

The Changing Role of the Post-War Diaspora in Vietnam's Nation-Building: The Case of Vietnamese National Cinema

Hanh T. L. Nguyen

Institute of Social Research and Cultural Studies
National Chiao Tung University

The Vietnam/American war (1955-1975) caused millions of Vietnamese to be displaced, resulting in a large Vietnamese diaspora in the West. The relationship between this diaspora and the communist state has been strained, but when Vietnam started to embrace a socialist-oriented market economy – known as *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) –, the state has sought to attract the diaspora for their contribution to the building of the homeland. This article focuses on the integration of the diaspora in the Vietnamese national cinema. International filmmakers, actors, and producers, especially those in the diaspora, have brought advanced filmmaking techniques from first-world countries to Vietnam, which have drawn bigger audiences to the movie theater. In return, diasporic filmmakers earn big profits and explore their ethnic identities on the screen in ways that would not be likely in countries like the United States. These transformations are outcomes of Vietnam's Renovation, which has been met with the favorable conditions of post-Cold War geopolitics, and the changes in sentiments towards the home country among the Vietnamese diaspora.

The Vietnamese diaspora includes overseas Vietnamese, or Vietnamese living in foreign countries. According to Vietnam's Nationality Law, overseas Vietnamese are defined as "Vietnamese citizens and persons of Vietnamese origin who permanently reside in foreign countries"; meanwhile "Persons of Vietnamese origin residing in foreign countries' are Vietnamese people who used to have Vietnamese nationality which had been determined at the time of their birth on the consanguinity principle and their offsprings and grandchildren are permanently residing in foreign countries." (1) (Vietnam Nationality Law 2008, Article 3, Item 3, 4). In Vietnam, overseas Vietnamese, especially returnees, are colloquially referred to as *Việt kiều*, a Sino-Vietnamese term that denotes people of Vietnamese origin living abroad.

According to the State Committee for Overseas Vietnamese (Ủy Ban Nhà Nước Về Người Việt Nam Ở Nước Ngoài), currently, there are approximately 5.3 million Vietnamese living in over 130 countries and territories, with 80% of them living in developed countries (2021). The diaspora, however, is nonhomogeneous in terms of members and the circumstances of their departure from Vietnam. They include emigrants to neighboring countries such as Laos and Cambodia since the feudal times, indentured and forced laborers in French colonies and immigrants in France and their offsprings and grandchildren, Vietnamese elites studying in Soviet Union countries in the 1980s and stayed after the collapse of the Western Bloc, and post-1975 refugees. This article focuses on the post-1975 diaspora in the West, which was formed after the defeat of Saigon on April 30, 1975.

Basically, the war refugee Vietnamese diaspora in the West was formed within 3 waves. The 1st wave of refugees are those who fled Saigon immediately before or after the fall of Saigon (Valverde, 2012). This wave was primarily composed of people who were urban residents with middle-class or upper-class backgrounds. Most of them were high-ranking soldiers or professionals who had close ties with the U.S. (Carruthers, 2008). These people traveled by air.

The 2nd wave of Vietnamese refugees are usually known as “boat people”. This wave started in 1975 and continued until 1981. Reasons for their departure included both the apprehension for and the experience of persecution by the communist regime (Hoang, 2018; Koh, 2015; Duong, 2012; Valverde, 2012; Võ, 2012), and the hope to be resettled to developed Western countries. This last reason was due to the regulation and mechanisms set up by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR) in 1979 that “any Vietnamese who left illegally and reached the shores of a first-asylum country would be automatically resettled in a developed country” (Casella, 1989, p. 162).

The 3rd wave of Vietnamese refugees started in 1979 when the UNHCR and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam signed the Orderly Departure Program on May 31, 1979 to regulate the flow of boat people (Valverde, 2012). Among those who left in this program were mixed children and prisoners who served in the military of South Vietnam. With the help of this program, the number of people who departed illegally and via risky routes declined. The Orderly Departure Program came to an end on September 30, 1999, twenty years after it began.



