

## Document Citation

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**Surname Viet Given  
Name Nam  
(DOCU-COLOR/B&W)**

**Toronto** A Woman Makes Movies release of an Idera Films production. Produced, written, directed and edited by Trinh T. Minh-ha; camera (color, 16m), Kathleen Beeler; art direction, Jean-Paul Bourdier; sound, Linda Peckham. Reviewed at Toronto Festival Of Festivals, Sept. 8, 1989. Running time: 108 MIN.

■ Rising above the stridency of feminist polemics, "Surname Viet Given Name Nam" is a sorrowful, lyrical and skillfully constructed filmed essay on the repression of women in Vietnamese society. It has a particular beauty and power best appreciated on screen, but public tv and specialty cable outlets should take notice.

Filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha elicits confessional interviews from five Vietnamese women as the cornerstone of her film. Her subjects include a doctor, an embassy maid, a former refugee, a student who has grown up in America, and a woman whose husband was imprisoned after the Communist takeover of South Vietnam. All of them have in common an indoctrination in the "four virtues" and "three submissions" which rigidly codify the lives of Vietnamese women in a society wholly dominated by men.

According to the documentary, the Communist triumph in the Vietnam war brought no change to the time-honored status of women as chattels. The popular concept of a woman's life divides it into three stages: a "Lady," before marriage, a "maid" during marriage and a "monkey" after marriage.

The women's testimonials unfold as painful confessional monologs, told in halting but eloquent English, about their quotidian struggle for survival in a police state society where injustice is commonplace. In a country that has known unceasing turmoil and bitterly hard times, women apparently have been victimized with the worst burdens of hunger and poverty.

As one participant says, she has had "to bear witness to the unbearable." Another recounts the "law of the jungle" in the inhuman refugee camps of Guam. Yet they feel an abiding love for their country, indeed, consider themselves eternally married to it, hence the film's title.

Brightly lit against a background of deep shadows, the interviews build over long takes that heighten their accumulated impact. Intercut with the interviews are a latticework of beautifully photographed scenes of folk dances and village life, archival footage from the days of French Indochina and of course, footage from the long American war in Vietnam.

Further layers of meaning are provided by the juxtaposition of folk songs and a famous epic poem about a female warrior. These lyrics and verse, translated in overtitles, suggest that the subjects' experiences are timeless

and representative of their society's as a whole.

The filmmaker also makes a parallel foray into the meaning of her own work and the elusive nature of documentary truth. "Surname Viet Given Name Nam," by illuminating the sequestered world of its subjects, sheds disturbing new light on their hard-to-fathom homeland. It has the haunting resonance of the best documentaries. —*Rich.*