

The Images of Vietnamese Women in Three Films by Tran Anh Hung

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Abstract

The Trung sisters (c. 12 - AD 43), Trung Trắc and Trung Nhi, were Vietnamese women who rebelled against Chinese rule almost 2,000 years ago, and are regarded as national heroines of Vietnam. Highly revered in Vietnam, they led the first resistance movement against the occupying Chinese after 247 years of domination. Many temples are dedicated to them during the Lunar New Year to commemorate their deaths.

The story of the Trung sisters conveys the courage and resilience of Vietnamese women that passed from generation to generation and survived dark episodes in history such as the Vietnam War. However, the Vietnamese women were usually seen as subservient and passive both in literature and in daily life. The issue prevails as to how the popular fictional avenues, such as cinema, represent Vietnamese women to the mass audience. To address this, the trilogy of films by Tran Anh Hung – *The Scent of Green Papaya*, *Cyclo* and *Vertical Ray of the Sun* – were selected. The analysis of these films conveys the passivity of women in the context of Vietnamese films.

The paper aims to show the passive representation of Vietnamese women in contrast with the patriarchal image of men both in films and in the media. Moreover, an examination of the reviews of the films unveils the important contribution of Tran Anh Hung to the feminist discourse.

Keywords: Vietnamese women, Vietnam War, Passivity, Tran Anh Hung

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Introduction

In Vietnam, Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism have co-existed for many centuries (Anh, 1998). They are known as the “triple religion” (tam giáo) and have pervaded all aspects of Vietnamese life. As a poetic metaphor, this blend of elements in East Asian cultures has been likened to a ‘grand tapestry’ with Confucianism as the ‘warp,’ providing morality and practical norms for human relation; Taoism as the ‘woof’ that defines human relations with the universe and the cyclical changes of nature; and Buddhism, with its notions of compassion and the afterlife, as the ‘golden thread’ (Johansson, 1998; Saso, 1990). Other religions, including Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism), Islam, Cao Dai and Hoa Hao also co-exist.

In spite of the diversity of religious influences in Vietnam, the concept of family has been deeply influenced by traditional Confucian doctrine. In the family, the man is traditionally regarded as the head, having the last word in making decisions on production, business, and investment of household resources (Drummond & Rydström, 2004; Que et al., 1999; Rydström, 2003). Traditionally, a Vietnamese woman should follow “the three obediences” (tam tòng), which are:

(i) obey her father as daughter; (ii) obey her husband as wife and; (iii) obey her eldest son, if the husband has died (Bich, 1999; Tuyet & Thu, 1978). Women in rural areas are relegated to doing the household chores such as child rearing and managing expenses. They have little influence on other important issues such as: purchasing assets, property, houses and other decisions requiring large amounts of money. (Anh, 1991; Liljestrom, 1991; Long, 2000).

Over the years, there have been important changes in Vietnamese society particularly regarding women’s status and education. The number of female deputies in the National Assembly accounted for 27.3% of the total members as of 2007 (Ha Thi Thanh Van, 2012). Meanwhile, in the same year, the proportion of female college graduates was 36.24%, master graduates was 33.95% and Ph.D. graduates accounted for 25.69% of the total, according to the statistics of the Vietnam Women’s Union. However, the decline of fertility in the female sector meant a decrease in household size and more women joining in the labor force (International Women’s Rights Action Watch, 2000).

Despite said changes in women’s priorities, the traditional Vietnamese family remains fundamentally the same. The preference for sons has remained, exemplifying the Vietnamese proverb, “having ten daughters but no son is the same as having no children” (Bélanger et al., 2002; Dong, 1991; Rydström, 1998). The cultural value of sons is strongly supported by government policies advocating the maintenance of a small family. According to a report of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW 5+6), in the state’s administrative offices at all levels, the percentage of women ministers is equivalent to 11.29% of the total. Breaking this down further, at deputy minister level the figure is equivalent to 12.85%, and at chief minister (and equivalent) 12.2% in 2004.

