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AUTHOR: Thuc Uyen K. Ngo

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FORGOTTEN MEMORIES: RE-CONSTRUCTING THE VIETNAM WAR IN FILMS

A thesis presented

by

Thuc Uyen K Ngo

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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Zhiwei Xiao
Committee Members: Dr. Jill Watts

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Abstract

As many scholars have written about the Vietnam War, this thesis, *Forgotten Memories: Re-Constructing the Vietnam War in Films*, explores a different approach to this topic by examining films. Historical films are becoming increasingly important in shaping the way the past is understood and remembered. After the war ended, many Hollywood films have continued to capture the atrocities of the war that affected the war narrative of the Vietnam War. American politics and the public suffered from the Vietnam Syndrome, and they lost confidence in the military and government structures. These emotions are translated into Hollywood films about the Vietnam War. The victory of the Gulf War in 1991 finally helped them to get out of the shadow of that psychological fear in foreign intervention. The Vietnam War films have made its comeback after the September 11th attacks. Many scholars have compared the war against terrorism is similar to the war against communism in the 1950s. Over the years, Hollywood has produced many films that are either directly about or set against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. The different representations of the Vietnam War presenting in both American and Vietnamese films produced between 1979 and 2005 explain how the film war narrative reconstruct the memory of history. By examining both American and Vietnamese films about the Vietnam War, this study calls attention to the importance of the Vietnamese experience in our understanding of the Vietnam War and brings an international perspective to the study of this subject in cultural and film studies. By identifying trends and discussing similarities and differences in film-narrative tropes across both American and Vietnamese films about the Vietnam War, this research argues that the film industry has shaped the collective memory of the Vietnam War. In doing so, Hollywood has highlighted the memorable and traumatic events that occurred during the war to construct the film narrative and generate a widespread perception of

the war. Vietnam's government, due to the war's destruction, made it a top priority to rebuild the economy and used films to deliver only social propaganda, expressing its gratitude and sympathy to families who lost their loved ones in the war.

Keywords: Vietnam War, American film, Vietnamese film, collective memory, public memory, Hollywood, Apocalypse Now, Apocalypse Now Redux, Platoon, Good Morning Vietnam, We Were Soldiers, The Abandoned Field, When the Tenth Month Comes, Vietnamese Economic Reform.

Introduction

This study's purpose is to understand how the Vietnam War narrative has changed over time in reaction to political circumstances by examining the representation of the war in film production over two decades leading up to 9/11. By identifying trends and discussing similarities and differences in film-narrative tropes across both American and Vietnamese films about the Vietnam War, this research argues that the film industry has shaped the collective memory of the Vietnam War. In doing so, Hollywood has highlighted the memorable and traumatic events that occurred during the war to construct the film narrative and generate a widespread perception of the war. Vietnam's government, due to the war's destruction, made it a top priority to rebuild the economy and used films to deliver only social propaganda, expressing its gratitude and sympathy to families who lost their loved ones in the war.

Although many studies have been conducted about U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, only a few scholars seriously have considered the Vietnamese perspective on the war. This study will address this imbalance by examining how the war is represented in popular Vietnamese films. To most Vietnamese people, the war was not about establishing a communist government for the country. Instead, it was about national unity and independence from foreign rule. Many Americans misunderstood the resistance and liberation movement in Vietnam because of their preoccupation with anti-communist politics. The U.S. saw the communist movement in Vietnam as a threat and became worried about a domino effect, i.e., neighboring countries falling under communist rule. This fear of communist expansion in Southeast Asia significantly influenced the U.S. decision to use military force in Vietnam.[1] For years, America-centric perspectives have dominated Vietnam War research—perspectives that suffer from an absence of a global

[1] Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, "From Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film," in *Movies and American Society*, ed. Steven J. Ross (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2002), 299.

perspective and insufficient knowledge about Vietnamese history. By examining both American and Vietnamese films about the Vietnam War, this study calls attention to the importance of the Vietnamese experience in our understanding of the Vietnam War and brings an international perspective to the study of this subject in cultural and film studies.

This study addresses the different representations of the Vietnam War in American and Vietnamese films produced between 1975 and 2005. By scrutinizing how the Vietnam War is represented in these films, we can develop a better understanding of how films shape public memory about an event taking place in the past. This study is a hybrid thesis with two components: a written portion and a digital project. The written portion's primary purpose is to explain the different representations of the Vietnam War in *both* American and Vietnamese films. The website will expand the time frame to include the Vietnam War's historical context.

The differences in how filmmakers from both sides of the Pacific have represented the war raise many interesting historiographical questions: What are the differences in the war narratives between American and Vietnamese films? To what extent do these films both shape and reflect public sentiment on each side? Were there any restrictions or censorship that could have affected how the war was depicted, especially in Vietnamese films? How are issues related to gender exploitation represented in these films? These are some of the questions that this study will explore.

All wars have winners and losers, and usually the winners have the power to control the historical narrative. However, the Vietnam War (1955–1975) seems to be an exception because even though Vietnam won the war, the U.S. controlled the historical war narrative through Hollywood films. The Vietnamese may have won the real war, but the Americans won the symbolic war in the discursive field. As one of the biggest industries producing war narratives,

Hollywood shapes the general understanding of the past not only among the American public, but also among people in other countries as well. Unlike scholarly writings, popular films impact and shape public memory much more directly and, thus, deserve to be taken seriously.

In the 1960s, during the Vietnam War, TV news coverage in the U.S. was ubiquitous, exposing Americans to the brutal realities of war and changing their views about U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. After the war, Hollywood continued to focus on the trauma from the war, revealing deep fissures within American society.

The American public was deeply divided about the war, with some viewing it as an anti-communist crusade and others strongly opposing U.S. foreign intervention in Vietnam. War supporters believed that U.S. involvement was a noble effort aimed at helping the Vietnamese people defend their country against a communist takeover, and that if some sacrifices had to be made, they were necessary.[2] This perspective is rooted in the belief that the U.S. was morally superior to other countries, as evidenced by the advancements that the United States has made in technological, economic, social, and political developments; however, most important of all, American military prowess gave supporters of the U.S. involvement the confidence that America would triumph over its enemies.[3]

Historically, Hollywood films played a tremendous cultural role as the twentieth century unfolded and the industry was born. One early example can be seen in *Birth of a Nation* (1915), which dealt with one of the most controversial and divisive issues in the nation's history:

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[2] Mark Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 1.

[3] In 1859, Charles Darwin and his *On the Origin of the Species* set out the hypothesis of natural selection as an explanation for adaption and speciation. His work stirred up debates among scientists and intellectuals that applied this biological principle of evolution to human development. The phrase '*survival of the fittest'* is used as examples of the success of social order, advancement industry, and colonial expansion. Social Darwinism is referred to this ideology of the biological natural selection to human society. It explains the belief of the U.S. supremacy and their confidence in economic and military power in the twentieth century. Donald W. White, *The American Century: The Rise and Decline of the United States as a World Power* (London: Yale University Press, 1996), 3.

slavery.[4] This film is considered a landmark event in film history because it demonstrated the power of media in shaping history through film. In spite of *Birth of a Nation* remains as one of the most controversial historical films, it recreated significant events, such as meetings of Congress, Civil War battles, and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. The course of American history was being constructed as a form of public medium, it caused riots in several cities that proved film can be an effective political propaganda. It also illustrated that filmmakers have the power to control storytelling and persuade the public. Films had the power to depict cultural consciousness from a bottom-up perspective.[5] After World War I, movies became more affordable for the middle and working classes, further cementing films as a pillar of popular culture and an influential instrument in public persuasion.

Hollywood, as the biggest film industry in the world, functioned as an effective political-message-delivery system. Propaganda leaped from poster images to the silver screen, heavily influencing public understanding of world events. However, U.S. global dominance after World War II was rivaled by the Soviet Union's rising power base in Eastern Europe. The U.S. gained massive confidence and moral righteousness concerning its ability to spread its philosophy of freedom and liberty worldwide. This self-righteousness was manifested in almost every Hollywood war film until the 1960s. It was a new beginning for American cinema to celebrate American nationalism and patriotism in its narrative. For instance, *Casablanca* (1942), *Bataan* (1953), *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), and two documentary films—*Why We Fight* (1942–1945) and *Victory at Sea* (1952–1953) —glorified U.S. participation in overseas conflicts, as well as the

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[4] *Birth of a Nation* is a 1915 American silent film directed and co-produced by D.W. Griffith. The story depicted the United States in the Civil War period. Despite the subjectivity within the film content, specifically the racism, *The Birth of a Nation* fictionally reenacted a piece of history on the screen. For more on *The Birth of a Nation* film analysis, see Robert Skylar, *Movie Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 60-64.

[5] Robert Skylar, *Movie Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 3.

nation's culture and institutions.[6] These wartime films promoted American culture and Americans' belief in their institutions, making them relevant to the people.

During most American wars, the film industry played a supporting role in producing positive contributions to the war effort.[7] The use of film as propaganda became more popular during World War II when the government created the Office of War Information (OWI) to distribute mainly war propaganda to the public. OWI Director Elmer Davis recognized media's impact on public sentiment, noting, "The easiest way to inject a propaganda idea into most people's minds is to let it go through the medium of an entertainment picture when they do not realize that they are being propagandized."[8] Not surprisingly, the government used Hollywood films as a powerful propaganda tool— an essential "weapon of democracy," as Davis put it.[9] However, the OWI was only active from June 1942 to September 1945 and did not operate during the Cold War, including the Vietnam War when it began 10 years later. The OWI served a gatekeeper that censored and contributed war information to the public. After World War II, the free flow of information provided the opportunity for the media, especially the film industry, to construct a war narrative without government interference.

During the 1960s and 1970s, American society went through a challenging period. Many protests in the 1960s sought racial equality and peace. The Civil Rights Movement and antiwar movement spread nationwide. The assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy reflected the decade's tensions and instability. Consequently, the cinematic narrative about the war began to reflect popular criticism of government in the 1970s.

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[6] Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., "Humphrey Bogart's Sahara: Propaganda, Cinema and the American Character in World War II," *American Studies* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 7, accessed March 10, 2018, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40641606.

[7] Kornweibel, "Humphrey Bogart's Sahara," 6.

[8] Kornweibel, 6.

[9] Kornweibel, 6.

As far as public memory is concerned, some Americans saw the Vietnam War as an act of American immorality.[10] In the 1960s and early 1970s, the antiwar movement fundamentally influenced this narrative.[11] College students played the most significant role in launching protests against President Johnson's decision to escalate American military involvement in Vietnam in the mid-1960s.[12] The media narrative shifted its thematic focus to reflect the antiwar movement and anti-Establishment sentiments, which were reflected later in films. This study will focus on American films produced after 1975, when the war ended with the Fall of Saigon.

Americans' self-confidence during the first half of the twentieth century was shattered after losing the war to the North Vietnamese Army (or the Viet Cong, also known as the National Liberation Front, hereafter VC). Henry Kissinger, who served as United States Secretary of State in 1969 and National Security Advisor in 1973, coined the term *Vietnam Syndrome*, which the Reagan administration used to refer to the backlash resulting from this U.S. foreign-policy failure. As a response to this military catastrophe, the U.S. government became much more cautious about interfering in international conflicts in the years to come.[13] This pessimistic

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[10] Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film*, 1.

[11] Anti-war sentiment actually developed before the 1960s' Civil Rights Movement and other activist movements that dated back as far as post-World War I. In fact, the antiwar movement slowly grew after the government began testing a new weapon at the end of the 1930s: the atomic bomb. Near the end of World War II, President Truman ordered attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan on August 6 and 9, 1945. This raised public concerns over the humanity and morality of this new warfare method. The peace movement, or the Vietnam antiwar movement, grew exponentially in 1965 after the U.S. began bombing North Vietnam in an effort to end the war, eliciting memories of the 1945 nuclear attacks. For further reading on the use of nuclear bombs in the twentieth century and its awareness of destruction, see Andrew Jon Rotter's *Hiroshima: the World's Bomb*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008; Ronald Powaski's *March to Armageddon: the United States and the Nuclear Arms Race, 1939 to the Present*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987; Charles Carpenter's *Dramatists and the Bomb: American and British Playwrights Confront the Nuclear Age, 1945-1964*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999; and Milton Katz's *Ban the Bomb: A History of SANE, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, 1954-1985*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986.

