

Project Summary

Project title: Prostitution in Contemporary Vietnam through the Lens of Vietnamese Cinema

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The proposed project is titled “**Prostitution in Contemporary Vietnam through the Lens of Vietnamese Cinema**”. With this project, I aim to examine how contemporary Vietnamese domestic and diasporic filmmakers perceive and present the figure of the prostitute, how and why such perceptions and (re)presentations confirm or differ from social and scholar understandings of prostitutes, and what contributions filmmakers offer to the current scholarship of prostitution and prostitutes both as social phenomena and social constructs.

In 1986, the Vietnamese communist party recognized the failure of the central-planned, state-subsidized economy that had been adopted throughout the country from 1975 to 1986. Slowly, the economy started to liberalize and adopt what would later be called a market-oriented economy under socialism. This fundamentally means that the closed, government-subsidized economy is now opened up for foreign investment, and the importation and exportation of commodities with capitalist countries are now allowed and even promoted. *Đổi Mới* also means that a large number of state enterprises are now equitized and privatized while individuals and private organizations are allowed to own businesses. Reviewing Vietnam’s progress under *Đổi Mới*, the World Bank states, “Economic and political reforms under *Đổi Mới* [...] have spurred rapid economic growth, transforming what was then one of the world’s poorest nations into a lower middle-income country.” (World Bank, 2020). In a nutshell, *Đổi Mới* has wired Vietnam into the global network of increasingly connected political economies and has not only reaped considerable economic achievements with a high GDP growth rate and rapid poverty reduction, but also gained more political openness and diversity in cultural activities and products (Beresford, 2008; Drummond, 2006; Nguyen Nhat Tuyen, 1999). Such a drastic economic and political

change has no doubt led to numerous and substantial transformations in Vietnamese society. One of these transformations involves the prevalence and multiplication of prostitution. While empirical studies of prostitution are undeniably helpful, most of them present dry facts and impersonal statistics. Film, on the other hand, offers personal accounts of specific persons with specific feelings that are more relatable to viewers than dry, detached data. Besides, due to the stigma, sensitivity and illegality of prostitution in Vietnam, it is hard to do thorough research on the country's sex industry. Thus, a cinematic approach to exploring the lived experience of prostitutes will be crucial and meaningful.

I use cinema as a site to study the social phenomenon and social construct of prostitution because cinema "bring[s] into sharp focus the contradictions and problems of a rapidly changing society" and "gives voice to the concerns, the joys and the sorrows of ordinary people during their day-to-day existence" (Dang & Pham, 2003, p. 195, 200). Through a corpus of films that portray from various perspectives the lived experience of prostitutes that are situated in Vietnam's contemporary political economy, this project examines Vietnamese filmmakers' ways of understanding and presenting prostitution and sex workers.

The cinematic documentation and construction of prostitutes' experience present an alternative approach -- a qualitative perspective -- to the oftentimes quantitative research endeavors. With a majority of research on prostitution being conducted from a public health perspective, most studies collect numerical facts or superficial information regarding sex workers' health risk behaviour (see, for examples, Ngo et al, 2007; Rosenthal & Oanh, 2006; Thuy et al, 1998; Tran et al, 2005; Yu et al, 2015). As such, most research on prostitution fails to provide in-depth accounts of life stories of the researched. While these studies are undeniably helpful, they remain dry facts and impersonal statistics. Film, on the other hand, offers personal accounts of specific persons with specific feelings that are more relatable to viewers than dry, detached data.

Moreover, cinema might offer a new perspective to the usual and/or official account of prostitution and sex works. In several cases, film has offered alternative interpretations of historical events or experience of the people that are different from the state's official account, which demonopolize the state's ownership and narration of national history. Revisionist films of the 1980s, for example, "subvert state commemorative practices",

“voice displeasure with the legacies of war” and open up “the process of remembering war, acknowledging and articulating the multiplicity of meanings” that the Indochinese wars insert on many Vietnamese people (Bradley, 2001, p. 222). Official discourses conceptualize prostitution as “social evil” (Anh et al., 2012) and prostitutes mainly as wretched victims who largely lack subjectivity and agency. Besides, while the sex industry continues massively to the national economy (Hoang, 2015), society fails to acknowledge sexual labour. In such a context, artistic accounts such as literature and cinema might be able to offer alternative understanding and project reality from the perspective of the sex workers. Besides, due to the stigma, sensitivity and illegality of prostitution in Vietnam, it is hard to do thorough research on the country’s sex industry. Thus, a cinematic approach to exploring the lived experience of prostitutes will be crucial and meaningful.