The Doi Moi policy, an economic reformation mandated by the Communist Party in the late 20th century, opened Vietnam to new influences and consciousness leading to an international view of human rights and the potential of the free market (Glewwe, 2004). Reforms in areas of health and education were also undertaken, mostly concerning the allowance of private sector with mixed results (Glewwe, 2004).

The Doi Moi policies are generally considered to have made positive contributions to the Vietnamese economy, as rapid growth rates were achieved, macroeconomic variables stabilized, exports and foreign direct investment grew, poverty levels reduced, and life-expectancy and school enrollment rates increased (Glewwe, 2004). During this period, women started to participate in different fields, which were primarily handled by men such as: Information technology, industrial manufacturing and trading. The government also conducted vocational training classes for women and encourage them to enroll in higher education (Le Thi, 2005).

Even so, Vietnamese society and its social structure have maintained a strong imprint of Confucian thought. Alongside Buddhism, Confucianism has contributed to the fading of communism in daily life (Rubensson, 2005).

Vietnamese modern society is described by scholars as a combination of old patriarchal traditions, emphasizing the subordinate role of women, and modern Communist party ideology advocating equality by law (Johansson, 1998; Thinh, 2001). At present, gender relations in Vietnam are a compound of norms, values, and practices inherited from a distant Confucian past as well as a more recent socialist one. These have been made complex by changes associated with the transition to a market economy and its integration with the global sector (Werner & Belanger, 2002). In other words, gender relations are in a state of flux, despite attempts to maintain older patriarchal norms concerning gender roles. "Tradition" and "customs" coexist with increased opportunities for women to participate in economic activities (Kabeer et al., 2005). Strong cultural traditions, often centered on patriarchal norms affecting the family and gender roles, continue to prevail despite economic reforms.

In the international scene, Vietnam has been reported to be performing well in terms of its GDI (Gender Development Index) ranking in relation to its per capita GNP (Gross National Product). It ranked 89 out of 146 countries in 2002, scoring well above other countries with a similar level of economic development.

Despite all these changes, men continue to be the primary breadwinners in the Vietnamese household. Women continue to be responsible for housework and childcare and are expected to maintain family harmony and happiness (Long et al., 2000). However, they are also expected to contribute to improving the household livelihood. Due to their heavy household work burden, women have only less time and energy to participate in social activities, additional learning and local democracy (Kabeer et al., 2005).

Historically, women have played an important role in Vietnamese society and they have held "a special position and prestige in family and society" compared with women in other countries in the South East Asia. This was seen during Vietnam War when women had to participate in the War effort while attending to household chores. (OMCT, 2001; WU, 1989). This is the impact of the Confucian influence in Vietnam

during the Chinese occupation of the northern half of the country more than 1000 years ago. It substantially weakened the traditional gender equity, and some authors have argued that it was at this point that patriarchy became entrenched as the dominant form of gender relation (Quy, 2000). With the advent of the Socialist government, formal equality was established in the Constitution. A number of government policies and grassroots women's organizations were established as a consequence of this such as: (1) the Marriage and Family Law (1989); the Civil Code (1995); (2) the Labor Code (1996) and Gender Equity Law (2006). Nevertheless, discrimination against women has continued to exist in Vietnam and women encounter substantial legal and social obstacles when attempting to enforce their rights (OMCT, 2001).

Even though Confucian influence has left strong imprints on family ideology and norms for social relations (Johansson, 2000), a number of changes have taken place during the 1990s. Relations between generations have altered. Fertility rates have been reduced. The number of women working outside the home has increased and women's education has improved. Despite this, men are considered to be the main decision-makers concerning production and allocation of resources, while the power sphere of women in many cases is restricted to the household (Franklin, 2000; Johansson, 2000).