[12] See Bill Ayers' *Public Enemy: Confessions of an American Dissident*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2013 for further reading on antiwar movement from college students and universities.

[13] For further reading about the cause and effect of the Vietnam Syndrome on American foreign policy, see David Anderson's "Postwar Perspectives," in *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010; Arnold R. Isaacs' *Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Ghosts, and Its Legacy*. Baltimore: Johns

sentiment lasted until the success of the American military operation during the first Gulf War (1990–1991). This victory helped American politics emerge from the shadows of the Vietnam Syndrome. However, while Americans' confidence in their country's military prowess was restored after the Gulf War victory, Hollywood films continued to dwell on the trauma of Vietnam. In the early 1990s, films about the Vietnam War often concentrated on the war's aftermath, especially stories about veterans coming home and the psychological and physical scars they brought with them.

As President George H. W. Bush said in a speech in 1991, "By God, we've kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all," [14] Hollywood changed course and made films about Vietnam veterans, rather than the war itself.[15] For instance, *Jacob's Ladder* (1990) and *Forrest Gump* (1994) depicted Vietnam veterans coming home and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These films' narratives portrayed American soldiers' psychological aftermath, in which they tried to remove themselves from the events.[16] Into the 1990s, American public memory of the Vietnam War gently substituted a new narrative that focused on healing the haunted past and trauma from violent war experiences. Also, the Middle East began to pose a

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Hopkins University Press, 1997; Jacqueline S. Ismael and Tareq Y. Ismael's *The Gulf War and the New World Order: International Relations of the Middle East*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994; and Brendan McQuade's "The Vietnam Syndrome's and the End of the Post- 'Sixties' Era: Tropes and Hegemony in History and Policy," *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 2, no. 1 (2014), 33-65.

[14] Maureen Dowd, "After the War: White House Memo; War Introduces a Tougher Bush to Nation," *The New York Times*, March 2, 1991, accessed January 23, 2018, http://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/02/world/after-the-war-white-house-memo-war-introduces-a-tougher-bush-to-nation.html?pagewanted=all.

[15] Andrew Martin, *Receptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture* (London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 120; and Laura E. Ferguson, "Kicking the Vietnam Syndrome?: Collective Memory of the Vietnam War in Fictional American Cinema following the 1991 Gulf War" (dissertation, University of Glasgow, 2011), 8. In Ferguson's dissertation, she argued that in spite of the Gulf War victory, the continuing effects of the Vietnam War reflected in American cinema, which made Vietnam Syndrome a part of American culture. To the extent, her argument makes a valid point to provide a post-Gulf War analysis of Vietnam as representation in popular cinema. Her study focuses on American films produced after the Gulf War, which these films demonstrated the psychological suffering of the Vietnam War and also explained how the Vietnam Syndrome affected American society from the mid-twentieth century to the twenty-first century.

[16] Ryan and Kellner, "From Camera Politica," 309-310.

new threat to U.S. foreign policy and economic interests. To understand how Americans perceived the Vietnam War, we must examine films produced *before* the 1990s, but *after* 1975, because these films demonstrate the connection between the entertainment industry and the film trend toward replicating social change. More importantly, the Vietnam War film narrative illustrated ongoing postwar debate in a divided country until the twenty-first century.

The Islamic extremist attack against the U.S. on September 11, 2001, reactivated memories of the Vietnam War and political consciousness of the Vietnam Syndrome, as Islamist extremists hijacked U.S. passenger jets and destroyed the World Trade Center in New York City and damaged the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. After President George W. Bush declared war on Iraq two years later, many scholars drew parallels between the Iraq War and the Vietnam situation in the 1950s.[17] Hollywood once again saw an opportunity to spin the Vietnam conflict from a new angle, with a focus on lessons from the Vietnam War, such as *We Were Soldiers* (2003). This film reenacts the Battle of Ia Drang in 1965, which eerily resembled the political and military situation in Iraq in 2003. Moreover, the re-release of *Apocalypse Now* as a special director's cut, *Apocalypse Now Redux,* in August 2001, just one month before the 9/11 attacks, revived the Vietnam War in the public's mind as well. These two films, *Apocalypse Now Redux* (although this version is not much different from the original, the added scenes are worth examining) and *We Were Soldiers*, are included in this study because they show the evolution of Vietnam War films and how they contrast with earlier films about the war, such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), and *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987).

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[17] The military operations against Iraq in the name of fighting terrorism resembled the war against communism during the Cold War period. The Cold War (1947–1991) was based on the idea of the U.S. vs. the Soviet Union as capitalism vs. communism. Fear that the communist party was taking control of many Asian countries was used to justify U.S. military intervention in Vietnam starting in 1955. In 2003, the U.S. declaration of War on Terror was viewed as a similar rallying cry. Scholars and politicians consciously looked back at the Vietnam War as a warning sign not to make the same mistakes, dovetailing with Hollywood's desire to restore the memory of the Vietnam War in the public's mind.

To date, there has been much discussion about the United States after the war and how film narratives have reflected American society, with no shortage of written works, including film analysis, relating to this theme. However, few scholars have researched Vietnamese films. A 1984 Vietnamese film, *When the Tenth Month Comes*, made its international debut at the Hawaii International Film Festival in 1985.[18] This film depicts the war from a perspective that most Americans had not experienced from Hollywood representations. In addition to this film, three other Vietnamese films—*The Abandoned Field: Free Fire Zone* (1979),[19] *Hanoi: 12 Days and Nights* (2002), and *The Letter Way* (2005) —will be discussed in this study to illustrate the differences between how American and Vietnamese filmmakers approached the war.

This historiography on cinematic representation of the Vietnam War is voluminous, and the approaches to the subject vary. Many scholars have focused on the issue of historical accuracy and the realistic dimension in the depictions of both American and Vietnamese citizens. Elisabeth Bronfen's book, *Specters of War: Hollywood's Engagement With Military Conflict*, discusses how Hollywood creates and circulates war narratives that reinforce American cultural memory. She argues that the American public is haunted by its past and that Hollywood films re-conceptualize the ideology of war, including its horrors and fantasies.[20] This re-imagination of the war captures the trauma of American soldiers' experiences, as well as the nation's feelings about the war. *Inventing Vietnam*, a collection of written articles edited by Michael Anderegg, provides an overview of both direct and indirect representations of the Vietnam War that

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[18] *When the Tenth Month Comes*, directed by Dang Nhat Minh. The film is considered a classic in Vietnamese cinema. On September 15, 2008, CNN rated this film as one of the 18 best Asian films of all time.

[19] *The Abandoned Field: Free Fire Zone* is a 1979 film drama directed by Nguyen Hong Sen. The film won the Golden Prize and the International Federation of Film Critics Award at the 12th Moscow International Film Festival.

[20] Elisabeth Bronfen, *Specters of War: Hollywood's Engagement with Military Conflict* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 3.

Hollywood has invented as a wider context to explain American society and politics. The discussions in *Inventing Vietnam* collectively illuminate Americans' depiction of Vietnam as it remains a lesson in politics and foreign affairs.

Panivong Norindr's book, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature*, has influenced many scholars' writing about Vietnam. Despite his focus on the colonial period in Vietnamese history, his work provides some theoretical insights. Norindr argues that Indochina became part of French fantasy and imagination, creating a faux identity for Indochina. He also claims that Indochina has become a collection of exaggerated fictions that the French wanted to relive in their colonial life experience.[21] His discussion of Marguerite Duras' novel *L'Amant* (*The Lover*), in particular explains the resilience of French nostalgia for Indochina and how its natural charm and exotic characteristics captivated many French imperialist writers and artists.[22] In many ways, his observations also apply to Hollywood films about the Vietnam War.

In their attempt to challenge Hollywood's conceptualization of the Vietnam War, some writers have called our attention to personal war experiences and memories to argue that the representations of the war in mass media have illustrated only part of the story. A Vietnamese American literary scholar, Viet Thanh Nguyen, best exemplifies this approach in his book, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. According to Nguyen, the Vietnam War was fought twice, first on the battlefield, then in memories.[23] One of his central arguments is that Hollywood has become an industry of memories that have the power to control the war narrative

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[21] Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature* (London: Duke University Press, 1996), 1-2.

[22] Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina*, 13.

[23] Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (London: Harvard University Press, 2016), 4.

through its films.[24] His discussion on the ethics of remembering "our" and "others" demonstrates how Americans, Vietnamese, and Vietnamese-Americans remembered the war differently.

Needless to say, a sound understanding of the Vietnamese perspective must be grounded in knowledge of post-war Vietnamese history. In her book, *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in the Late Socialist Vietnam*, Hue-Tam Ho Tai argues that historical contexts are crucial to our understanding of the country's selected memories about its past. In particular, economic reforms (*đổi mới*) that have steered the nation toward a market-driven economy tend to redirect public attention away from memories about the trauma from the war. Collectively, the essays in her edited volume argue that it was essential for the Vietnamese Communist Party to reorient the war narrative toward empathy rather than rage. As a way to bring closure to the generation that went through the horrific war years, this reoriented narrative was adopted in the 1980s and has continued into the 2000s.[25]

The Country of Vietnam: A Struggle for Independence and National Identity Crisis

To the extent that mainstream Western discourse ever covers Vietnam at all, it tends to focus on issues related to the war. However, few studies of the Vietnam War have considered the Vietnamese perspective. Many historians have struggled to explain what went wrong in Vietnam and how Americans lost to the Vietnamese.[26] Conspicuously absent in their explanations is an

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[24] Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 109.

[25] Hue-Tam Ho Tai, "Situating Memory," in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 6-7.

[26] For further reading on Vietnam historical background and Americans' perspective on the cause of the Vietnam War, see Michael E. Brown's *The Historiography of Communism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008; William Duiker's *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994; I.V. Gaiduk's *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*. Chicago: I.R. Dee, 1996; Pat Proctor's *Containment and Credibility: The Ideology and Deception that Plunged America into the Vietnam War*. New York: Carrel Books, 2016; Norman Podhoretz's *Why We Were in Vietnam*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982; D.R. SarDesai's *Vietnam: The Struggle for National Identity*. Boulders: Westview Press, Inc., 1992; and Wynn Wilcox's *Vietnam and the West: New Approaches*. Ithaca: Cornell University, 2010.

understanding of the Vietnamese people's strong desire for national sovereignty and independence.[27]

Background History

Between the tenth and sixteenth centuries, Vietnam was known as Dai Viet (or "Great Viet") and began to gain wealth and power steadily. The new mission during this period was to expand to the south, which was similar to the American concept of *Manifest Destiny*.[28] The expansion resulted in conflicts over geography. The country lacked territorial cohesion and the nation unintentionally divided itself into two regions: North and South. This division would cause many problems in the years to come.

The Southern region believed in the vision of expansion that Vietnam was destined to expand to the South China Sea. Southerners were exposed to Western philosophy due to their trading activity. During the eighteenth century, the Vietnamese people already had differences in governmental structure. The ideas of freedom, liberty, and free trade were fascinating to many Southerners, which explained their distaste for the communist party and why they favored democratic practice.[29] Around 1884, the French colonial empire took control of Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, and named it Indochina. During this time, the divide between North and South became more pronounced under French colonial rule (1884–1954).

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[27] For more information on Vietnamese nationalism, visit https://ngothesis.csusmhistorydepartment.com/

[28] William Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), 8-9. The term *Manifest Destiny* is well-known to American history in the nineteenth century. It is a doctrine or belief that the expansion of the U.S. throughout the American continents from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean was both justified and inevitable. The phrase was coined in 1845 by John L. O'Sullivan, an American journalist and editor who was also an influential advocate for Jacksonian democracy. In historian William Duiker's book, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam*, he utilizes this term to describe Vietnam's nationalist expansion movement as early as the 11th century through the 18th century. In Vietnamese history, this movement is called **Southward Advance**. In some 700 years, Vietnam tripled its territory in the South from its original heartland in the Red River Delta.

