



Between Globalization and National Identity: A study on the Evolution of Vietnamese cinema

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Introduction

At the turn of the twenty-first century, policy and academic circles have shown more and more interest in Vietnam, as it is located at the epicentre of a historic power transition. Vietnam is one of the most rapidly developing economies in Asia. Since the launch of *Đổi mới* economic reforms in 1986, influenced by the reforms initiated in China under Deng Xiaoping, Vietnam has moved from a directed socialist economy at a so-called "market socialist" economy. It allowed for the opening to capitalism and the market economy, without democratic transition (Moi, D. and Moi, L., 2021). These reforms started a contemporary art movement that also touched the cinema industry. However, the Vietnamese film industry, despite its development, is still behind other Southeast Asian countries when it comes to "film production and revenue".¹ Despite Vietnam's significant population nearing 100 million, its film industry remains relatively modest, anticipating revenues of merely US\$17.86 million this year.² While Indonesia, which boasts a substantial population of roughly 270 million, revenues from movie ticket sales amount to US\$131.80 million in 2023. Still, things are moving in Vietnamese cinema, when *The Golden Butterfly Tree*, directed by Pham Thiên Ân won the *Caméra d'or* during the 76th Cannes Festival, elevating Vietnam on the international stage with a whole new film aesthetic. Vietnam has endured multiple colonial and military occupations, by China, the French and later the United States during the Cold War. The ongoing construction of a Vietnamese national identity is the main consequence of such a historical context.

Through cinema, people build a collective memory and a sense of unity in remembering the past struggles against foreign domination. The idea of national identity is related to the discourse on 'globalization of culture' and most specifically its impact on the film industry, since cinema serves as maintaining cultural traditions and norms. This article is based on the analysis of a specific branch of culture that is cinema facing globalization, as its relationship with politics is undeniable. From propaganda films and biopics to today's independent films depicting social problems and realities in urban society, cinema is a powerful medium of influence capable of shaping mentalities and spreading social, political, artistic messages and so forth. In other words, cinema engenders uncontrollable emotions for viewers. Hence, what better means for States to shape national identities, than through the lens of cinema?

¹ Vietnam Briefing News. (2023). *Vietnam Film Industry for Foreign Firms*.

² Statista. (n.d.). Cinema Tickets - Vietnam | *Statista Market Forecast*.

This research will answer the following question: how does the contemporary Vietnamese cinema negotiate national identity in response to globalization? In the first part, I will be reconstituting the background of Vietnamese cinema, in consideration of the relationship between filmmaking and state control. The second part will attempt a similar analysis of the structure of the Vietnamese cinema industry, inspired by the work that Seio Nakajima provided when analysing China's, with the additional place of diasporic and Korean influences.

Part 1 – The Introduction of the Vietnamese Cinema Department and the Đổi mới reforms

1.1 State Control and Vietnamese filmmakers

Vietnamese cinematography, which was too frequently limited to local channels and certain adjacent countries, remained for a long time discreet and even unheard to Western film consumers. It was scarred by the wars that repeatedly shattered the country throughout the 20th century. Even if the French colonists brought cinema to Vietnam in 1910, distributing largely in cities movies from Hong Kong, France, and the United States, Vietnam only saw its first talking film, *Haunted Cemetery*, in 1937 – now gone (www.cinematheque.fr, n.d.).

The year 1956 marked the creation of the Vietnam Cinema Department which was placed under the Ministry of Culture. Artists were forced to work hand in hand with the government, as scripts and projects had to be approved in advance by a board formed out of representatives of the Ministry of Culture and the department. Vietnamese filmmakers were then limited in their range of actions and choices: John Charlot, a writer for the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* did two visits to the Vietnam Cinema Department in Hanoi in 1987 and 1988 and was able to talk about Vietnamese movies with several department executives which he interviewed. He was told that “no film would be allowed that attacked ‘the very principle’ of the government”³ Films were produced by state-funded studios with an explicit obligation to present to the public a cinematic content that was suitable for the state's values (Charlot,

³ See John Charlot *Vietnamese Cinema: First Views*, 1991, p.39

1991).

