

The background of the cover is a dark green field filled with intricate white line drawings. These drawings are architectural in nature, featuring floor plans, structural grids, and curved, organic forms. Some areas are filled with a pattern of small hexagons. The lines vary in thickness and density, creating a complex, layered visual texture.

THE COLD WAR AND ASIAN CINEMAS

Edited by
Poshek Fu and Man-Fung Yip

ROUTLEDGE



The Cold War and Asian Cinemas

This book offers an interdisciplinary, historically grounded study of Asian cinemas' complex responses to the Cold War conflict. It situates the global ideological rivalry within regional and local political, social, and cultural processes, while offering a transnational and cross-regional focus.

This volume makes a major contribution to constructing a cultural and popular cinema history of the global Cold War. Its geographical focus is set on East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. In adopting such an inclusive approach, it draws attention to the different manifestations and meanings of the connections between the Cold War and cinema across Asian borders. Many essays in the volume have a transnational and cross-regional focus, one that sheds light on Cold War-influenced networks (such as the circulation of socialist films across communist countries) and on the efforts of American agencies (such as the United States Information Service and the Asia Foundation) to establish a transregional infrastructure of "free cinema" to contain the communist influences in Asia.

With its interdisciplinary orientation and broad geographical focus, the book will appeal to scholars and students from a wide variety of fields, including film studies, history (especially the burgeoning field of cultural Cold War studies), Asian studies, and U.S.-Asian cultural relations.

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Edited by
Poshek Fu and Man-Fung Yip

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Introduction

The Cold War was a momentous era in global history. The confrontation between capitalism and communism functioned as a macro-historical structure that shaped ideological conflicts and organized international relationships for much of the latter half of the twentieth century. According to conventional wisdom, the end of the Cold War can be dated to the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the fall of the Berlin Wall, the shredding of the Iron Curtain, as well as the ousting of the communist regime in the Soviet Union and the eventual disintegration of the Soviet empire brought about the collapse of the Communist Bloc. But just as scholarly inquiry always blossoms after the event, Cold War scholarship, spurred by newly declassified archival materials across the world in recent years and by the different insights opened up by other fields (notably cultural history), has continued to grow and be enriched over the last 30 years or so, as evidenced by new journals such as *Journal of Cold War Studies* and *Cold War History*¹ and by a proliferation of research monographs that have brought a wide range of new materials and perspectives to our understanding of the global conflicts.

A significant shift in the recent Cold War research has been an expansion of geographical scope beyond Euro-America and an adoption of a more local, non-totalizing, and culturally specific frame of analysis (Ang 2018; Chamberlin 2018; Chen 2001; Masuda 2015; Reynolds 2014). This means, on the one hand, conceptualizing the Cold War not simply in relation to the heightened state of hostility and rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, but as a global conflict fought as much between the two superpowers as between their allies and proxies across the world. Asia in particular, a region that witnessed the rise of communist China, the partition of Korea and the subsequent civil war, the Vietnam War, and so on, was a major battleground where the Cold War conflict was played out. On the other hand, concerted efforts have also been made to localize the Cold War experience by examining it in relation to other key trends and developments such as decolonization, nation-building, and other local processes and movements. In highlighting the local experiences of and responses to the Cold War, such an approach provides a more complex picture of the global Cold War and helps reimagine what has long been ignored or taken for granted.

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At the same time, recent Cold War scholarship has also developed a broader focus that goes beyond its traditional preoccupations with military or political confrontations or with high diplomacy and interstate relations. The Korean War, the Cuban missile crisis, the Vietnam War, the détente, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—all these were major incidents of the Cold War and merit close attention. But the Cold War struggle involved also, and perhaps above all, ideological warfare—a battle fought with words and images, that is, in the cultural realm. It is thus imperative not to lose sight of what has been called the “cultural Cold War” and “Cold War culture”—a rapidly growing field that investigates the multifaceted ways in which art, literature, media, and other cultural sectors partook in, responded to, and were shaped by the Cold War dynamics (e.g., Cummings 2009; Day and Liem 2010; Doherty 2005; Klein 2003; Saunders 2000). The cinema in particular offers special insights into these processes, given that the medium, with its mass popularity and cultural salience in the mid- to late twentieth century, was seen by both sides of the ideological divide as a potent vehicle for creating and mobilizing support for their causes.

There is certainly much more to be studied about the Cold War, particularly from a non-Western cultural perspective, and it is this belief that has guided this collection on the intersection of the Cold War and Asian cinemas. While a sizable literature exists that investigates American and other Western (especially British, German, and the Soviet Union) cinemas within the context of the Cold War (e.g., Moine 2018; Shaw 2006; Shaw and Youngblood 2010), attempts to study Asian cinemas through a similar lens have emerged only relatively recently (Hee 2020; Hughes 2014; Wong and Lee 2009). There is no doubt a need for more research on the subject and greater attention to the complex issues involved. Driven by this observation, this collection sets out to offer an interdisciplinary and historically grounded inquiry into the nature and extent of the Cold War’s connections to Asian cinemas. It builds on the premise that Asian cinemas during the Cold War—their films, their film industries, their film cultures, and the interconnections between all of these—were constituted at the juncture of a number of forces: the global ideological rivalry of the era was one of them, but no less crucial were a set of regional historical imperatives (decolonization, modernity, search for national identity) and local film-industrial demands (market pressures, the aspirations of building a national cinema). This suggests that Asian cinemas’ responses to the Cold War were more fluid and intertwined than is generally thought; Cold War ideologies were often mingled with ideas and identities associated with local political, social, and cultural processes, while for many film companies and filmmakers, allegiance to the “left” or to the “right” was not a mere ideological issue but also a tactical means toward industrial or individual goals. The use of the Cold War as an analytical framework, then, does not mean seeing

it as a deterministic influence, but rather as one among many forces driving Asian cinemas in the period.

