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VIETNAM: MEMORIES AND MEANING

The Roles and Representations of Women in Post-*Doi Moi* Vietnamese Cinema

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Depictions of women have long been employed in various visual media as a form of synecdoche for social concerns, such as the nation. Filmmakers in Viet Nam have been using this kind of shorthand for decades, for example through the retelling of the legend of the Trung Sisters, or in the ubiquitous tourist image of a young woman wearing the traditional Vietnamese costume (*áo dài*). Viet Nam is an interesting case in that the Confucian kinship model, which foregrounds the values of filial piety and the importance of male children, would seem to suggest that women are not important. In this paper, I will use film examples from the late 1990s (the period immediately after *doi moi*, or economic renovation, was introduced) to illustrate how women came to represent Vietnamese resilience and tenacity in a time of rapid social and economic change.

Keywords: Vietnam; cinema; representation; gender; social change; economics

Introduction

Due to its cultural and historical links to both East and Southeast Asia, its long history of war and threats of invasion, and the rapid changes that have occurred since the 1980s, Viet Nam is a fascinating country to study. Since 1986, Viet Nam has been transitioning from a Communist and largely agricultural economy to a free market economy. These political-economic changes reflect and are reflected in alterations to Vietnamese social and cultural life. As a medium of and for popular culture, cinema is a particularly productive arena in which to investigate these changes.¹

This article will focus on understanding cinema as a tool for analyzing cultural discourse and change. It will discuss the history of cinema in Viet Nam; the rapid and dramatic socio-cultural changes that have occurred there over the past few decades, especially in relation to gendered roles and rules for women; and how these changes are being represented in and by the Vietnamese media in general and the film industry in particular. My discussion will focus on four major films: *Mùi Du Đú Xanth/The Scent of Green Papaya* (Tran Anh Hung dir. 1992); *Ba Mùa/Three Seasons* (Tony Bui dir. 1999); *Mùa hè chiều thẳng đứng/The Vertical Ray of the Sun* (Tran Anh Hung dir. 2000); and *Áo lụa Hà Đông/The White Silk Dress* (Luu Huynh dir. 2006).²

Cinema as Cultural Text

Trinh Min Ha, the famous Vietnamese filmmaker, writer, and literary theorist, tells us that films are cultural translations, and filmmakers are the translators. This translation takes place whether the culture in question is being translated to an audience within that culture or outside of it. Indeed, Ha goes on to argue that “[filmmaking] is involved in the very production of meaning within one or across several contexts, mentalities and cultures” (Ha 1999, 60). Popular (or commercial) cinema is a particularly fruitful arena in which to investigate these translations, as, almost by definition, such films are attempting to connect with a wide and varied audience. Without going into great

¹ I would like to thank Lan Anh Cao and two of my former students, Ngoc-Anh Cao and Tran Nguyen, for film suggestions and for working through some of these ideas with me.

² Through the remainder of the text, and in the References section, I will refer to the films by their titles in English.

detail about the history of film/cinema studies, suffice it to say that it has only been towards the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century that scholars such as Rey Chow (1995), Annette Hamilton (2009), Leslie Barnes (2010), or indeed Trinh Minh Ha herself, have taken up the challenge of critically analyzing and writing about cinema as a socially and culturally–embedded text. While there were earlier examples of scholars who promoted this approach in regard to commercial cinema, such as John Weakland (1975), it took some time for the approach to gain wider acceptance. Work by cultural and critical studies scholars of cinema and popular culture, such as Laura Mulvey (1985), helped pave the way, but they were also often reductionist in terms of both the agency of the audience and the possible readings of the cinematic text.³ Post-colonial studies and post-modern theory added some new wrinkles to the way we look at popular culture, such as Louise Mary Pratt’s framing of autoethnography as a tool that colonized subjects can exploit to “represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer’s own terms,” a practice that signals “a group’s point of entry into metropolitan literate culture” (Pratt 1992, 7–9). Barnes gives us an example of this cultural “autoethnography” in her discussion of the film *Cyclo* (Tran Anh Hung dir. 1995): “One need only note the director’s artistic affinities with French cinema and his strategic placement of the Evian bottle during the sister’s first experience as a prostitute to recognize the extent to which the film addresses French cultural domination in both form and content” (2010, 111).⁴ This method of commentary on the colonial/post-colonial world shows up in several films, such as in *The White Silk Dress* when Dan, the principal female character, is paid to act as wet nurse for an old man, thereby reflecting the Vietnamese experience of Chinese cultural and military imperialism, or in the difference of representation of the French (visible faces, sadistic) and American soldiers (faceless, aside from the backs of some soldiers in Da Nang walking down the street with Vietnamese women).