Because China ruled over Vietnam for eleven centuries, Vietnamese society possesses a social structure of a strong authoritarian patriarchy, as a direct influence of Chinese and Confucian semi-feudalism (Hamilton, 2009, p. 143). In the 1920s, Vietnamese filmmakers produced nationalist-leaning short films, but more credits were given to the production of feature films from the Chinese and French capital. In addition, the Vietnam Cinema School was created in 1959 and the curriculum was primarily instructed by soviet artists from East Bloc countries (Charlot, 1991). But to further their ideological and discursive goals, the Vietnamese have developed their own film narrative concerning the invasions by the French and the Americans (Soldavini, 2010, p. 14), as a means to shape their own national identity.

1.2 The Path to *Doi Moi*

The only purpose of creative and cultural activity in the years before the open-door policy was implemented was to benefit society. Making a profit was despised because it was seen as an indication of capitalism's corrupting powers (Drummond et Thomas, 2003, p. 192). Therefore, state subsidies eased many producers and directors of the burden of worrying about money and box office returns, allowing them to concentrate on the creative merit of their works. But the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) came to the realization in the mid-1980s that the country was in danger of economic collapse and that the development model it had adopted from the Soviet Union and the Eastern European bloc was outdated and had defects that prevented it from growing economically.

This insight proved to be a turning point, inspiring Vietnam's leaders to take action and enact the *Doi Moi* at the Sixth National Congress in December 1986 (Võ, 2009) a political and economic reform that modernized and liberated the country's economic policies of the time. The VCP approved resolutions emphasizing the re-establishment and growth of economic and diplomatic ties with the Western powers. It resulted in the sharing of enormous wealth, the State resigning from its role as an economic and social life regulator, and the emergence of mafia

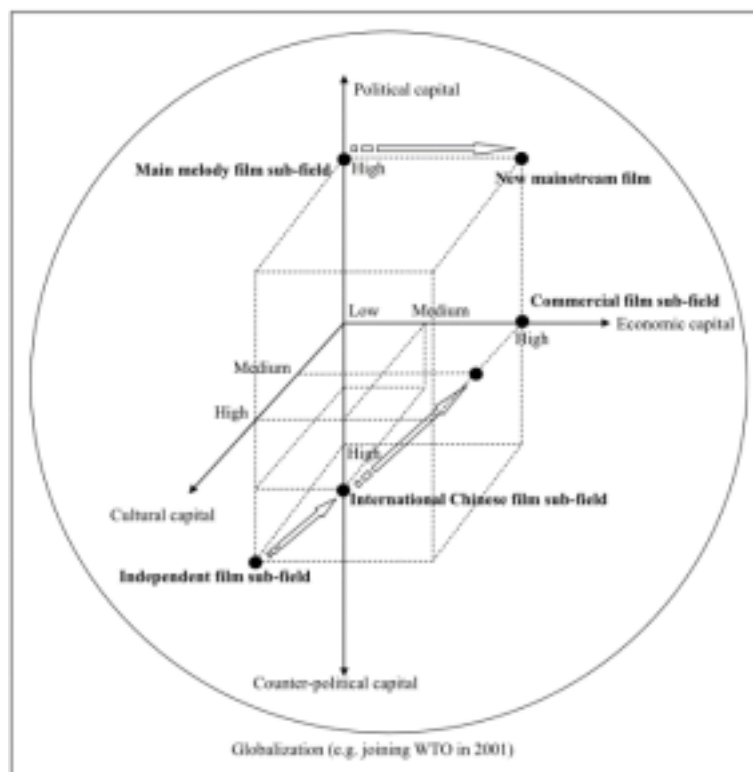
like phenomena under a financial collapse government. Most film studios had to resort to private investors and companies to survive and compensate for the end of government support. For instance, a whole Vietnamese film studio's annual budget in 2000 was less than \$500,000.