The inequality also affects the representations of Vietnamese women in the mainstream media, particularly in the news, have been accentuated by scholars because such depictions play a vital role in shaping perceptions of the world (Berger & Luchmann, 1967; Hall, 1997; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). The importance of the issue is magnified because media consumers are allowed to see the world through the eyes of the media (Fishman, 1980). Accordingly, the rendering of Vietnamese women as passive and subservient rather than as women possessing an agency for empowerment may have further implications.

However, the news media is not the only outlet that feeds the images of Vietnamese women to the Western world. Fictional films are also a vivid source of information. As Appel and Richter (2007) assert, films have an implicit influence on the way people view the world. Yet one is left to wonder how films represent Vietnamese women to the world and the images and roles they portray. One is also left to wonder whether these representations are true to the real experiences of the contemporary Vietnamese women

Through different periods, the images of Vietnamese women always emphasize tolerance, sacrifice and passivity. In order to give a clearer picture of Vietnamese women's portrayal in film, the researcher has considered some significant films below as examples that help underpin the main themes of the study.

Discussion

Films about Vietnam and Vietnamese people produced by foreign national directors are scarce and among these that portray Vietnamese women are scarcer still. It is for this reason that the trilogy comprising *The Scent of Green Papaya*, *Cyclo* and *The Vertical Ray of the Sun* have been selected for this examination. The goal is to discern the images and characters of Vietnamese women embedded in these films.

1. The Scent of Green Papaya

Synopsis

The interior life of a Vietnamese household in the 1950s, as seen through the eyes of a young servant girl. The film is set in 1951, when the beautiful and inquisitive 10-year-old peasant girl Mui (Lu Man San) is hired as a young helper to work at the home of a businesswoman in Saigon. When the father steals all the family's savings, the tireless mother (Truong Thi Loc) is forced to support the family through the little profits of her tiny fabric store. As the family struggles to survive, Mui becomes attracted to a family friend named Khuyen (Vuong Hoa Hoi). The film then moves to the 1960s. The family is in desperate straits. The father has passed away, and Mui (Tran Nu Yen Khe), now in her twenties, works for Khuyen. Khuyen has a sophisticated and attractive French educated fiancée. Mui serves Khuyen as she served her former employer, with dedication and silence. She also develops feelings for Khuyen in silence, but gradually Khuyen begins to take notice of Mui's love for him.

The images of women

The structure of the film consists of two parts: The first part describes the operation of servitude relationships. Women start to handle the house chores at childhood, learning from an early age how to eventually be a housewife and a homemaker. The second part focuses on the employer, a woman with multiple roles in the family and who has a useless husband. And at the end of life, the grandmother and the employer can only seem to have meaningful dialogues with the deceased, not with the living.

The role of women in Vietnamese culture is central to this film and they are portrayed as victims of a cultural ideology, Confucianism.

The employer, Truong Thi Loc, is a multiple-role woman: a mother, a wife, a daughter-in-law and a breadwinner. As a wife, she suffers betrayal and oppression from her own husband. Yet she loves her husband with an unconditional love and expects nothing in return from her life partner. The scene that best expresses her tolerance is that in which she helps her husband prepares his suit for his "walk", and then realizes that he has taken all the family's money for his personal gratification. Even when the husband returns from his third 'disappearance', she does not blame him:



Mui: “But the other time when he came back, she didn’t say anything?
“Nothing, not a single word, she was happy. She cried for joy.” Said the old helper.
The employer lives a meaningless life, a life that has been defined by the patriarchal system; she has the role of motherhood not only to her children but, effectively, also to her husband and the wife-hood-to give but not to receive. She prioritizes her family before herself, displayed in the scene when she runs up and down thanklessly to serve the meal for her family.

The story also shows other subtle traits relating to Vietnamese women. If Mui is the image of a beautiful woman, the employer, has the traditional Vietnamese traits, which are kindness and servility. She gently comforts Mui as well as taking care of her own children. She expresses love for her lost child to Mui, while seeing her sleeping. She regards Mui more as a daughter rather than as a maid. The mother acts as the catalyst that holds the family together. The maternal role of Vietnamese women plays a vital role in the family as well as in the society. Tran Anh Hung also emphasizes this role in Mui, when she touches her womb at the end of the film.