³ The “national cinema” approach has also come under scrutiny for similar reasons (see for instance Chow 1995 for China, or Choi 2010; Chung 2014 for South Korea).

⁴ Cousins states something similar regarding Tran’s *The Vertical Ray of the Sun*—that because of his life history Tran’s films are more “detached from Vietnam” than some other Asian directors (Cousins 2004, 473).

These examples foreshadow some of what will be discussed later, so I would like to turn now to a brief outline of the history of cinema in Viet Nam before returning to issues of gender.

Vietnamese Cinema History

There are three distinct, if overlapping, periods of cinema development in Viet Nam: the colonial period, the communist (or socialist) period, and the post-renovation (*Doi Moi*) period. All of these have left their mark on the industry and its products.

It is difficult to overstate how powerful the effects of war and colonialism have been on Vietnamese culture, especially popular culture (Jaehne 1989). In a country where there are still unknown numbers of unexploded bombs left over from the American War, it is perhaps not surprising that the legacy of that misadventure still features regularly in Vietnamese cinema (as it does in the U.S.; see, for instance, Williams 1991, though more recently Afghanistan and Iraq seem to have taken over at least somewhat in the American imaginary)—such as in *Three Seasons* and *The White Silk Dress*. However, the French colonial period also remains an important part of that narrative—as evidenced in films such as *The Rebel* or *The White Silk Dress*—and in particular a personalized brutality persists in representations of the French soldiers and colonial officers as compared to the impersonal and/or unseen depictions of the Americans (e.g. bombs dropping from the sky). The colonial period had another important effect on cinema in Viet Nam—it was when film was first introduced to the country, though surprisingly late (c. 1910) compared to China, Japan, or the British and Dutch colonies in Asia (Charlot 1991, 35). Films from France (as might be expected) were among the first shown in Viet Nam, as well as American and Hong Kong films. As elsewhere, these early screenings were limited to urban areas. The first films made in Viet Nam were French-produced documentaries. By the 1920s, the French were also making feature films in the country, whereas production by the Vietnamese themselves at this time was limited to short films. According to Charlot, Vietnamese film historians trace their industry to a newsreel of Ho Chi Minh's proclamation of Independence in 1945 (1991, 35). Other Vietnamese-produced documentaries soon followed, and feature film production began a little

later, after the formation of the Vietnam Cinema Department in 1956. Films made in South Vietnam prior to 1975 were typically fiction and entertainment-oriented or, as Jaenkhe puts it, “schlock” (1989, 33).

Under the Communist Party, film matters (and the newly formed Vietnam Cinema Department) were placed under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture (1991, 36). While it is true that cinema in Viet Nam avoided the fate of the industry in other communist countries (the Soviet Union and China in particular), cinema remained a government project, and not a well funded one. Technical and financial limitations aside, according to Charlot (1989, 1991) and Hamilton (2009) Vietnamese films during the socialist era were well made and visually powerful. While there were also clumsy propaganda films, for the most part Vietnamese films produced under communism escaped the worst examples of Soviet or Chinese control over film production, which isn't to say that all of the films out of either the Soviet Union or China during this period were horrible propaganda, either. Indeed, many talented individuals created excellent work; however, the point remains that they were often limited in style and content (Cousins 2004, 242–245, 306–310, and 419). Further, as Hamilton states, “a commitment to questions of humanity, beauty and moral character came to the fore. A concept of ‘authenticity’ in Vietnamese cinema was developed” that “must arise from the study of society as it is, not derived from other national film traditions” (Hamilton 2009, 142). This tradition of authenticity can be seen in contemporary independent Vietnamese cinema.