On the other hand, the fact that many Asian films of the period were intertwined with Cold War ideologies or confronted with political pressures does not necessarily mean that they were mere propaganda or kitsch lacking artistic or entertainment values. The binary opposition between propaganda and art, ideology and entertainment, is too simplistic and fails to recognize the creative and cultural energy that can be observed even in films, such as Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940), with clear intention to serve political causes. The same is true with some of the most ideologically invested Asian films in the Cold War context: from Chinese model opera films and Thai's anti-communist actioners to South Korean and Vietnamese war movies, Cold War-inflected Asian cinemas created new ways of communication and engagement as filmmakers drew upon their own national cultures and various cinematic traditions (Hollywood, socialist realism, Soviet montage, etc.) and creatively deployed narratives, styles, and genres to assert their ideological commitments.

This collection also strives, as best as we could, for a more inclusive treatment of Asian cinemas during the Cold War; its geographical focus is set on East Asia (China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea), Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam), and South Asia (India). In adopting such an inclusive approach, we aim to bring an interdisciplinary and comparative perspective to the book, drawing attention to the different forms and meanings of the "cinematic Cold War" across the region. More generally, many chapters in the collection take on a transnational and cross-regional focus, one that sheds light on Cold War-influenced networks (such as the circulation of socialist films across communist countries) as well as on the efforts of American agencies (such as the United States Information Service or the Asia Foundation) to establish a transregional infrastructure of "free cinema" (e.g., the Asia Film Festivals) to contain the communist influences in Asia. This emphasis toward the transnational will further open up our understanding of the cinematic Cold War in Asia.

This collection consists of three parts. The first part, *Transnational Connections*, focuses on a variety of border-crossing formations and practices that can be observed in Cold War-influenced Asian cinema. Man-Fung Yip explores Vietnamese revolutionary films of the 1960s and 1970s and argues that the films, despite their clear didactic intent, are marked by a richly expressive style derived in part from the Soviet avant-garde cinema of the 1920s as well as from the "thaw" films in the immediate post-Stalin years. Namhee Han's chapter takes as its object of study the military newsreels made by the South Korean army in Vietnam and examines how these news films used images, sounds, and the compilation format to control the narrative about South Korea's military

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involvement in the Vietnam War. The last two chapters in this part both deal with issues of transnational film circulation and reception. Drawing on the memories of moviegoers, Li Jie retraces the reception of foreign films—primarily those from fellow socialist countries—in China during the Cold War era. Their use as propaganda notwithstanding, Li argues that there was “considerable grassroots heteroglossia and creativity” in the ways how these film imports were appropriated and refunctioned to meet the particular needs of the Chinese viewers. Lan-jun Xu discusses the different ways in which the mainland Chinese film *Third Sister Liu* (*Liu Sanjie*, 1961) was received in Singapore and Hong Kong. She attributes the film’s huge success in Singapore to the leftist labor and anti-colonial movements in the territory during the period, while in Hong Kong, the film and two locally made adaptations were locked in a fierce competition for audiences in which landscape and folk songs, as politically contested elements in representing Chineseness, played a key role.

The second part, *Global Conflicts, Local Formations*, includes six chapters that explore how the macro structures and effects of the Cold War were refracted and mediated by local processes. Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano delves into the educational films of post-WWII Japan and argues that they did not simply reflect but actually created an emerging national ideology known as “postwar”—an ideology that was profoundly shaped by the unequal power relationships between Japan and the United States during the Allied Occupation and in the post-Occupation, Cold War era. Focusing on the topos of land and on the reflexive yet ambivalent appropriation of the discourse of revanchist cultural nationalism in the Nikkatsu studio’s *Wataridori* series (1959–62), Michael Raine proposes cinema as part of Japan’s Cold War cultural infrastructure, not so much a conduit for political messages as the environment in which audiences experienced and resolved the desires, resentments, and anxieties generated by Japan’s subordination to the American government’s shifting goals of (anti-communist) security and economic development in Asia.

In her chapter, Jessica Tan situates writer-director Evan Yang’s MP&GI films within the context of Shanghai’s literary modernism of the 1930s, and explores, through the interconnected motifs of the automobile and the modern woman, the modern sensibilities of the films in the Cold War film culture of 1960s Hong Kong. Calvin Hui, using Wang Ping and Ge Xin’s *Sentinels under the Neon Lights* (*Nihong dengxia de shaobing*, 1964) as a case study, examines how leisure and consumption, rather than being accepted as part of everyday life, were frequently repressed and displaced as mere symptoms of bourgeois capitalism in communist China. Hye Seung Chung utilizes recently declassified archival materials and makes a convincing case that film censorship in South Korea during the Cold War era, unlike what many people think, was not a mere tool for political repression but worked, in a less draconian way, to boost public morale by instilling a “cheerful” sensibility into

Korean films. Rini Bhattacharya Mehta's chapter concludes the second part by exploring the elusive connections between Indian cinema and the Cold War. The evolution of Indian cinema, according to Mehta, was shaped, to a large extent, by the Indian nation-state's simultaneous espousal of democracy and a regulated "quasi-socialist" economy, while a clear apportioning along the Cold War geopolitical divide marked the global reception of Indian films, with the state-subsidized art films gaining more access in the capitalist "First World" and the commercial Hindi films being more popular in the socialist "Second World" (as well as many developing nations in Asia and Africa).