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According to some diasporic scholars, the refugees were labeled “traitors” by the communist state (Hoang, 2018; Duong, 2012, Võ, 2012). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that this “traitor” label was not widely propagandized in Vietnamese official discourses. Instead, in the mainstream Vietnamese media, the exodus of Vietnamese refugees was referred to as “the fleeing” (“cuộc tháo chạy”) and the people themselves were called “fleers” or “those who fled”. In the post-war years (from 1975 to

the late 1980s), the topic of “those who fled” was rarely uttered in the official discourse because they were “considered outside the nation” (Casella, 1989, p. 163).

However, in the wake of the 6th Party Congress in 1986 in which the decision of opening up the country was made -- a historical milestone commonly referred to as *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) --, Hanoi began to reconsider its stance on the Vietnamese diaspora. The communist administration said that expatriate Vietnamese were a “component of the Vietnamese nation” and openly admitted that they sent remittances and presents worth more than \$100 million annually to their families in Vietnam (Casella, 1989, p. 163). In fact, since Renovation, the state’s construction of the diaspora has changed from being “outside the nation” to being a “component of the Vietnamese nation” (in 1986) to being “an inseparable part of the Vietnamese nation” (in 2004). Now, overseas Vietnamese are referred to not as “traitors” nor “fleers”; they are referred to in public discourses as compatriot overseas Vietnamese (*Việt kiều yêu nước*) and those of the same blood cells as the Vietnamese people (*kiều bào*) whose hearts are always directed towards the homeland (*với nỗi lòng luôn đau đáu hướng về quê hương*) (Resolution 36, 2004).

Not only has the official rhetoric about *Việt kiều* changed to be highly inclusive and appealing to overseas Vietnamese’ nationalistic and primordial sentiments, but policies that assist their return and involvement in activities of nation-building have also been introduced over the years. In 2004, the Politburo issued Resolution 36 (2), a turning point in the relation between the Vietnamese state and the diaspora. This Resolution officially states that *Việt kiều* are “an inseparable part of the Vietnamese nation” and invites them to “help modernize the country” (Duong, 2016, p. 156) with their “skills, financial assets, and ties to educational institutions, corporations, international agencies and governments abroad” (Võ, 2012, p. 73). After that, a series of laws were promulgated to encourage *Việt kiều* to work and establish businesses in Vietnam, including permission for them to register a business on local terms (2005), home ownership rights (2006), visa exemption (2007) and dual nationality (2008) (Duong, 2020; Koh, 2015; Chan & Tran, 2011). From *Việt kiều*’s perspective, the ample opportunities in the emerging market of Vietnam have been highly attractive. The combination of, on the one hand, the favorable policies and the inclusive rhetoric of a “transnational family” that embrace the diaspora (Duong, 2012, p. 120), and on the other hand, the opportunities of development and identity exploration have brought thousands of overseas Vietnamese, together with their resources, back to the homeland every year.

According to the State Committee for Overseas Vietnamese, in five years from 2016 to 2020, the total remittances from Viet kieu was 71 billion U.S. dollars, increasing 6% each year despite the economic crisis due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2021, the remittances from overseas Vietnamese was 18.1 billion, which made 5% of the country’s national gross income. Nowadays, diasporic Vietnamese participate in various enterprises, including entrepreneurial activities, education, and art and culture.

Diasporic Filmmakers in Vietnam’s national cinema

In the front of art and culture, *Đổi Mới* has created favorable conditions for diasporic filmmakers to return and make films in Vietnam. Nowadays, they are involved in approximately half of the commercial movies made in Vietnam (Boudreau, 2012). In 2019, Vietnam Cinema Association dedicated July as the month of *Việt kiều* films, screening and discussing films such as *Three Seasons* (Tony Bui, 1999), *Owl and The Sparrow* (Stephane Gauger, 2009), and *The Rebel* (Charlie

Nguyen, 2007). Film researchers in the country have also taken up research about the role of diasporic films in Vietnam's national cinema (eg., Trần, 2016).

