

EXAMINING POSTWAR ISSUES OF MALE IDENTITY CRISIS AND  
DISENFRANCHISEMENT IN VIETNAMESE FILMS: *THE WILD REED* AND  
*LIVING IN FEAR*

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## ABSTRACT

Themes of war and revolution dominated the Vietnamese film industry when it first developed during the early years of the First Indochina War (1945-54). These films glorified comradeship on the battlefield and venerated the image of heroic soldiers who sacrificed their lives and youth for the liberation and unification of the nation, which was achieved in 1975 after nearly a century of continued warfare. In the postwar period, the legacies of war continue to dominate the content of many films. Filmmakers have privileged the social plight of women as a key narrative tool to discuss the emotional wounds of war, and the trope of grieving Vietnamese women, particularly in the postwar context, has come to symbolize the sorrow and devastation of the nation in the aftermath of war. Yet, an examination of the crisis of Vietnamese male identity and the role of men in postwar society raise many interesting social and political questions about that society. The story of the postwar as told from the perspective of male protagonists in film sheds light on the mine-laden social and political landscapes through which the nation maneuvered to build a new and unified Vietnam.

This thesis analyzes two films, *Co Lau* [The Wild Reed] (1993) and *Song Trong So Hai* [Living in fear] (2005), which revisit the theme of war from a nuanced angle through a critical examination of postwar issues from the perspective of male protagonists. *The Wild Reed* is narrated by Luc, a northern soldier from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), and *Living in Fear* privileges the perspective of Tai, a former southern soldier from the Army Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The films affirm that the crisis of male roles in the new Vietnam is intricately linked to conflicting social and political issues related to citizenship and nation building in postwar Vietnam. Films that privilege female subjectivity lack discussion of such

issues. Both films analyzed in this thesis explore the fragmentation of the patriarchal family structure and its consequences on the male protagonists and their sense of masculinity in domestic and public spheres. The differing political stances of the protagonists affect the way in which their male crisis, as well as their recuperation, is experienced. I will also explore how *Living in Fear*, and to some extent *The Wild Reed*, dare to examine and articulate the social displacement of former southern soldiers in the postwar society. In doing so, the films depart from the conventional narrative of postwar Vietnam and offer an alternative narrative that illuminates postwar experiences that have long been heavily censored and suppressed by the state.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Eileen Nho Vo was born in Vietnam and grew up in Toronto, Canada. She graduated from the University of Toronto with a B.A in East Asian Studies in 2006. She is currently enrolled in the Ph.D program in the East Asian Literature Department at Cornell University.

To my parents, Tam Vo and Bien Tran for their love and support

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In March 2006, the film *Song Trong So Hai* [Living in Fear] (2005) won five awards, including best director and best script, at the Golden Kite Awards show, the Vietnamese equivalent of the American Academy Awards. This was a significant achievement for the film considering that it departs dramatically from the conventional narrative of the history of postwar Vietnam. The film elucidates the social and political discrimination that a former southern soldier, Tai, experiences as he struggles to reintegrate into a transformed Vietnamese society after reunification in 1975. The Golden Kite committee may not have received this storyline so favourably had the awards show taken place decades earlier than it did. The critical acclaim of *Living in Fear* in 2005 exemplifies the changing policies of the Vietnamese film industry that are not only reforming the production of films, but also reshaping the function of films as a means for Vietnamese filmmakers to express their social and political critiques. The film illustrates that directors can--and indeed they are beginning to--articulate alternative historical narratives of postwar society. *Living in Fear* achieves this through the eyes of a marginalized male character whose experience highlights controversial issues regarding nation building that could not have appeared in previous films. The relaxation of state censorship of film is indeed related to the liberalization of the economy in mid-1980s Vietnam.

The *doi moi* (“renovation”) period in Vietnam, which refers to the set of economic reform policies that promoted a market-oriented Socialist economy, began in 1986 and subsequently led to the state’s relaxation of guidelines for arts and films, allowing the privatization of film production companies. These wider structural transformations in Vietnam facilitated filmmakers’ ability to explore different social

issues beyond the thematic content of war, which had exemplified the Vietnamese film industry since its emergence during the early years of the First Indochina War (1945-54). Early post-American-Vietnam War films glorify comradeship on the battlefield and venerate the image of heroic soldiers who sacrificed their lives and youth in that war for the liberation and unification of the nation, which was achieved only after more than a century of resistance to French and American intrusion.

In the post-*doi moi* period, films were no longer just propaganda tools. Filmmakers began using their work, albeit with caution, as a platform to critique social issues, such as the emotional wounds of war and the negative effects of economic development and modernization in Vietnamese society and culture. However, their critiques were still mainly under the guise of issues relating to the social plight of women. The trope of grieving Vietnamese women, particularly in the postwar context, has come to symbolize the nation's sorrow and devastation in the aftermath of war. In other words, female subjectivity has been prominent in Vietnamese films because females, as perceived by the state, are a politically neutral group; the thematic content of their social plight does not challenge or undermine the strict regulations and censorship implemented by the state, which discourages any criticism of the one-party regime and its policies.

Western scholarship on Vietnamese film has also dealt primarily with the issue of female subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> Accessibility of Vietnamese films to Western audiences could be to blame. Films that are submitted for screenings at international film festivals and films (with English subtitles) that are available outside of Vietnam are often politically

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Gina Marchetti, "Excess and Understatement: War, Romance, and the Melodrama in Contemporary Vietnamese Cinema." *Genders* 10 (1991 Spring): 47-74, Kathryn McMahon. "Gender, Paradoxical Space, and Critical Spectatorship in Vietnamese Film: the Works of Dang Nhat Minh" in *Trans-status Subjects: Gender in the Globalization of South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Sonita Sarker and Niyoki De Esha (N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 2002), 108-125, Dana Healy, "Laments of Warrior's Wives Re-gendering the war in Vietnamese Cinema." *Southeast Asia Research* 14, no. 2 (2006): 231-259, and Lan Duong. "Spectral Imaginings and National (Be)Longing in *When the Tenth Month Comes and Spirits*." *Asian Cinema*, (Fall/Winter 2007): 5-2.

neutral and frequently depict the social plight of female protagonists, and as a result have shaped the focus of Western scholarship on Vietnamese film. Yet, an examination of Vietnamese male identity raises many interesting questions regarding the social and political issues of the postwar period. For example, if the plight of females has come to represent the nation's grief and sorrow during the postwar, then what kind of narrative about postwar society could be articulated through the perspective of male protagonists?

*Co Lau* [The Wild Reed] (1993) and *Living in Fear* are two films that critically examine postwar issues from the male point of view. These works suggest that when male trauma dominates film, or more specifically when the lives of returning soldiers are examined, a discussion of the crisis of male positions in the new Vietnam becomes possible. More importantly, that crisis points to several conflicting social and political issues concerning citizenship and nation building, fragmentation of the family and national stability, recuperation and reconciliation in postwar society--something that films privileging female subjectivity fail to achieve.

*The Wild Reed*, directed by Vuong Duc (b.1957) and closely based on a short story with the same title by Nguyen Minh Chau (1930-1989), portrays the problematic reunion of family members after long years of war.<sup>2</sup> Luc, a northern soldier, has not returned to his home since he was drafted during the war because he lost touch with his family and thought they may have died. One year after reunification, he is stationed at his hometown in Quang Tri to manage two state projects: to rid the war-torn land of wild reeds in order to locate the bodies of fallen comrades, and to build a martyr cemetery to commemorate their selfless sacrifices. One day at a photography shop, he sees an old picture of himself and his wife, Thai. The photographer, Quang,

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<sup>2</sup> Nguyen Minh Chau wrote the short story in 1986. The story's setting takes place in 1976 in Quang Tri (central Vietnam). For the short story, see Nguyen, Minh Chau. *Co Lau Tap Truyen Ngan* [The Wild Reed and Other Short Stories] (NXBVH: Hanoi, 1989), 7-69.

tells him that the soldier in the picture has died in the war. When Quang goes on to tell him that the deceased soldier was his wife's first husband, he realizes that Thai had remarried. Luc finds out that Quang is also taking care of Thom, Luc's daughter with Thai, as well as Luc's father. Such a replacement means that Luc's pre-war roles as both husband and filial son (he only discovers his fatherhood status during this trip) – key markers of male identity within the household - have been supplanted by another male. Displaced, Luc struggles with his predicament and avoids Thai, who eventually finds out that he is still alive. When Quang realizes Luc's real identity, he is afraid that Luc will want his family back, which causes him great anxiety. The two men negotiate the conflict of their male positions and Luc decides to only take back his daughter and his father, but not Thai, to live with him. The film ends with the happy reunion between Luc and his daughter, Thom.