The second part of the film is built on a distinction between the two opposite cultural perspectives. One side is represented by the fiancé named Thu. She comes from an elite class and has been educated in Europe. She has Western ideas of glamor but more significantly, has absorbed a more European approach to the balance of power and responsibilities between men and women who are involved in relationships. Yet, at the same time, she is aware of the Confucian custom that women should not touch a man’s head, as it is the noblest part of a man.



“I wonder what percentage of women in Vietnam have never touched their fiancé’s head. My mother told me that before they used to teach girls that a well-educated woman should never do it.” She wonders.

In a critical scene, she touches Khuyen’s head without hesitation, something that Mui, a quiet and servile woman, who is aware of and maintains the traditional values, would never do.

Khuyen chooses a traditional woman, probably because he wants someone who is familiar with these customs and he has a fear of radical change. Khuyen does not want to be dominated by Thu, who has a strong personality and is also very outspoken. Had they married, Thu might have had a more equal relationship with Khuyen and had her revolution. Ultimately, the film implies that men still want to retain their superior position over women - the patriarchal structure favors men and subordinates women.



At the end of the film, Tran Anh Hung offers the audience the solution: When the husband teaches Mui how to read and write, he inadvertently hands weapons to her by which she might be liberated. But this is only a possibility, and one that she does not take. Because, in the last scene, Mui, after a monologue delivered facing the camera closes her eyes in response to the fetal movement inside her womb. With this pregnancy, the cycle might begin again and the traditional relational model will be repeated. Through the characters in the movie, modes of behavior that are very characteristic of Vietnamese women are displayed: these are patience, dedication, and sacrifice. The character development is not shown because any changes that will come in these social arrangements will come very slowly indeed.

1. Cyclo

Synopsis

A "cyclo" is a bicycle-drawn taxi similar to a rickshaw and, in this story, is used as the nickname of an 18-year-old boy trying to scrape together a living in the desperate poverty of Ho Chi Minh City. Cyclo lives with his grandfather (Le Kinh Huy) and two sisters (Tran Nu Yen Khe and Pham Ngoc Lieu). He drives his taxi for a bitter woman (Nguyen Nhu Quynh) who devotes most of her time to her mentally unstable son (Bui Huy Hoang). When the pedal-cab is stolen, Cyclo is forced into a life of crime to repay the debt and falls in with a group of petty thugs led by a self-styled poet (Tony Leung Chiu Wai).