The focus of the third part, *Struggle for Hearts and Minds*, touches on one of the central aspects in the cultural Cold War—that is, using cultural practices and products as a tool to propagate opposing ideological positions in order to win the allegiance and support of the public. For Michael G. Vann, the 1984 Indonesia film *Pengkhianatan G 30 S/PKI* was made to do just that, a tool used by the Suharto government to cultivate a collective anti-communist memory surrounding the historical events associated with the failed 1965 coup d'état. Poshek Fu considers in his chapter postwar Hong Kong Mandarin cinema and explores the "cinematic containment" strategies promoted by the U.S. and Nationalist Taiwan psychological war agents and the so-called "Free China" studios to draw audiences away from communist influence. Man-Fung Yip's chapter explores the complex reasons for the waning of Hong Kong leftist cinema in the late 1960s and 1970s. Going beyond mere political factors (i.e., the heightened political and ideological control that came in the wake of the Cultural Revolution in China), Yip takes a close look at the leftist studios' struggle to adjust to a Hong Kong society marked by accelerated processes of modernity and modernization and by major demographic changes. Finally, Hang Sang Kim considers the propaganda films made by the United States Information Service in South Korea during and after the Korean War, and examines the mechanisms and structures of the gaze through which South Korean audiences were positioned in the films.

Taken together, we hope, the chapters in this collection bring a broader, deeper, and more nuanced understanding of the complex responses of Asian cinemas to the Cold War conflict. In doing so, they attest to this collection's goal to further the ongoing effort to extend discussions of the Cold War to the cultural realm and, more specifically, to help contribute to a global history of the cinematic Cold War.

Note

- 1 *Journal of Cold War Studies*, associated with the Harvard Project on Cold War Studies (HPCWS), was established in 1999, followed a year later by *Cold War History*, based in the Cold War Studies Program at LSE IDEAS, the Centre for International Affairs, Strategy and Diplomacy at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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Part I

Transnational Connections



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1 Art in Propaganda

The Poetics and Politics of Vietnamese Revolutionary Cinema

Man-Fung Yip

With few exceptions, Vietnamese revolutionary cinema has received virtually no attention in English-language scholarly literature. This dearth of interest is due in part to lack of access: with the exception of a few art-house hits by Tran Anh Hung or by overseas Vietnamese such as Tony Bui and Nguyễn Võ Nghiêm Minh, Vietnamese films, and those from the 1960s and 1970s in particular, have not been widely available outside of Vietnam and thus have been ignored by historians and film scholars alike.

But there are perhaps deeper reasons for the critical disregard for the films. For many people, Vietnamese revolutionary cinema, operating under the control of a socialist regime and identifying closely with its policies and ideologies, is mere propaganda not worthy of study. More broadly, there is also a lack of interest in Vietnam as a sovereign nation with its own history and cultural distinctiveness. For a long time, Vietnam had been taken simply as a mirror to the international threat of communism and/or American failure. It is true that in the United States, copious films have been made about the Vietnam War—or the American War rather, as the conflict is known in Vietnam—and much has been written and discussed about these films. Yet this seeming attention to the conflict has never been much about Vietnam or about the war per se. Instead, it is first and foremost about the United States, specifically its Cold War fantasy of American exceptionalism or, contrarily, its ideological crisis following a long and traumatic war experience. In this context, the “Vietnam” represented in the films, often reduced to a dense primitive jungle and to a set of stereotypical Vietnamese characters (vicious soldiers, beautiful prostitutes, hapless villagers, etc.), figures not as a subject but as an imagined construct that serves as a ploy for America’s self-reflection. And with the apparent end of the Cold War and the fading away of the Vietnam conflict from the American and global consciousness, even this deceptive interest has started to disappear.

My goal in this essay is to provide a preliminary study of Vietnamese revolutionary cinema (with special emphasis on the period of the 1960s and 1970s) and to make a case for its historical and aesthetic significance. Such an endeavor is important for a number of reasons, not least

to restore Vietnamese subjectivity by drawing attention to and exploring narratives and images that present Vietnamese people and life from a local perspective. Moreover, a better understanding of the revolutionary films of Vietnam, not just at a politico-ideological level but at the level of aesthetics, also helps bring a more nuanced view of socialist cinema beyond its alleged status as mere propaganda. Widespread as it is, the notion of propaganda as aesthetically banal and uninteresting seems to me fundamentally flawed. The binary opposition between propaganda and art is too facile and fails to recognize the creative energy that can be found in even some of the most ideologically invested films—including, as will be clear, Vietnam's revolutionary cinema, which developed novel techniques of communication and engagement as filmmakers drew on their national cultures as well as a host of different cinematic traditions (socialist realism, yes, but also the Soviet avant-garde cinema of the 1920s and the cinema of the Thaw, among others) and inventively deployed narratives, styles, and genres to assert their ideological positions.

Before developing the aforementioned and other points further, I would like to point out some caveats in this study. First, due to the issue of access mentioned earlier but also to lack of space in this essay, my discussion focuses only on fictional films and leaves aside documentaries, even though the latter had played a major role in Vietnamese cinema and were produced in much greater quantity than any other types of film (save for newsreels) throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Second, and more importantly, I am not a Vietnamese studies scholar, nor do I speak or read the Vietnamese language. This definitely puts some limits to this study. Still, in concentrating my discussion on issues of form and style and illuminating in the process the unique aesthetics of Vietnam's revolutionary cinema, I believe that I can contribute something to our knowledge and understanding of this long-neglected film tradition.

Vietnamese Cinema: A Brief Historical Review

Cinema was introduced to Vietnam at the turn of the twentieth century. Over the next few decades, film production and exhibition were almost exclusively under French control—by the colonial authorities who commissioned films to propagate images of the colony in France, instituted censorship law to impose restrictions on film content, and legislated controls that espoused protections for French film imports; and by French businessmen who owned most of the distribution companies and movie theaters in Vietnam (Wilson 2007). But despite this monopolization, the 1920s and 1930s did see a number of indigenous attempts to make films with Vietnamese actors/actresses and, with the advent of sound film, in Vietnamese. These films, however, were hampered by inadequate material and technical resources, and none of them was able to compete with the foreign imports from France, the United States, and Hong Kong,

which dominated movie theaters (mostly in Saigon, Hanoi, and other urban areas) throughout the interwar years (Phạm 2001, 60–1).