In 1986, the Vietnamese government turned from a socialist, planned-economy model to one more aligned with market forces and foreign investment. This “renovation” (*Doi Moi*) of the economy has had a profound effect upon Viet Nam and its people, economy, and culture, with cinema very much feeling those effects (Charlot 1989). With the opening of the Vietnamese market, the cinema industry in that country expanded outside the Soviet Bloc, with films like *The Scent of Green Papaya* nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film and the Camera D'Or at Cannes, and *Three Seasons* winning three awards at Sundance, including the Grand Jury Prize. However, that same opening up of the market also meant that the industry began to face competition for its homegrown audience.

Indeed, that expansion has been a two way street and the new audience—at home, the diasporic Vietnamese audience abroad, and an ever-increasing non-Vietnamese audience—has meant that Vietnamese cinema has had to negotiate Western styles and expectations. As Hamilton puts it:

Historical factors, indigenous cultural preferences, highly articulated ideological concerns and a particular sense of temporality must find a presence in terms of the vastly changed social and cultural experiences of younger generations now encountering very different economic and social conditions than those which had shaped the cultural productions of earlier generations (2009, 142).

Amongst those changes are the roles and representations of women both in film and in real life.

Gender in Viet Nam

As is mentioned in the Introduction, one of the reasons that Viet Nam is such an interesting country is because of its liminal state between East and Southeast Asia (Andaya 2006). This in-betweenness is very much the case in terms of gender, too. While too often there is a teleological assumption as to the inevitability of the Vietnamese nation-state (see also Taylor 1998; or Ho 2017, 961 in regards to China), those generalizations typically fail to take into account two important and interlinked historical and ultimately cultural details. One of those details is that, historically, Viet Nam is composed of three entities—the North, the Central, and the South. The North is the cultural home of Viet Nam, and the area with the longest and most complex relationship with China (Taylor 1998). The center was the site of the Champa kingdom, a maritime trading center important for the sea trade that stretched from China and Japan through India and the Middle East to Africa and Europe. The Viet North eventually incorporated this kingdom (Taylor 1998, 956). The south was part of the Khmer kingdom in Cambodia—one of the three important agrarian kingdoms in Southeast Asia, the others being the Pagan/Bagan in Myanmar, and Ayutthaya in Thailand. The easternmost part of the Cambodian Khmer kingdom

became part of Viet Nam (Taylor 1998, 965),⁵ and eventually became South Viet Nam, which was more directly under the influence of the French during the colonial period. What all of this means is that there are very different cultural histories at play in each of these areas. Perhaps the most clear example of these differences came after reunification, where:

For those in the north, cultural practices continued under the control of the socialist regime, whereas for those in the south many aspects of their familiar daily experience had to be abandoned. Thousands fled [...]. For those remaining, 're-education' was required, sometimes in detention (Hamilton 2009, 142).

On top of this massive difference between North and South, there is also the aforementioned influence of China, which is strongest in the North and, somewhat ironically, amongst the urban elite. Viet Nam was part of the mandarin system, and the Vietnamese royalty was modeled in part on Chinese dynastic traditions. Chinese cultural values, such as Confucianism's respect for filial authority, and authority in general, and patriarchal gender values were also spread throughout the country (Xiangjun Li and Xin Yan 2006).

All of this is not to argue that Viet Nam's gender ideology is somehow *not* patriarchal, but that there are some mitigating factors that do have an influence on just how that patriarchal ideology plays out. Part of it has to do with the influence of the Communist Party. As Hamilton states, "Socialist ethics repudiated the continuation of oppressive dominating gender relations, considering them the result of feudalism and archaic social elements" (2009, 143; see also Goodkind 1995, 345). One of the most fascinating examples of the socialist condemnation of gender oppression can be seen in the Women's Museum in Hanoi, where amongst floors dedicated to various aspects of women's lives and contributions to the nation is the

⁵ Taylor makes the important argument that none of these incorporations were as straightforward or as inevitable as is often represented in histories of Viet Nam, especially ones with a nationalist focus (1998: *passim*).