*Living in Fear*, directed by Bui Thac Chuyen (b. 1968), examines the experience of a former southern soldier adjusting to a new society. Due to his former political affiliation, Tai and his family are relocated to an uncultivated area of the new economic zones in central Vietnam to continue his rehabilitation program after reeducation camp.<sup>3</sup> The resettlement area is littered with land mines and threatens the family's survival on a daily basis. Tai's former political affiliation causes the new regime to discriminate against him, and his bigamy causes further problems because it challenges the state's law on monogamous marriage (Tai had remarried during the war). He is not allowed to participate in deactivating the land mines, because it is a task reserved for the citizens of the new nation. Unemployed by the state, he finds various means to support his two families. Eventually, he begins to deactivate the land mines illegally so that he can sell and exchange them for food in order to care for his

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<sup>3</sup> The new economic zones (NEZ) was a program implemented in the postwar period to relocate people, most of whom were affiliated with the southern regime, to uncultivated areas of Vietnam as a way to resolve over population issues in the urban centers of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

two families. At the same time, the relationship with his brother-in-law Hai Dan becomes volatile, because Hai Dan resents him for supporting the southern regime and for abandoning his sister, Thuan, and her children when he took on a second wife, Ut, during the war. When Tai impregnates his two wives and they go into labour at the same time, his responsibility as a husband proves overwhelming and he leaves the hospital. Hai Dan seeks out Tai in order to reproach him, but when he discovers Tai's land mine collection he expresses his admiration for Tai's work instead of reprimanding him. The film concludes with the two men's reconciliation with one another, the state's recognition of Tai's talent, and his readmission into the new society.

Even though these two films did not generate high audience figures in Vietnam, they won prestigious domestic and international awards and received positive reviews from film critics. *The Wild Reed*'s war and revolutionary themes were praised by the Ministry of Defense who named it one of the best films of 1993. It won the Jury Prize and received second place at the Tenth Vietnam Film Festival, in addition to the Golden Torch Award at the film festival in Pyongyang in 1994. In addition to the five Golden Kite awards mentioned earlier, *Living in Fear* also won other domestic prizes, as well as the Asian New Talent Award at the Shanghai Film Festival in 2006. Despite attempts by the government to promote *Living in Fear* by spending one hundred million Vietnamese Dong (estimated at \$6,500 USD) in advertisement costs, and another two hundred million Vietnamese Dong (estimated at \$13,000 USD, prize money the film won in Shanghai) to improve the film's visual and sound quality, it ranked--to the disappoint of the government--as the fourth lowest earning motion picture at the box office in 2005. The lack of success at the box office was attributed to the film's postwar theme. The film failed to attract a large audience

because young adults who make up the majority of moviegoers in Vietnam today perceive war-themed films as “boring and a waste of time.”<sup>4</sup>

Audience indifference notwithstanding, these two films stand out from other war-themed films because they offer a more nuanced view of postwar society by elucidating the fragmentation of the family structure through the exploration of the crisis of male social and political positions. In particular, *Living in Fear*, and to some extent *The Wild Reed*, audaciously examines and articulates the social displacement of former southern soldiers in the post-war society, a cinematic topic that has been heavily censored and suppressed by the state. The fact that they were screened for international audiences not only alludes to the state’s relaxation on the topic but it also illustrates how, by 2005, young filmmakers such as Bui Thac Chuyen were able to revisit the theme of war from a more nuanced angle and to offer an alternative narrative of postwar experiences than audiences are used to.

These two films examine social issues relating to the reconstruction of society and nation building in the newly unified Vietnam from the perspective of a male: in the case of *The Wild Reed*, this is of a northern soldier from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV); whereas in *Living in Fear* it is of a former southern soldier from the Army Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). On the surface, the two films depict how the long years of war have disrupted the patriarchal family structure, which is defined through the male-centered kinship system.<sup>5</sup> Yet, beneath the erosion of the fabric of

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<sup>4</sup> Cam Vinh, “*Song Trong So Hai Chieu Trong...So Hai*” [*Living in Fear* Screened...in Fear], *Viet Bao* [Viet Newspaper], <http://vietbao.vn/Van-hoa/Song-trong-so-hai-chieu-trong-so-hai/40116265/183>. This reaction was expressed by several moviegoers after they learned about the war themes of *Living in Fear* at a movie theatre in Ho Chi Minh city. Their attitude was part of an article that addresses the issue of why critically acclaimed films such as *Living in Fear* fail to attract large audience members. The author notes that those moviegoers did not watch the film because of its war content. The scenario illustrates the common problem that many domestic films face - their narratives do not appeal to moviegoers in general.

<sup>5</sup> Anthropologist Hy Van Luong writes that, “the male-centered kinship system is based on the East Asian hierarchical model in which descent was traced mainly through men; postmarital residence was predominantly patrilocal (a couple living with the husband’s parents) and inheritance was heavily in favor of sons who were responsible for ancestor worship and patriline continuity, and where authority,

patriarchal family lie conflicting issues pertaining to male social and political identities in the new society. Because of their different political stances, the two protagonists experience the problems of male identity and recuperation differently. Also important is the two films' depiction of these soldiers themselves. Although *The Wild Reed* examines the issues of the northern soldier's reintegration into society with more complexity than other films of the 1990s, it still portrays Luc as a moral soldier. Twelve years later, this moral image of the northern soldier is not always cinematically upheld as depicted by the character of Hai Dan in *Living in Fear*. The portrayal of Tai's character, a former southern soldier, also offers an alternative view of postwar society and the experiences of the people who were affiliated with the southern regime--a theme that had been absent in Vietnamese films until *Living in Fear*.

The fragmentation of the patriarchal family symbolizes social disorder in post-revolutionary Vietnam, and both films explore its consequences for male positions within the family and society. In *The Wild Reed*, Luc, a northern soldier, returns to his hometown only to discover that another man, Quang, has occupied his position within the family. This dislocation ruptures Luc's sense of identity as a man, husband, and son, and he struggles to reorient himself within the new society that aims to restore social order through the promotion of the "happy family" campaign.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, Luc's manhood is rescued by his role as a moral soldier, and his public and civil duty to the nation reestablishes his masculinity at the end of the film.

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both domestic and public, rested with men." Hy Van Luong, "Gender Relations: Ideologies, Kinship Practices, Political Economy," in *Postwar Vietnam Dynamics of a Transforming Society*, ed. Hy V. Luong (Landam and Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, 2003), 203.

<sup>6</sup> The happy family campaign will be discussed in detail in chapter five. For more information on this topic, see *Xay Dung Gia Dinh Xay Dung Cuoc Song Van Minh Hanh Phuc* [Building a Progressive and Happy Family and Lifestyle] (Hanoi: NXB Phu Nu, 1976).

In *Living in Fear*, Tai's disenfranchisement in the new nation illustrates how masculinity relates to the issue of citizenship, a status that is regulated by the state. If citizenship is a membership that carries certain rights (such as the distribution of food rations) as well as obligations (participating in nation building), then in the new Vietnam, citizenship hinges upon one's prior political affiliation.<sup>7</sup> It requires that one had been pro-Communist, if not politically neutral, during the American-Vietnam War. A former enemy of the new regime, Tai is deliberately marginalized and disenfranchised by the state; he is denied participation in the reconstruction of the country, a duty and privilege that is reserved for the citizens of the new nation. Moreover, Tai is unemployed and has little financial means to adequately support his families. The fact that the task of deactivating land mines is performed by females exacerbates the crisis of his position as a male in society. Tai's bigamous relationship further undermines his status, especially given that his first wife, Thuan, and her family supported the northern regime during the war, while his second wife was affiliated with the southern regime. In other words, Tai's bigamy contests the state's vision of reunifying the nation into one cohesive family as promoted by the "happy family" program.<sup>8</sup>

In both films, the use of space plays an important element in the recuperation and reclaiming of both Luc and Tai's masculinity. If their masculine identities are undermined in the domestic space, then they seek to redefine themselves by demonstrating their worth in the public domain. The public space is associated with the recovery of a scarred landscape, whether it is covered with land mines or with fallen soldiers. The two men's participation in state-led reconstruction activities allows

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<sup>7</sup> On rights, obligations, and citizenship: See Charles Tilly, "Citizenship, Identity and Social History," in *Citizenship, Identity and Social History*, ed. Charles Tilly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 8-9.