[29] Duiker, *Sacred War*, 10, 14-15.

The North kept its traditional practices, but the South's trading business caused new tension because of the ease of access to the China Sea.[30] Northerners, under the influence of Ho Chi Minh in the early 1900s, believed that communism was the only way to unify the nation. (In the early 1900s, Ho Chi Minh was called under a different alias of Nguyen Ai Quoc; he adopted the name Ho Chi Minh in 1942). Also, being close to China, the North believed that they could follow China as an inspiring example to reunify the country under communist control.

The country geographically was divided, with different government structures. The Vietnamese people saw an opportunity with the fall of European imperialism in the middle of twentieth century, which resulted in global conflicts. Many countries under imperialistic control, including Vietnam, rebelled to regain freedom from European powers. Examining Vietnamese history helps in understanding Vietnam's struggle and its people's strong-willed spirit in fighting against outsiders.

This general historical background provides a different perspective for thinking about the Vietnam War. As far as Americans' historical memory, the war started in 1955 and ended in 1975, but for most Vietnamese, by the time the Vietnam War was over in 1975, they had been fighting for their freedom and their country's independence for nearly a century. Their struggle for nationhood started through resistance to French colonial rule beginning in 1884, continued during World War II against Japanese occupation, and finally culminated with the defeat of the Americans in 1975. After the war, the Vietnamese people finally accomplished their goal of becoming an independent nation. However, they struggled with new challenges in dealing with wartime and economic destruction. More importantly, this war deeply affected the Vietnamese people because it was very personal to every family.

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[30] Duiker, 9.

Economic Reform and the Shift in War Narrative

After the war, Vietnam went through significant economic, political, and social changes. In 1986, the Vietnam government initiated an economic reform known as 'đổi mới' (or *doi moi*) and adjusted its foreign policy to welcome investment from foreigners.[31] After decades of warfare, the country and its people were devastated emotionally. Economic reforms have been a top priority for policy-makers since 1975. Due to the United States' trade embargo, Vietnam traded very little with any Western countries.[32] The government announced its economic-reform plan in 1986, but many experimental policies were put in place before the official development took off in 1989. The reforms began with the agricultural system, the biggest sector of the nation's economy, accounting for most of the nation's employment.[33] During the early years of reform, the country's limited resources did not allow the film industry to produce many films. For the few films that were approved for production, the state had to approve each script, as it funded all film productions. *The Abandoned Field* (1979) and *The Tenth Month* (1984) are two examples that signaled the early shift in official policy regarding how the war should be presented to the public. A lack of government funding helps explain why few films were produced in the 1990s despite the industry's success in producing war films. The state cautiously distributed capital to various public projects, such as infrastructure and tourism, and film production was not a priority. However, the state was determined to project a different national

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[31] For more details on the Vietnamese Economic Reform, please visit https://ngothesis.csusmhistorydepartment.com/historical-narratives/vietnamese-economic-reform/.

[32] Quan H Vuong, "Vietnam's Political Economy in Transition (1986-2016), *Stratfor*, May 27, 2014, accessed March 23, 2018, Vuong's "Vietnam's Political Economy in Transition (1986-2016), *Stratfor*, May 27, 2014, https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/vietnams-political-economy-transition-1986-2016.

[33] For further readings on Vietnam's Economic Reform era, see Melanie Beresford's *National Unification and Economic Development in Vietnam*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989; Keith Griffin's *Economic Reform in Vietnam*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998; Geoffrey Murray's *Vietnam: Dawn of a New Market*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997; and Quan H Vuong's "Vietnam's Political Economy in Transition (1986-2016), *Stratfor*, May 27, 2014, https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/vietnams-political-economy-transition-1986-2016.

image of Vietnam to the world. Subsequently, the conventional narrative of the war and the way in which Westerners had been depicted in the past would need to be reconstructed for both domestic and international audiences.

War Memory through the Media
A Distorted Recollection

The study of memory is notoriously difficult because personal memory is inevitably subjective and based on people's personal references. To further complicate the matter, mass media, such as films, can influence and manipulate how specific historical events are remembered. In *Nothing Ever Dies*, Viet Thanh Nguyen suggests that the American media played a significant role in shaping public memory of the Vietnam War. Nguyen uses the concept of "ethics of remembering" to describe how public memories reflect how people choose to remember. As he states that:

> This ethics has national variations, with the Vietnamese more willing to remember women and civilians than the Americans are, the Americans more willing than the Vietnamese to remember the enemy, and neither side showing any inclination for remembering the southern Vietnamese, who stink of loss, melancholy, bitterness, and rage. At least the United States gave the southern Vietnamese who fled as refugees to American shores the limited opportunity of telling their immigrant story, and by so doing, inserting themselves into the American Dream. The Vietnamese government only offered them reeducation camps, new economic zones, and erasure from memory. Little surprise, then, that the exiled southern Vietnamese also insist, for the most part, on remembering their own … It expands the definition of who is on one's own side to include ever more others, thereby erasing the distinction between the near and the dear and the far and the feared … War involves so many because war is inseparable from the diverse domestic life of the nation. To think of war solely as combat, and its main protagonist as the soldier, who is primarily imagined as male, stunts the understanding of war's identity and works to the advantage of the war machine.[34]

This quote demonstrates the complexity of war memory and the unsettled nature of the war victory for the Vietnamese people. The VC's victory unified the country geographically, but the Vietnamese people remained divided culturally, with differing memories of the war.

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[34] Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 9.

Post-Vietnam War: American Films

Over the years, Hollywood studios have released many films about the Vietnam War. Much has been written about these films and the strengths and weaknesses in their depictions of the war, the two countries, and the people involved. It is an impossible task to review and analyze *all* of them. The films discussed in this study were selected because of how their representation of the Vietnam War resonated with the popular narrative in American society. Also, chronologically, these American films were produced around the same time that Vietnamese films included in this study were produced, making them conducive to comparison.

Apocalypse Now is a 1979 production directed by Francis Ford Coppola. The screenplay is adapted from Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. The screenplay changed the setting from the late nineteenth century Congo to the mid-twentieth century Vietnam in the midst of war. The plot is about Captain Benjamin L. Willard, played by Martin Sheen, on a secret mission to assassinate Colonel Kurtz, who has gone insane and declared himself as a demi-god. The film is set during the Vietnam War in 1969 and revolves around Willard's journey to find Kurtz so he can complete the mission. Willard's narration through the film illustrates the psychological conditions that American soldiers experienced during the war. The film also shows conflicts among American soldiers and lack of discipline in the U.S. Army. Moreover, *Apocalypse Now* depicts war atrocities committed by American soldiers, who randomly kill innocent Vietnamese villagers.

The theme of immorality also appears in *Platoon*, a 1986 American antiwar film written and directed by Oliver Stone. This film is the first of a trilogy of the Vietnam War films by Stone, along with *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and *Heaven & Earth* (1993). The male protagonist in *Platoon* is Chris Taylor, who arrives in South Vietnam in 1967 and is assigned to an infantry

platoon of the 25th Infantry Division near the Cambodian border. The rivalry between Barnes and Elias shows the undisciplined in the U.S. Army. Instead of fighting against the enemy, American soldiers are fighting each other. Barnes and his followers represent the immoral side of the war: American men rape then kill innocent village women, whereas Elias, an African American soldier, and his crew use marijuana to reduce the pain from injuries and homesickness, which is an obvious *an emotional escapism* for American soldiers to deal with the war.[35] The inexperienced and naivety of Lieutenant Wolfe also seems to foreshadow the final result of the war. Oliver Stone's war narrative spotlights the cruel and immoral reality of the war.

Good Morning, Vietnam, directed by Barry Levinson, is set in Saigon in 1965. Robin Williams played the role as a radio DJ on Armed Forces Radio Service named Adrian Cronauer. This film portrays a different side of the war: Saigon is depicted as a calm, peaceful city instead of a military fighting ground between Americans and Viet Cong. Cronauer's attitude and demeanor create some conflicts between him and the staff members. His broadcast consists of satirical news humor and rock and roll music, which are discouraged by his superior officers, Second Lieutenant Steven Hawk, and Sergeant Major Phillip Dickerson.[36] Cronauer falls in love with a Vietnamese girl, Trinh, whose brother is a Viet Cong named Tuan. In the film, it demonstrates the war-related news was not allowed to be broadcast to American soldiers, and

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[35] The use of drug, or marijuana, was and still is a common treatment for soldiers coming back home from fighting for their country. It is also a well-known fact that during the Vietnam War, many GIs turned to smoking marijuana, so they could find a way to scope with the war situation or reduce pain from wounded injuries. (Nevertheless, United States GIs were smoking marijuana in many places, especially in the 1970s, not just in Vietnam). The depiction of American soldiers smoking weed in both *Apocalypse Now Redux*, and *Platoon* demonstrates a stereotype narrative of American soldiers that most of them smoke marijuana; however, in an interview of Vietnam veteran, after watching *Platoon*, they all claimed they did not smoke in the field. Jay Sharbutt, "Reunion: Men of Real Platoon," in *Movies and American Society*, ed. Steven J. Ross (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 310.

[36] Martin, *Receptions of War*, 142-143. As a contribution to the 1960s American culture, it is unavoidable to include rock 'n' roll music. Scholar Andrew Martin remarked that "No film about the Vietnam War seems quite complete without a 1960s rock 'n' roll accompaniment." The music in Good Morning, Vietnam represented the 1960s American liberation movement between class and race. The use of music also helped the film to be identified with the time period and developed an authentic sense of emotions with the viewers.

Cronauer could not discuss any political nor social issues on air; he could only read what was already on the script. This film brings a different approach to representing the Vietnam War. Instead of telling a war story as *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon* did, *Good Morning, Vietnam* tells a love story of an American man and an ordinary Vietnamese young woman during the war. For the most part, the Americans in this film, are portrayed positively as passionate, humorous, and good-hearted whereas the Viet Cong, particularly Trinh's brother Tuan, are portrayed as untrustworthy and manipulative.

The war ended in 1975; films produced shortly afterward took off in different directions, seemingly paralleling American society's disunity. *Apocalypse Now* reflected the prevailing sentiment that many people felt about the war by presenting it as insane. Many Americans disapproved of U.S. military actions in Vietnam, and their opposition increased dramatically in the mid-1960s. By the 1980s, many filmmakers changed their attitudes toward Vietnam veterans. *Platoon* is an exception to this trend because Oliver Stone was a Vietnam veteran and he was more empathetic toward the troops, distinguishing his perceptions of the war from those of others. *Good Morning, Vietnam* stood out by constructing the war narrative from a different perspective.

Post-war American Collective Memory

Studying memories of the Vietnam War presents its own set of challenges. The media, specifically the film industry, has shaped public memory of the war profoundly. In the late 1960s, Hollywood's critical examination of Americans' values and history correspond to that decade's social movements, e.g., the Civil Rights Movement and feminism. Thus, these films became a

primary source that articulated critiques of American values and institutions.[37] Hollywood has produced a collective memory of the Vietnam War as a reassurance of American pluralism in its national identity.[38] However, this collective memory also can impact individual memories, as popular narratives that Hollywood produces exert media influence on people's memories.

During the twentieth century, the media—including news from newspapers, radio, and TV—became a powerful communication tool that transformed how information was distributed to the public. In the 1960s, when the Vietnam War was in full gear, victory was uncertain in America, and the U.S. government sent journalists and photographers to Vietnam to document the war, wanting to see for themselves how the war was unfolding. The government hoped these reports would assure the public that victory would be realized.[39] However, this effort backfired because the accounts of the war by people who witnessed it only increased public concerns. TV networks aired extremely graphic news coverage of the war. Political disarray in South Vietnam also exacerbated American pessimism about the conflict.