Women in History exhibit. Much of this floor is dedicated to the women that fought alongside men throughout Viet Nam's many experiences with war, with prominence given to women's role in the American War. One of the academic colleagues who accompanied me on my visit to the museum was born in China, but is now an American citizen. He told me that you wouldn't find something like this in China—although it was left unsaid, the implication was that the government would not acknowledge their contribution.⁶ Another indication that socialist gender ethics are at play in Viet Nam is that the villages are much more aligned with a Southeast Asian gender model than with a Chinese one. "However, although [the Confucian] ideology was pervasive, the vast bulk of rural peasantry and agricultural workers on whom the system of social reproduction relied continued to exhibit many of the classical Southeast Asian elements of bilateral kinship and public female visibility" (Hamilton 2009, 144). The point is that for several reasons—socialist ideology of gender equality isn't entirely responsible for the difference—women in Viet Nam appear to have, particularly to an outsider, a fascinating duality of role. They are at once something of a problem in a patriarchal society in which male children are expected to carry on the lineage, take over the household, and look after elderly parents, but, at the same time, women are also a valued part of society (Jaenkhe 1989; Luong 2006; Hamilton 2009). This valuation is strong enough that women have arguably become the symbol of Viet Nam in the ubiquitous tourist images of Vietnamese women in *ao dai*—the tight-fitting silk tunic-like dress worn over pants. As Jaenkhe points out, this duality of gender expectations and representations of women has a powerful history in Vietnamese cinema (Jaenkhe 1989, 34–35).⁷

The economic changes that resulted from *Doi Moi* have affected the entire country, men and women, but I want to focus here on the effects upon women. As in the rest of Southeast Asia, women in Viet Nam have a much larger public role than in some other parts of Asia. For instance, they are the ones primarily responsible for selling

⁶ See Li (2017) to compare the depictions of women/gender roles and rules in contemporary Chinese cinema.

⁷ This dichotomous role for women in visual culture is well documented. See for instance Berger 1973, Mulvey 1985, Hershfield 1996, and Butler 2002, amongst many others.

goods in the markets and running food stalls where most people eat every day. The shift to a more market driven economy has been an especial boon to the creation of small to medium businesses, i.e. the very types of jobs that women normally hold. This by no means suggests that there are not any gender issues now; the expectations for boy and girl children remain different, and the need for a male child, along with the two-child policy, has led to a reported increase in abortions of female fetuses. Further, the social upheaval has led to a (probably predictable) backlash and demand to a return to “traditional” values, especially those of a more patriarchal-focused society. Some scholars, such as Goodkind (1995) have claimed that *Doi Moi* has had a negative economic effect on women. As Viet Nam is truly still in a process of negotiation with the shifting cultural and social tides that *Doi Moi* has produced, it is to be expected that there will be complex transitional navigations of the shifting terrain. What is interesting is how filmmakers are translating these gender vacillations.

Depictions of Women in Post-*Doi Moi* Cinema

In this section I will look at four post-*Doi Moi* films that provide four accounts of the ways in which women have come to stand as a synecdoche for the gendered changes in Vietnamese society: engaged and engaging women/distracted and distant men in *The Scent of Green Papaya*; the power of sisters in *The Vertical Ray of the Sun*; past, present, future... in *Three Seasons*; and resilient women, resilient nation in *The White Silk Dress*.