<sup>8</sup> In fact polygamy was outlawed in 1969.

them to regain their male roles. More significantly, the films demand a negotiation of two male characters in the public, male-dominated realm in order to restore their masculinity. By privileging the male perspective and trauma, *The Wild Reed* and *Living in Fear* not only raise issues related to their precarious positions in postwar Vietnam, but they begin to critique the politically sensitive issue of citizenship and the treatment of people who were affiliated with the southern regime.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE HISTORY AND MAKING OF VIETNAMESE FILM

The production of propaganda and the mobilization of citizens for war efforts led to the development of Vietnamese cinema. Vietnamese film scholars have divided the evolution of the cinema into four historical periods: cinema under French colonization (early 1900-1945), revolutionary cinema during the liberation struggle and decolonization (1945-54), cinema during the reunification period (1954-1975), and cinema since the reconstruction phase (1975-today).<sup>9</sup> Cinema during the French colonial period was limited, and most films were directed and produced by the French to promote French colonialism.<sup>10</sup> Many Vietnamese enthusiasts experimented with filmmaking, but their work was never celebrated because of their poor quality due to inadequate funding and the absence of an established film production company. The development of Vietnamese cinema officially began when Ho Chi Minh signed the decree for the establishment of The Vietnam State Enterprise for Film and Photography in March 1953, in which he exhorted the use of the cinema as an apparatus for state propaganda. This approach to filmmaking echoed the strategy of the French to utilize the medium to promote and justify their mission to civilize Indochina for audiences in the colony and the metropole.<sup>11</sup>

Soviet socialist realist films and documentaries, too, influenced the Vietnamese cinema, which is not surprising considering that many Vietnamese filmmakers trained

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<sup>9</sup> *30 Nam Nghe Thuat Dien Anh Viet Nam* [30 Years of Vietnamese Cinema] (Hanoi: Vien Tu Lieu Phim Viet Nam, 1983), 9-15.

<sup>10</sup> Most film activities were monopolized by the French as well as several Chinese businessmen. See Xuan Lam and Dao Xuan Chuc, "Hoat Dong Dien Anh O Viet Nam Truoc Cach Macg Thang Tam" [Movie Activities in Viet Nam Prior to the August Revolution], in *Hanh Trien Nghien Cuu Dien Anh Viet Nam* [Vietnamese Cinematography: A Research Journey], ed. Pham Vu Dung (Hanoi: NXB Van Hoa Thong Tin Tap Chi Van Hoa, 2007), 30-41.

<sup>11</sup> See Panivong Norindr, "Vietnam: Chronicles of Old and New," in *Contemporary Asian Cinema*, ed. Anne Tereska Cieccko (Oxford and New York: BERG, 2006), 48.

in the Soviet Union or with Soviet filmmakers in Vietnam.<sup>12</sup> Developed over years of war, themes of nationalism and struggle came to characterize Vietnamese national cinema. Indeed, the primary tasks of filmmakers during these formative years of the film industry were to organize propaganda on government policies, highlight the achievements and instances of heroic fighting of the Vietnamese people and the national army, inform friendly countries of Vietnam's achievements in economic and social fields, and promote the cultural and political education of the people.<sup>13</sup> Some pioneers of Vietnamese cinema acted as camera operators or reporters who accompanied combatant soldiers on the battlefield to record combat scenes for propaganda purposes.<sup>14</sup> The moving images of the liberation struggles were promoted to instill anti-foreign sentiments and to encourage people to fulfill their revolutionary and production duties.<sup>15</sup> In short, themes of war lie at the core of Vietnamese national cinema.

*Chung mot dong song* [Sharing the Same River] directed by Nguyen Hong Nghi and Pham Ky Nam in 1959, sets the thematic paradigm adopted by later films.<sup>16</sup> This was the first feature film that depicted the division of the country into north and south at the seventeenth parallel. In spite of the separation of the film's key characters

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<sup>12</sup> Phan Dinh Mau, "Su Tuong Dong Giua Hai Nen Dien Anh Viet Nam" [Similarities Between Soviet and Vietnamese Cinema], in *Hanh Trien Nghien Cuu Dien Anh Viet Nam* [Vietnamese Cinematography A Research Journal], ed. Pham Vu Dung (Hanoi: NXB Van Hoa Thong Tin Tap Chi Van Hoa, 2007), 556-557.

<sup>13</sup> *30 Nam Nghe Thuat*, 6. See also, Ngo Phuong Lan, *Modernity and Nationality in Vietnamese Cinema*, trans. Dang Viet Vinh and Nguyen Xuan Hong (Yogyakarta: Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival and Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema in collaboration with Galangpress, 2007), 170.

<sup>14</sup> This historical narrative about Vietnamese war documentary films is depicted in the documentary film, *Grilled Rice* and in *Song of the Stork*, a film about the American-Vietnam War that glorifies comradeship on the battlefield and was made to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the "liberation" of Vietnam. The political economy during the war period affected film storage and operations. *Grilled Rice* depicts how these camera soldiers sacrificed their rice ration to protect their film and camera. They did so by grilling the rice and using it as a drying agent to keep their film stock from rotting and their cameras from rusting. See also, Norindr. "Vietnam," 48-50.

<sup>15</sup> Pham Vu Dung, *Dien Anh Viet Nam An Tuong va Suy Ngam* [Vietnamese Cinema: Impression and Reflection](Hanoi: NXB Van Hoa Dan Toc, 1999), 240.

<sup>16</sup> Pham, *Dien Anh Viet Nam*, 238.

by the Ben Hai River, which demarcates the two Vietnams, the two lovers Van (who is from the northern bank) and Hoa (who is from the southern bank) remain faithful to one another. The fact that their love symbolizes “the sentiments of the people in both Vietnams against the Americans,” attests to the function of films as a visual representation to express filmmakers’ desire to unify the country.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, later filmmakers often borrow the symbol of the river, the physical marker that divides the two Vietnams, to express the country’s partition. Fittingly, filmmakers employ the image of a bridge as a metaphor for reconciliation and the reunification of the two Vietnams in many postwar films.

From the beginning, the task of Vietnamese cinema was to mirror the reality of war, and film industry served as an arm of state propaganda to instill patriotism and nationalism among the population.<sup>18</sup> Film historian Ngo Phuong Lan asserts that, “Consequently, because of the dominant themes of war, separation and nationalism between 1954 and 1975, both domestic and foreign audiences have come to stereotype Vietnamese films as being heavily imbued with propaganda.”<sup>19</sup> This stereotype is further reinforced by the socialist realist nature that characterizes these films. The propaganda function of films continued after 1975, when the war and its legacies remained the central focus of many films, in order to justify the war efforts of the people and to explain the poverty and instability that plagued postwar Vietnam.

Beginning in the 1990s, domestic audiences, who wanted to be entertained by the martial arts and melodrama films from Hong Kong and Taiwan, lost interest in

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<sup>17</sup> Ngo, *Modernity and Nationalism*, 172.

<sup>18</sup> Pham, *Dien Anh Viet Nam*, 239.

<sup>19</sup> Ngo, *Modernity and Nationalism*, 167. Between 1954-1975, Vietnamese cinema included films produced by both the DRV, north Vietnam, and by *Giai Phong* [Liberation] film studios of the national front for the liberation of south Vietnam. There were five main film studios: Vietnam Feature Film Studios; Central Documentary and Scientific Film Studios; Vietnam Animated Film Studio; Army Film Studios; and the *Giai Phong* Film Studios in South Vietnam. I have not been able to locate and view any films produced by south Vietnam but I am interested to compare the films made by the two governments before 1975.

films whose themes centered on narratives of heroic sacrifice in war.<sup>20</sup> Today, domestic films face heavy competition from imported Hollywood action movies or the melodramatic craze of the ‘Korean wave,’ which is so popular among young adult moviegoers. Pirated DVDs of both imported and domestic films are also an impediment to the development of the Vietnamese film industry.

In the past, Vietnamese films were fully subsidized by the state, which controlled all aspects of film production and distribution until 2003. Filmmakers had to adhere to the guidelines implemented by the state, which dictated the topics directors could discuss and depict cinematically. The state encouraged films to broadcast the ethos of a socialist society. Criticism of the one-party political system was heavily censored, and films that were too sexual were discouraged, even if filmmakers argued that they were adhering to state guidelines by emphasizing the realist quality as encouraged by socialist realism.<sup>21</sup> After *doi moi*, the replacement of the state’s subsidy system with a more open market arrangement meant that the state no longer monopolized the film industry, thus allowing the Ministry of Culture and Information to issue licenses to non-state production companies to produce films.<sup>22</sup> The market-driven, liberal economic policies and political transformation provided a positive catalyst for many writers and filmmakers to re-evaluate the effects of war on society and articulate their own version of Vietnamese history. Historian Dana Healy

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<sup>20</sup> Films made for television in the 1990s and high movie ticket prices were also a deterrent to the popularity of these state-subsidized films and the growth of Vietnamese cinema in general. See Norindr, “Vietnam,” 51.

<sup>21</sup> The controversy surrounding Dang Nhat Minh’s 1987 film *Co Gai Tren Song* [The Girl on the River] is a good example. In his diary, Dang Nhat Minh writes that the film committee censored him about a sex scene in the film and they threatened to not screen it publicly if he does not delete it. See Dang Nhat Minh. *Hoi Ky Dien Anh* [Cinema Diary] (TP Ho Chi Minh: NXB Van Nghe, 2005), 100-101.

