

A Quick Look at Vietnamese Cinema in the Era of Renovated Economy (*Đổi Mới*)

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This short article gives an overview of the Vietnamese cinema in the era of economic reforms in Vietnam since 1986 to the present time, known as *Đổi Mới* era. Due to social, economic and political transformations brought about by *Đổi Mới*, Vietnamese cinema has become increasingly preoccupied with economic advances and expressions of individuals rather than commemoration of past wars. Moral decadence as a result of encroaching capitalism is also explored in several contemporary films.

Keywords: Đổi Mới, economic reforms, liberalization, urbanization, Vietnamese cinema

Introduction: Vietnam's Neoliberal Economic Reforms *Đổi Mới*

More than a decade after Vietnam's North-South reunification in 1975 (or the end of the second Indochinese war as referred to in the West), Vietnam was tightly under the grip of poverty and hunger (Elliott, 1992). Aid from its ally—the Soviet Union—was also dwindling towards the end of the 80s as the Eastern Bloc was heading towards dissolution. Vietnam was faced with the precarious reality inside the country and the neoliberal pressure from international donors such as the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and the World Bank to open the country's market in exchange for loans and donations. At its Sixth National Congress in 1986, the Vietnamese Communist Party decided to adopt a new economic model called the socialist-oriented market economy, following its communist neighbour China. This reform policy, known as *Đổi Mới* (Renovation), allowed for the abandonment of the central planning model of socialism to adopt a market-oriented economy under the socialist state's guidance. This fundamentally means that the closed, government-subsidized economy is now opened up for foreign investment, and the importation and exportation of products are allowed and promoted, hence the common name "open door policy" (*chính sách mở cửa*). *Đổi Mới* also means that a large number of state enterprises are now privatized and individuals and private organizations are allowed to own businesses. In a nutshell, *Đổi Mới* has wired Vietnam into the global network of closely connected economies and has not only reaped considerable economic achievements with high GDP growth rate and rapid reduction in poverty but also gained more political openness and diversity in cultural activities and products (Beresford, 2008; Drummond, 2006; Nguyen Nhat Tuyen, 1999). The World Bank's overview of Vietnam states that "Economic and political reforms under *Đổi Mới* [...] have spurred rapid economic growth, transforming what was then one of the world's poorest nations into a lower middle-income country." (The World Bank, 2020).

However, *Đổi Mới* has also disrupted the lives of countless Vietnamese people who struggle to adapt to the transformations made under the reform policy and situated certain groups of the Vietnamese population in vulnerable places. A part of the contemporary cinema of Vietnam is devoted to presenting the struggle of these marginalized groups to the public eye.

Vietnamese Cinema in the *Đổi Mới* Period

According to the Vietnam Film Archives, the history of Vietnamese cinema is divided into three periods: the French colonial period, the American war period, and the socialist period. Following the logic of corresponding cinematic developments with the nation's political and economic transformations, Chuong-Dai Hong Vo (2008) added a fourth period, the *Đổi Mới* period. In this section, I want to discuss the *Đổi Mới* era of Vietnamese cinema, with special attention to its depiction of the “renovated” city.

Vietnam's established filmmaker Đặng Nhật Minh wrote, cinema shapes “part of society's reality, gives voice to the concerns, the joys and the sorrows of ordinary people during their day-to-day existence” (Dang & Pham, 2003, p. 200). Aware of Vietnam's intensive transformations in the last few decades, Đặng identifies cinema as a platform to “bring into sharp focus the contradictions and problems of a rapidly changing society” (p. 195). Cinema, as stated by former director of the Vietnam Cinema Department Nguyễn Thu, should emphasize authenticity and reflect society as it is based on a careful study of the Vietnamese society rather than following foreign film traditions (Charlot, 1991; Hamilton, 2009). Inheriting this spirit, generations of Vietnamese filmmakers have made films anchored in Vietnamese ideas of humanity, philosophy, and national identity to show “a commitment to questions of humanity, beauty and moral character” (Hamilton, 2009, p. 142). Vietnamese cinema's conventional and well-visited themes are reflective of relevant social issues faced by ordinary people, such as war, mourning, reconciliation, and family life (Charlot, 1991). These themes are coherent with the country's history with wars, collective struggle and the culture's emphasis on family values. Films representative of these themes include *Bao Giờ Cho Đến Tháng Mười/When The Tenth Month Comes* (Đặng Nhật Minh, 1987), *Tướng Về hưu/The Retired General* (Nguyễn Khắc Lợi, 1988), and *Bến Không Chông/Wharf of Widows* (Lưu Trọng Ninh, 2000).