Not surprisingly perhaps, little emphasis is placed on the colonial era in state-sanctioned narratives of Vietnamese film history. In official accounts, the first important films—that is, important to the development of a free revolutionary cinema in socialist Vietnam—are traced to the documentaries made by guerrilla filmmakers during the resistance war against the French from 1946 to 1954, including *The Battle of Moc Hoa* (*Trận Mộc Hóa*, 1948) and *The Battle of Dong* (*Khe Trận Đông Khê*, 1950). According to Thong Win (2017), these documentaries, shot in combat zones and shown in clandestine screenings across rural areas along the Mekong Delta, served as a way to mobilize support from disparate, and largely neglected, rural communities and bind them into a resistant political body under a new communist Vietnamese nationalism. Later on, as Việt Minh, the national independence coalition set up by the Indochinese Communist Party in 1941, consolidated power and began to anticipate victory in the anti-French struggle, the state monopolization of culture started to take shape. It can be observed, for instance, in the attempts to structure the artists and intellectuals into a more vertical, top-down arrangement through the development of professional creative organizations under a state umbrella. In the case of cinema, Hồ Chí Minh, then president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) or North Vietnam, signed decree 147/SL in 1953 to establish the State Enterprise of Cinematography and Photography, thereby marking the official nationalization of the Vietnamese film industry. Following this was the establishment of the Vietnam Cinema Department, placed under the Ministry of Culture, in 1956, while the Vietnam Cinema School was founded three years later in 1959 (Phạm 2001, 64–5).¹

From the focus on newsreels and documentaries in the late 1940s and much of the 1950s, the DRV moved on to make its first fictional feature—Nguyễn Hồng Nghi and Phạm Hiếu Dân (Phạm Kỳ Nam)’s *Along the Same River* (*Chung một dòng sông*)—in 1959, followed by the same directors’ *The Memento* (*Vật kỷ niệm*) in 1960 and Mai Lộc’s *A-Phu Couple* (*Vợ chồng A Phủ*) in 1961. But with the country getting into another long and fierce military conflict (with the United States) while still recovering from the anti-French resistance war,² the conditions of filmmaking were extremely difficult at the time, and only a few feature films were able to be made each year. In fact, the newsreel and documentary format continued to form the bulk of film production in communist-controlled areas of Vietnam. According to one researcher, 463 newsreels and 307 documentaries were produced in the DRV between 1965 and 1973, compared to just 36 fictional films made in the same period (Nguyen 2014).

One major feature of Vietnamese revolutionary cinema in the 1960s and 1970s is its persistent focus on the subject of war, specifically the

anti-French and anti-American resistance as well as the conditions of life in wartime in general. Given the country's constant military struggle for independence and later unification, this choice of emphasis is no surprise. Indeed, it is in the war film genre that we can find some of the most acclaimed Vietnamese movies of the period, from Nguyễn Văn Thông and Trần Vũ's *The Passerine Bird* (*Con chim vành khuyên*, 1962) and Phạm Kỳ Nam's *Mrs. Tu Hau* (*Chị Tư Hậu*, 1963) to Hải Ninh's *Little Girl of Hanoi* (*Em bé Hà Nội*, 1974). In addition to the war theme, another key area of attention pertained to the construction of a new society and the new woman/man under socialism. Examples in this category include Trần Vũ's *Floating Village* (*Làng nổi*, 1964), which extols a woman's efforts in bringing the peasants together to maintain the dike and protect the village from floods, and Nguyễn Đỗ Ngọc's *The Echo of the River* (*Dòng sông âm vang*, 1974), a film about the collective work involved in building a hydroelectric plant.

With the reunification of North and South Vietnam in 1975, Vietnamese cinema entered a new stage of development. For one thing, film production saw a dramatic increase, with the annual number of fictional features skyrocketing from three to five during wartime to an average of 15 to 20 in the late 1970s and early 1980s. War as a subject continued to inform numerous films, albeit often in new and different ways. A good case in point is Đặng Nhật Minh's *When the Tenth Month Comes* (*Bao giờ cho đến tháng Mười*, 1984): in telling the story of a widow who asks a teacher to write letters in her late soldier husband's name so that her frail father-in-law will find the strength to live, the film eschews the simplistic glorification of soldiers found in earlier films, offering instead a nuanced picture of the sufferings and losses of war while also affirming the resilience of the people. Other films looked into the new social reality of peacetime, such as the problems encountered by soldiers returning from war to civilian life (e.g., Trần Vũ's *The People We Met* [*Những người đã gặp*, 1979]) and the wounds incurred to families by years of war separation (e.g., Huy Thành's *Back to the Sand Village* [*Về nơi gió cát*, 1981] and *Far and Near* [*Xa và gần*, 1983]). The film industry was confronted with new challenges from the late 1980s onward, after it had shifted from a state subsidy system to a market-oriented one in keeping with the country's economic reform policy known as *đổi mới*. The result was an influx of private capital into the film industry and an explosion in low-budget and often sloppily made commercial films (especially video films), although the relatively liberal climate also facilitated works—by Đặng Nhật Minh, Lưu Trọng Ninh, and Lê Hoàng, among others—with innovative content and daring viewpoints (Phạm 2001, 76–80; Ngo 1998, 93–6). Entering into the twenty-first century, as Vietnam further opened up and became economically more buoyant, the trend toward privatization and commercialization intensified while attempts were also made to modernize the outdated filming equipment and poorly equipped

film theaters. International cooperation has also been on the rise. Despite its many problems, then, Vietnamese cinema has been growing over the last decade or so, albeit in a markedly different direction from its revolutionary past.