In South Vietnam, which was under U.S. protection, Ngo Dinh Diem, who served as President of South Vietnam from 1955 until 1963, and his aggressive policy against communism went to the extreme, which alarmed U.S. journalists. His obsession with communism led to several false accusations against innocent Vietnamese people. He also ordered the destruction of

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[37] Michael Ryan and Douglas Kelner, "Films of the Late 1960s and Early 1970s: From Counterculture to Counterrevolution, 1967-1971," in *Hollywood's America Understanding History through Film*, ed. Steven Mintz, Randy Roberts, and David Welky, (United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 270.

[38] Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 10.

[39] The combination of technology and media played a massive role in the Vietnam War for every American family at home. The government thought it could use mass media (especially TV) to gain American support and confidence in its foreign policy and military engagement in Vietnam. Reporters spent most of their time in South Vietnam in Saigon because the U.S. was protecting this territory under the 1954 Geneva Conference. Prior to that time, there was little censorship of war coverage on TV. Battles were brought directly to Americans' living rooms. Many have argued that these reports actually weakened Americans' support for the war, especially U.S. military actions.

monuments to Viet Minh martyrs from the Indochina War.[40] This action was perceived as a direct attack on Vietnamese traditions that involved worshipping veterans, who were considered heroes for their country's unification. Ngo Dinh Diem's actions also reflected negatively on the U.S. government, which supported him and contributed to the collapse of his regime a few years later. Also, as a Catholic, his religious policy created a vicious religious hysteria in Vietnamese society. For instance, the Buddhist crisis between May and November 1963 was a political and religious campaign in South Vietnam that led to a coup, in which Ngo Dinh Diem's government was overthrown.[41] Diem's policies favored Catholics and antagonized many Buddhists, including bans on the Buddhist flag; only Vatican flags could be displayed in public.[42] In May 1963, many monks went to Saigon to protest against Diem's government as a religious and political movement. These stories became headlines in U.S. newspapers and quickly grabbed Americans' attention, as the media began to criticize U.S military actions in Vietnam.

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[40] The formation of the National Liberation Front (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) lies in the communist-dominated resistance to the French, the Viet Minh – League for the Independence of Vietnam, established by Ho Chi Minh on May 19, 1941. During the war against the French, the Viet Minh was an effective political weapon set up by the Communist Party of Vietnam to attract people from all classes, including non-communists, who participated in the fighting under the party's leadership. In the battle of Dien Bien Phu (1954), Viet Minh soldiers, under the command of General Vo Nguyen Giap, defeated the French forces and compelled France to surrender, ending the era of French imperialism in Southeast Asia. At the end of the war, the Viet Minh were placed in charge of North Vietnam and soon attempted to root out the counter-revolution movement. The Viet Cong, formed in 1954, primarily was a guerrilla army based in South Vietnam and began to gain popularity among the people in the 1960s against American military forces. Many Vietnamese scholars viewed Ngo Dinh Diem as a dictator, who was highly suspicious and paranoid toward the enemy. Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, set up a government with cruel policies against the Viet Cong, or anyone else who endangered their rule. As a leader, Ngo Dinh Diem did not have many supporters and was very unpopular with the people.

[41] Malcolm Browne took the most iconic photo of the war, showing a self-immolating monk. The monk's name was Thich Quang Duc, and he burned himself to death on a busy street in Saigon on June 11, 1963, in opposition to Diem's aggressive policy against Buddhism. For further reading on the Buddhist crisis in South Vietnam, see Edward Miller's "Religious Revival and the Politics of Nation Building: Reinterpreting the 1963 'Buddhist Crisis' in South Vietnam," *Modern Asian Studies* 49. No. 6 (2015): 1903-1962; and Robert Topmiller's *The Lotus Unleashed: the Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam, 1964-1966*. Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2002.

[42] Edward Miller, "Religious Revival and the Politics of Nation Building: Reinterpreting the 1963 'Buddhist Crisis' in South Vietnam," *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 6 (2015): 1921.

In Barry Levinson's film *Good Morning, Vietnam*, we can catch a glimpse of life for American troops in Saigon. Through Robin Williams' character, Cronauer, the film shows how media news in South Vietnam worked under strict censorship. The film took place in 1965, during the most critical time of the war, when the U.S. rapidly increased its forces in South Vietnam and assured the public of a quick victory. In January, President Johnson unveiled his "Great Society" plan during his State of the Union Address. The Civil Rights Movement had reached its peak, resulting in the 1965 Voting Rights Act, with Johnson outlawing discriminatory voting practices in many Southern states. As U.S. troop levels in Vietnam increased rapidly, from 75,000 to 125,000, anti-war protests at university campuses nationwide also increased dramatically. In May, many college students burned their draft cards, and professors held many teach-in demonstrations against the war at the University of California, Berkeley. However, these U.S. headlines were not aired during Cronauer's radio broadcasts. Almost every scene shot before Cronauer begins his broadcasts features a typewriter typing highlighted news happening in the U.S., but these stories are never part of the scripts that Cronauer reads during his radio show.

As a narrative trope, women often are portrayed as prostitutes or rape victims. In *Good Morning, Vietnam*, when Cronauer and his men are hanging out in a GI bar owned by a gay Vietnamese man, only American soldiers and Vietnamese prostitutes are allowed inside the bar. Cronauer uses money to lure prostitutes to his table to sit with him and his friends. Also, at the beginning of the film, Cronauer is attracted to Vietnamese women wearing the traditional white silk dress, *áo dài*. In fact, the dress remains the symbol of Vietnamese women to the present day. However, áo dài was expensive during this time, but in the film, nearly every young Vietnamese woman wears this dress to attract the white male's Orientalist gaze for Vietnamese women. The

representation of women in these films reveals the popular understanding and expectations of white men toward women of color.[43] The depiction of women in these films also has changed over time, compared with *We Were Soldiers* (2002) and *Apocalypse Now Redux* (2001).

In *Platoon*, an episode reminds the audience of the My Lai Massacre. During one of the patrols, VC booby traps kill three U.S. troops, which upsets Taylor and the men in his platoon. When the platoon unit discovers an enemy supply and weapons in a village nearby, they violently interrogate civilians, demanding to know whether any of them helped the VC. During the interrogation, Lerner cold-bloodedly kills the village chief's wife. Shortly afterward, Taylor prevents a gang rape of two Vietnamese girls by some of Barnes' men. Although this scene was not as brutal as the actual My Lai massacre, it revisited memories of the event. The reconstruction of the massacre also revisits the gruesome memory that solidifies common themes in war films relating to sexuality and violence. However, the theme of violence is not the only central premise that American filmmakers wanted to depict in the Vietnam War narrative trope. The sense of disunity within the U.S. military among soldiers is also a common theme in many films. This narrative trope is highlighted in *Platoon* through the cinematic lens of Oliver Stone, who enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1967 and requested combat duty in Vietnam.[44] *Platoon* is Stone's first of three films about the Vietnam War, and it serves as his reflection and an autobiographical observation about the nature of the war.[45]

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[43] Tony Williams, "Narrative Patterns and Mythic Trajectories in Mid-1980s Vietnam Movies," in *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*, ed. Michael Anderegg, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 128.

[44] Randy Roberts and David Welky, "Coming to Terms with the Vietnam War – A Sacred Mission: Oliver Stone and Vietnam," in *Hollywood's America Understanding History through Film*, ed. Steven Mintz and Randy Roberts, and David Welky, (United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 306. For more Oliver Stone's biography, visit https://ngothesis.csusmhistorydepartment.com/american-films/oliver-stones-biography/.

[45] Roberts and Welky, "Coming to Terms with the Vietnam War," 307.

The film was produced in 1986, during the Reagan era, when the United States and Hollywood were interested in heroic action and science fiction movies, and much less interested in re-living the Vietnam War, as *Platoon* does.[46] The Reagan era is associated with President Reagan's conservatism, as his ideas dominated national policymaking in areas such as taxes, welfare, and nuclear defense, helping the nation restore its economic prosperity.[47] During this period, Hollywood reaped box-office successes from new developments in film technology and sequels through the *Rocky*, *Star Wars*, and *Star Trek* franchises. The American people were attracted to these films and enjoyed watching these glorious fantasy realms, rather than facing the realities of a war with no end in sight. *Platoon*'s success at the box office exhumed the unpleasant memory of a war that many Americans wanted to forget, depicting the war's realities, rather than telling a story about heroic victories.

The word "chaos" fairly describes the Vietnam situation because the war was one of the most unpopular wars in American history. Given social movements against military commitment back home, those who fought overseas were even more disillusioned and traumatized. For example, *Apocalypse Now* revolves around Col. Walter E. Kurtz, who went insane and saw himself as a demi-god. The film portrays Willard's mission to kill Kurtz as the epitome of hypocrisy because the U.S. Army focuses on killing their people rather than fighting against the enemy. It also illustrates American values' emptiness during the war. *Apocalypse Now* reprises this theme of chaos throughout the film, e.g., the scene when Lt. Col. Bill Kilgore orders his men to surf after ordering a napalm strike on local cadres, proclaiming "I love the smell of napalm in

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[46] Roberts, 313.

[47] Ronald Reagan, *White House*, accessed September 11, 2017, https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/ronald-reagan/.

the morning."[48] This quote highlights the idiosyncrasies of war, that the American soldiers did not believe in the cause of the war, and that the war was not a noble cause, instead highlighting the nonsense and madness. *Apocalypse Now* demonstrates the atrocities of war and demonstrates how the fighting impacted civilians and soldiers, both physically and mentally.

Postwar Hollywood films about the Vietnam War revived unpleasant memories and experiences in their efforts to recreate a controversial war. These films emphasized common themes in war films, mainly violence, to highlight memorable events. These reenactments emotionally resonated with Americans, many of whom were against the military engagement in Vietnam. The film narrative reflected most Americans' general perspective, but also shaped how people will remember the war because the narrative has been integrated into the nation's collective memory of the war through media depictions, providing a wider social and cultural perspective in the study of film and history.

Post-Vietnam War: Vietnamese Films

Under a tight government controls over the film industry, one would expect Vietnamese films to portray Americans negatively, but that is not the case. Shortly after the war ended, Nguyen Hong Sen, a famous director of war films, released *The Abandoned Field: Free Fire Zone* in 1979. The film takes place within the perimeter of an empty field called Đồng Tháp Mười (Plain of Reeds), an inland wetland in Vietnam's Mekong Delta. The main characters Ba Đô, his wife, and their infant son live in a small shack in the middle of the water. They are assigned the task of keeping the communication line for the Viet Cong. The director focused on the couple's daily life that involved rice farming, raising children, and catching fish. These activities are interwoven with the scene of the American soldiers raiding the watery field where

[48] *Apocalypse Now*, directed by Francis Coppola (1979; USA: Zoetrope Studios, 1979).

the guerilla soldiers were operating. When Ba Đô is killed by gunfire from an American helicopter, his wife chases after the helicopter and shoots it down to the ground.

However, perhaps the best-known Vietnamese film about the war among American scholars is *When the Tenth Month Comes*. The story is about a woman named Duyên, who returns home from her visiting her husband on the southwestern border. She carries an ineffable pain of knowing her husband has died in a battle. On her way back home, she falls into the river and is rescued by a village teacher, Khang. She is determined to keep her husband's death to herself and not to let anyone in the family know, especially not the elderly father-in-law, who is gravely ill. To comfort her father-in-law, she asks Khang to write letters impersonating her husband, so everyone would believe that he is still alive. These letters bring joy to the family, but she suffers the grief over her husband's death in silence. Then, there are many rumors that Duyên and the teacher, Khang, are having an affair because they have spent lots of time together. To make the situation worse, the father-in-law asks Duyên to write a letter to his son and wants him to come to visit him on account of his sickness. At this point, Duyên realizes that she could not hide the truth anymore. Director Dang Nhat Minh highlights the beauty of Vietnamese women by focusing on the female protagonist's psychology and inner struggle of women during wartime.