<sup>22</sup> Between 1990 and 1992 various organizations and associations formed the forty different film companies in Vietnam. Gradually, the film industry became more commercialized and private individuals and film producers funded these films. Ngo, *Modernity and Nationalism*, 181.

writes, “The new perspectives on war, on history, grew out of a sense of social crisis” and precipitated a re-examination of postwar society.<sup>23</sup>

The thematic content of Vietnamese films began to change after the *doi moi* period. The theme of collective efforts no longer dominated post-*doi moi* films, but rather, individual fates and concerns took the central spotlight as filmmakers begin to critically examine social issues that had been suppressed in the past. Many post-*doi moi* films diversified the representation of war and presented it as a tragedy and source of sorrow.<sup>24</sup> This was also a dominant theme in literature.<sup>25</sup> These films, however, continue to centralize the social plight of females and the vulnerable positions they occupy in society and the family. The popularity of privileging the female perspective, including females as military participants, is partly because women were not key players in the war and that they also occupy a nonthreatening political position in postwar society. The collective effects of war on women tend to emphasize maternal and familial issues and related domestic responsibilities that often transcend political tensions and differences--factors that contribute to the disillusionment and volatile positions that many former male soldiers experienced in postwar society. Many acclaimed films, such as *Doi Cat* [Sandy Life] (2001) and *Ben Khong Chong* [Wharf of Widows] (2000), examine the emotional wounds of war by focusing on the grievances of women who have lost a husband or a son to the war, or how the long years of war that denied them the possibility of motherhood have in effect endangered their womanhood.<sup>26</sup> Even though films after *doi moi* begin to contest collective history

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<sup>23</sup> Healy, “Laments of Warrior’s Wives,” 235.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>25</sup> The theme of disillusionment was not as prominent in films as it was in post-*doi moi* literature. Ngo Phuong Lan suggests that unlike literature, which is a private pursuit, the production of a film requires more efforts from different entities that naturally subject it to censorship. Because of state subsidization, films also undergo many stages of censorship screening that makes it more difficult for them to critique the regime. *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately I have not accessed these films so I am relying on Dana Healy’s analysis. See her article for more information on this issue.

and war, they continue to utilize the female trope to critically articulate those issues while largely ignoring how the experiences of men in postwar Vietnam figure into that dialogue.

Beginning in the twenty-first century, Vietnamese films began to take a new realist approach by adopting a reportage style in addressing contemporary issues, such as sex and prostitution, drug abuse, and HIV/AIDS.<sup>27</sup> These films highlight the new social concerns that result from the market freedom of consumerism, but they are still narrated from the female perspective and highlight issues concerning women. Nguyen-Vo Thu Houg writes, “The exposure of the female body marks the reality of the market,” and films like *Bar Girls* and *Street Cinderella* feature the racy lives and tribulations of women caught up in the pleasures and glamour of the consumer market economy.<sup>28</sup> In other words, “the mystery of market reality comes in the form of a feminine presence...a popular craving for new realities marked by the on-screen presence of women, but often in the form of the exposed female body and its sex.”<sup>29</sup> Filial and self-sacrificing daughters who enter prostitution to financially support their families are just some of the recurring themes in these “instant noodle films” (*phim mi an lien*).<sup>30</sup> It is only when war-themed films focus on male trauma, particularly that of

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<sup>27</sup> In the past, most of these issues were deemed unsuitable for films unless they were a part of a propaganda moral campaign. See Norindr, “Vietnam,” 45.

<sup>28</sup> See Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong, *The Ironies of Freedom Sex, Culture and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008), 226.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> “Instant noodle films” is a term that Vietnamese film critics use to describe the lack of depth and poor artistic and acting qualities that characterize these films due to their short production period. “Artistic” films (*phim nghe thuat*) are differentiated from “instant noodle films” by the quality of their production. Because they have a higher budget, the quality tends to be better. The storylines of artistic films are more complex and they are not as melodramatic as “instant noodle films.” Their acting quality is also better because the actors are recruited from professional acting institutions whereas the actors for “instant noodle films” tend to be plucked from the modeling and music industries. For a discussion on this topic see, Nguyen Huy. “Phim Nghe Thuat Chet Tuc Tuoi” [Artistic Films Sadly Dies]. *Viet Bao* [Viet Newspaper], <http://vietbao.vn/Van-hoa/Phim-nghe-thuat-chet-tuc-tuoi/65053585/183>.

former soldiers, that issues of male identity and citizenship surface--themes that were only articulated and critiqued after the *doi moi* period.

In general, war-themed films have not attracted a large domestic audience in Vietnam. Given this fact, the crucial question remains why these films are still being made if they cannot compete with domestic “instant noodle films” that deal with drugs and prostitution--themes that adolescents relate to more--as well as imported Hollywood and Korean films. One reason that filmmakers may return to war-themed films is to remind people of the solidarity and nationalistic fervor of the war years in order to combat the superficiality and moral vices that accompany consumerism in Vietnam. Interestingly, from conversations with several film directors who have come to North America to promote their films, such as Nguyen Vinh Son, it appears that many films currently being made in Vietnam, including war-themed films, are actually not aimed at the domestic audience. Low domestic audience figures have caused many filmmakers to lament that their artistic visions and skills are not being appreciated. Part of the reason may be due to a lack of an established film culture in Vietnam compared to the West where cinema is not only a form of entertainment, but an art form that demands an audience and legions of faithful, appreciative fans. In addition, in Vietnam, there is an absence of sufficient nationalistic sentiment among the population to support the domestic films, and many would rather watch films on television than pay to watch them at the theatre.

The promotion of films (including *Living in Fear*) outside of Vietnam illustrates how filmmakers depend on the international acclaim they receive abroad to help bolster their films in Vietnam. It also points to how these films might be made with an international audience in mind because the thematic content of their films are more positively received abroad. In recent years, Vietnamese films have begun to gain more attention in the international circuit with submissions into prestigious film

festivals such as Cannes, the Venice Film Festival, and the Toronto International Film Festival. The international exposure of these films is important because films such as *Living in Fear* are beginning to show international audiences how the new cinematic production of the histories of wartime and postwar Vietnam offer alternative and more complex versions of past conflicts than earlier propaganda films. Unfortunately, a lack of sources makes it difficult for a researcher to properly evaluate the impact and consequences of this alternative narrative of postwar society on the Vietnamese domestic audience. However, the low audience figures for recent films suggests that domestic audiences may be indifferent to the alternative history presented in these films. More importantly, it also illustrates how Vietnamese moviegoers would rather be entertained than imbued with nationalistic sentiments at the movie theatre.

### ***Revisiting the Theme of War in Postwar Films***

If the role of cinema throughout decades of war was to promote patriotism through newsreel and documentaries, then the hardships of war depicted in postwar films were used to justify Vietnam's freedom and independence. In postwar Vietnam, the theme of war gradually became a secondary topic, while explorations of more peripheral issues relating to war began to take precedence.<sup>31</sup> The image of the soldier offers references to the war and is a mechanism through which to examine the agonies of individuals in postwar society. Even though some postwar films reconfigured the issues that soldiers encountered as they reintegrated into society, altruism of soldiers is still synonymous with the state and the leadership of the new regime. Soldiers continue to be depicted as kind and morally and ideologically correct in their thinking and actions, as clearly portrayed in *Bao Gio Cho Den Thang Muoi* [When the Tenth Month Comes] (1984) by Dang Nhat Minh, *Chuyen Co Tich Cho Tuoi Muoi Bay*

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<sup>31</sup> Pham, *Dien Anh Viet Nam*, 241.

[Fairy Tale for a Seventeen Year Old Girl] (1986), and *Nga Ba Dong Loc* [Intersection at Dong Loc] (1997), to name a few. Several films such as *Anh va Em* [Brothers] (1986) and *Tuong Ve Huu* [The General Retires] (1988) and *Ba Ca Truong Son* [Song of the Stork] (2002) began to depict soldiers more introspectively to highlight their struggles of reintegration into family and society after being discharged from the army. No longer representing the collective, soldiers became “individuals” who have personal dilemmas that need to be confronted in everyday situations.<sup>32</sup> Although more complex as a character, most postwar, and post-*doi moi* films still characterize the soldier in a positive light. Any negative portrayal of the soldier, such as his decadence and rise to power through corruption, is severely criticized, as exemplified by the film critic, Pham Vu Dung who claims that “those portrayals are not realistic depictions.”<sup>33</sup> Yet, still absent from a lot of these films is a discussion about the experiences of former southern soldiers in postwar Vietnam.

As noted earlier, *The Wild Reed* and *Living in Fear* revisit the theme of the war in post-*doi moi* period through the image of the soldier in postwar society. In 1993, *The Wild Reed* articulated--albeit peripherally through the character of Nhi, who was Luc's rival and enemy during the war--the issue of the displacement of former southern soldiers in the new society, and in 2005 *Living in Fear* made the issue its central topic. Moreover, the moral and righteous characteristics that epitomize the northern soldier are no longer championed three decades after reunification. Through male subjectivity and trauma, the two films show that despite Vietnam's attempt to cinematically portray itself as a unified nation and homeland for its people, the fragmented family in the films alludes to the social and political instability of the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 252-253.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 254.

postwar period. Their storylines offer a different narrative from the dominant collective history that is depicted in earlier films.