Between Propaganda and Art

As can be seen from above, Vietnamese revolutionary cinema was born and developed in an era when the country was continually at war fighting for liberation, independence, and national unification. It was also an exclusively state-run enterprise, constituting part of a national cultural front that advocated the mobilization of all art forms in the service of the revolution and the socialist state. Such a politicized conception of the arts was spelled out clearly in two important documents—"Theses on Culture" from 1943 and the more substantial "Marxism and Vietnamese Culture" from 1948—written by Trường Chinh, the chief theoretician among the communist leaders in Vietnam. For Trường Chinh, artistic and cultural work in a free socialist Vietnam was to be based on three guiding principles: nationalization, popularization, and scientific orientation. The first principle, nationalization, entailed the search for a new Vietnamese identity, one that eschewed not only centuries of Sinitized classical culture privileging a literati elite, but also a modern Vietnamese culture tainted by French and Chinese influences. Going beyond this nationalist focus, popularization, the second principle, embraced a class standpoint in its emphasis on the people, insisting that artists must create for and serve the interests of the masses, that is, workers, peasants, and soldiers. Lastly, scientific orientation was marked by a rejection of traditional practices and stressed a sense of progress through rational thought and discussion (Ninh 2002, 28–34; 39–45). What we see in Trường Chinh's recommendations for a cultural front, then, is a prescriptive account of a new Vietnamese culture defined in the context of a mass-based, rational, and progressive national identity, which could only be achieved after a victorious national liberation. And this liberation, in turn, would only be possible under the guidance of the political party with the strongest organizational capacity and the most scientific vision about the direction of the country's future—that is, the Vietnamese Communist Party.

According to this framework proposed by Trường Chinh, a revolutionary cinema in socialist Vietnam was to be a "mass cinema" that would not only appeal to the people and reflect their daily lives, but also gain and galvanize their support for the state's social, political, and economic objectives (e.g., the anti-colonial/anti-imperialist struggle against France and the United States; the building of a new socialist society). This was precisely the direction in which the emergent revolutionary cinema of Vietnam would be heading; when the State Enterprise of

Cinematography and Photography was founded in 1953, for example, it was tasked with four major goals:

- 1 Propagating the policies and guide-lines of the Government;
- 2 Highlighting the feats of arms of the Vietnamese army and people in their heroic struggle;
- 3 Acquainting our people with the life and successes in struggle and construction of the peoples of fraternal countries; and
- 4 Instilling cultural knowledge and political consciousness into our population

(Trinh 1983, 4).

With the onset of military conflict with the United States, these initial aims were revised to give primacy to the “education of opposition to the American invaders and their servants, in the promotion of patriotism and in the teaching of revolutionary heroism” (Tran 1990, 202). But for all the shifts in emphasis, what remained unchanged was the political utility of cinema: the conception of cinema as a fighting front, a weapon that was driven by the revolutionary goals set forth by the communist leadership, acting in the interests of the people.

Indeed, given a largely illiterate peasant population (the peasants made up about 90% of Vietnam’s population at the time), the importance of cinema (and other forms of visual and audio media) in supporting the revolutionary causes of the state was clear and hardly escaped the communist leaders. For example, long-time Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng once quoted Lenin in saying that “Film is an artistic genre of great significance and impact as it penetrates the masses directly and at their most sensitive point” (as quoted in Tran 1990, 202). But it was not just the audiovisual nature of cinema that rendered it such a promising agitprop and educational tool. The fact that cinema was a young and emerging art form (especially true in Vietnam), whose aesthetic and social properties had not yet been fully formed and were thus open to maneuvering, can also be said to enhance the medium’s political efficacy. As Thong Win (2017) rightly points out, “If Vietnamese intellectuals were in the process of defining a modern Vietnamese character both politically and within the arts, the emergence of a new popular art form as separate from centuries of traditionalism was undoubtedly appealing, since the production and reception of film could be tailored to meet Party demands during wartime. As an art form whose formal and aesthetic qualities were still being negotiated, cinema was granted a privileged position within the Party in a cultural struggle against colonial and imperial forces” (177).

While Thong Win’s focus is on the underground documentary film practices (especially the clandestine screenings in the rural areas along the Mekong Delta) in the early years of Vietnamese revolutionary cinema, his point about negotiating and developing a new aesthetic

commensurate with the state's political and ideological goals applies to later Vietnamese films as well. A crucial idea to consider in this connection is socialist realism. First institutionalized in the First Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934, socialist realism was the official cultural ideology and aesthetic paradigm of Stalinism. Central to this doctrine was a condemnation of formalism and modernism and their attendant philosophy of individualism: artists were expected to relinquish their individualistic selves so as to entirely devote themselves to fulfilling the ultimate end of history, that is, socialism (Robin 1992, 25–31). Anticipating in many ways Trường Chinh's proposed framework of artistic and cultural production in socialist Vietnam noted earlier, the three basic properties of socialist realism as formulated by the Soviets included "people-ness" (the relationship between art and the popular, defined simultaneously in relation to the masses and to the nation—the spirit of the people—as a whole), "class-ness" (the class characteristics of art), and "party-ness" (the identification of the artist with the Communist Party) (James 1973, 1–14). In a way that reflected the polarizations in the Cold War era, socialist realism had little impact in the capitalist world, where it was widely condemned as a totalitarian means of imposing state control over individual artists, but exerted a major influence in the Soviet Union and was widely adopted across socialist countries, including the DRV.³

Like its counterparts in other socialist countries, then, socialist realism provided a set of guidelines shaping Vietnamese revolutionary cinema (Nguyễn 2007). Specifically, as a method of practical filmmaking (rather than general aesthetic principles), the doctrine manifested itself in a number of interconnected features. First among them was simplicity of form and content—a clear-cut, unambiguous narrative with strong ideological closure, conveying easily accessible messages that conformed to the goals of the state. While this generally meant emphasizing what has been accomplished or won (such as a triumphant battle or successful efforts in building socialism), it did not preclude the depiction of events less immediately positive or promising. What was important were not the events per se, but the representation of reality in its inexorable evolution toward a better (socialist) future. As Trường Chinh ([1948] 2012) pointed out:

We can, of course, describe a lost battle, but in doing so, we must see to it that people realize how heroically our combatants accepted sacrifices, why the battle was lost, what our gains were, and, notwithstanding the defeat, that our combatants never felt demoralized because all were eager to learn and draw the appropriate lessons in order to secure victories in future battles. We can describe a local defeat while showing that the war is going our way.