Post-War Vietnamese Collective Memory

Vietnamese history is crucial to our understanding of the Vietnam War. As a country, Vietnam had fought for national unity for more than 1,000 years. Every major conflict with a foreign power entailed specific meaning, which is reflected in Vietnamese linguistic references to conflicts. Just as Americans refer to the Vietnam War as "the Vietnam War," the Vietnamese people call this war "the American War" or "the War of National Salvation against the

American."[49] The labeling of the Vietnam War as "the American War" implies that the Vietnamese people view their conflict with the Americans from a much broader historical perspective. They see the war as part of their long, continuous struggle against foreign rule to achieve their independence. Not surprisingly, representations of the war in Vietnamese films primarily are anchored in that nationalistic position. In contrast, representations of the war in most American films are not governed by one single theme or ideological position. Rather, a wide range of thematic thrusts, emotive sentiments, and political orientations can be seen, reflecting the intellectual pluralism, cultural diversity, and political divisiveness in American society. In the films examined in this paper, Hollywood consistently depicted the Vietnamese people, including the VC, as dangerous, unpredictable, and cowardly, while American soldiers often were innocent, inexperienced, and/or compassionate. However, Vietnamese films highlighted the heroism and nationalism of the Vietnamese people, especially Vietnamese women, and the terrible consequences of the war on Vietnam as a nation.

Understanding the war from the Vietnamese perspective opens the door to analyzing the Vietnamese depiction of the war in the nation's film productions. It is essential to keep in mind that the Vietnamese communist party maintained a tight grip over film narratives. After the war, the government prioritized rebuilding the country and did not want the citizenry to dwell on war memories. Vietnamese film productions were oriented toward giving the veteran family a sense of closure so that the country could move on and heal the wounds left by the war. This trope can be seen in *The Abandoned Field* and *The Tenth Month*. Both of these films were produced shortly after the war, through government funding. The message in these films was not about politics, but humanism. Compared with American filmmakers, Vietnamese filmmakers did not

[49] Shaun Kingsley Malarney, "The Fatherland Remembers your Sacrifice: Commemorating War Dead in North Vietnam," in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 48.

use a specific event during the war as the basis for their film narratives. Rather, they used the war as a backdrop and focused on the life of ordinary Vietnamese families during wartime. For example, in *The Abandoned Field*, Ba Đô's family is depicted as one of many other patriotic families that joined the revolutionary fight against the Americans as part of their daily lives. The central narrative trope was to highlight the patriotism of ordinary people and their struggles to make a living during the war.

The Abandoned Field portrays the pure beauty of nature in the South, as in the opening scene, with Ba Đô and his wife singing a traditional folk song in a duet. This scene paints a picture of typical daily life for Dong Thap Muoi farmers living on the river. This singing tradition, ***hát hò***, is a very well-known representation of Southern culture.[50] Music plays a significant role in this film. Southern folk music in this opening scene pinpointed the story's geographical location while illuminating the rich and distinctive culture in different regions of Vietnam. Throughout the film, the viewer hears the soundtrack music, composed by celebrated songwriter Trinh Cong Son, whose music is very well-known in Vietnam. The collaboration between director Nguyen Hong Son and songwriter Trinh Cong Son contributed to the film's success, making it the most famous war film in Vietnam. Interestingly, music is also featured prominently in *Good Morning, Vietnam*. The Robin Williams character, Cronauer, plays rock-and-roll music during his broadcasts, echoing the rebellious attitude of many Americans during

[50] Traditional folk music in Southern Vietnam is known as ***hò***. According to Professor Tran Van Khe, ***hò*** is a genre of popular music in Vietnamese culture originating from lowland living practices, expressing the mood of the people on boats crossing the river. It is often a musical dialogue between two people, usually between a man and a woman, expressing their feelings for and/or attraction to each other while rowing their boats. Tuy-Phuong Tran Le, "Vietnamese Traditional Folklore Music – Southern Music," *Dot Chuoi Non* (Vietnam), trans. Uyen Ngo, January 16, 2015, accessed July 15, 2018. https://dotchuoinon.com/2015/01/16/dan-ca-dan-nhac-vn-ho-mien-nam/.

the 1960s back home.[51] In both cases, music is implemented effectively throughout the films' narratives to depict cultural influences and social movements in real life.

It is interesting to note that at the end of *The Abandoned Field*, Ba Đô was killed by gunfire from an American helicopter. To avenge her husband's death, the wife shoots down the helicopter. At that point, the film cuts to a close-up of a photo falling out of the American pilot's cockpit. The people in that photo are presumably the pilot's wife and children. This scene makes the viewers feel empathy for American soldiers because they also were ordinary people with wives and children like Ba Đô, but they had to leave their families and fight in a war. Women and family became the central theme at the end of the film, which depicts the realities of war, and how war destroys and separates families, and does not exclude anyone.

In post-war Vietnamese films, the resilience of Vietnamese women has become a symbol of women's empowerment. Many say that women have extraordinary strength and endurance, and this became a common feature ascribed to Vietnamese women on the screen. However, the depiction of Vietnamese women in these films is not only beautiful, but also ascetic and distressing, as their strength is compressed into acts of sacrifice, patience, and tolerance. It was not until the commercial cinema period in the early-2000s, that Vietnamese women began being depicted as more modern women. In these modern films, women are mentally strong, financially independent, and morally responsible for their choices.[52] Furthermore, films produced after the war tended to concentrate on the morality of people within the community, especially in the portrayal of women's behavior. To emphasize this particular narrative trope, filmmakers have

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[51] Mikal Gilmore, "Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and the Rock of the Sixties," *Rolling Stone*, August 23, 1990, accessed November 5, 2018. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bob-dylan-the-beatles-and-the-rock-of-the-sixties-176221/.

[52] Ngoc Diep, "Vietnamese Women on Film: Suffering, but Tolerant?" *Tuoi Tre Online*, (Vietnam), trans. Uyen Ngo, October 19, 2018, accessed November 5, 2018. https://tuoitre.vn/phu-nu-viet-tren-phim-sao-co-the-kho-dau-nhan-nhin-den-the-20181018085257526.htm.

used the collective representation of Vietnamese women to strengthen the nation by placing family values on women. This is best shown in *When the Tenth Month Comes*.

When the Tenth Month Comes has even fewer war-related depictions, with the narrative primarily concentrating on the principal character, Duyên, and her emotional struggle to cope with the death of her husband. Dang Nhat Minh wrote the screenplay, which was based on the real-life experiences of many Vietnamese families that experienced the pain of losing loved ones. These losses became a burden for many Vietnamese women, a theme highlighted continually in this film. One of the best scenes is when Duyên is in a courtyard performing in a famous play that uses a Northern Vietnamese satirical musical theatre form known as *chèo*.[53] The performance involved a tale about a wife saying farewell to her husband, who is on his way to battle, and she promises to take care of his old mother at home. Duyên, being in a state of unspeakable pain, reveals her real feelings through the character she portrays. In the next scene, Dang Nhat Minh used a spiritual scene of Am Duong (Yin Yang) Market at the village temple to illustrate the separation between life and death to amplify the reality. At the end of this scene, the husband tells Duyên: "Continue to live happily because only people that are still alive can do it."[54] The recurring scene from this Yin Yang Market one of the most surreal scenes while raising the ideology of humanity in *When the Tenth Month Comes*. The principal message is that the dead cannot be resurrected and that only the living can continue to live and move on, i.e., the

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[53] ***Chèo*** is one of many types of traditional Vietnamese theater art. ***Chèo*** thrived in the northern region of Vietnam, especially near the Red River Delta, in the two spreading areas of the Northern midland and mountainous regions. This type of theater is highly developed and rich in ethnicity. The art of ***chèo*** theater enjoys a long history, from the tenth century to the present, going deep into Vietnamese social life. It fully reflects all aspects of Vietnamese national identity: optimism, compassion, and loving the peaceful and simple life, but resisting invaders and defending the country in the spirit of national pride. It comprises lyrical, romantic, and poetic literary genres. Catherine Diamond, "The Pandora's Box of 'Doi Moi': The Open-Door Policy and Contemporary Theatre in Vietnam," *New Theatre Quarterly* 13, no. 52 (1997): 374.

[54] *When the Tenth Month Comes*, video file, 1:21:42, YouTube, posted December 21, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSJ7g2zGD0k&t=4s. For more details on these two scenes, visit https://ngothesis.csusmhistorydepartment.com/vietnamese-films/when-the-tenth-month-comes/.

Vietnamese people should focus on rebuilding the nation. Nevertheless, when the film was released, it faced many difficulties during the censorship process because the director of the Vietnam Feature Film Studio at the time said the film contained an element of superstition and wanted the Ying Yang Market scene removed. However, Dang Nhat Minh refused to do so because he believed the scene depicts sacred values within Vietnamese culture and beliefs that must be highlighted and presented.[55]

As economic reforms accelerated, the Vietnamese government restricted production of war films and prioritized other national projects, such as infrastructure and education. Films about the war were censored by the government strictly to protect the war narrative for educational history. The communist government wanted to generate a unified war narrative and did not want filmmakers to have many opportunities to reconstruct the war's brutality and stir up any controversy in public discourse. With no private sectors financing independent films, the government would only fund films that supported official policy. Since negative representations of Americans in particular, and Westerners in general, would not help the country improve its relationship with foreign countries, Vietnamese films about the war generally focused on the Vietnamese, not the Americans.[56]

Although both *The Abandoned Field* and *When the Tenth Month Comes* are considered the most famous Vietnam War films, it should be noted that *The Abandoned Field* takes a Southern perspective on the war, whereas *When the Tenth Month Comes* identifies with the

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[55] Le Hong Lam, "'When the Tenth Month Comes': Classics from Simple Things," *Zing*, (Vietnam), trans. Uyen Ngo, August 23, 2017, accessed November 5, 2018. https://news.zing.vn/bao-gio-cho-den-thang-muoi-kinh-dien-tu-nhung-dieu-gian-di-post773753.html.

[56] Nevertheless, the country did not entirely demolish or disgrace its proud history of fighting for independence and national unification. Many documentary films and TV drama series aired in prime time during the 1990s. The most famous TV drama series, still considered the most notable in Vietnamese culture in the 1990s, is *The Southern Land*. Even though it was set during the French colonial and revolutionary periods, it demonstrates a pattern in Vietnamese war narratives: a focus on civilians and their daily lives, rather than the enemy. The portrayal of the enemy remains the same, whether it's the French or Americans being depicted.

Northern perspective. However, both films' narratives concentrate on daily life through the recognizable characteristic of regional folk music. The details of the regional landscape, folk music, and cultural practices helped establish the proud identity of a nation that had been struggling for independence for almost half a century. By looking back, these two films reconstructed the public memory of the war through the film medium, which also manifests war nostalgia to a social level that was familiar to the war reality.

Reconstructing the Memory
Receptions of the Vietnam War by the Hollywood

It was not until the military victory of the Gulf War in 1991 that Americans began to move on from Vietnam War memories and the U.S. government began to overcome the Vietnam Syndrome. The Soviet Union's collapse broke down alliances that also resulted in the emergence of new powers, especially in the Middle East. U.S. foreign policy shifted its interest in geopolitics, increasing tensions between the U.S. and the Middle East from the 1990s into the 2000s. During this time, the Vietnam War narrative in American film production gradually was phased out and replaced by blockbuster genres, such as animation and fantasy, due to the use of new computer technology in film production.[57] However, the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and subsequent military actions drew the media's attention back to the Vietnam Syndrome because of the similarity between the U.S.-Iraq conflict and Vietnam. The film industry began to rebuild the image of the Vietnam War on the silver screen to reflect American values during this new wartime period.

[57] Robert Sklar, "Transition to the 21st Century," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed May 24, 2018, https://www.britannica.com/art/history-of-the-motion-picture/Transition-to-the-21st-century.