### CHAPTER 3

#### CONCEPTUALIZING VIETNAMESE “MASCULINITY”

Conceptualizing Vietnamese male identity for this thesis has been a difficult task because Western theories of masculinity cannot be adequately applied to the Vietnamese context--different historical, cultural, and social values inform gender roles in Vietnam. Because of the deep influence of Confucianism and Chinese culture in Vietnam, Kam Louie’s conceptualization of Chinese masculinity through the literary-military dyad of *wen-wu* is a useful model for discerning how Vietnamese masculinity has been understood historically. He writes that Chinese males, in particular the upper class, strove to achieve the *wen-wu* ideals throughout Chinese history, where “official recognition of *wen-wu* achievement is most commonly attained by passing the civil service or the military service examinations.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Vietnamese male and some female historical figures who occupy a prominent position in the making of Vietnamese history and nation have been remembered for either their literary skills or military leadership.<sup>35</sup> The *wen-wu* model is also evident during the colonial and post-colonial period, where many literary men took up revolutionary activities by using their literary talent as a political tool to encourage the population to join war efforts. In modern times, the persona of Ho Chi Minh (1890 - 1969) is constructed around both his military leadership and his literary skills. He is simultaneously praised as a literary scholar and a military leader, qualities reiterated in the film *Hanoi Winter of 1946*, which centers on his character and describes the days

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<sup>34</sup> See Kam Louie, “Chinese, Japanese and Global Masculine Identities,” in *Asian Masculinities The Meaning and Practice of manhood in China and Japan*, ed. Kam Louie and Morris Low (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 4-5.

<sup>35</sup> Female historical figures such as the Trung sisters and Lady Trieu, as well as, Doan Thi Diem and Ho Xuan Huong have been respectively praised for their military strengths and literary talents – qualities that place them on par with their male counterparts in those two domains.

leading up to the declaration of war with France.<sup>36</sup> However, as appealing as the *wen-wu* model may be, it is limiting because it does not articulate how masculinity is conceived at the micro-level of society and the family. To fully rely on the *wen-wu* model would mean ignoring the multifaceted aspects of Vietnamese society and culture.

Scholarship on masculinity in Vietnam stands as a subject of inquiry that has not been properly examined. However, an in-depth analysis on this topic remains beyond the scope of this thesis. The dearth of research on masculinity in Vietnam has prompted me to conduct my own research, albeit limited, to gain a better grasp of how the concept is understood and conceived by Vietnamese men of the American-Vietnam War generation. I undertook in-depth semi-structured interviews with eleven war veterans who were between the ages of fifty and seventy-five in Tinh Hoa village, Quang Ngai (Province), central Vietnam in July 2009. Similar to the two male protagonists of the films analyzed here, my informants were rural men who had fought in the American-Vietnam War. The occupations of my informants mostly included fishing and farming. Some hold, or had previously held, high positions within the local government. Overall, the interviews provided me with a basic framework to better examine how male identities are conceptualized in *The Wild Reed* and *Living in Fear*.

When I began interviewing the former soldiers, it quickly became clear to me that defining masculinity in Vietnam, or at least attempting to use Vietnamese terms, is a problematic task. The term *nam tinh* is how masculinity is normally translated into Vietnamese, but I discovered that the term had no resonance with my interviewees.<sup>37</sup> In many cases, if not all, my informants asked me to elaborate on my question, “What

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<sup>36</sup> *Hanoi Winter 1946* is a film directed by Dang Nhat Minh in 1997. The film emphasizes the intellectual and military strengths that are often associated with Ho Chi Minh by portraying him at his desk writing poetry while deliberating the best military strategy to resist the French colonial power.

<sup>37</sup> The reason why the term *nam tinh* did not resonate with my informants is because the concept of *nam tinh* is a recent import and is more commonly used among young adults than the older generation.

does masculinity entail?” [*nam tinh gom nhung yeu to gi?*]. I rephrased my question, asking, “What is the role of a man in society and the family?” [*vai tro cua mot nguoi dan ong la gi trong xa hoi va trong gia dinh?*]. They understood the second question far better, and our discussions of male identity commenced at last. Over the course of two weeks of interviews, the answers of my male informants revealed that their conception and definition of a male is always defined in relation to the role of females in both society and the home.

My interviews and the scholarly research available on gender studies in Vietnam demonstrate that gender identity is perceived as a construction that begins at an early age. Preconceptions of different gender personalities are inculcated in young boys and girls through teaching and parental interaction.<sup>38</sup> Males are normally characterized as “strong,” and “decisive.” They possess innate and enduring leadership and decision-making skills, while females are “gentle,” “patient,” and possess secretarial skills.<sup>39</sup> Parents reinforce these personality traits in the treatment of their sons and daughters and teach them “how to become a female and a male” based on socially constructed gender values. Boys are encouraged “not to cry, to appear strong and courageous and not to play with dolls,” while girls “should not be rough (*cau kinh*) or talk loudly, and should be gentle and help with the household chores.”<sup>40</sup> My interviewees commented on the importance of physical strength in informing social constructions of gender differences. One middle-aged informant, Nguyen Chan Thanh, admitted to me that, “I will make my son do heavier manual labor tasks while giving my daughter lighter tasks around the house and remind my son to relieve heavy duties

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<sup>38</sup> Tran Thi Que, *Nhung Khai Niem Co Ban Ve Gioi Va Van De Gioi O Viet Nam* [Basic Gender Concepts and Gender Issues in Vietnam] (Hanoi: NXB Thong Ke, 1999), 17.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 13. See also, Helle Rydstorm, “Female and Male ‘Characters’: Images of Identification and Self-Identification for Rural Vietnamese Children and Adolescents,” in *Gender Practices in Contemporary Vietnam*, ed. Lisa Drummond and Helle Rydstorm (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004), 74-95.

<sup>40</sup> Tran, *Nhung Khai Niem*, 17.

from his sister.”<sup>41</sup> Vietnamese boys and girls are taught these socially prescribed gender characteristics and they maintain them into adulthood.

The practice of gender traits is often influenced by how the opposite sex conceptualizes and perceives those traits. That many of the females, mostly the wives of my informants who were present during the interviews, did not oppose the prescription of male and female traits as put forward by the interviewed men attests to that notion.

### ***Gender Neutrality During Wartime?***

Gender equality (*binh dang nam nu*) has been espoused as early as 1930 by the Indochinese (later Vietnamese) Communist Party (ICP) founded by Ho Chi Minh. Rural and urban women were mobilized into political organizations at the turn of the century, and later for war efforts, beginning with the First Indochina War.<sup>42</sup> Gender equality was promoted by allowing women to exercise their rights and participate in national affairs.<sup>43</sup> Females and their emancipation from traditions became political tools that symbolized the liberation of Vietnam from French colonial rule, and, later, from the Americans. Many women were encouraged and inspired to leave the home and take up arms alongside their male counterparts as their patriotic duty, instead of waiting for their husbands to return home from the battlefield. Women became symbols for awakening national consciousness and patriotic fervor; they were active

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<sup>41</sup> All names of interviewees have been changed. Nguyen Chan Thanh is a 55 year old male. He works as a seasonal farmer and a fisherman. After returning from the Cambodia-Vietnam war in 1978 he was offered political positions in the local government but he declined them.

<sup>42</sup> Traditionally, concepts of femininity have been defined by Confucian virtues of the three bonds and five relationships. Moreover, the three submissions required a woman to obey her father when she was young, her husband when she was married and her son when she was widowed. The four virtues encouraged proper virtue, proper speech, proper countenance and proper merit and they conceptualized femininity for women even to this day in Vietnam. Deviation from them is normally explained by the impact of western ideology, such as equality and democracy, during the colonial period in Vietnam.

<sup>43</sup> Werner, Jayne, *Gender, Household and State in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 20.

participants in the war to liberate the country. They were recruited for military service, serving on the front, in the army, or as guerrilla fighters in the militia.<sup>44</sup> With a female presence in the military, enlistment was no longer an exclusively male responsibility as it had been for centuries. Given the new gender shift in military service, how did men feel about female participation?

Interestingly, none of the men that I interviewed stated that female participation in the war threatened their manhood in any way. This was because both sexes were united in fighting the same collective cause--to liberate Vietnam from foreign aggressors and to unify the country. One informant, Nguyen Det, explained that they were “too busy fighting to liberate the country” to worry about and contest gender transgression.<sup>45</sup> It is tempting to assume that women’s participation in the war translates to gender equality on the battlefield during the war years. Yet, in contrast, labor was divided along gender lines within the military units; many of the male interviewees noted that even though females fought alongside them during the war, they worked more in the rear and were in charge of transferring supplies and resources. Furthermore, even though a number of women fought in combat, they were mostly recruited as volunteers to the youth brigade unit, and were responsible for non-combatant activities, such as filling bomb craters to ensure that the Ho Chi Minh Trail was clear for transportation purposes. Male soldiers comprised the majority of the combatant soldiers because they were considered to have stronger mental abilities and more physical strength than their female counterparts.<sup>46</sup> Gender hierarchies within the party meant that males also occupied many of the important leadership positions due

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>45</sup> Nguyen Det is 60 years old. He currently holds a high political position in the local government.