However, *Đổi Mới* has massively transformed the society at large as well as the cinema industry, which has led to several changes in filmmaking practices and contents addressed in film. During the period of centrally planned economy, like workers of any other occupation, filmmakers were paid with monthly salaries and received rations of food and other necessities. Besides, film production fees were entirely subsidized by the state. Unconcerned about both funding and profit, filmmakers' sole aim was to “serve society” (Dang & Pham, 2003, p. 192). For many filmmakers and producers, state subsidies freed them from mundane concerns of financing and profitability, thus allowed them to focus instead on the artistic quality of their films. Đặng Nhật Minh remarked that it was no coincidence that the period of state subsidy witnessed the release of numerous art films of exceptionally high quality (ibid.). Vietnamese cinema of this period, apart from some propagandistic socialist realist films, was appreciated for the artistic quality of Vietnamese films given the scarcity of financial and technological resources as well as the hardship as conditioned by warfare and colonial history (Charlot, 1991; Hamilton, 2009).

Đổi Mới, however, has substantially lessened if not terminated the state subsidy provided for film production. Many film agencies have been privatized and no longer receive funding from the state.

One way for film production to survive is to attract capital from private entrepreneurs whose interest, however, is mainly to generate profit. Therefore, films have to be both inexpensive to produce and appealing to the popular taste. This condition and filmmakers' uninhibited desire to earn financial independence in the open-door era are among the main reasons that Vietnamese films have become "commercial products made for popular entertainment rather than education or aesthetic appreciation" (Dung 1999; Hoa 1999; Kim 2000; Lan 1998 as cited in Dang & Pham, 2003, p. 193). This stands in stark contrast with the socialist era when making money for oneself was condemned.

In addition, since the commencement of *Đổi Mới*, Vietnamese culture has started to be visible to the outside world whereas domestic consumers, especially younger generations, have become increasingly interested in foreign cultural products, including films, such as Hollywood blockbusters, Hong Kong martial epics and South Korea's soap operas. This means fierce competition for the homegrown cinema. For younger audiences, Vietnamese films have become too formulaic with clichéd story lines and too familiar themes such as rural life, struggle against alien invaders and post-war socialist reconstruction. This sentiment is shared not only among general audiences but also writers. In 2006, *Truyện Ngắn 8X/Short Stories of 8X*, a collection of short stories written by authors born in 1980s, known as generation 8X, boasted in its statement that the authors do not wish to "rewind archaic tapes" (*nhai lại những cuốn băng cũ rích*), or "chew over the old" (Healy, 2013, p. 2) because they are the young generations. Although this statement was withdrawn later, it still expressed the younger generations' disinterest, if not distaste, in themes that had thitherto dominated the country's high culture, such as cinema and literature. Clearly, while the older generations feel nostalgic about older times and frustrated about the "social evils" of modernity, the younger generations have become more interested in economic changes and self-expression than reminiscences of past sufferings (Dang & Pham, 2003; Hamilton, 2009). This dilemma has posed tremendous pressure and a significant challenge for Vietnamese filmmakers to create products with comprehensive narratives and representations to not only appeal to audiences and make profits but also be artistically valuable.

Moving from narratives of war and loss, Vietnamese cinema has become devoted to more contemporary issues. Since the 2000s, Vietnamese films have often portrayed poverty and struggle to keep up with society's rapid changes, some examples of which are *Cánh Đồng Bất Tận/The Floating Lives* (Nguyễn Phan Quanh Bình, 2010), *Trái Tim Bé Bông/The Little Heart* (Nguyễn Thanh Vân, 2007) and *Ròm/Rom* (Trần Thanh Huy, 2019). Besides, since the "renovated" city has provided abundant social spaces for both men and women, such as amusement parks, cafes and restaurants, filmmakers have observed, and featured on film, gender, sexuality and various issues faced with men and women in the transforming society. Examples of films about these themes include *Chuyện Của Pao/Pao's Story* (Ngô Quang Hải, 2006), *Chơi Vơi/Adrift* (Bùi Thạc Chuyên, 2009), *Cha và Con và.../Big Father, Small Father and Other Stories* (Phan Đăng Di, 2015) and the documentary *Chuyến Đi Cuối Cùng Của Chị Phụng/Madam Phung's Last Journey* (Nguyễn Thị Thắm, 2014).