It is from this perspective that we can understand films such as Nông Ích Đạt's *Kim Đồng* (1964) and Bùi Đình Hạc and Lý Thái Bảo's *Nguyễn Văn Trỗi* (1967), where the historically based protagonists lose their lives fighting for the revolutionary cause. Despite—or rather because of—their sacrifices, the tone of the endings of the films is one of affirmation rather than defeat; what is expressed is an orientation, a goal, an objective; a clear and unmistakable sense of the direction in which the future is headed.

Also indispensable in the method of socialist realism are the conventions of the positive hero or heroine, a figure of the masses who, with a high degree of revolutionary fervor and passion, exemplifies the new man or woman in a socialist society. In Vietnamese revolutionary cinema, such an ideal figure can be observed in many war films where the protagonists are imbued with the spirit of heroic patriotism: a soldier during the anti-French resistance war who, despite being assigned the job of cook at the beginning, teaches himself to read and write as well as to use a gun, and in the end manages to destroy an enemy's tank (Hải Ninh and Nguyễn Đức Hình's *The Young Soldier* [*Người chiến sĩ trẻ*, 1965]); a young woman who, along with her father, guards a supply trail for the Vietnamese People's Army (VPA) and organizes the building of a makeshift but workable bridge in short order after a bomb crater and an unexploded bomb block the trail (Hải Ninh's *Miss Tham's Forest* [*Rừng O Thắm*, 1967]). On the other hand, there were also films about men and women devoting themselves to the building of a new society in socialist Vietnam. In stressing the valiant efforts of individuals to sacrifice one's self-interest for the collective good (Trần Vũ's *The Story of the Luc Couple* [*Truyện vợ chồng Anh Lục*, 1971]) or to fight against poverty and backwardness in the country's mountain areas inhabited by ethnic minorities (Nông Ích Đạt's *Teacher of the Highlands* [*Cô giáo vùng cao*, 1969]), such films served to energize the population to participate in the intense efforts of economic and social transformation in Vietnam's march toward socialism.

A variation of this positive hero or heroine convention pertains to protagonists who, impulsive and politically immature in the beginning, undergo a transformation, often through the guidance of an experienced party cadre, in the course of the film. The eponymous character in the Vasilyev brothers' *Chapaev* (1934), a quintessential socialist realist film from the Soviet Union (and a favorite of Josef Stalin), is a prototypical example of this type of "flawed" hero. In Vietnamese revolutionary cinema, a similar character can be found in Phạm Văn Khoa's *Fire on the Middle Line* (*Lửa trung tuyến*, 1961): Dũng, platoon leader of an artillery section, is disappointed and becomes hot-tempered after he is ordered to withdraw from the frontline and to be in charge of an ammunition store. It is only later that he comes to realize, through the heroic actions of the people when the ammunition store is hit by enemy's fire,

that the frontline is everywhere, and that every mission is important to the final victory. In depicting this change in attitude, the film presents the protagonist as a model of the “spontaneity” of the individual that needs to be enlightened by the “consciousness” of the masses.

There is no question that the adherence of Vietnamese revolutionary films to socialist realism made them a propaganda tool to spread the state’s revolutionary message to the public. A more contentious issue resides in the commonly held assumption that these films, precisely due to their status as state propaganda, are formulaic and simplistic and thus not worthy of serious study. Yet it is a mistake to write these films off out of hand; for one thing, such a dismissive stance overlooks the fact that the films, despite their ideological purpose and content, offer a glimpse of Vietnamese life and people through local lenses and render perceptible many aspects that are systematically excluded in Western (and especially American) images of the country. In *Little Girl of Hanoi*, set (and partially shot) in the United States’ fierce bombings of Hanoi in December 1972, a little girl is seen wandering through the rubble of the city, looking for her father. In many ways, the film may be taken as just another propaganda effort (even though the focus here is not so much on demonizing Americans as on emphasizing the resilience and solidarity of the Vietnamese people), but the bombings, and the piles of debris and ruined buildings, were real and extracted from reality, giving a palpable sense of civilian sufferings and losses. On the other hand, in Hồng Sến’s *The Wild Field* (*Cánh Đồng Hoàng*, 1979), we see a couple’s mundane family life—fishing, gathering wood, repairing the house, cooking, eating, taking care of the baby son, relaxing, sleeping—interspersed with war activities (such as serving as a contact for the liberation forces in South Vietnam and protecting themselves from American helicopter gunfire). For a people who had been at war for decades, they had come to learn to live a normal life in the midst of war, and this is precisely what was captured so poignantly in the film.

No less importantly, the propagandistic nature of Vietnamese revolutionary cinema does not mean that it was entirely bound by political and ideological shackles and had no artistic value. On the contrary, compared to their Soviet and Chinese counterparts, Vietnamese films of the 1960s and 1970s are, in many cases, aesthetically more interesting. John Charlot (1991), for instance, speaks of the “handsome black-and-white camera work” in both documentaries and fictional films, and compares the chiaroscuro effects in nighttime sequences to traditional Vietnamese lacquer art. The sinuous lines and atmospheric effects of many outdoor scenes are also said to evoke ink paintings on silk (48). While I am not completely convinced of this kind of culturalist reading, the larger point of Charlot’s argument—that is, the relatively high aesthetic quality of Vietnamese revolutionary films—is not to be disputed. Indeed, considering the limited resources (lack of funding, equipment, trained

personnel, etc.) and exceptionally challenging working conditions (a poor country constantly in the midst of wars), the artistic excellence of the films is nothing short of amazing.