This was just barely sufficient to produce up to three feature films per year (Drummond et Thomas, 2003, p. 192). Like in China, however, the local establishment of companies is difficult or impossible without some connivance with the local authorities, especially with the Communist Party authorities (Moi, D. and Moi, L 2021).

Since the implementation of the *doi moi* program, Vietnamese cinema has frequently explored in its films the effect of economic transformations, both beneficial and detrimental on Vietnamese society.

Part 2 – The New Wave of Vietnamese cinema

Figure 1. The transformation of the contemporary Chinese cinematic field (Source: Nakajima, *The genesis, structure and transformation of the contemporary Chinese cinematic field: Global linkages and national refractions*, 2006: Figure 2)



In this second part, I will be applying Seio Nakajima's thorough analysis of the Chinese Cinematic Field to the case of Vietnamese Cinema. In his research, Nakajima examines how politics, economy and culture interact to mold modern Chinese cinema in the context of

globalization. As I discuss the dynamics and structure of this industry, his detailed analysis will provide a strong framework and be a key point of reference along the subject. Seio Nakajima investigates the Chinese cinematic field using Pierre Bourdieu's "field of cultural production" theory. According to Bourdieu, society can be divided into several largely independent "fields" (e.g. artistic, religious, scientific, bureaucratic, and economic) (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). His theory is crucial for the 'specific and irreducible' division of the cinematic field, that is itself embedded in the broader fields of cultural production.⁴

Many filmmakers, with the decrease of state-control under the reforms of *doi moi*, were motivated for creative aspirations. What is referred to as the New Wave of Vietnamese cinema encompasses a wide range of film types and styles, each playing a unique role in articulating the nation's identity and negotiating its position in the global arena. From art-house cinema to international, independent, or commercial films, all possess and are influenced by political, cultural and economic factors.

2.1 The Independent films

The Vietnamese independent films, also called 'art-house films' stand on the position of high cultural capital, medium to high economic capital, and low political capital. This type of filmmaking is one of the cultural productions that the state has ceased to fully finance, with a decrease of subsidies. Nevertheless, as proven by the financial success of certain independent films, arts and culture can be extremely lucrative when they live up to consumer expectations (Drummond et Thomas, 2003, p. 194). *The Return (Tro Ve)* came out in 1994 and is a remarkable example of the new wave of art cinema that portrays personal aspirations and moral issues that the Vietnamese people had to face, living in a nation experiencing social and economic transformation. Drummond and Thomas (2003) gave a proper definition of an art film (phim nghệ thuật), described as a film which "endeavors to portray the lives of ordinary people, their joys and heartaches, and to bring into sharp focus the contradictions and problems of a rapidly changing society" (p. 195). These films are typically produced outside the major studio system and offer more personal or unconventional narratives. Therefore, private studios and "new movie houses" were created in 2005 as major distributors for these

⁴Nakajima notes that media and communications as well as cultural and creative industries are included in the field of cultural production. For the purpose of this article, only the films will serve as a source of analysis.

independent movies, as they received little to no funding (Hamilton, 2009).

2.2 Commercial films / Vietnamese blockbusters

As for Vietnamese commercial films, they include mainstream cinema, popular within Vietnam characterized by mass appeal, that are mostly released at the period of Tết, (Lunar New Year), also of the most celebrated festival in Vietnamese culture. It is a key period for the films to make the box office, not only in Vietnam but in several Asian territories. Therefore, they stand on the position of medium cultural capital, as they influence popular tastes within Vietnam, high economic capital, centered on the maximization of box office returns, and finally low political capital. For instance, *Mai*, directed by Trần Thành, is a romantic drama that delves into the psychology of its female protagonist, and it clearly emerged victorious: he was at the top of the box office with a revenue of 400 billion VND (16.4 million USD) in 2024⁵. However, for the moment, it is the local films that pull the market. ProductionQ CEO Nguyễn Hoàng Quân, who along with director Trần Hữu Tân is behind several successful horror films, explained that the company had been most successful with stories rooted in local folklore and traditions, as well as adaptations of novels by young writers with a large readership of generation Z (lecourrier.vn, n.d., 2024).