In the existing literature, most of the scholarly writings of Vietnamese films are conducted by international, particularly Western, scholars who adopt a Western feminist perspective in their analyses. Although theoretically informed, these scholars lack, to a certain degree, a Vietnamese sensibility that enables a subtle understanding of cultural nuances that carry weight and cultural revelation in the films. Meanwhile, most Vietnamese texts on these films are journalistic-style film reviews published in local newspapers, as opposed to scholarly research. Therefore, as a Vietnamese academic, I will use my Vietnamese cultural sensibilities as well as my understanding of film theories and intellectual discourses surrounding film as historiography as instruments to conduct this research with.

Perceiving film as historiography, this project considers films as its field. At the moment, the tentative corpus of films for this project includes *Girl on the River* (Đặng Nhật Minh, 1987), *Cyclo* (Tran Anh Hung, 1995), *Three Seasons* (Tony Bui, 1999), *Bargirls* (Lê Hoàng, 2003), *Street Cinderella* (Lê Hoàng, 2004), *The Little Heart* (Nguyễn Thanh Vân, 2007), *Lost in Paradise 1 & 2* (Vũ Ngọc Đăng, 2011 & 2017), and *Flapping in the Middle of Nowhere* (Nguyễn Hoàng Điệp, 2014). However, it is expected that more films will be added to this corpus by the end of the extensive search for films on the topic of prostitution in Vietnam. Some of these films might not have made it to the international market or the Internet due to Vietnam’s strict censorship, but it would be very meaningful for the project to get hold of these films in the country. The fieldwork will take place in Vietnam, which includes various activities at the following sites:

- (a) The Vietnam Film Institute in Hanoi
- (b) The National Library of Vietnam in Hanoi
- (c) The National Library of Vietnam in Ho Chi Minh city
- (d) The DVD stores in Hanoi
- (e) The DVD stores in Ho Chi Minh city
- (f) The DVD stores in Vinh city

Since the tentative corpus of films included in this project spans over more than three decades since 1986, many of these films are not available on the market or on Internet platforms anymore. For films that are relatively new and could be available on the Internet, my physical location in Taiwan sometimes prevents me from watching them because some of the Vietnamese streamlining websites are inaccessible in Taiwan. Thus, even though some films are available online, my access to these films is blocked due to my geographical position. For those that are accessible, the video quality of oftentimes illegal websites is not good enough for the necessary meticulous analysis required in my research.

Thus, I plan to find these films in Vietnam during my trip from January 1 to March 31, 2022. First, I am going to scout video and DVD stores in Vietnam for the DVDs of the listed films. Part of this shopping will be done in the city near my hometown in central Vietnam, called Vinh city. However, most of it will be done in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city where more DVD stores with larger collections are available. It is expected, nevertheless, that older films such as *Girl on the River* (1987) or less popular films such as *The Little Heart* (2007) might not be found in the stores. Thus, I plan to watch film screenings at the Vietnam Film Institute in Hanoi, which organizes private film screenings for researchers who study films that are available in their archives. The archives at the film institute will also provide other film references for my research.

Besides scouting for DVDs in different cities and watching film screenings at the Vietnam Film Institute, I will also visit the National Library of Vietnam in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city to collect documents of laws and policies relevant to the project, such as laws on prostitution, legal documents about campaigns against “social evils” (such as prostitution), and cinema laws.

This fieldwork will be conducted for a period of 3 months from January 1st, 2022 to March 31st, 2022. The proposed budget for the fieldwork activities is 41,100 NTD, specified as follows:

Duration of time	Activity
Jan 1 – Jan 15, 2022	DVD shopping in Vinh
Jan 15 – Jan 30, 2022	DVD shopping in Hanoi
Jan 15 – Jan 30, 2022	Request private film screenings at the Vietnam Film Institute in Hanoi
Feb 15 – Feb 30, 2022	Visit the National Library in Hanoi to find documents of laws and policies
March 1 – March 15, 2022	DVD shopping in HCMC
March 15 – March 30, 2022	Visit the National Library in Hanoi to find documents of laws and policies

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