What makes Vietnamese revolutionary cinema so fascinating from an aesthetic point of view is in part its highly expressive use of film techniques, especially those—composition, staging, lighting, cinematography—that pertain to the visual construction of the shot. Here, the Vietnamese films show an obvious affinity to Soviet avant-garde cinema of the 1920s, which, as noted by Philip Cavendish (2013), has “a strong commitment to maximize the expressive potential of filmic images through recourse to innovative compositional mechanisms” in order to convey the extremes of revolutionary experience (7).⁴ Much the same may be said of the Vietnamese films of the 1960s and 1970s (and beyond); in them, one sees a strong propensity for striking and expressive images, which manifest themselves in a number of different forms and serve a number of different purposes. In some cases, highly stylized images are utilized as a means for character delineation: close-up shots of the protagonist’s radiant face angled up toward the sky, for instance, emphasize the vision and determination of a revolutionary heroine or hero (Figure 1.1), whereas the use of cast shadows and a perspective-distorting high-angle shot makes the oppressors look sly and devious (Figure 1.2).

In other instances, the goal is to amplify the dramatic tension of a scene. In Vũ Sơn’s *Two Soldiers* (*Hai người lính*, 1962), the clash between a Việt Minh soldier and a local villager over the fate of a French prisoner of war is vividly captured by a bold composition that pits the close-up faces of the Vietnamese characters against one another in the foreground, with the French captive anxiously watching



Figure 1.1 A proud, confident revolutionary heroine in *Miss Tham’s Forest* (1967).

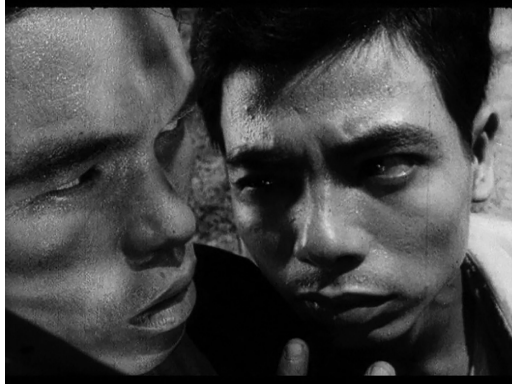


Figure 1.2 Sly and devious oppressors in *The Passerine Bird* (1962).



Figure 1.3 *Two Soldiers* (1962).

the confrontation from behind (Figure 1.3). Tension can be heightened in other ways as well: in an early scene from *Mrs. Tu Hau* where the female protagonist is assaulted by a Vietnamese collaborator and ultimately raped by a French soldier, the director makes use of set design (a small hut crammed with dried fish hung from the ceiling) and atmospheric, almost expressionistic lighting effects (casting light through the bamboo wattle) to create an oppressive ambiance and sharpen the tense situation (Figure 1.4). On the other hand, the last image of *The Wild Field*—a wide shot of a woman, with a baby in the arms and a rifle on the shoulder, walking off slowly after shooting the American helicopter gunner who has killed her husband—achieves its stunning effect by juxtaposing two markedly contrasting elements through the principle of internal montage (Figure 1.5).



Figure 1.4 *Mrs. Tu Hau* (1963).



Figure 1.5 *The Wild Field* (1979).

In addition to manipulating the content within the shot, Vietnamese filmmakers also paid much attention to the relationship between shots—in other words, editing—in their attempts to heighten the expressivity of their works. This can be especially seen in battle scenes—a staple in war films—where fast cutting, often coordinated with sharp alternations in camera angle, generates an impression of agitation, urgency, and kinetic energy. (The inclusion of actual battle footage further augments the experiential veracity of the scenes.) But like Sergei Eisenstein and other Soviet pioneers in the 1920s, who are usually associated with a “montage” approach to filmmaking, Vietnamese revolutionary films also resort to more abrupt, disjunctive forms of editing. At the end of the first part of Bạch Diệp’s *The Holy Day* (*Ngày lễ thánh*, 1976), the wedding of Ái, a Catholic sister who breaks with the moral code of the Church in remarrying, is disrupted by her disloyal (ex-)husband and her devoutly religious sister. Tension mounts as Ái’s sister is confronted by the village

cooperative chairman (in a composition very much similar to the example from *Two Soldiers* discussed earlier). Then the film abruptly cuts to a close-up of an oil lamp, whose glass ruptures suddenly. And we see, in the next shot, the cooperative chairman suffer a serious wound in his head (Figure 1.6). In presenting the attack in such a terse and elliptical



Figure 1.6 The Holy Day (1976).

manner, the film not only accentuates its impact by making it appear so unexpected and quick, but also adds a sense of mystery by not revealing who the culprit is for the attack. Only later, after we see someone squeezing a rock into the hand of Ái's sister in the ensuing chaos, do we know that she is *not* to blame.

Another, and even more remarkable, example can be found in a combat scene near the end of Trần Vũ and Nguyễn Thụ's *Smoke* (*Khói*, 1967). The scene opens with a medium shot of a bugle-playing soldier, followed by a series of extremely brief and highly fragmented shots of Vietnamese fighters getting out of the dugouts and charging forward. These shots may seem confusing because the way in which they are edited is not totally bound by plot requirements, but rather serves to create a perceptual and affective impact that highlights the importance of the moment (i.e., the onset of the Vietnamese counterattack). As the bugle song gives way to rousing orchestral music, the scene's focus shifts to the charging soldiers in open field, and here the editing dynamizes the action by making the vectors of the soldiers' movement "clash" between shots. The scene escalates to a new pitch of intensity during the actual combat; the film's protagonist, an intelligence officer of the VPA, is shown lurching forward toward the camera, and the next shot shows an American soldier falling on his back, away from it. Then comes a rapid succession of shots, filmed almost exclusively with a handheld camera and in close-up, that underscore the utter chaos of the fighting. In all of this, the scene evinces a style of editing that builds up a dramatic action out of many short and fragmented pieces. In fact, the average shot length of the scene is an astounding 1.3 seconds, and this exceptionally fast cutting rate, together with the often disjunctive ways in which the shots are put together, establishes a nervous, vibrating rhythm and intensifies the sequence's force of impact.

