

The Emergence of the Cinema Industry in Vietnam during the French Occupation

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This paper presents the development of Vietnamese cinema in early French Indochina. It argues that the French introduced cinema to Vietnam to achieve its colonial goals. Furthermore, Vietnamese workers in the film industry and business people looking for new investment opportunities transferred the industry's technology to Vietnam with the intention of promoting the image and culture of Vietnam to its people and French subjects. This paper confirms that the cinema industry in Vietnam was established under the French occupation and had a significant influence on diffusing Vietnamese culture overseas.

Keywords: Vietnam, the Cinema industry, identities, culture, French Indochina

Introduction

In "What is cinema"? Andre Bazin suggests that cinema is "*the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny.*" (Sherzer, 1996, p. 122). Likewise, Teresa de Lauretis sees cinema as "*an apparatus of social representation,*" involved in "*the production of signs.*" (Sherzer, 1996, p. 122). Therefore, to analyze and understand movies as "*signifying practice,*" we must put them in a given socio-historical situation and consider the material conditions that facilitated their productions and their implications in the production and reproduction of meaning, value, and ideology. As a visual tool for the world, colonial film analysis is thus a way to understand the actual development of the colonial regime itself. It is also a storage box of the past that allows us to study the ideas, cultures, and identities reflected in films (Norindr, 1997). Hence, this article explores the film industry development in Vietnam from 1858 to the 1940s and the subtly expressed Vietnamese culture and identity through movies.

This article is divided into three parts. First, it evaluates the relationship between the French civilizing mission and the film industry's role in the conquest of the French colonies. Then, it presents the development of the film industry in Vietnam from 1858 to the 1940s. Lastly, it analyzes the first film made by French cinematographers and Vietnamese actors in Vietnam, *Kim Vân Kiều*.

The *civilizing mission* and colonial cinema

In France, two significant events occurred in 1895. The first was that the Third Republic declared the "*mission civilization*" (Mission civilisatrice) as the new French Empire's official ideology. Accordingly, "*the superior races have a right vis a vis the inferior races... they have a right to civilize them*" (L.Conklin, 1997, p. 11). More importantly, the French were optimistic enough to think that the civilizing mission of France could proceed without the use of force, emphasizing the idea of moral conquest instead through the dissemination of ideas and exchange of commodities. The second significant event was "*Louis Lumiere's invention of the portable motion picture camera*" (Creed & Hoorn, 2011, p. 225). These two developments may appear unconnected at first glance. However, in reality, cinema became "*a powerful ally in representing and disseminating the ideas and outcomes of the French civilizing mission and the colonial ventures of all the imperial powers*" (Creed & Hoorn, 2011, p. 225).

By the early 1910s, the French colonists had become fully aware of film's ability to disseminate the civilizing mission's ideals. They argued that if railroads, schools, and health care were the tools and means to show how modern and industrialized white people were, then film was the only visual tool that could describe their lifestyle, ideology, and culture. Therefore, film was used in various ways to support French colonial ambitions.

In film, the French colonists found a means to showcase their identities as European residents and bearers of civilization to the colonized (Slavin, 2001, p. 4). Movies about the West and Westerners were sent to the colonies, strongly influencing public opinion. These films were tools for entertainment and played a role in creating cultural cohesion between metropolitan France and its colonies. They especially revealed how indigenous people perceived the appearance and behavior of Westerners.

In the colonies, the film industry often developed according to the prerequisite goals of advertising a large, beautiful, desolate land requiring investment and settlement by the "motherland." These movies also increased the knowledge about the vast French Empire (Sherzer, 1996, p. 22). Albert Sarraut, Minister of the Colonies from 1920 to 1924, made a practical observation. It was "*absolutely indispensable*," he declared in 1920, "*that a methodical... propaganda by word and visual image, journal, conference, film, and exposition be activated in our land among adults and children*" (Slavin, 2001, pp. 59-60). Integrating film into a school curriculum offered a "*lively, expressive, and practical*" means of removing the ignorance of the colonies held by French youth. Therefore, when Albert Sarraut acted as Governor-General of Indochina from 1911 to 1914 and 1917 to 1919, he launched "*mission cinematography*" (mission cinématographique) to put his ideas into practice. French filmmakers made travelogues of daily life and historical sites such as Hue's imperial capital, which depicted how the Vietnamese used domesticated buffalo and elephants, and water transport to cultivate rice plants in the traditional economy. Projecting an image of a peaceful, stable society with hardworking adults and happy children, "*minutely polite, whose skin is the color of old wax*"—these films implied that Indochina awaited development and subtly invited French capital investment. The images constructed in these movies certainly contributed to shaping a French perception of the colonized lands and people favorable to French interests (Slavin, 2001, pp. 59-60).

At the same time, indigenous filmmakers attached great importance to the seventh art's influence on the indigenous people and Metropolitan France. They gradually approached this new industry and

made films to preserve, restore, and introduce native cultures to the West. Significantly, some of them saw film as a means of showing social identity and reshaping indigenous society under the influence of colonial rule. Thus, these colonial films were not simple stories of individual lives but originated from legends, events, myths, poetry, and folklore espousing national identity. In short, these factors paved the way for the development of the film industry in Vietnam and introduced Vietnamese culture overseas.