Engaged and Engaging Women/Distracted and Distant Men in *The Scent of Green Papaya*

The Scent of Green Papaya and *The Vertical Ray of the Sun* are films by Viet Nam’s arguably most well known director—Tran Anh Hung. *Scent of Green Papaya* is probably Hung’s most famous film in the West; it was nominated-for and received many prestigious film festival awards, and put Vietnamese cinema on the global radar. The film itself follows a young servant girl from the countryside, Mui, as she arrives at a Saigon family’s home in the 1950s. Much of the film centers around Mui’s interactions with the family and the other domestic help. Mui is shown as being enthralled with the world around her, taking delight in the sights, sounds, and even feel of the things she comes into contact with. The scene where she is touching the seeds from the green papaya that she and an older servant have been using to make

salad is an excellent example of the pleasure she takes in simple sensory experiences. The film also spends time letting us get to know the family and their problems. The mother is mourning the loss of a child, and comes to treat Mui as a surrogate daughter. The father is withdrawn, spending much of his time alone, playing a *Dan Sen* (a Vietnamese lute). The three sons are likewise distant, and in the cases of the younger two, somewhat disturbed. The middle son is shown dripping hot wax onto ants and then pressing his finger down on them. The similarity of this shot with the one in which Mui joyfully touches the papaya seeds is notable, and draws attention to the difference in the two actions. The youngest son takes delight in tormenting Mui, such as when he ties a lizard onto a stick and scares her with it. As time passes, Mui leaves this family to work instead for Khuyen, a friend of the oldest son. By this time, the eldest son is married and is the owner of the family house. When she was young, Mui fell in love with Khuyen, and over time, as her employer, Khuyen returns that love, and they have a child together. Even in love, however, Khuyen is still somewhat distracted and distant. These depictions are interesting as they coincide in many ways with traditional expectations of male and female behavior. In Vietnamese society, men are expected to be strong, stoic, intelligent, to avoid conflict, and protect the family honor. Women, on the other hand, are to be demure, shy, chaste, and always aware that their modesty and/or lack of it will reflect upon their entire family. The way these expectations play out in *The Scent of Green Papaya* makes it clear that traditional roles ultimately lead to difficulties for both males and females, but that it is the women who bear the brunt of the problems, as when the father of the family Mui was originally working for runs off with all of the household money, leaving the mother to try to scrape by. Indeed, Bacholle states that because of its history of occupation and colonialism, Viet Nam is actually “fatherless” (2001, 177)—a point Tran Anh Hung makes literal in *The Scent of Green Papaya*.

The Power of Sisters in *The Vertical Ray of the Sun*

A later and less well-known (outside of Viet Nam) film by Tran Anh Hung, *The Vertical Ray of the Sun* is a slice-of-life tale of three sisters living in Hanoi. As with *The Scent of Green Papaya*, the women are very engaged with the world around them, and have an especially close and supportive relationship with each other. The oldest of the sisters is

having an affair, at least partially because her husband has another wife and child. The middle sister's husband is a writer struggling to finish his novel; she comes to suspect (somewhat mistakenly) that her husband is also having an affair. The youngest of the sisters lives with their brother, with whom she has a strange relationship. She also has a fraught relationship with another young man, who avoids meeting her for most of the film, and with whom she later breaks up. The lies and secrets in these relationships create a great deal of tension and complex emotions between the various characters, but the deep bonds between the sisters hold the women's lives together. The film is interesting for several reasons, not least the realistic beauty of the cinematography. But more importantly for our purposes here, the depictions of the women and especially their relationship with each other compared to their husbands/boyfriend is quite stark (aside from the middle sister, though her relationship with her husband is also shaky once she suspects him of adultery). As in *The Scent of Green Papaya*, the men in the film are self-absorbed or distracted, and their relations are ephemeral compared to the sisters. It is hard not to read the story as a parable for Viet Nam itself—the women represent the Vietnamese nation/people and the men represent the state.