Post-9/11 American Films

Apocalypse Now Redux is a 2001 extended version of the original film. The Redux adds extra 49 minutes of material that had been removed from the earlier version, which brings a fresh perspective to the film and the war. One of the important scenes is the Playboy-Bunnies helicopter, and it is about 9 minutes long (79:11). The boat is coming to another U.S-outpost where the camp has completely degenerated. Willard notices a helicopter nearby with the Playboy logo and decides to arrange two-hours with the playmates while waiting to get the gasoline refill. Another crucial scene that was added in *Apocalypse Now Redux* is the new French rubber plantation sequence about 25 minutes long (110:32). Willard and the crew meet the French family, who refuse to leave Vietnam after the French defeat in 1954. This scene is a reminder of French imperialism in Vietnam, Indochina. The head of the family, Hubert de Marais invites the crew to stay for dinner while preparing for Clean's funeral. At the dinner, Willard learns that the plantation has been held by de Marais' family for 70 years. The French family decides to stay in Vietnam because they still believe that it is their home and where they belong. After the dinner, Willard and the daughter of the de Marais, Mme Sarrault, continue to drink and talk until they go to the bedroom. Mme Sarrault and Willard are laying on the bed as she lights an opium-pipe for him, then takes off her clothes. This scene is being faded out on white fog as the opium smoke covers up the whole room. This longest extension in the Redux version displays the post-war reflection on imperialism, which also includes criticism for American helping the French to maintain their status of power.

We Were Soldiers is based on the book *We Were Soldiers Once … Young: Ia Drang – the Battle that Changed the War in Vietnam* written by Lieutenant General Hal Moore and reporter Joseph L. Galloway, who both were at the Battle of Ia Drang on November 14, 1965. The film

begins with a French unit on patrol in Vietnam in 1954, which was the final year of the First Indochina War between the French and the Viet Minh forces. The French troop is ambushed by the Viet Minh under the commander, Nguyen Huu An, who orders his soldiers to "kill all they send, and they will stop coming." Then the plot changes to eleven years later, when the United States has entered the most vital period of the Vietnam War, 1965. In spite of the fact that intelligence has no idea of the strengths of enemy troops, Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore is in charge of 400 men to train and lead them to the same location that the French lost eleven years ago. After landing in the Ia Drang Valley, an American soldier captures a North Vietnamese soldier and learns from him that the location they were sent to is the base camp for a veteran North Vietnamese army division of 4,000 men that leads by Nguyen Huu An.[58] Despite being trapped and outnumbered, the U.S. force manages to hold off the North Vietnamese with artillery and help from American helicopter which airlifts supplies and reinforcements.

Meanwhile, back in the United States, a cab driver is hired to deliver telegrams notifying the next of kin of soldiers' deaths in combat. Julia Moore, Lieutenant Moore's wife, takes over this role because she feels emotionally responsible as a lieutenant's wife to personally deliver the telegram to the other wives rather than having a stranger doing it. At the end of the film, it is revealed that the landing zone quickly reverts to North Vietnamese territory. Lieutenant Moore continues to lead the battle for another year before he could return home. In the Ia Drang battle, the American military had underestimated the enemy strength. Going into the battle, the U.S.

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[58] The Battle of Ia Drang, also known as the "Valley of Death," was the first major battle between the United States Army and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). The U.S. entered the war fighting against unknown factors, which included the territorial landscape. This battle was the first large-scale helicopter attack using B-52 strategic bombers as tactical support. The Viet Cong forces were in nominal control of most of the countryside in South Vietnam by 1965. The VC established military infrastructure in the Central Highlands to the northeast of Saigon region. Due to the geographical reasons, the U.S. saw Ia Drang as an ideal area to test their new air mobility tactics. This was the beginning of the U.S. strategic bombing tactic. Later, this strategy became more common when fighting in Hanoi in the 1970s.

troops were blindfolded and surprised by the number of enemy troops. To veterans like Hal Moore, they have a different memory of the war comparing to what shows on the movie screen.

Post-9/11 American Collective Memory

Generally speaking, before going to a war, the U.S. government had to secure public consensus on the nation's commitment and support for military engagement in other countries. Back in the 1950s, when the U.S. sought to send forces to Vietnam, the domino theory was utilized to create an atmosphere of anxiety against communism, becoming U.S. justification for declaring war on communism in Vietnam. In 2001, the terrorist attacks against New York City and Washington, D.C., were coordinated by the Islamic terrorist group al-Qaeda, providing a motive for President George W. Bush to declare war on Iraq because of its suspected cache of weapons of mass destruction. Bush used the phrases "War on Terror" and "War on Terrorism" to describe the military campaign launched after the 9/11 attacks. Many scholars and historians have compared the War on Terror to the war on communism because of similarities in U.S. military actions and foreign policy. Debate on this topic in academic and news media realms revisited the Vietnam conflicts to reevaluate American values.

Apocalypse Now Redux retains the theme of war's madness and insanity in the narrative. When it was released on August 3, 2001, about a month before the 9/11 attacks, it earned about $12.5 million at the box office worldwide.[59] The added scenes incorporated three consistent themes: insanity vs. morality, sexual desire, and the ideology of imperialism. The *Redux* version included two memorable scenes: (1) the crew members spending two hours with Playboy girls,[60]

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[59] "Apocalypse Now Redux," *Box Office Mojo*, accessed August 3, 2018, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=apocalypsenowredux.htm.

[60] For more details on this scene and the depiction of American women in film, please visit https://ngothesis.csusmhistorydepartment.com/american-films/apocalypse-now/.

and (2) a dinner with the De Marais family, which owned a plantation in Vietnam, during which they discussed the reasons for French and American fighting in Vietnam.

The scene with the French family focused on the ideology of imperialism in America. This went back to World War II, when the U.S. Navy began to be viewed as one of the most formidable fighting forces in the world, building on its victory in World War I. Using the British Navy as its model, the U.S. Navy started investing in overseas islands to lay the foundation for its global projection of power.[61] After World War II, the U.S. acquired more islands to maintain its naval presence globally.[62] This territorial expansion was displayed as a form of imperialism and colonialism. The depiction of the French family represented the old imperialist power, and the United States' interests and involvement in Vietnam were viewed as the new imperialist power. During the dinner scene with the French family, its patriarch was outraged that the French had lost many battles in World War II, Dien Bien Phu, Algeria, and Indochina, but the rubber plantation belonged to the family, and he must continue living in Vietnam to keep it. Then he blamed American involvement in Vietnam for the creation of the Viet Cong because the U.S. took over the French territory, making America the enemy. He went on to state that the Vietnamese would win because they were receiving aid from the Soviet Union and China, even though the Vietnamese despised the Chinese more than the Americans because of their long history of animus. The dialogue echoes the domino theory and predicts the communists' eventual victory. This scene was not in the original 1979 film, but the fact that it was added in the 2001 *Redux* version sheds light on twenty-first-century politics and American foreign policy toward the Middle East, which is known as *geopolitics*.

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[61] Ruth Oldenziel, "Islands: The United States as a Networked Empire," from *Entangled Geographies: Empire and Technopolitics in the Global Cold War*, ed. Gabrielle Hecht (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 17, accessed October 11, 2017, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hhfwx.5.

[62] Oldenziel, "Islands."

Geopolitics is the study of geography's effects on international politics and relations. It emphasizes national security in international relations. This term has become more popular in the twenty-first century because it represents modern politics and economic interests in building a strong nation. Many scholars have looked back at the Vietnam War as an example of the United States' involvement in nation-building as a way to gain regional resources and expand trade. Because of the U.S. failure in Vietnam, many scholars in the twenty-first century questioned the U.S. decision to go to war with Iraq.[63] *Apocalypse Now Redux* did an excellent job by revisiting the collective Vietnam War memory, effectively invoking the Vietnam Syndrome.

As for *We Were Soldiers*, its central narrative entails the reenactment of the Battle of Ia Drang. The principal message throughout the film is that American GIs were fighting for their comrades, not for the cause of the war. A new theme accompanying this depiction of patriotism is the respect for victims on the other side, as evidenced in a scene with dying VCs and widows reading their husbands' diaries.[64] The Vietnam War on the silver screen in the twenty-first century seems to be more realistic than films made in previous decades. The American soldiers are still depicted as young, but they are more disciplined, well-prepared for battle, and have a stronger comradeship than the soldiers in Oliver Stone's *Platoon*.[65] *We Were Soldiers* is based on Lt. Gen. Hal Moore's combat experience during the Battle of Ia Drang, fighting alongside his

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[63] For scholarly work that comparing Iraq and Vietnam, see Christopher A. Lawrence's *America's Modern Wars: Understanding Iraq, Afghanistan, and Vietnam*, Oxford: Casemate Publishers, 2015; Jeffrey Record's *Iraq and Vietnam: Differences, Similarities, and Insights*, Pennsylvania: University Press of the Pacific, 2004; Andrew Hoskins' *Televising War: From Vietnam to Iraq*, London: Continuum, 2004; David R. Contosta's *America's Needless Wars: Cautionary Tales of U.S. Involvement in Philippines, Vietnam, and Iraq*, New York: Prometheus Books, 2017; David Fitzgerald's *Learning to Forget: U.S. Army Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice from Vietnam to Iraq*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.

[64] John Kleinen, "Framing 'the Other': A Critical Review of Vietnam War Movies and Their Representation of Asians and Vietnamese." *Asia Europe Journal* 1, no. 3 (2003): 434.

[65] Martin, *Receptions of War*, 99-100. Despite Martin's statements described the stereotype groups of Vietnamese people in *Go Tell the Spartan* (1978, directed by Ted Post), this is the common depictions of Vietnamese people in American films.

soldiers. Both *We Were Soldiers* and *Platoon* re-create war episodes using personal experiences, but since they were produced at different times, the emotive tone in their narratives is subsequently different. *Platoon* is an antiwar film that reflects the divisions within U.S. society about the war.[66] *We Were Soldiers* glorifies American unity and individual valor as demonstrated by American soldiers during wartime.

The film industry has been constructing and deconstructing American collective public memory of the Vietnam War continually. American films about the Vietnam War produced between 1975 and 2005 consistently reflect the politics and social movements of their corresponding time periods. After the Vietnam War, Hollywood films generally were critical of U.S. involvement in the war. This is the dominant theme in *Apocalypse Now*/*Apocalypse Now Redux*, *Platoon*, and *Good Morning, Vietnam*. In these films, the American soldiers are divided into either the antiwar camp or war enthusiasts. For example, both *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon* depict disagreement among soldiers about the war. American soldiers are seen fighting against each other rather than against the enemy. *Good Morning, Vietnam* attempts to change the paradigm of the Vietnam War narrative trope by shifting the violence in war-themed to the American social and political conflicts that occurred in Vietnam. In this study, there are only three films produced between 1979 and 1987 that are reviewed to examine the representation of the Vietnam War because each film narrative made a great impact in the collective memory of the Vietnam War in films before entering the twenty-first century. After 9/11 and especially the spectacular military victory over Iraq, the old Vietnam War memory faded, and a new Vietnam War narrative emerged that emphasized unity and shared values among the American people.

[66] Kleinen, "Framing 'the Other,'" 445.

Vietnamese Film Industry
A Manufactured Memory of the War's Legacy

While Hollywood was using the Vietnam War as a political cautionary tale, Vietnam began to experience a period of economic growth in the twenty-first century. The Vietnamese government made a great deal of effort to improve the nation's image on the global stage. The Vietnamese tourism industry played an important role in attracting foreigners to visit the country. Although the government still aimed to control the film industry, it cut back funding to film productions. To survive in the new economic environment, film studios have taken more innovative approaches to filmmaking, giving them more freedom to be creative in film narratives and production.

Vietnamese Film Industry Background

The war's sorrow had taken a toll on every citizen in Vietnam, so to reassure the public, the state reminded people that their sacrifices were worthwhile. Vietnamese-produced films focused on public support for veterans' families. Generally speaking, American soldiers in Vietnamese films are portrayed as merely a generic enemy, no different from other foreign invaders in previous eras. Contrary to the popular perception that Vietnamese films about the war were propagandist in nature, many films produced in Vietnam during the 1980s were quite humanistic and devoid of explicit political themes.[67]

During the reconstruction era, the Vietnamese government concentrated on using films as a political tool to heal the nation's trauma, instead of spread communist ideology. The young film industry in Vietnam comprised only a few government-funded studios, the most prominent of which was the Vietnam Feature Film Studio (VFS), based in Hanoi. In fact, this studio

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[67] John Charlot, "Vietnamese Cinema: The Power of the Past," *The Journal of American Folklore* 102, no. 406 (1989), 446, accessed October 27, 2017, http://www.jstor.org/stable/541783.

produced *When the Tenth Month Comes* (1979), *Hanoi 12 Days and Nights* (2002), and *The Letter Way* (2005).

