

Document Citation

Title	Vietnamese women pulled from obscurity
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Source	<i>Honolulu Star-Bulletin</i>
Date	1989 Dec 01
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	B-1, B-2
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Surname Viet given name Nam, Trinh T. Minh-ha,, 1989

“
*A film is like a page of paper which I offer the viewer.
 I am responsible for what is within the boundary of the paper,
 but I do not control and I do not wish to control its folding.*
 ”

Filmmaker Trinh Minh-ha



By Craig T. Kojima, Star Bulletin

Trinh Minh-ha is in Honolulu to present her film, "Surname Viet Given Name Nam" before the East-West Center's Hawaii International Film Festival. Trinh is a filmmaker, author and composer who has lived in the United States, France and Africa, as well as her native Vietnam.

Vietnamese women pulled from obscurity

□ Film challenges several historical prejudices

By Susan Manuel

Star Bulletin

P RIMERS in Vietnamese history tell of heroic women like Trieu Au, who led a third-century revolt against the Chinese, flinging her 9-foot-long breasts over her shoulders as she rode her elephant into battle. The Trung sisters vanquished the Chinese in 40 A.D. and set up a short-lived independent state.

The deification of Vietnamese women has been part of their oppression, says filmmaker Trinh Minh-ha. "It glosses over their problems" and coexists with Confucian dictates that women be submissive to men.

To illuminate the universal condition of women, Trinh chose Vietnamese women living in socialist Vietnam and exiled in California as the subjects of her latest film "Surname Viet Given Name Nam." But she could have picked women in any part of the world.

Her challenging film of interviews, archival footage, songs and dances shows at 9 tonight in the Imin Center of Jefferson Hall of the East-West Center.

Trinh was here this week as part of the East-West Center's Ninth Annual Hawaii International Film Festival. A filmmaker, author and composer, she teaches film courses at San Francisco State University.

Centuries after the Trung sisters and after decades of colonization, Vietnam surfaced in Western media with the Indochina War. But its women remained invisible.

To find and describe Vietnamese women, Trinh didn't look for stereotypical heroism or suffering, but for subtleties. In all her scholarly work, she shuns absolute truths. As a filmmaker she avoids directing her audiences toward a single conclusion.

"A film is like a page of paper which I offer the viewer," she has written. "I am responsible for what is within the



boundary of the paper, but I do not control and I do not wish to control its folding."

In this film, her primary technique is the interview. But she tells the audience mid-film that interviews are highly suspect as channels of truth. "You can talk. We can cut, trim, tidy up..." she interjects.

The first half of "Surname Viet Given Name Nam" consists of staged monologues by Vietnamese women living in California speaking the roles of women in post-revolutionary Vietnam. The text came from interviews conducted in Vietnam in 1982.

In the second half the women "actresses" are themselves. But the lines between real and dramatic are blurred.

The lives of the women in contemporary Vietnam are surprisingly difficult. Some Vietnam watchers in the East-West Center audience Wednesday were critical of Trinh's "interviews," saying they ignored the progress of feminism in Vietnam and were too bleak.

"I try to avoid falling back in this binary opposition between capitalism and communism," Trinh replied.

The film implies that besides the universal women's woes of child-bearing, working, husband-serving and

See **FILMMAKER**, Page B-2

FILMMAKER: Even far from Vietnam, traditional 'four virtues' live

Continued from Page B-1

growing old and less attractive to men, today's Vietnamese women are living in a void of phony socialist equality.

None have high Communist Party positions. One woman describes a street sweeper, encouraged to give a speech at a Party meeting. The speech, which momentarily gives the female sweeper the illusion of citizenship, has been written by a man.

"Men get power in socialist Vietnam," says one of the interviewees. Women's unions "make us heroic women, (but) ghost women, with no humanity ... The woman is alone. It's a sea of solitude. The idea of heroism is horrible."

Her "loyal companion," for whom she has "sincere affection" is her bicycle.

In the film's second half, the women are themselves, liberated in a Western sense by their more material American life and their access to professional jobs. Their voices are brighter. They're shown jogging, working at drafting tables and sitting in front of fireplaces.

Yet the exiled women espouse the most traditional and demeaning of Vietnamese beliefs — the four virtues and the three submissions — beliefs that socialist Vietnam has abandoned. (Women must be able in cooking, sewing and household budgeting. Be gracious, compliant and cheerful for their husbands. Speak properly and

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softly. Know their place — faithful and sacrificial to husbands. The three submissions are to father, husband and son.)

While the socialist women talk more of suffering, they also seem ennobled by their awareness. And they are not dreaming of the capitalist West, Trinh points out.

Trinh layers image on image. Running through the film in subtitles or voiceovers are Vietnamese folk tales defining women's place in a patriarchal world. There are pitiful metaphors for women who don't marry, such as "a rice mill with a broken axle" or a "bed

whose nails have come loose."

Trinh says women in Vietnam repeat this folk wisdom with sarcasm, as jokes, aware of the historic damage. They're brokers between past and present.

A Vietnamese doctor complains her women patients are given no privacy in modern Vietnamese hospitals, a necessity to establish trust, given their traditional training. "In the old society," the doctor says, "the body was an unnamed place, nonexistent and not talked of."

But the women exiled in America tend to hang on to the traditions that oppressed them in Asia, Trinh says. One woman in the film wins a California beauty contest by promoting the four virtues.

In both worlds women continue to bear the double burdens of work and sacrifice.

"Of course it's a step forward for women to work outside the family," says Trinh. "But it's not the end point of the struggle. Vietnamese women in the States and in Vietnam are questioning the so-called liberation of women."

At other screenings, Trinh has gotten warm responses from American, Iranian and Indian women. "It brings out the oppression of women in whatever regime they are in," she said.

"But as I criticize what is hap-

pening with the condition of women, I also see myself being caught in it. I am not free of the four virtues in the film."

The title comes from a socialist proverb: A young man asks a woman if she is married. She demurs by saying yes, my surname is Viet, given name Nam. Married to the state, in other words. "The film is about the question of identity — female and Vietnamese," said Trinh.

Trinh's own identity is multicultural, formed by a series of exiles in the United States, France and Africa. Born in Hanoi and raised in Saigon, she left Vietnam at 17 for a small college in Ohio. She has not been back to Vietnam, but keeps informed with frequent letters from family who remain. She has advanced degrees in French literature and ethnomusicology. She taught music in Senegal, where she made two previous films.

No one is an expert, she says, even on her own culture. That's why her filmmaking is self-consciously subjective.

"One can never escape who one is and where one comes from. One constantly has to point to one's self, the filmmaker. One cannot stand in a safe position talking about another culture. This film I was pointing to myself as an outsider, vis-a-vis Vietnam."