<sup>46</sup> For more information about female war participation, see Karen Gottschang Turner with Phan Thanh Hao, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War From North Vietnam* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc, 1998). The film, *Nga Ba Dong Loc* [The Intersection at Dong Loc] is a great source to better understand the secondary role females held on the battlefield.

to “their ability to make good decisions,” as one interviewee put it. Hence, gendered personality traits and physical strength dictated wartime responsibilities for men and women.

It is interesting to note that within my interviews there was a divided response when I asked the men, did “serving the country made you feel more ‘manly’ than men who did not fight?” Some replied that one has to be sympathetic to the circumstances that hindered the participation of some men. Several replied that they felt more ‘manly’ in that they not only brought honor to themselves, but also to their family (especially those men who also fought in the Cambodia-Vietnam war of 1978-1979, when the participation of females was not as prominent). What this suggests is that during the war years, many males did not consider military service as exclusively a male duty, nor were they threatened by the presence of female cadres who worked with them in a space that was traditionally occupied by males. Part of the reason is because males were fully aware of the political agenda and importance of female mobilization in the war efforts--womanpower was crucial to fight the enemy. The fact that romantic relationships among cadre members were discouraged attests to how gender neutrality was preferred, at least theoretically, during the war years in order to concentrate energies on the resistance. The goal of liberating the country was the priority of all soldiers, and the shared duty blurred gender distinctions that would otherwise have been maintained.

### ***Defining Gender Distinctions in Postwar Society***

In post-American-Vietnam War society, when the newly unified Vietnam was undergoing a process of nation building, gender divisions continued to be ambiguously defined. Men and women had to be “good citizens” and contribute to the reconstruction of the country. “Men and women, young and old were expected to

follow the leadership of the government and do whatever was needed to rebuild the country,” recalls Nguyen Cong.<sup>47</sup> It was also a time when many males, including my interviewees, would enter the next phase of their adult life--marriage and children. To some men, such as Tai and Luc in *Living in Fear* and *The Wild Reed* respectively, it was a time to reunite and return to the roles of husbands, fathers, and sons that they had suspended during the war. It is within the arena of the family that gender distinctions and expectations shifted and were reorganized in new ways that departed from the past.

Even though Marxist ideology promotes equality between the sexes, the reality of the double-burden that females face in contemporary Vietnamese society does not echo state propaganda. The notion of gender equality (*binh dang nam nu*) is somewhat misleading without context, and my interviewees demonstrated its ambiguity through their definitions of the idea. Many of the males I spoke to believed that gender equality was practiced in their families, and yet they admitted to being the head of the family (*chu gia dinh*), a position that contradicts the notion of gender equality because it entitles them to hold more power in managing the family and in making any final decisions. Their responses reflect the patriarchal traditions that are still practiced and valued despite the promotion of egalitarianism between the sexes by the state. Several of my informants, such as Nguyen Tet, said that women earned new freedoms because they demonstrated their abilities and credentials during the war.<sup>48</sup> What gender equality has indeed accomplished is more female visibility in social and political organizations compared to the pre-war period.

Gender historian Jayne Werner notes how the notion of gender equality as social equality (that is, public gains for women) shifted to a concept of “family

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<sup>47</sup> Nguyen Cong is 54 years old. He is a seasonal farmer and a migrant labourer.

<sup>48</sup> Nguyen Tet is 82 years old. He is retired but had served in the local government after reunification.

equality” (*gia dinh binh dang*) during the *doi moi* period with the promotion of post-Marxist and post-Confucian discourses by the state.<sup>49</sup> Within the context of the family, this means that women are able to voice their opinions. The men I interviewed defined gender equality within the family along these lines, and expressed the importance of consulting their wives before any major decisions are made, such as making big household purchases like real estate or a refrigerator. But, the majority of them emphasized that although they would take their wife’s opinion into consideration, the final decision rested with them. For them, it is acceptable for a man to choose to ignore his wife’s wishes if he so chooses. Many of my male informants compared being the head of the family to that of a pillar--they represent the strong foundation required to support the family.

Gender traits also marked the role and responsibility of the husband. Numerous subjects expressed the idea that men possess the skills and characteristics pertaining to leadership, such as the ability to think more clearly and to be more “committed to their words,” skills that women ultimately lack, as Nguyen Loi claimed.<sup>50</sup> For that reason they consider themselves more competent in managing the family than women. Financial contribution marks male responsibilities as being “heavier” (*nang hon*) than females. Being physically stronger, men feel the necessity to contribute more to the household by working harder. As they perceived themselves as being the head of the family economy, many of the men I interviewed felt that they should contribute more financially, and several even admitted that they would feel a “lack” (*mat mat*) if their wife was the breadwinner, because that makes men appear inadequate. Hence, gender hierarchies in the family have continued to place women at a disadvantage to men despite state rhetoric of gender equality.

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<sup>49</sup> Werner, *Gender*, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Nguyen Loi is 53 years old. He is also a seasonal farmer and fisherman.

Although the characteristics pertaining to male gender identity that were expressed by my interviewees may not adequately represent the ideas and subjective perspectives of all Vietnamese veteran and non-veteran men across different social classes, their answers have helped me gain insight into how veterans of the American-Vietnam War perceived their male identity before the war, during the war years, and especially in the postwar period. Specifically, my informants represent the voices of rural men who participated in the resistance movement, like Luc and Tai in the two films under analysis, who are veterans returning to their families and their previous positions in their rural hometowns. Although cinematic representation of male social and political positions may not always precisely reflect practice in reality, these veterans' conceptions of manhood can help us to better understand and contextualize some of the struggles that film protagonists like Tai and Luc experienced in postwar society.

## CHAPTER 4

### FORMER ARVN SOLDIERS DISENFRANCHISED

In addition to the representation of women in Vietnamese films discussed above, the depiction of male soldiers has also occupied a central place in cinema, wherein their fighting and sacrificing spirits have been highlighted and celebrated. In early Vietnamese cinema, the characters of DRV soldiers were inspired by real people and historical figures who were promoted as revolutionary exemplars for the film audiences to emulate. Over time, the portrayal of soldiers became more nuanced and complex. His valor and loyalty on the front was transposed to everyday situations where he now battled with issues in his personal life. During the American-Vietnam War, the image of the soldier was not only confined to people in an army uniform--“soldierly” qualities were transmitted to ordinary people, including women, who eventually emerged as a revolutionary symbol. Viewers were supposed to recognize the onscreen soldierly qualities as manifestations of the ideal Ho Chi Minh soldier. In postwar society, the soldier icon represents the leadership of the government in rebuilding the nation.<sup>51</sup> As mentioned earlier, although postwar films became more introspective and concentrated on the personal struggles faced by soldiers, what remains largely absent is the cinematic depiction of the social integration of former southern soldiers and the discrimination they faced in postwar society.

Unification complicated the issue of male identity in postwar Vietnam, especially when the northern regime had to suddenly integrate and accommodate the southern population, their former enemy. On the one hand, social issues arose when DRV soldiers re-entered society and resumed their former social and familial positions. On the other hand, the reunification of the country produced citizenship

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<sup>51</sup> Pham, *Dien Anh Viet Nam*, 247-251.

issues where former southern soldiers, at least those who remained in Vietnam, were detained to reeducation camps to be rehabilitated with politically correct ideology.<sup>52</sup> The discourse on how the former ARVN soldiers were reintegrated into society has long been censored because the topic of reeducation camps still remains a politically sensitive issue in Vietnam. Public, collective, and popular remembrance of the war in monuments, museums, and literature often avoids controversial issues, such as the camps, in order to avoid fanning political antagonism in postwar society. But how exactly were these former ARVN men re-assimilated into the new society?

*The Wild Reed* and *Living in Fear* are two films that diverge from this tendency as they revisit the theme of war from a different angle, one that highlights the political issues associated with former southern soldiers in the process of nation building. They demonstrate how the marginalized roles that Nhi and Tai occupy offer an empowering perspective for the audience. The audience is made to identify with the critical positions of the ‘marginal--yet central--character,’ or what Kathryn McMahon refers to as being located paradoxically as “outsider-within.” This focus on the marginalized perspective of the character allows the audience to acquire the role of an empowered critical spectator.<sup>53</sup> The peripheral status of the former ARVN soldier is similar to McMahon’s analysis of marginalized women in the new economic world of postwar Vietnam, where they are “at once a spectator and participant, shifting across boundaries between agency and duty, and between adherence to tenets of self-abnegation and the refusal to be complicit with their own oppression.”<sup>54</sup> It is through the character of the disenfranchised soldier in postwar society that the audience is able

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<sup>52</sup> A large exodus of people, a majority of whom were affiliated with the southern regime, fled the country prior to April 30, 1975, as well as after reunification; they make up the first wave of the “boat people.” The second wave of exodus to flee Vietnam was mostly Chinese-Vietnamese who were pressured to leave during the Sino-Vietnam War in 1979. The third wave consisted mostly of economic migrants who left in the 1980s.