The VFS was founded in 1953 and owned by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism of Vietnam. In 2009, this studio was converted into an independent film company and is no longer funded by the government.[68] Shortly afterward, the studio experienced several financial setbacks.[69] *The Legend Makers* (2013) is one of the most recent films about the Vietnam War, and despite the fact that the film received several awards, it was not enough the save the studio from its financial troubles.[70] It remains one of the few war films produced in the modern era, but it did not have much success at the box office when it was released.

The Abandoned Field: Free Fire Zone was jointly produced by VFS and the Liberation Film Studio (PGP). The PGP studio was established in Saigon in 1962 and later became the Central Film Distribution Branch in Ho Chi Minh City, the second branch of the Vietnam Film Institute.[71] However, since 2010, the studio began experiencing financial troubles and legal problems. The old film studios in Vietnam have been seeking foreign investment to save the industry and preserve Vietnamese film heritage.[72] Critics have viewed these financial troubles as a pattern tied to these studios' longtime reliance on government funding, rendering them unable

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[68] "[Photos] Vietnam's National Film Studio is the Perfect Backdrop for a Horror Flick," *Saigoneer*, Semptember 27, 2017, accessed December 18, 2017, https://saigoneer.com/saigon-arts-culture/arts-culture-categories/11362-photos-vietnam-s-national-film-studio-is-the-perfect-backdrop-for-a-horror-flick.

[69] Hoang Anh, "Film Studio Lives on in Public's Heart," *Viet Nam News*, October 15, 2017, accessed February 23, 2018, http://vietnamnews.vn/talk-around-town/405542/film-studio-lives-on-in-publics-heart.html#0YycHvYGCahwKm1x.97.

[70] *The Legend Makers*, or *Những Người Viết Huyền Thoại* directed by Bùi Tuấn Dũng, who also directed *The Letter Way* (or *Đường Thư*). The film tells the story of people who set up the gas pipelines from the north to the south so the guerilla army could have gasoline for the tanks. Many ordinary civilians, including young men and women, sacrificed their livelihood and love to join the campaign to protect this pipeline.

[71] "Introduction," *PGP*, trans. Uyen Ngo, accessed January 6, 2018, http://phimgiaiphong.com.vn/gioi-thieu.html.

[72] Vo Tham, "Film Industry Seeks Finance," *Sai Gon Online*, trans. Thuy Hang, September 10, 2007, accessed April 27, 2018 http://sggpnews.org.vn/culture_art/film-industry-seeks-finance-32412.html.

to adapt to the economic environment after losing this funding. The failure of war-themed films also seems to suggest that the current generation is no longer interested in the subject matter.

During the modern period, a new distributor of Vietnamese films in America has given young directors the creativity and freedom that they have wanted to put new perspectives into their films. Chanh Phuong Films (CPF) was founded by Vietnamese American director Charlie Nguyen in 1995 under the name Cinema Pictures in Westminster, California.[73] Many young and talented Vietnamese American filmmakers who have been educated and trained in the U.S. work for this studio. Moving beyond the political agenda, CPF films emphasize contemporary approaches that target a global audience market, rather than promote propaganda messages or follow any political agendas. This change in direction for the Vietnamese film industry is affecting the public's memory of the war because the younger generation remains less interested in war films. Presently, war films have a difficult time connecting with audiences because the war-film narrative remains under government-censorship strictures. This makes it more challenging for the new wave of filmmakers, who must follow the official script that has been constructing the war narrative for more than a decade. Government regulation of war films weakens filmmakers' motivation to produce Vietnam War films, as well as audiences' appetite for the genre.

Twenty-First Century Vietnamese Films

In the twenty-first century, Vietnam has begun to move forward in the global market. The film industry also has new perspectives on the war, as their productions have shifted from the national-control narrative to a more contemporary approach. *Hanoi 12 Days and Nights* (2002) is an example of a contemporary war genre of the modern Vietnamese cinema. The story portrays

[73] "Overview," *Chanh Phuong*, accessed June 16, 2017, http://www.chanhphuongfilms.vn/cpfoverview.

the Operation Linebacker II (18 – 29 December 1972), the B-52 aerial battle in Ha Noi. *Hanoi 12 Days and Nights* is a meticulous attempt to reconstruct the aerial battle of Dien Bien Phu, an aggressive battle between Ha Noi people and a strategic B-52 military strike. Through the film, the repetitiveness of 'B-52' in almost every scene presents that dedicates the dangerous but also the courage of the people of Hanoi. They were not afraid of the destruction of B-52 bombs and were determined to shoot down the enemy's aircraft.

The Letter Way, a 2005 film production, portrays Tan and An, the two messenger soldiers who have received orders to deliver a letter in the middle of a battlefield. Their mission is to deliver the letter at all cost to a liberation army command post that is surrounded by the enemy. If the letter arrives late or intercepted, the whole unit could be in danger. They face many obstacles because of the severe terrain and hiding from the enemy. The new soldier, An, is undisciplined and inexperienced, who gets frustrated when he cannot go to the frontline to fight. At first, he is not happy to be assigned as a mail-delivery soldier, but after Tan explains to him the importance of his work, An is proud of his job. At home, An's girlfriend, who is waiting to marry him, but he could not return home because of the war. When he has a chance to visit his hometown, he learns that his girlfriend is already married to another man. At the end of the film, it indicates that Tan's lover has died because of the raiding bombs near where she lives.

Twenty-First Century Vietnamese Collective Memory

In *Hanoi 12 Days and Nights*, the most interesting character is a young French journalist, Lily, who is sent to Vietnam to report on the war in the early 1970s. In a scene at the cafe, a gathering place for Hanoi artists and writers, she tells the crowd that many people worldwide, especially the French, are rooting for Vietnam's independence. Like any good reporter, Lily comes to the war front to report, but also to help soldiers evacuate citizens and avoid B-52

bombings, which occurred in December 1972. The irony is that the French colonized Vietnam, with the First Indochina War between the two countries having lasted eight years (1946–1954). This also reflects how the Vietnam War drew worldwide attention. Humanitarians and leaders worldwide supported Vietnam's independence. The film amplified the Vietnamese people's bravery fighting against massively destructive U.S. weapons, as well as highlighted other nations' sympathy. The dialogue throughout the film embodied Vietnamese citizenry's pride when soldiers shot down B-52 bombers, but it also displayed the bias in the film's narrative. Unlike previous films *The Abandoned Field* and *The Tenth Month*, *Hanoi 12 Days and Nights* directly attacks Americans through its depictions of them. For instance, when an American soldier is imprisoned and interrogated, the American character is depicted as innocent, yet ignorantly acknowledging the bomb's destruction and that he was only following orders.[74] The representation of the Vietnam War in modern Vietnamese cinema is more aggressive and belligerent.

In an interview, the film's director, Bui Dinh Hac, said it was unthinkable not to include the B-52 footage in the film.[75] In one scene, a newspaper hawker uses a speaker to shout, "The victory at Hanoi has outshone the event of Apollo landing on the moon."[76] Strangely enough, the soldiers who shot down the U.S. aircraft wear uniforms that looks like astronaut suits. This illustrates this battle's significance and what it means historically. Vietnam was a technologically backward country compared with the U.S., so its success in shooting down B-52 bombers is

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[74] *Hanoi 12 Days and Nights*, video file, 1:23:55, YouTube, posted February 27, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KFdu_6qM8c.

[75] Ngoc Huyen, "Relive the Magnificent Historical Moments with Hanoi 12 Days and Nights," *HanoiTV*, trans. Uyen Ngo, December 16, 2017, accessed November 5, 2018, http://hanoitv.vn/song-lai-nhung-khoanh-khac-lich-su-hao-hung-voi-ha-noi-12-ngay-dem-8h-kenh-1-tu-1812-d79378.html.

[76] *Hanoi 12 Days and Nights*, video file, 2:01:09, YouTube, posted February 27, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KFdu_6qM8c.

understandably a memorable event in its war against the Americans.[77] However, Operation Linebacker II in American history is hardly mentioned except for the famous line from U.S. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger: "We bombed the North Vietnamese into accepting our concessions."[78] This film recreated and reconstructed a war memory that many American people may have overlooked in the war's history. *Hanoi 12 Days and Nights* offers a different representation of the war in the Vietnamese film narrative, which illustrates that the film industry has moved away from the manufactured, scripted, government-approved storyline to focus on the reconstruction of a past event that was historically significant in the nation's eventual victory over the Americans.

Hanoi 12 Days and Nights began shooting in 1997 and was completed in April 1999. However, at the time, the Vietnamese film industry was incompetent and disorganized, and was unable to release the film until 2002. The Vietnam Feature Film Studio (VFS) produced the film, and in 2002, the studio was in financial trouble due to a lack of capital and government funding. Moreover, the total investment in the film went up to 7 billion VND (approximately 300 million USD).[79] The film producer revealed that the scene depicting the B-52 bombers in the battle over Hanoi, lasting 3 minutes and 38 seconds, alone cost 620 million VND (approximately 25,000 USD).[80] The investment in this film aimed to re-enact a chapter in the Hanoi-Dien Bien Phu victory that forced the U.S. to sign the Paris Peace Accords that brought peace to North Vietnam,

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[77] For further reading on Operation Linebacker II, or also known as the Christmas Bombing, please visit https://ngothesis.csusmhistorydepartment.com/historical-narratives/operation-linebacker-ii/.

[78] "Nixon Announces Start of 'Christmas Bombing' of North Vietnam," *History*, November 13, 2009, accessed February 2, 2019, https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/nixon-announces-start-of-christmas-bombing-of-north-vietnam.

[79] Ngoc Huyen, "Relive the Magnificent Historical Moments with Hanoi 12 Days and Nights."

[80] Ngoc Huyen, "Relive the Magnificent Historical Moments."

but the film did not draw much of an audience at the box office. Shortly after the film's release, VFS was in financial and legal trouble, which explains why the studio went out of business.

The Letter Way recounted a small story during the war that many historians and scholars may have overlooked. Unlike films that depicted epic military campaigns or battles, the film focuses intensely on the story of mail delivery during in the war.[81] In addition to demonstrating the significant role of mailman soldiers, the film depicted heartfelt emotions when soldiers received letters from loved ones back home. The director, Bui Tuan Dung, who was in his early 30s when he directed the film, received criticism from colleagues, who said the film was limited in its depictions of battlefield life and that it had a hasty ending. Nonetheless, *The Letter Way* offered a new representation of war through the perspective of a young director's emphasis on the forgotten history of postman soldiers.

The Letter Way also successfully constructed the character of Hoang An, a young soldier who dreamed of becoming a war hero so that his girlfriend Would be proud, but he gets re-assigned to become a postman soldier after getting into a fistfight. Unlike previous films that always depicted Vietnamese soldiers as well-disciplined, this film depicted young soldiers who lacked experience and discipline, and instead were full of naked ambition and arrogance. The film shows that Hoang An joined the military not because he is a patriot, he because he wanted to be a war hero. This is shown in the letters he sends to his girlfriend, in which he lies about fighting in the war. During the Truong Son Strategic Supply Route journey (also known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail) to Unit 861, An constantly despises the postman's role, proclaiming, "Being a soldier without taking part in any battles is meaningless. Books, newspapers, and movies only

[81] Luu Ha, "*The Letter Way* – A New Perspective of the War from the Young Generation," *VNExpress*, trans. Uyen Ngo, August 19, 2005, accessed November 4, 2018, https://vnexpress.net/giai-tri/duong-thu-cach-nhin-chien-tranh-cua-nhung-nguoi-tre-1885269.html.

write about spies and special forces; no one talks about the military postman."[82] Not until An saw how happy soldiers became when they read letters from family members did he realize that the letters give them both physical and spiritual strength to continue to fight the war. His journey helps him become more humble and more mature as a soldier, and he begins to realize the important service and duty that a postman soldier provided during the war.

