** The *QAM*, built on *MobileNetV3-Small*, classifies each cropped plate into one of three categories: “clear”, “restorable”, or “unrestorable” [8, 9, 12, 25].
3. **Conditional Image Restoration:** Only “restorable” plates are processed by a fine-tuned *Swin2SR* model to recover textual fidelity [19].
4. **Character Recognition and Retrieval:** A *CRNN* with CTC decoding transcribes the (restored or original) plate, followed by structured database lookup [24].

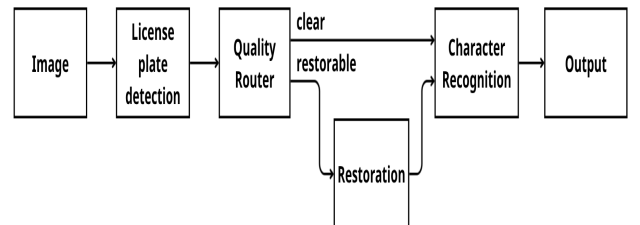


Figure 1: Block diagram of the proposed adaptive ALPR pipeline. The *QAM* enables conditional routing: clear plates bypass restoration, restorable plates are enhanced via *Swin2SR*, and unrestorable plates are rejected to prevent error propagation.

3.2 License Plate Detection (Module 1)

The primary objective of this module is to accurately localize all license plate instances within a full-frame input image, enabling robust downstream processing under real-world traffic conditions.

- **Model Selection:** We adopt *YOLOv8-nano* [4] as the detection backbone, building upon the foundational real-time object detection paradigm introduced in YOLO [5]. This variant is selected for its optimal trade-off between inference speed and mean Average Precision (mAP) on small, densely packed objects—critical for multi-vehicle scenes in Vietnamese urban environments. Fine-tuning on a diverse dataset of annotated Vietnam traffic images (including day/night, rain, and motion blur) further enhances robustness to regional plate variations and imaging distortions [2, 1].
- **Input and Output:** The module accepts a full-resolution input image $I \in \mathbb{R}^{H \times W \times 3}$ and outputs a set of bounding boxes $B = \{(x_{1,i}, y_{1,i}, x_{2,i}, y_{2,i}, c_i)\}_{i=1}^N$, where N is the number of detected plates and c_i denotes confidence score. Non-maximum suppression (NMS) with IoU threshold 0.4 eliminates redundant detections.
- **Data Flow:** For each bounding box B_i , the corresponding plate region $P_i = \text{crop}(I, B_i)$ is extracted and resized to a fixed dimension (128×64) while preserving aspect ratio via padding. These cropped patches serve as direct input to Module 2: Image Quality Assessment and Routing (QAM), enabling adaptive processing based on degradation severity.

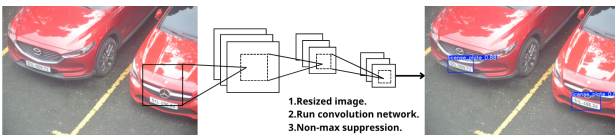


Figure 2: The YOLO detection pipeline [5]. The input image is resized, processed through a convolutional backbone, and refined via non-maximum suppression (NMS) to produce confident license plate bounding boxes. This mechanism forms the core of *Module 1*, enabling real-time localization in multi-vehicle scenes.

3.3 Image Quality Assessment and Routing (Module 2)

IV. CONCLUSION

V. REFERENCES

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