<sup>53</sup> See McMahon, Kathryn. “Gender, paradoxical space,” 115-16.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

to critically reflect upon social and political issues that may resonate with them. In particular, Tai's complicated north-south split allows audiences a more comprehensive examination of this topic.

The films demonstrate how the Vietnamese state simultaneously regulates the masculinity of former southern soldiers and denies them citizenship. By belonging to the losing side, former southern soldiers like Tai and Nhi are not eligible for the special privileges reserved for people who supported the liberating revolution, such as better access to education, proper housing, health care, and food rations.<sup>55</sup> These rights further accentuate the north-south political split in post-revolutionary society. Denying former southern soldiers access to certain rights and refusing their participation in the rebuilding of their own country illuminates how the state ultimately rejects them as members of the new Vietnam.

### ***Nhi in The Wild Reed***

Produced in 1993, nearly a decade after *doi moi*, *The Wild Reed* depicts the issue of the disenfranchisement of former southern soldiers through the character Nhi. Although he is a minor character in the film, his plight offers a more nuanced picture of postwar society. During the American-Vietnam War, Nhi serves as an ARVN soldier for the southern regime. Prior to the war, Nhi had occupied a position of high status in society. This fact threatened Luc's masculinity, as he felt ashamed of his comparably low social status when he had to row Nhi and his new scooter--a sign of Nhi's wealth and power--across the river. The image of the river serves as a physical symbol of both the imminent partitioning of the nation and the two men's political

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<sup>55</sup> *Hoi va Dap ve Chinh Sach Doi voi Nguoi Co Cong voi Cach Mang* [Questions and Answers about Laws Regulating the Rights of People who Participated in the Revolution] (Hanoi: NXB Lao Dong-Xa Hoi, 2002), 10-11.

ideology. Nhi's social power undermines Luc's role as a husband to the point that Luc accuses his wife, Thai, of being unchaste by flirting with Nhi. During the war, the two men become enemies, and Luc becomes a target for Nhi due to their political differences. In the new society their social positions are reversed. Nhi and his family become disenfranchised and, even worse, homeless and left to wander from one place to another, carrying their scarce belongings in tarpaulin bags.

Kyung Hyun Kim's research on postwar society in Korean films, in particular his analysis of the postwar fragmentation of families and the loss of home is both relevant and instructive to the Vietnamese context. He writes about the symbolism of living on the road

as a site of neither transit nor freedom. It is where people suffer: traumatized beyond recuperation, disenfranchised without a place to return...it is also a permanent site for many thousands of refugees who have lost their homes and families.<sup>56</sup>

Similarly, Nhi's status and position in the new society goes unrecognized, signified by his "home" on the road. He is denied any status or benefits, such as the allocation of land to build a new home--a privilege which citizens of the newly unified nation are able to enjoy. A former enemy of the state, Nhi is not regarded as a citizen in the eyes of the new nation. The juxtaposition of his homelessness to other families migrating to the new economic zone to build their new homes affirms his disenfranchisement. More significantly, he is not allowed to join the soldiers in building the martyr cemetery or clearing the wild reed, reconstruction projects in which citizens are

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<sup>56</sup> Kyung Hyun Kim, *The Remasculization of Korean Cinema* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 53.

expected to participate. Unclaimed by the state and receiving no food rations, Nhi is unable to provide for his family.

One scene in particular, where Thai sees Nhi and his family on the road, points to numerous issues relating to citizenship and male identity. At this point in the film, Nhi admits to Thai that his former political affiliation brought him no benefits: “I was a pathetic man. I joined the southern army and my wife was raped and had a mixed-race child.” This confession simultaneously underscores his disillusionment with the southern regime and cinematically echoes the confessions and self-criticism that many ARVN soldiers were forced to make following the war. This is also similar to Tai’s self-deprecating confession in *Living in Fear* during his interrogation with Hai Dan, when Tai is forced to confess his betrayal to the country: “I am Nguyen Tai. I served for the southern regime because of the war. Even though I have never held a gun or shot at a civilian or a revolutionary, I am a traitor.” The confessions of the two men in the respective films point out that even though their plight is given cinematic attention, former southern soldiers are still required to declare their defeat in order to remind themselves (and possibly viewers who served the American regime) of their betrayal to the country. In a way, they have not been fully “forgiven,” but the fluidity of Tai’s status in *Living in Fear* offers a nuanced depiction of the reintegration of the former southern soldier.

The above scene is also filled with rich symbolism that demonstrates Nhi’s subjugation in the new society. Nhi is no longer a soldier for the southern regime and cannot rely on his soldier title to redeem his status. The fact that Nhi does not need to be confronted by Luc to resolve their political antagonism illustrates how the former’s defeat is so great that there is no need for them to come face-to-face because Luc, now an army commander, has already ‘won.’ Luc’s military status would be discredited if he were to have a physical confrontation with Nhi because such an act would go

against the righteous image of the soldier who uses his energy to serve the people and the new nation, not to resolve personal conflicts. Thai's social position is elevated when Nhi's wife asks her to forgive Nhi: "I beg you, my husband hasn't harmed anyone. He's the kind of soldier who only curses. He doesn't know how to lie or kill people." Her plea illuminates her attempts to redeem Nhi's enemy status by pointing out weaknesses in his character, such as his foul speech, and stressing how he does not kill or lie--virtues that fit the state's rhetoric of soldiers as noble and honest people. Yet her plea is unfulfilled because Thai does not possess the political power to change or redeem Nhi's position, which is further symbolized by how Thai ignores the significance of the patched army shirt that Nhi dons at the end of the scene. The patching of the 'political' tear, a symbol of mending political differences, is not sufficient enough to receive forgiveness from the new regime. More significantly, with no male authoritative figure to recognize Nhi's efforts and to pardon his betrayal, these attempts to gain redemption remain ineffectual.

Nhi occupies a space peripheral to the central power, but it is from this vantage point that we can observe how his manhood is socially removed from him and how his deficiencies in the new society undermine his male identity. Although Nhi's character and predicament are not given a central place in the film, the fact that his role and accompanying issues received cinematic attention in 1993 set a precedent and opened up the possibility for other filmmakers to explore similar issues more comprehensively. This is exactly what Bui Thac Chuyen achieved with *Living in Fear*.

### ***Tai in Living in Fear***

In comparison to the previous decade, by 2005 the relaxation of guidelines for films afforded filmmakers a greater flexibility to openly explore more controversial issues. The theme of the disenfranchised former southern soldier is given central

attention in *Living in Fear*. In fact, the film is based on a documentary, titled *Tay Dao Dat* [The Digger] that Bui Thac Chuyen made in 2001 about Ngo Duc Nhat, “a farmer who plows on the land filled with mines to survive,” and who inspired Chuyen to make his first feature film.<sup>57</sup> Even though this is still a politically sensitive topic, the director did not encounter any harassment from the government during its production. At the same time, it would be premature to claim that just because party officials did not monitor him, this can be interpreted as the state consenting to the absolute cinematic freedom of filmmakers to explore whatever topic they desire. In my correspondence with Chuyen, he emphasized that Tai is only an imagined character that is loosely inspired by Ngo Duc Nhat. By stating Tai’s fictitiousness, Chuyen is careful to avoid political criticism from the film committee, which is largely made up of party officials who had approved of his funding for the film. Chuyen’s political consciousness is actually reflected in the function of the film’s narrative, which demythologizes the brutality of the communist government toward former ARVN soldiers by cinematically depoliticizing the issue. It does so by ignoring Tai’s experience in the reeducation camp and by downplaying the harsh treatments former southern soldiers received in postwar society.<sup>58</sup> Tai’s voiceover at the beginning of the film illustrates this. He narrates:

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<sup>57</sup> BH, “Bui Thac Chuyen: Tu “Tay Dao Dat” den “Song Trong So Hai” [Bui Thac Chuyen: From “The Digger” to “Living in Fear”] *Viet Bao* [Viet Newspaper], <http://vietbao.vn/Van-hoa/Bui-Thac-Chuyen-Tu-Tay-dao-dat-den-Song-trong-so-hai/70029091/181>. I have not watched the documentary to properly compare and contrast the film protagonist, Tai, and Ngo Duc Nhat. In an interview, Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc, the co-scriptwriter of *Living in Fear*, reports that Ngo Duc Nhat removed approximately two thousand land mines in a field where many professional mine removers lost their lives. For his contribution, the state awarded him ownership to that field. Do Le Anh Dao. “Phong Van Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc” [A Conversation with Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc], *VIFF*, <http://www.vietfilmfest.com/films/livinginfearspotlightVN.html>.