In terms of diasporic films' contribution to the national cinema, according to Brian Hall, CEO of MegaStar Cinemas, Việt kiều filmmakers have presented diverse options for Vietnamese audiences who are hungry for home-made, Vietnamese-speaking blockbuster films (Boudreau, 2012). Domestic filmmakers have been said to learn from overseas Vietnamese' techniques and more and more of them are going abroad to study filmmaking to catch up in the competition with Việt kiều filmmakers. Indeed, with the filmmaking techniques learned in top-notch film industries like the United States or France, Việt kiều filmmakers, actors and producers have made numerous movies that have drawn domestic audiences to the cinema in the last couple decades. Besides, Việt kiều filmmakers have diversified the Vietnamese national cinema with new voices and perspectives. According to Vietnamese-American scholar Lan Duong (2016), diasporic filmmakers have reinvigorated the Vietnamese film industry that was expiring in the 1990s.

While Việt kiều filmmakers contribute considerably to Vietnamese cinema, they also enjoy major benefits of working in Vietnam. First, making films in Vietnam is cheaper than in the West. The market for Vietnamese language movies is also substantially larger in Vietnam with a population of 100 million people versus a mere 5 million in the diaspora. Thus, the Vietnamese film market is very promising for making profits and gaining fame. Many films by Việt kiều directors are bestsellers at the box office. Việt kiều directors are making millions of dollars, hence the name "million-dollar directors" ("đạo diễn triệu đô"), such as Charlie Nguyen and Victor Vu. Besides, making films in Vietnam offers diasporic filmmakers space to explore their artistic and racial identities, an exploration for which they have significantly fewer opportunities to engage in, for example, in the U.S. (Tran, 2017; Võ, 2012). In addition, making films in and about Vietnam gives diasporic filmmakers the chance to produce narratives that counter those of the State. Films such as *The Rebel* (dir. Charlie Nguyen, 2007) or *Monsoon* (dir. Hong Khaou, 2019) are where diasporic filmmakers explore their identity and tell their own stories. In fact, making films in Vietnam, diasporic filmmakers, alongside domestic filmmakers, engage in the production of knowledge and perspectives, a process no longer monopolized by the state. Ghost film, for example, with its nonlinear time mode, has become an outlet for Vietnamese American filmmakers who were displaced by war to reconstruct history from their perspective to counter the state's official narrative (Duong, 2016).



“Rebel” by [Phim Ahn](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#).

The Two Generations of Diasporic Filmmakers

Diasporic filmmakers in Vietnam can be divided into two groups that are sometimes called the two generations of Việt kiều filmmakers. The first generation include those that returned and made films from the late 1980s to the mid-2000s, such as Tran Anh Hung with *L'Odeur de la papaye verte* (1993) and *Cyclo* (1995), Tony Bui with *Three Seasons* (1999), and Nguyen Vo Nghiem Minh with *The Buffalo Boy* (2004). Films by these directors are oftentimes *phim nghệ thuật*, or art films, that appeal to film critics and international film festivals more than the mass. While the films by first-generation diasporic filmmakers are appreciated for their aesthetics (writer Lê Lưu, film director/former director of Giai Phong Studio), they are also perceived in a rather negative light by domestic filmmakers and critics. According to domestic experts, diasporic filmmakers look at Vietnam from an outsider perspective (film critic and deputy editor-in-chief of Culture and Arts Magazine *Đỗ Lai Thúy*); the portrayal of Vietnamese life in their films is nostalgic and unfamiliar with Vietnamese people's perception of life in contemporary Vietnam (Former President of Hanoi University of Theater and Cinema Trần Thanh Hiệp); diasporic films are made for foreign audiences, not for Vietnamese (film director Nguyễn Khải Hưng) (opinions reported by Nguyễn, 2006). Another minus point for Việt kiều films is the outdated and unnatural use of the Vietnamese language in the script and the accented speeches of Việt kiều actors (Boudreau, 2012).