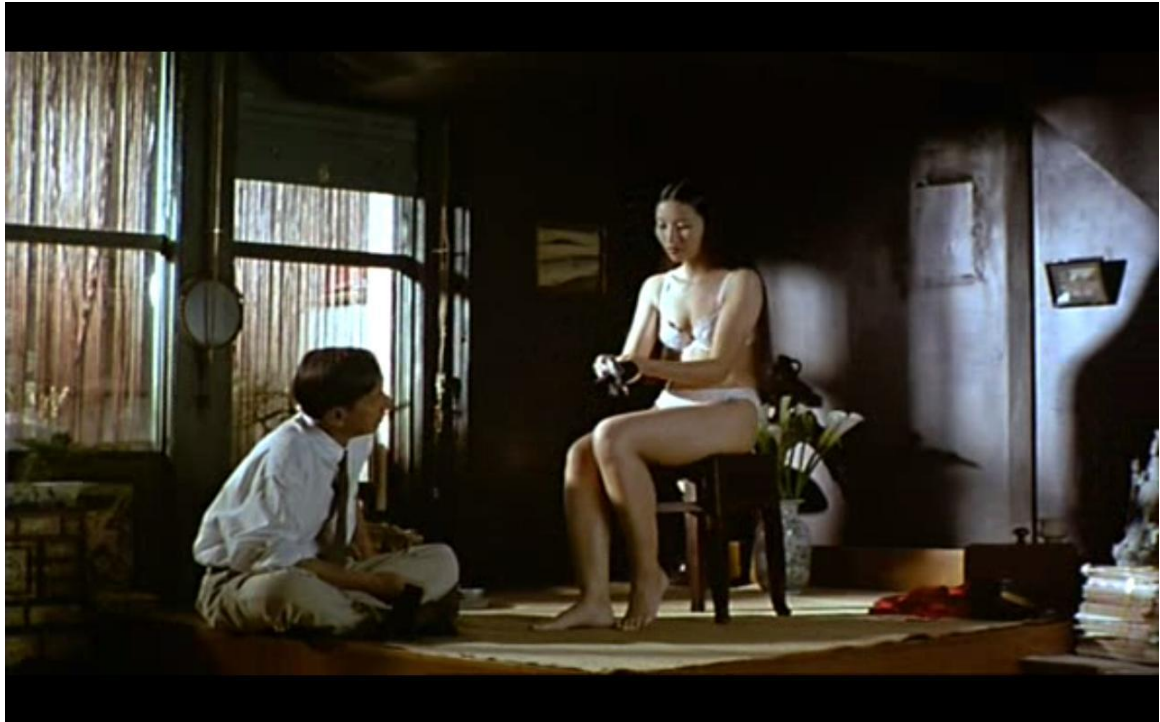
The images of woman

The film focuses on the post-war survivors of the conflict during the reconstruction period of the 1980s and the character Cyclo (Le Van Loc) serves almost as an 'everyman', whose experiences almost mirror those of the country itself in the post-war era.

Alongside the adventures that befall Cyclo, the director illustrates how women lived at this time. They are still restricted by the rules of Confucianism but cannot escape the impact of the political upheavals of this period.

Cyclo's sister is the female character standing between the two male protagonists, Cyclo and the poet. Her gracefulness embodies an idealized construction of tradition in contrast with the grim atmosphere that pervades the film. Her passive presence is almost allegorical and is set in sharp contrast to the perversion and chaos that seem to characterize the almost Mafia-like society that is immediate post-war Vietnam. Neither her brother Cyclo, nor her boyfriend the poet (who is unable to lead a normal relationship with her and even becomes her pimp), are able to protect her. She ultimately faces the same destiny as countless other Vietnamese women during and after the war as she is forced into prostitution.

Aside from being a war victim, she is also a victim of the male-dominated culture in Vietnam, exemplified by the men just returned from the war whose power still remains. She could have chosen to be an ordinary worker as she used to be but, ironically, because of love, she slips into prostitution. As with the leading character in "The Scent of Green Papaya", love will not necessarily free women from servitude in their relationship with men. In the sister's case, because of love, she ends in shamefulness by sacrificing her human dignity. While she had no chance to participate in other career, her naivety in following the lover's footsteps into a Mafia world reflects her passivity. Indeed, most of the time, she remains silent and her expression is almost limited to simply crying when facing problems. It has been argued that language is a man-made construction, constructed by men and for men (Muted group theory- Cheris Kramarae) but in this film, the sister is muted verbally and mentally because she has been oppressed by the patriarchy and by the poet, her lover.



This theme is underlined when she encounters different types of customers. She is first sold to a pervert who forces her to urinate in front of him; one likes to wash women's feet and another man likes to see women handcuffed. Yet her portrayal somehow still aligns with the feminine and pure image of the principal protagonists in "The Scent of the Green Papaya".

Indeed, she is at last able to free herself after the death of the boyfriend (the Poet), an ending that might be seen as positive since that her servile position can be seen to end when the dominant (male) group is not present.