The emergence of the cinema industry in Vietnam

In the mid-nineteenth century, France expanded its colonial territories to the Far East and invaded Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The French colonists established the Indochina Union in 1887, including Tonkin (North Vietnam), Annam (central Vietnam), Cochinchina (South Vietnam), Cambodia, Laos, and Guangzhouwan. The French colonists managed these new territories by controlling Indochina's politics and economy and conducting cultural assimilation by introducing French culture to Vietnam through film. Thus, cinema was introduced to Vietnam very early.

On April 28, 1899, Gabriel Veyre, a student of the Lumiere brothers, held the first movie premiere in Hanoi free of charge. After this event, cinema became increasingly visible. Aste, a French expat living in Hanoi, built the first cinema in Vietnam—the Pathé theater—which was inaugurated on August 10, 1920. Since then, many theaters in Tonkin have been built. To establish the exclusive rights to exploit the cinema network, on September 11, 1923, French businessmen established the Indochina Films and Cinema Society (Société Indochine Films et Cinéma), and the Cinema Theaters of Indochina Society (Société des Cinéma théâtres d'Indochine) (Asselle et al., 1984, pp. 65-66) in 1930. In 1932, there were 27 cinemas in Tonkin, 11 movie theaters in Annam, and 13 movie theaters in Cochinchina (Brocheux & Hémerly, 2009, p. 232). Also, business people held mobile cinemas in the provinces. Besides French cinemas, some Chinese living in Vietnam also invested in building small theaters, mainly showing French films and a few Hong Kong and Chinese films. After that, some Vietnamese started to take an interest in this new business, including Vạn Xuân, who built the Olimpia cinema. By 1939, the number of movie theaters in Vietnam had reached sixty.

An example of an indigenous film: *Kim Vân Kiều*

In 1923, Indochina Film and Cinema Studio made the first movie in Vietnam, an adaptation of Nguyễn Du's epic poem *Truyện Kiều* (*The story of Kieu*) (Du, 2020)—one of the most famous poems in Vietnamese literature. The transformation of this work into a film not only had commercial significance but also showed the pride Vietnamese people have for their traditional culture and promoted the Vietnamese identity to Westerners, especially regarding French audiences.

Although scripted and directed by E.A. Famechon, this was the first Indochinese film with Vietnamese actors, decorations, and costumes provided by An Nam Quảng Lạc Theater (Hanoi). Therefore, as soon as the film was released, the Indochinese and Western journalists quickly reported and discussed it in both French and Vietnamese across many magazines such as the *L'Avenir du Tonkin* (*The Future of Tonkin*), *L'opinion* (*The Opinion*), *Indépendance Tonkinoise* (*Tonkin Independence*), and so on.

For the Vietnamese, *Kim Vân Kiều* was an opportunity to show foreigners a clear representation of native customs. This movie reflected Vietnamese social life during the feudal period with depictions

of different classes of society, such as the mandarins, the soldiers, the maids, the nuns, and the farmers. Moreover, through the film, the many aspects of Vietnamese culture, such as customs, houses, clothes, rituals, and music, were also communicated to Western and French audiences. For example, the film accurately depicted traditional Vietnamese costumes such as *Áo dài*, *khăn đóng* worn by men, and *áo tứ thân* worn by women. The furnishings in the house also clearly show the housing traditions of the Annam people, namely *sập gụ* (table), tea cupboard, *hoành phi* (horizontal lacquered board), and incense burner.

The Vietnamese actors tried especially hard to show their national pride in this movie. In the *Trung Bắc Tân Văn* (Annam-Tonkin Journal) newspaper on June 9, 1923, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh highlighted that "if we could make a good film, the Indochina film company would be famous worldwide. Everyone must praise Vietnamese literature and Vietnam's thoughts. Then, we could also do typical advertising for our country to the world" (Quốc, 2019).

Finally, the film's appearance opened up a new business. The businessmen in Vietnam believed that cinema could become a profession of enrichment for individuals and the country because producing a film requires the collaboration of people from many roles and fields (Cucherousset, 1924, pp. 86-88).

In short, for French colonialism in Indochina, *Kim Vân Kiều* was one of the best means of spreading colonial propaganda about Vietnam's resources and activities to the French in Metropolitan France, thereby encouraging them to invest or travel to this territory. However, for the Vietnamese, the film not only helped the Vietnamese better understand and appreciate their country's natural beauty, customs, and cultural traditions but also contributed to promoting the vivid image of Vietnam to the West, especially the French (Indochina Film, 1924).

Conclusion

The remoteness of France made cinema the only place where the indigenous and the colonists could admire French and Western cultures. Therefore, cinema attracted an increasing number of people, especially intellectuals. Simultaneously, the French received images of pristine lands that needed investment and exploitation through Indochina films. They also understood some of Vietnam's cultural characteristics and identities. Similarly, the Annamese also found a way to present their country as a land rich in culture, ideology, and spirit.

However, very few filmmakers made films about Indochina, and the Vietnamese conducting business in the film industry did not gain many remarkable achievements pre- 1945. Most studios such as Hương Ký, Annam group, and Asia film had to close after a short time, partly due to a lack of funds and human resources and partly due to the competition with French, American, and Chinese film studios. In particular, the colonial governments(plural?) did not encourage the development of private Indochinese companies in this field. Finally, prolonged warfare, especially the war against the French after 1946 and US involvement in the Vietnam war after 1954, made it difficult for Vietnamese cinema to develop.

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