Another change in Vietnam's filmmaking industry since *Đổi Mới* is its hybrid character (Hamilton, 2009). This hybridization started to occur in the late 1990s when the country started to welcome Vietnamese diasporic filmmakers, who escaped Saigon in 1975, back into the country. Vietnamese-French Trần Anh Hùng's *Cyclo* (1995) and Vietnamese-American Tony Bùi's *Three Seasons* (1999) are among the earliest "Vietnamese" films made by diasporic directors in the *Đổi Mới* era. From the 2000s, the collaboration between Vietnamese and overseas Vietnamese filmmakers, actors and producers has become increasingly stronger for a number of reasons

including changes in Vietnam's laws that enable overseas diasporic Vietnamese to have dual citizenship and to own property in Vietnam (Duong, 2020). Vietnamese diasporic filmmakers and crews now see opportunities in an unprecedentedly welcoming and profitable film market in Vietnam. Vietnamese-American director Charlie Nguyễn, for example, has made many films for Vietnamese audiences since the 2000s, including commercial successes *Dòng Máu Anh Hùng/The Rebel* (2007), *Để Mai Tính/Fool For Love* (2010), *Long Ruồi/Long Fly* (2011), and *Em Chưa 18/Jailbait* (2017). Another Vietnamese-American director, Victor Vu, has also been a prolific filmmaker with romantic comedy *Cô Dâu Đại Chiến/Battle of the Brides* (2011), horror *Quả Tim Máu/Vengeful Heart* (2014) and most recently, romantic drama *Mắt Biếc/Dreamy Eyes* (2019). Although most Vietnamese diasporic directors prioritize entertainment and box office by making commercial productions, some of them also make art films that deeply reflect concerns and struggle of the poor, such as Nguyễn Võ Nghiêm Minh with *Mùa Len Trâu/Buffalo Boy* (2004), Lưu Huỳnh with *Áo Lụa Hà Đông/The White Silk Dress* (2006), Tony Bùi with *Three Seasons* (1999) and Trần Anh Hùng with *Cyclo* (1995).

Apart from diasporic directors and actors, *Đổi Mới* has also enabled domestic filmmakers to seek financial assistance and collaboration with foreign producers and artists. Several of Vietnamese award-winning films are products of collaboration and sponsorship from outside the country. For example, Ash Mayfair's *Người Vợ Ba/The Third Wife* (2018) was partly funded by the American Spike Lee Production Fund. Some other non-Vietnamese contributions to the film include Thai cinematographer Chananun Chotrungroj and artistic consultant Trần Anh Hùng. Nguyễn Hoàng Điệp's *Đập Cánh Giữa Không Trung/Flapping in the Middle of Nowhere* (2014), likewise, was also co-produced by VBlock Media (Vietnam), Ciné-Sud Promotion (France), Film Farms (Norway) and Filmallee (Germany).



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Urban Life in Vietnamese Cinema

As a result of the reformist policy, Vietnamese society has transformed substantially, especially the city which has been referred to as the “land of opportunity” (Dang & Pham, 2003, p. 197). With foreign investment pouring into developmental projects in cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (former Saigon), these places have become magnets that draw people from underdeveloped regions to come seeking job opportunities. On the receiving end of the country’s “industrialization” and “modernization” efforts (*công nghiệp hóa, hiện đại hóa*), the city has transformed from “big villages” (Tran Quoc Vuong, 1981 as cited in Giang Hoang Cam, 2016, p. 2) into bustling urban zones of big and small businesses that keep springing up in response to city dwellers’ increasing consumerist attitude. Besides factories that manufacture essential life equipment and appliances, encouraged by *Đổi Mới*, the city now also hosts a multitude of less essential enterprises such as hotels and restaurants and non-essential services such as coffee shops and bars. Work opportunities in the city for the working class lie in numerous factories, construction sites, restaurants, bars, hotels and other places that are promoted by *Đổi Mới*’s privatization and liberalization agenda.

A significant part of the city’s population hail from rural areas where the socialist collective farming production was terminated. Job opportunities are scant and individual household agricultural production neither provides enough nor requires farmers’ constant presence. The changes in Vietnam’s Land Law in 1993 that allow farmers to rent their agricultural land also contribute to rural residents’ burgeoning migration to the city (Anh, Rigg, Huong & Dieu, 2012). Recent literature has also identified climate change and price fluctuations as new elements that drive farmers to working in the city (Nguyen, Raabe & Grote, 2015). To reflect on Vietnam’s shift from socialism to economic liberalization and its profound impact on the society, numerous Vietnamese filmmakers have focused on relocated demographics, such as the rural-to-urban migrant.