1. The Vertical Ray of The Sun

Synopsis

'The Vertical Ray of the Sun' is a tale of three sisters who live in close proximity in present-day Hanoi. Lien (Tran Nu Yen Khe), the youngest sister, shares an apartment with her younger brother Hai (Ngo Quang Hai) and works at a cafe run by her oldest sister Suong (Nguyen Nhu Quynh). Suong is the wife of Quoc (Chu Hung), a photographer with whom she has a son. The middle sibling Khan (Le Khanh) is married to Kien (Tran Manh Cuong), a writer in the midst of finishing his first novel.



The images of women

During the first decade of the 2000s, Vietnam's economic growth rate was among highest in the world. The country started willingly to open itself to the outside world and was influenced by different cultural waves and especially American culture. Vietnamese women gradually changed their lifestyle and social ideology although they still faced many challenges because Vietnamese men did not always accept these changes easily or graciously. It is a period of transition in relations between the sexes, and this is captured in the film when Hoa (Lien's boyfriend) comments on his relationship with Lien (the youngest sister):



“I’m not ashamed to tell you this but I think she dominates me.”

He is afraid of being dominated by women or somehow overreacts to the situation but he slowly accepts it, and in the same with the patriarchal way of thinking in Vietnam slowly gave way to changes that recognized the possibility that women were the equal of men.

Their second eldest sister Khanh (Le Khanh) is married to a novelist who is struggling to end his latest novel but finally finds a way to end it. Compared to her siblings, Khanh has the most luminous life with a loving and romantic husband. She is also a liberal woman, comfortable when talking about the male's sex organ in conversation with her other sisters -a topic that Vietnamese women would never have talked about so openly in the past. Tran once again praises the importance and virtues of women's motherhood role in the scene when Khanh admitted that she is pregnant. Nevertheless, Khanh is stuck between liberal and conservative thoughts. Thus, she comfortably talks about sex with her husband but when she fears her husband may be having an extra-marital affair she just remains silent. Instead of confronting her husband directly, she chooses to share her doubts with her sisters. These women prefer their comfort zone: there is still a gap that makes them reluctant to approach the men closest to them to discuss important family matters.

The third sister is Suong (Nguyen Nhu Quynh), whose husband is obsessed with his photographs of rare plants. Suong knows that her husband is having an extra-marital affair with a woman by whom he has had a child and with whom he secretly lives on an island where he collects his specimens. The nature of his life explains his long absences from both women. Suong has been fully aware of her husband's attitude towards their marriage through the indifference he showed after she miscarried their first child.



If the film was set before the war, Suong would be like other women, silent and subservient, but she comforts her heart by falling for a businessman. Suong wants equal treatment with husband and she looks for the love that she deserves.

Tran made the films for women but he also used the trilogy to criticize the continuing and unquestioned role of men in the family perspective. The women carry the burden of motherhood and child rearing while the men continue to enjoy a degree of freedom in their approach to familial responsibilities that cannot easily be justified. The culture might be more liberal than the past but the traditional values still remain in contemporary life.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that *The Scent of Green Papaya*, *Cyclo* and *The Vertical Ray of the Sun* contribute to shaping the attitude and the belief of viewers toward Vietnamese women. The trilogy functions as a witness to changes that have occurred in Vietnamese culture between the 1950s and the present and also serves as a device for interpreting the lives and the worlds of Vietnamese women as they changed during those decades. These three films are quite possibly even more instructive and persuasive than a presentation of bare statistics and facts. *The Scent of Green Papaya*, *Cyclo* and *The Vertical Ray of the Sun* can implicitly influence the way viewers understand Vietnamese women and the way they make judgments about Vietnamese women's worlds.

Also, this research has highlighted the power of narrative. Films can persuade viewers and in this instance can play a major role in constructing the world of Vietnamese women to viewers. Films and the other arts have a peculiar flexibility: they are able to alter reality or single out particular realities that better fit their narrators' agenda. Accordingly, it is important both to highlight the portrayals of Vietnamese women in *The Scent of Green Papaya*, *Cyclo* and *The Vertical Ray of the Sun* and to understand how the director has constructed those portrayals to better convey his themes.

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