2.3 International movies

International Vietnamese movies stand in the position of high cultural capital, low to medium economic capital and low political capital. Because they showcase its unique cultural and social traditions, they portray Vietnamese identity more easily. It raised the bar for diasporic Vietnamese films such as Vietnamese American or French Vietnamese co-productions. Considering Vietnam's history of occupation, many Vietnamese expatriates sought to produce movies in Vietnam as a means to reach local but also international audiences (Hamilton, 2009, p.143). They are medium in economic capital because of their low cost of production and because they reach a wider audience, generating a lot of income and revenue thanks to international festivals and the participation of foreign companies which offer them better

⁵ lecourrier.vn. (n.d.). *Mai, le plus gros succès du box-office vietnamien.*

budgets. But in 2006, the Vietnamese authorities started to worry about the influence of Vietnamese expatriate filmmakers and tried to hinder their local production (Hamilton, 2009, p. 151). These movies represent an interesting ‘counter-narrative’ to the perception of Vietnamese society that the West constructed, sharing Vietnamese own realities of the different wars that they had to face (Soldavini, 2010). Released in 2007, the historical drama and martial arts film *The Rebel* was influenced by foreign culture, including American and French, to create a story that resonates across different regions. The film's synopsis, which is set in 1922 French Indochina, centres on the patriarchal rebel leader's anti-colonial operations and revolves around nationalism and resistance. The storyline champions Vietnamese nationalist history through a succession of male protagonists, from the traditional Confucian patriarch to his Westernized son, illustrating the nation's historical and cultural evolution.

Lastly, the globalization of pop culture is also one of the strong influences on Vietnam's cinema that needs to be considered. Among these influences, the Korean Wave, or Hallyu, refers to the international popularity of South Korean culture, encompassing music (K-pop), television dramas (K-dramas), films, fashion, beauty products, and even cuisine. Popular culture has proven to be the most effective representative of Seoul in Vietnam since the two countries' formal diplomatic relations were established in 1992. Since the debut of "Winter Sonata" on

Vietnamese television, the Korean wave have gained more popularity. And as of right now, Korean dramas like "Autumn Love Song," "Love Story in Harvard," "Full House," "Boys over Flowers," "Jewel in the Palace," and several more are well-known to Vietnamese viewers (Hoa et al., 2015, p. 565). Twenty years later, Hallyu is increasingly popular globally and is prominent in Vietnam. Factors contributing to South Korean pop culture's supremacy in this country could be the “digitalization, modernization and the rise of consumer culture” following *Đổi mới*⁶. But also the current social and cultural shifts in Vietnam:

“Romantic K-dramas and sentimental K-pop ballads, which emphasize pure, idealized romantic love, self-love, and self-awareness, struck a chord with the changing local society, which has witnessed a turn to the ordinary and the private in its own media.”
(Collins, 2016, p. 110)

⁶Gammon, T. (2023). *How the Korean Wave Intersects With Social Change in Vietnam*.

Conclusion

In summary, Vietnamese cinema reflects the nation's history, culture, and evolving identity in an increasingly globalized world. Rooted in a tradition of state-controlled filmmaking that mirrored the ideological and political priorities of the time, it has gradually transitioned into a diverse and vibrant industry. The introduction of the Đổi mới reforms marked a turning point, encouraging creative freedom, reducing state subsidies, and contributing to the emergence of independent films, commercial blockbusters, and international co-productions. These developments have enabled Vietnamese filmmakers to explore complex social, economic, and cultural themes, addressing both local realities and universal human experiences. At the same time, the globalization of popular culture is strongly changing Vietnam's cinema scenery. The influence of movements like Hallyu has changed audience expectations and introduced new aesthetic and narrative elements into Vietnamese films. Despite these external influences, Vietnamese cinema remains centered on its historical and cultural context, serving as a medium to preserve collective memory, celebrate national resilience, and redefine Vietnam's place on the international stage.

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