Being the land of opportunity as well as the site of human struggle, the renovated city has replaced the village image that, as Giang (2016, p. 2, 3) describes, was a “strong” and “persistent” symbol of “national personality” in Vietnamese cinema before 1986. Unlike commercial movies where shots of lavish, glamorous city life filmed in MTV manners are often used to attract and please audiences, art films (*phim nghệ thuật*) tend to be more committed to showing shabby corners of the city and the struggle of its poorer residents. Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the two largest cities of the country, are featured the most in the last 30 years of *Đổi Mới*, in movies such as *Xích Lô/Cyclo* (1995), *Ba Mùa/Three Seasons* (1999), *Tâm Hồn Mẹ/A Mother’s Soul* (2011), *Lạc Lối/Aimless* (2013), *Đập Cánh Giữa Không Trung/Flapping In The Middle of Nowhere* (2014), and most recently, *Ròm/Rom* (2019). Visualizing the city in the *Đổi Mới* era, these films seem to portray Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, although having their own idiosyncratic features, both as bustling, fast-paced, chaotic, and usually disrupted with construction sites, either continuing or abandoned. The city is usually depicted as a space of contrast where images of wealth and prosperity are juxtaposed with images of poverty and struggle. Trần Thanh Huy’s *Ròm* (2019), for example, features the struggle for survival of orphan children and poor citi-zens in a slum right next to the city’s most iconic symbol and a reminder of powerful neoliberal forces, the Bến Thành Market.

The image of visible money, that is cash, is also seen quite often in films set in the city, signaling city dwellers’ and contemporary society’s equating of “better life” with money. In Trần Anh Hùng’s *Cyclo* (1995), small bills of five or ten thousand dong (less than 50 cents) are seen being passed from hand to hand between manual laborers, which signifies the fast flow of “free trading”, but more

importantly, to accentuate the hardship in the lives of people toiling unceasingly day by day only for a few bucks. In Lê Hoàng's commercial hit *Gái Nhảy/Bargirls* (2003), American dollar bills are shown in close-up shots to highlight the U.S. dollar's penetration into Vietnam and Vietnamese culture — the penetration of consumerism, including consumption of the body as a commodity. This circulation of money, according to Paul Narkunas (2001), points to the encroachment of the lawless underworld as the city starts to embrace westernization and global capitalism (cited in Do and Tarr, 2008).

In Đặng Nhật Minh's *Trở Về/Returning* (1994), there is an interesting contrast between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. In the film, Hanoi is a “timeless city” (Dang & Pham, 2003, p. 196), a cradle of longstanding and harmonious traditional values and the root of culture — the place of return. On the contrary, Ho Chi Minh City is depicted as a place of injustice and inequity, causing degradation of morality and failure of personal and social relationships (Dang & Pham, 2003). In *Return's* world, ten years into economic reforms, while Hanoi's integrity is still intact, Saigon has already transformed into the decadent capitalist Ho Chi Minh City (Do and Tarr, 2008). However, Đặng Nhật Minh's perspective on Hanoi later changed as revealed in his film *Mùa Ổi/Season of Guavas* (2000) where the city is portrayed as a trap that lures an honest, hardworking woman into a newly built hotel to work as a waitress and prostitute. To younger generations of filmmakers such as Phan Đăng Di and Nguyễn Hoàng Điệp, Hanoi is far from being a safe and cultured place. Hanoi in Phan Đăng Di's *Bi, Đừng Sợ!/Bi, Don't Be Afraid!* (2010) is full of dark hallways, gray, lifeless buildings, and shabby slums. Meanwhile, in Nguyễn Hoàng Điệp's *Đập Cánh Giữa Không Trung/Flapping in the Middle of Nowhere* (2014), the city's corruption and shenanigan that are hinted at in Đặng Nhật Minh's *Season of Guavas* is exposed through the revelation of the procurer's deception towards a young, pregnant girl.

In general, in contemporary Vietnamese cinema, the city is the living environment that shapes the experiences of characters who have to navigate through the treacherous ways of life in the city where money holds the highest value. In Hanoi's shabby streets in Phạm Nhuệ Giang's *Aimless* (2013), whose Vietnamese title literally translates “lost” (lạc lối), the migrant couple find themselves losing not only their material belongings but also their marriage and identity. As such, the city not only provides opportunities but also precarity for those wishing to find a better life in the transforming society of contemporary Vietnam. After 30 years into *Đổi Mới*, it seems that Hanoi has also turned into another decadent capitalist center, like Ho Chi Minh City.

Notes

1. We cry/We laugh/We act crazily/We are benign/And the final state of mind is emptiness.//We are lonely/Sometimes we find writing/A luxurious release/When we're calm, we find everything meaningless.//And then we cry again, we laugh again, we act crazily again... But we do not rewind archaic tapes/Because, simply, we are the young generations. The Generation 8X full of confidence and pride. (*Short Stories of 8X*, 2006).

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