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Vietnamese women topic of film study

"A woman is a lady before marriage, a maid during marriage, and a monkey afterward."

—Old Vietnamese saying

By JAMES AUER

of The Journal staff

A FAR FROM doctrinaire look at the deplorable lot of Vietnam's women, ancient and modern, is presented in a far from traditional manner in *"Surname Viet Given Name Nam."*

The uniquely personalized documentary, directed by the emigre artist Trinh T. Minh-ha, will be screened at 7:30 p.m. Friday in Mitchell Hall, Room B91, on the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee campus.

Deliberately paced but with moments of lyricism, realism and high emotional power, the film is made up of vintage newsreel clips, interviews with contemporary women and poetically manipulated snippets of pre-war life.

The Vietnamese-born director, currently an associate professor in the department of cinema at San Francisco State University in California, will attend Friday's showing, which is free and open to the public.

It's clear from an advance screening of this convoluted but consistently involving work that Trinh T. Minh-ha is nobody's clone, either stylistically or in terms of political orientation.

Her approach to the sometimes cliched documentary form is as idiosyncratic, yet carefully thought out, as is her way of looking at and dealing with the political realities of postwar Vietnam.

Her focus, throughout the 108 minutes of color and black-and-white footage, is on her homeland's wom-

en: stalwart, enduring, exploited, isolated.

She lets them speak in their own words (150 were interviewed, just five retained for onscreen representation). The result is simultaneously a critique of Vietnamese life and an implied commentary on the conventions of fact-oriented filmmaking.

Clearly, this independent producer-director is a tool neither of a particular political faction nor of a specific ideological stance. For one thing Trinh T. Minh-ha is not afraid to bring to our attention women who regard the forcible reunification of North and South Vietnam as simply another means of solidifying male privilege and domination.

Nor does she hesitate to suggest that efficiency has dwindled following the expulsion of the Americans, and that professionalism has been made subservient to politics, particularly in the health-care area.

But her principal message is that Vietnamese women, whether they remained in their homeland after the war or fled to the United States, are survivors — strong, articulate, determined, self-sacrificing.

Women are a facade, trotted out for the benefit of foreigners, says one interviewee.

"Socialist Vietnam venerates the mothers and the wives. It does not venerate the woman. She is only the laborer," declares another.

"Our bosses are often men. We support them. This is what equality means," insists a third.

Trinh T. Minh-ha's visit to the UWM campus is sponsored by the Center for 20th Century Studies and the College of Letters and Science Film Program, with support from the graduate school; the department of film; and Great Lakes Film and Video.

misquoted

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