Throughout the film, many scenes depict characters reading letters with background narration to describe soldiers' stories on the battlefield. The American film *We Were Soldiers* (2002) also included a scene with letters sent during the war—the telegrams notifying next of kin of soldiers' deaths in combat. The U.S. Army actually began hiring cab drivers to deliver these telegrams. Julia Moore, Lt. Col. Hal Moore's wife, insists that she should be the one to deliver such news to other soldiers' wives who are also living on the base. These death notices symbolized American women's strength in *We Were Soldiers*. Although these wives had lost their husbands, a sense of community binds them as they suffer through these losses. Also, because the film was produced in the twenty-first century, the depiction of gender and racial equality is more just and optimistic. If the telegram in *We Were Soldiers* symbolizes women's strength, then in *The Letter Way* (2005), the letter symbolizes the hope for freedom and love for the soldiers. The letter expresses soldiers' homesickness for their hometowns and loved ones' sentiments toward soldiers fighting for independence. It is a common feature in Vietnamese cinema to utilize soldiers' letters to capture viewers' emotions. In the film, the letter emphasizes soldiers' strength to fight and determination to stay alive so they could reunite with their families.

Most of *The Letter Way*'s footage was filmed on the dangerous Ho Chi Minh Trail, known for its infamous booby traps. It was a military-supply route running from North Vietnam

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[82] *The Letter Way*, video file, 26:45, YouTube, posted February 12, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZieILHWZq0&t=3s.

through Laos and Cambodia to South Vietnam. *The Letter Way* used the trail to reconstruct part of the war's history that may have been forgotten, especially in American historical accounts about the war. In the film, under the leadership of Tan, an experienced postman soldier on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Hoang An still cannot avoid the bomb traps on the mountain road. This demonstrated this territory's importance during the war, and how both sides wanted to control it. For the Americans, another distinct feature in this film is the portrayal of the enemy. Although in the dialogue, it is stated that the Americans were attacking the 861 battalion, the film showed that the South Vietnamese were the enemy.[83] From the Vietnamese perspective, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was the traitor to the country because it fought with the American forces. In the aforementioned American films *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Platoon* (1986), the film-narrative trope concentrates on disorganized and undisciplined American soldiers who fight each other for senseless reasons—the opposite of the Viet Cong, who are organized and worked well together. *The Letter Way*, produced in 2005, shifted the Vietnamese film-narrative trope in the depiction of the war and the portrayal of the Vietnamese and Americans.

The representation of the Vietnam War through the Vietnamese film narrative provides a different perspective and understanding of history that has not been explored in Western discourse. *Hanoi 12 Days and Nights* reenacted the narrative in the famous aerial battles with B-52 bombers during Operation Linebacker II. The effort aimed to capture a piece of this historical victory at Hanoi and put it on the silver screen to reconstruct a new narrative trope for the modern-day Vietnamese film industry. The Vietnamese film industry in the twenty-first century

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[83] South Vietnam, Republic of Vietnam (RVN), was a country that existed from 1955 to 1975 under the United States' protection during the Vietnam War. In 1949, this region received international recognition as the "State of Vietnam" and was governed as a constitutional monarchy by Emperor Bao Dai from 1949 to 1955. Ngo Dinh Diem became the first president of South Vietnam on October 26, 1955, after Emperor Bao Dai was exiled. In Vietnam, the war, or the "America War" (among other names), was fought between North Vietnam, i.e., the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam (Viet Cong) against the U.S. and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), or South Vietnam. For more reference, see Footnote 40.

undoubtedly offered more opportunities for directors and screenwriters to reconstruct the war narrative. However, due to the financial crisis of the Vietnam Feature Film Studio (VFS), a famous studio known for producing war movies, both *Hanoi 12 Days and Nights* (2002) and *The Letter Way* (2005) did not experience enough success at the box office to secure international releases. *The Abandoned Field* (1979) and *The Tenth Month* (1984) are more well-known to some audiences in the Western world because when comparing them to American films, they bring a fresh perspective of the war that has not been seen before. To study the representation of the Vietnam War in the entertainment industry, such as in films, requires interpreting the war from both sides to fully comprehend the unique narrative thoroughly.

The War's Nostalgia
Representations of the War through Films

When the Vietnam War ended in 1975, both Hollywood and the Vietnamese film industry continued to reconstruct their war narratives because the whole world was concerned about this war's outcome. American films like *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Platoon* (1986) were big box-office hits because both films provided popular depictions of the war based on the universal understanding of American society during the war era. The Vietnam War's primary narrative trope, based on the American perspective, was that the war brought the worst out in humanity, driving people to insanity that led to atrocities, and that the lack of support for the war back home reflected tensions and instability within American culture and society during the 1960s and early 1970s. *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987) provided a different portrayal of the war, especially in the depiction of American and Vietnamese people. The film also demonstrated how influential the media could be in the public realm. These films were produced after the war, when American society had lost confidence in domestic and foreign policies, allowing Hollywood to explore different narratives on the topic until the late 1990s, when the direction

shifted toward Middle Eastern conflicts, which became deadly serious on September 11, 2001. American society revisited its collective Vietnam War memory through *Apocalypse Now Redux* (2001) and *We Were Soldiers* (2002), which captured American fears and concerns with government actions toward the Middle East. In summary, the nation's ideological politics and popular cultural understanding of the current situation influenced the war narrative, and Hollywood, being the most powerful influence on the global entertainment industry, knows how to seize the opportunity to transform a piece of history on the silver screen and impact perceptions globally.

In the U.S., the different generations have different memories about the Vietnam War, if any, the millennials would feel even more disconnected to the war because they are more related to war narrative when it is put on screen. Hollywood, as the most powerful entertainment industry, has the advantage to reconstructing the Vietnam War history in many perspectives and through different stories, such as in the most recent film, *The Post* (2017) focus on the journalism at the Washington Post that published the Pentagon Papers. The war was just not about the battles and fighting; many other factors and elements participated in the events, and the film industry is a helpful tool to explore these hidden stories.

After the war, Vietnam received worldwide attention during its political and economic reconstruction. The Vietnamese film industry also gained some conspicuous attention on an international stage through films such as *The Abandoned Field: Free Fire Zone* (1979) and *The Tenth Month* (1984). Both films highlighted Vietnamese cultural characteristics and the nation's distinctive beauty. Although the Vietnamese film industry was young and technologically incapable of creating advanced cinematic pictures, its authenticity brought a fresh perspective when they had the chance to depict the war from different angles. The most exciting and

unexpected twist was in the depiction of Americans. Instead of portraying them as pure evil and ignorance, in *The Abandoned Field*, American soldiers are portrayed as ordinary people. The primary narrative trope was to help families move on from grieving and illuminate the bravery of Vietnamese people in contributing to the war effort. At this time, the Vietnamese government heavily controlled the film industry, which meant scripts were approved before filming began.

Many Vietnamese film critics and scholars have looked back at the Vietnamese film industry and debated whether the industry thrived with many respectable films produced in the 1960s and 1970s.[84] Evidence indicates that *The Abandoned Field* and *The Tenth Month* received many international awards and remained classics in Vietnamese film lore. However, when the country entered a period of reconstruction, economic priorities took a toll on the film industry, which could not continue to grow and maintain its legacy. As of today, Vietnam War films do not exert much importance or impact on viewers compared with previous decades. Instead, a new film industry is emerging with a new generation of filmmakers that has shifted the industry toward producing commercial blockbuster movies. It is targeting the younger generation of moviegoers by introducing a more modern approach to adopting martial arts in the historical action film, e.g., *The Rebel* (2007) and *Blood Letter* (2012)[85] and *Blood Letter* (2012).[86]

The Vietnamese film industry in the 2000s has more opportunities to *change* the war narrative decades after the war ended. People have learned how to forget the war's horrors—or at

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[84] Quang Duc, "The Debt of History in Film: When Will Vietnamese Movies Have a 'Blockbuster' Movie for Vietnam War?" *Zing*, (Vietnam), trans. Uyen Ngo, July 25, 2017, accessed June 29, 2018, https://news.zing.vn/mon-no-lich-su-qua-lon-phim-viet-khi-nao-co-bom-tan-chien-tranh-post765780.html.

[85] *The Rebel*, or *Dòng Máu Anh Hùng*, directed by Charlie Nguyen. For more description on this film, visit https://ngothesis.csusmhistorydepartment.com/vietnamese-films/the-rebel/.

[86] *Blood Letter*, also released as *Sword of the Assassin*, directed by Victor Vu. The film was set during the reign of Emperor Le Thanh Tong (c.1460–1497). The Nguyen Trai family has been accused of treason, and the empress ordered everyone in the family, including servants, beheaded. Only an 8-year-old boy survived and lived under the care and martial-arts tutelage of the lone monk. Twelve years later, the boy is a 20-year-old young man with sophisticated martial-arts skills who finds out the truth about how his family was killed and begins his adventures to seek revenge.

least accept its outcomes and move on from the grief. The physical and emotional destruction that the war elicited slowly has faded from the collective public memory. In Vietnam's postmodern cinema era, *Hanoi 12 Days and Nights* and *The Letter Way* have introduced new representations of the Vietnam War and its narrative. The Vietnamese film industry finally has escaped the government's strict censorship grip to produce a new war narrative that focuses primarily on depicting people who contributed to the war effort, but this time, the narrative trope is to illuminate the Vietnamese national spirit, solidarity, and courage against the French and American regimes, striving through successful long-term resistance and reunification. It takes a direct approach in reconstructing the war's cruelty, demonstrating the enemy's oppression explicitly. However, in this century, the Vietnamese public does not have much interest in revisiting its war memory. Modernization gradually has overshadowed nostalgia for the war, and the younger generation is focusing more on Western popular culture, which is slowly driving them away from stories about the war that they have heard repeatedly. Furthermore, they have technological tools to explore war narratives from other perspectives.

The younger generation takes advantage of the Internet to look up their history, which is written in other languages besides their mother tongue, from other perspectives. This allows them to comprehend Vietnam's history from a global perspective. Furthermore, the country's modernization has begun to integrate Western philosophical teachings into its cultural practices. Young Vietnamese only know the war through stories from their families and historical lessons at school. Most of them do not have any war memories to repress, as their parents and grandparents have. In fact, many ironically are attracted to American popular culture—whether it is movies, music, or food—sometimes leading to them overlooking the history between the two

countries. To keep this proud history alive, filmmakers continue to highlight the Vietnamese people's sense of national patriotism and unity in the twenty-first century.

Discussing the public memory of the Vietnam War can be a complicated process. First, Vietnam won the symbolic war, but the war's atrocities emotionally tore the Vietnamese people apart. Second, the discussion comprises three different generational groups. Depending on their age, gender, regional origins, political sympathies, and personal experiences, each group has different memories and knowledge about the war, including its aftermath.[87] The oldest generation (those born between the early 1900s and mid-1940s) who lived through the global conflicts in the first half of the twentieth century would have the most oppressive memories. For many of them, the war was neither against the French nor Americans, but merely a war for independence and freedom. The next generation (those born between the mid-1940s and 1970s) includes those who were born during the Vietnam War (1955–1975). They have the most conflicted memories because they were living in a divided country. During the war, the U.S. military protected the South, and the communist party controlled the North. Moreover, for geographical reasons, it is inevitable that Northerners and Southerners recall the war differently. More importantly, some Southerners would have mixed feelings about their support for the Americans, especially after the Fall of Saigon in 1975. Many supporters of the Americans decided to flee the country and became refugees hoping to immigrate to America or other countries rather than remain in Vietnam. The final generation comprises millennials (those born between the 1980s and 2000s), who grew up in a country that already had reconstructed the war narrative and formulated a national narrative. The government and education system have manufactured the state narrative of the Vietnam War that is taught in schools. However, this

[87] Ho Tai, "Situating Memory," 8.

generation can learn about Vietnam War history by reading foreign historical sources online. The government is extremely cautious with this group because of the free flow of information on the web. As a result, modern Vietnam war films have begun to find an equilibrium in the narrative to depict the war in a way so that the younger generation can relate to history from a global perspective.

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