While all these characteristics and the lack of a popular appeal may render first-generation diasporic films unattractive to the majority of Vietnamese domestic audiences, they draw international attention. In fact, according to screenwriter Trịnh Thanh Nhã, a point of comparison between domestic filmmakers and diasporic filmmakers is that while the former focus on “urgent social issues” (những vấn đề xã hội cấp thiết), the latter focus on Vietnam’s “ethnic and cultural identity” (bản sắc dân tộc và văn hóa của Việt Nam) (Nguyễn, 2006). For this reason, Việt kiều films are sometimes considered better at representing Vietnam to the world than films made by domestic filmmakers. According to Ngô Phương Lan, former director of Vietnam Cinema Institute, “Việt kiều filmmakers are better at flying the Vietnamese flag than directors in the country itself” (cited in Duong, 2012, p. 55). In fact, Ngo Phuong Lan’s words could be seen as a conclusion about the expected role of diasporic filmmakers in contemporary Vietnamese cinema: they are the ones designated to bring the image of Vietnam to the world. This expectation for Việt kiều filmmakers resonates with the vision for overseas Vietnamese in general to be the bridge between Vietnam and the world, as stated in Resolution 36.

However, the second-generation of Việt kiều filmmakers who started making films in Vietnam in the late 2000s, such as Charlie Nguyen, Victor Vu, Dustin Nguyen, and Ham Tran, started to develop a different vision in filmmaking. Instead of presuming the designated role of representing Vietnamese culture through art films, they appeal more to popular taste and invest much more on commercial products. Some of these films are Dòng máu anh hùng/The rebel (Charlie Nguyen, 2007); Để Mai tính/Fool for Love (Charlie Nguyen, 2010), Giao lộ định mệnh/Inferno (Victor Vu, 2010), Tôi thấy hoa vàng trên cỏ xanh/Yellow Flowers on the Green Grass (Victor Vu, 2015), Âm mưu giày gót nhọn/How to Fight in Six Inch Heels (Ham Tran, 2013), and Mắt Biếc/Dreamy Eyes (Victor Vu, 2019).

The investment in making commercial movies could be seen as a response of overseas Vietnamese returnees to a special moment in Vietnam’s history: the intensified integration into the world’s neoliberal economic regime, the partial privatization of Vietnamese cinema in 2002, the Resolution 36 in 2004, and the turn to commercial films to attract home audiences by Vietnamese domestic filmmakers, which was initiated by Lê Hoàng with his film Gái Nhảy/Bar Girls in 2003. Instead of realizing the designated Vietnamese dream of bringing beautiful and exotic images of Vietnam to the world through highly aesthetic films, the second generation of Việt kiều filmmakers have become more interested in making financial success through commercial blockbusters. Observing young Việt kiều, especially Vietnamese Americans, reaping success in Vietnam thanks to their cultural capital and a unique moment in the Vietnamese political economy (i.e., the turn to neoliberalism), Nguyen-Akbar (2016) remarked that these Vietnamese returnees have found opportunities to realize the “American dream” in Vietnam.

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Notes

1. Người Việt Nam định cư ở nước ngoài là công dân Việt Nam và người gốc Việt Nam cư trú, sinh sống lâu dài ở nước ngoài. (Luật Quốc tịch Việt Nam, Điều 3, Khoản 3)

Người gốc Việt Nam định cư ở nước ngoài là người Việt Nam đã từng có quốc tịch Việt Nam mà khi sinh ra quốc tịch của họ được xác định theo nguyên tắc huyết thống và con, cháu của họ đang cư trú, sinh sống lâu dài ở nước ngoài. (Luật Quốc tịch Việt Nam, Điều 3, Khoản 4)

2. Nghị Quyết Số 36/NQ-TW Về Công Tác Đối Với Người Việt Nam Ở Nước Ngoài.