So far we have looked at how the revolutionary cinema of Vietnam, influenced to a large extent by the tension-based montage aesthetic of 1920s Soviet avant-garde films, developed a dynamic expressive style that utilized various resources of the cinematic medium to accentuate the perceptual and emotional impact of the viewing experience. Yet there existed a different form of expressivity in the Vietnamese films—not as dramatic or intense and more inclined toward the lyrical and the poetic, with strong emphasis on nature, on pastoral beauty and peasant traditions, as well as on the simple but charming details of daily life. Indeed, this poetic and lyrical dimension is, more than anything else, what distinguishes Vietnamese revolutionary films from their socialist counterparts. It is to this very aspect, particularly as it pertains to the use of landscape, that I will turn my attention to in the next section.

The Landscape in War

To speak of a poetic sensibility in Vietnamese cinema is not something new. "Poetry," as Charlot (1991) contends, "is at the center of

Vietnamese culture and sensibilities, and cinema cannot be divorced from it. This poetic sense separates their creations clearly from conventional socialist realism" (46). Similarly, Irina Miakova (2007) argues that the passion for poetry goes deep into the minds of the Vietnamese people at all levels of society, from political leaders (it is well known that many Vietnamese leaders, including Hồ Chí Minh, wrote poems themselves), soldiers, to even those who are illiterate and cannot read or write (as attested to by the folk poetry known as *ca dao*). From this, she concludes that "The popularity, long development, and broad functions of poetry in Vietnamese society have greatly influenced the Vietnamese people's perceptions and personalities as well as other forms of art, including the cinema" (478). In fact, paradoxical as it may sound, this "poetic touch in the national character," as a critic puts it, is such a deep and enduring feature that it can be observed in every Vietnamese film even during wartime, in the midst of all the fighting ("Images of the Land," 15).

Most critics thus take the long and rich poetic tradition of Vietnam as the root for the expressive poeticism in Vietnamese cinema. While this is certainly true, it is possible to identify other sources of influence. The films of Alexander Dovzhenko are a case in point. Considered to be part of the revolutionary cinema of the Soviet Union, Dovzhenko's films, according to Vance Kepley Jr. (1986), are some of the most lyrical works of Soviet cinema, deriving "much of their beauty from a Ukrainian pastoral tradition and from an abiding faith in peasant custom" (3). In his films, particularly his acclaimed masterpiece *Earth* (*Zemlya*, 1930), one can find an abundance of images of nature and rural landscape—cloudy skies and misty rivers, wind blowing across immense wheat fields, a solitary tree against a large expanse of sky, rain-drenched apples hanging from the trees and lying on the ground—that manifest a strong lyrical impulse. The Vietnamese revolutionary films, too, are rife with similar natural and pastoral imagery: a clouded sky broken by sun rays (Hoàng Thái's *Stories of my Homeland* [*Câu chuyện quê hương*, 1963]; *Smoke*), solar glare through the tree foliage (*The Passerine Bird*; *Stories of My Homeland*), peasants laboring in a wind-blown rice field (*The Memento*), images of the forest (*Miss Tham's Forest*) and the ocean (Nguyễn Tiến Lợi and Nguyễn Ngọc Trung's *Call of the Sea* [*Biển gọi*, 1967]), a tree-lined river flowing idyllically (*Stories of my Homeland*), a small boat gliding across a marsh full of lotuses/water lilies (Nguyễn Thụ's *Portrait Left Behind* [*Bức tranh để lại*, 1970]; *The Wild Field*), and so on. As in the films of Dovzhenko, the concerted efforts to capture the beauty and wonder of pastoral nature impart to the Vietnamese films an intense lyricism and poetic expressivity.

However, for a predominantly agricultural country such as Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, trees, rivers, marshes, rice fields, and so forth were among the most typical forms of landscape. It is thus no surprise that they would frequently appear, and become the major poetic elements,

in the country's cinema and culture. So as far as Dovzhenko's influence is concerned, the choice of subject matter—that is, the emphasis given to the rural natural world—is less important than the poetic manner in which this world is rendered into the visual construction of the films. Both Dovzhenko's works and the revolutionary films of Vietnam display a high level of compositional originality. Indeed, they share some strikingly similar strategies of framing and shot design: for example, radically decentered compositions in *The Passerine Bird* and Mai Lộc and Trần Vũ's *Remarriage* (*Đi bước nữa*, 1963), placing the human/animal figures along the lower edge of the frame and reducing them to tiny silhouettes against the immense billowing cloudy sky, bear a strong resemblance to some of the shots in *Earth* (Figures 1.7–1.9). Similarly, the image of a lone tree against the sky in Huy Vân and Hải Ninh's *A Day in Early Autumn* (*Một ngày đầu thu*, 1962) (Figure 1.10) evokes a similar shot in Dovzhenko's *Zvenigora* (1928) (Figure 1.11), while both Dovzhenko and Vietnamese filmmakers like to resort to reflections (of trees, human figures, etc.) in the waters of a stream or river (Figures 1.12 and 1.13). These similarities suggest a different aspect of Soviet influence on the Vietnamese revolutionary films beyond the montage aesthetic. Embracing the painterly and the poetical, this alternative style imbues the images with such richness and suggestiveness that they achieve the emotional depth and complexity of lyric poetry.

Another point of reference is the so-called “thaw” films that first emerged and came into prominence during the liberalization in Soviet politics and, by extension, artistic productions following Josef Stalin's death in 1953. During the “thaw” period, as Josephine Woll (2000) points out, Soviet cinema revived from the stultifying political shackles in the previous decades and exploited the growing opportunities available in the new milieu. Film production increased markedly, and



Figure 1.7 *The Passerine Bird* (1962).