Past Imperfect, Present Tense, Future... in *Three Seasons*

The film *Three Seasons* by diasporic Vietnamese director Tony Bui is a set of interwoven stories about five very different Vietnamese, and an American ex-soldier in Vietnam to find his daughter. The Vietnamese characters include Kien An, a young woman who works collecting and selling lotus blossoms for a wealthy writer suffering from leprosy; Teacher Dao, the aforementioned writer; Hai, a *cyclo* (bicycle rickshaw) driver; Lan, a prostitute; and two young street children, Woody and an unnamed girl who begins following Woody around. The lives of these characters intersect with one another in order for the filmmaker to make several statements about Viet Nam's past, present, and future. Kien An and Teacher Dao can be seen as representing the past, and perhaps express a powerful critique of Viet Nam's Confucian tradition of veneration of authority. The *cyclo* driver and the prostitute that he falls in love with represent the present, with several scenes where one or the other comments on contemporary Viet Nam and how they have little place in the shiny new *Doi Moi*

world. Lan, the prostitute, in particular reflects the alienation caused by this new economy; it takes the patient (and somewhat stubborn) love of Hai to show her that in this world people have to look after one another. The street children, then, represent the future, and it is telling that the only characters who never interact are Kien An, Woody, and his female friend. But, then, this makes sense—the past and future can only meet through the present.

The roles and representations of female characters in this film are particularly interesting. Although Kien An is (for the most part) a traditionally proper young woman, she ruffles feathers while harvesting lotus blossoms by singing a different song than the other women. It is she who meets the teacher who, as the symbol of the old ways, is starkly represented as having leprosy—an obvious critique of those ways. It takes Kien An's act of throwing lotus blossoms on the river in the teacher's hometown to cleanse the past. Furthermore, even though Teacher Dao is surrounded by staff, including male staff, Kien An alone is depicted as being capable of accomplishing this act, because of the appreciation of traditional Vietnamese aesthetics and culture she shares with the Teacher.

Perhaps the most interesting female representation in the film is the little girl that begins to follow Woody around. Without speaking, and often in the face of Woody's dismissal, this girl nevertheless either shows up Woody or helps him, and in this way she eventually gains his acceptance. Our last glimpse is of them walking together, not quite into the sunset, but facing the future side by side.

Resilient Women, Resilient Nation in *The White Silk Dress*

Our final film is directed by another diasporic Vietnamese (his family moved to the U.S. when he was 16). *The White Silk Dress* tells the story of one family from the French colonial 1950s until the end of the American War (though by that time only one daughter remains alive). Much like the more famous Chinese film *To Live* (Yimou Zhang 1994), *The White Silk Dress* is not always easy to watch, as it reflects the trauma and devastation that colonialism and war have had, particularly upon the poorest sector of Vietnamese society. The mother of the family goes to extreme lengths to provide for her husband and children. For example, she makes a white silk dress so

that her daughters can continue to attend school, and she secretly agrees to be a wet nurse for an elderly man,⁸ which has unfortunate consequences when her husband discovers what she has been doing. At the very end of the movie, the director plainly tell us what the white dress signifies when the surviving daughter provides the following voice over: "My mother said a white silk dress is the symbol of a Vietnamese woman's immense suffering as well as her generosity. Through traumatic hardship, through horrific destruction caused by countless wars, the Vietnamese white silk dress still maintains beauty. The beauty of a Vietnamese woman cannot be characterized by white skin, rosy cheeks, and red lips, but by the elegant laps of the white silk dress, which represents honesty, purity, and grace..."

Conclusion

In all of these films, women and the representations of women mean much more than just that individual character. I would argue that women have come to represent the Vietnamese nation and people, their resilience, and (as in *The White Silk Dress*) their tenacity. Gender and identity are always intertwined, for good or ill, and, as we have seen in these four films, women are often the ones that represent their family's honor and thus an element of society and nationality much larger than themselves. These four films illustrate the different ways in which women in post-*Doi Moi* Vietnamese cinema have been asked (or forced?) to be the exemplars of Vietnamese society and social change. Indeed, this is the case not just for cinema; the picture of a Vietnamese woman in a white silk dress is one of the most common images presented by Vietnam's tourism industry. In other words, Vietnamese women have come to literally represent their country to the world.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

⁸ Wet nurse usually refers to nursing a baby. However, in this scene she is feeding her breast milk to an elderly man.

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