<sup>58</sup> In fact, the brutality of the reeducation camps is altogether absent in the film. The idea of reeducation camps in the film diametrically contrasts to the one painted by *Journey From the Fall*, a film produced by overseas Vietnamese filmmakers. For accounts of the conditions in the reeducation camps experienced by former ARVN soldiers see Edward P. Metzner and Huynh Van Chinh et al, *Reeducation in Postwar: Vietnam Personal Postscripts to Peace* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2001).

The Viet Cong arrived quickly like a storm. Their shirts were green and their AK guns riveted the sky. Rumours have it that the soldiers in Saigon will get killed, so will their wives and children. They will bathe in bloodshed. However... it turned out to be nothing. They behaved and treated us normally. But, we are still scared. I wonder when we will stop worrying.

It is fascinating to note that Tai's voiceover is absent from the English-subtitled version of the film that was screened for audiences abroad. This may have been deliberately left out to avoid perpetuating the negative image that is associated with the "fall of Saigon" or the final push of the American-Vietnam War (when north Vietnam invaded south Vietnam to declare reunification) among the international audience, who may be familiar with that historical narrative. The real reason for the absence of Tai's narration is unknown, but the fact that it is absent further points to how the Vietnamese government continues to monitor and control the content of the nation's cinematic production that gets exported internationally. Yet at the same time, the state's funding of Chuyen to improve the quality of the movie so as to attract a larger film audience at home, and to be able to screen the film internationally, shows how the Vietnamese government has become more relaxed regarding certain postwar issues. They do not mind the negative portrayal of the state to the audience abroad, which is evidenced by the depiction of the Vietnamese government in the film as authoritarian in their need to rehabilitate and monitor former southern soldiers and their families in postwar society. Establishing Vietnamese cinema within the international circuit may also be at the top of the state's agenda, which would allow for slight toleration of a negative image of the government.

From the perspective of a marginalized outsider, the film gives us deep insight into how former southern soldiers were treated in the new society. Even though the

Viet Cong do not kill Tai when they arrive in Saigon, Tai and his family are relocated to central Vietnam for ideological rehabilitation following his time in a reeducation camp. Adding further insult, the new regime allots the family war-torn land to build their homes, and their daily lives remain haunted and threatened by remnants of the recent war and lasting trauma. Although the sites where ex-ARVN soldier families are relocated are not re-education camps per se, their allocation to the landmine-filled area clearly indicates that they were part of an experiment, headed by the state, to test the quality of the new economic zone for occupancy purposes. Even though they are meant to be working and living on the recently cleared land, the scarred landscape and active landmines threaten their survival in postwar peace.

Similar to Nhi, Tai is restricted from participating in the activities of nation building in post-revolutionary society. Even though Tai expresses his interest to assist in the deactivation of land mines, the state rejects his request. More significantly, the state denies him the possibility to be a productive member of the new society. Uyen, the female cadre who is in charge of Tai's rehabilitation unit, explains to him:

Deactivating the mines is the responsibility of the cadres. It is not a civilian's job. Moreover, you belong to the monitored group (*dan trinh dien*).<sup>59</sup> If the mine explodes, and we die it's not a problem, but if you die then people will say that we pushed you to your death.

Uyen's harangue points out that the task of deactivating the land mines is a dangerous job, one that is excluded from people who do not wield political status. More significantly, by rejecting his request to deactivate the mines the state does not consider Tai a worthy enough citizen to die for the cause of reconstructing the nation;

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<sup>59</sup> This political title marks their political affiliation with the former southern regime; it indicates how they need to "present" themselves to be rehabilitated.

his citizenship is neither required nor wanted in the new nation. However, unlike *The Wild Reed* where Nhi has no agency to renegotiate his own status, Tai is able to redeem his position in the new Vietnam by challenging the state's governance of his status and male identity, a topic that I will explore in greater detail in chapter six.

CHAPTER 5  
THE CRISIS OF MALE IDENTITY AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE  
FAMILY

The crisis of masculinity among returning soldiers is a common experience that can be found in many postwar countries. Yet, the cinematic production of that crisis as depicted in *The Wild Reed* and *Living in Fear* illustrates how this is not a similar experience for all returning soldiers in Vietnam because the American-Vietnam War was both a political and geographical partition. The wartime political affiliations of the characters play a pivotal role in shaping their different experiences and the way in which they can reclaim their manhood. What the two films have in common is that the crises faced by Luc and Tai both revolve around the displacement of their male positions within the family. What is distinct are the particular circumstances and conditions of their crises. Luc is displaced within his family after discovering that he no longer occupies the male roles (i.e. father, husband and son) that he previously held in prewar society, yet he is able to rely on his military status in order to rescue his male identity. On the other hand, Tai's crisis of male familial and social positions is, in a way, imposed by the state, which regulates his status in the new society. Unrecognized by the state, he is unable to adequately provide for his family and this undermines his role and responsibility as a man. He needs to prove his worth in the new society in order to repair his political relationship with the state. Another noteworthy point here is how in both of these cases, the crisis of the male character upsets the patriarchal family structure. The trope of the fragmentation of the family in the two films allegorizes postwar Vietnam and the lives of the politically divided population in the war-torn land.

Contrary to the peaceful society that the Communist state envisioned after the reunification of the country in 1975, many economical, social and political issues plagued postwar society. Many former southern soldiers were sent to reeducation camp for rehabilitation, while a large exodus of people, who came to be known as the “boat people,” left Vietnam in fear of political persecution. Furthermore, the poor economy brought many hardships and discontent among the population. For that reason, the state promoted the image of the “happy family” as a part of their political agenda to unify the nation. Handbooks, such as *Building a Progressive Happy Family and Lifestyle*, were targeted at women who bore responsibility for implementing the happy family policy.<sup>60</sup> The happy family was crucial “in order to build and reform in every sector, and to have a civilized (*van minh*) and happy (*hanh phu*) life.”<sup>61</sup> The handbook quotes from a speech Ho Chi Minh made in 1959 to emphasize the importance of the family in maintaining national cohesion: “It is necessary to think in terms of the family because when you add them together they will form a society. If the society is good, then the family will be even better, and if the family is stable, only then will society be orderly.”<sup>62</sup> The happy family model encourages the following:

Husbands and wives should love and respect each other and mutually discuss plans involving the wellbeing of their family; follow the family planning guidelines; parents should care and teach their children Uncle Ho’s five principles; and children should look after the well-being of their parents.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Werner, *Gender*, 59.

<sup>61</sup> *Xay Dung Gia Dinh*, 16.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>63</sup> The five principles are: Love one’s country and one’s people; study and labour industriously; unite and be disciplined; look after one’s hygiene; be modest, honest and courageous. *Ibid.*, 11.

Moreover, the loving and well-disciplined family described above also functions as a model to teach and discipline the young generation about national unity and stability.<sup>64</sup> The universal image of the happy and well-ordered family as a microcosm of society was a metaphor for the cohesive and happy nation that the state envisioned after reunification. In fact, such family imagery appears in the Vietnamese words for the state and nation. The word for state, *nha nuoc*, literally translates to “family/home country,” while the word for nation is *nuoc nha*, or “country family/home.”<sup>65</sup> Hence, the family unit is required to fulfill the agenda of the nation to rebuild the country physically, materially, and spiritually. For Vietnam, this meant pushing aside political differences that had separated the country during the war years. As such, the goal was to maintain social order, which meant the family unit had to be strong and cohesive. Its fragmentation would undermine the state’s vision of stability.

As mentioned earlier, the Vietnamese family is based on a model of a male-centered kinship where patrilineal and patrilocal practices have long been observed. Hy Van Luong writes that “inheritance is heavily in favor of sons who were responsible for the ancestor’s worship and patriline continuity and authority, both domestic and public, rested with men.”<sup>66</sup> Authoritative power through the notion of patriarchy enforces male identity within the household. Anthropological work by Halle Rydstroms also supports how the responsibility for performing the patrilineal ancestor worship is one of the defining characteristics of the male within the family.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>65</sup> This is actually a direct translation of the Sino-Vietnamese word for state, *quoc gia*, which also employ family imagery because it translates to “country home”.

<sup>66</sup> Luong further notes that neither the male domination in the public domain, nor the dominant male-centered model of kinship and household relations were fundamentally transformed during the French colonial era or by the new family and marriage law in 1959 that specified equal inheritance rights of both sons and daughters. See Luong, “Gender Relations,” 203-204. Similar findings to Luong have also been reported. For example, see Charles Hirschman and Vu Manh Loi, “Family and Household Structure in Vietnam: Some Glimpses from a Recent Survey.” *Pacific Affairs* 69, no.2 (1996 Summer): 229-49.

<sup>67</sup> The reason is because they belong to the “inside lineage” (*ho noi*) so the son is recognized as the

When this duty is taken away from him, a man may experience a sense of lack or deficiency in terms of his male responsibilities. This is the case with Luc when he returns home to discover that another man, Quang, occupied the roles that had marked Luc's male identity before the war.

### ***The Displacement of Luc's Male Identity***

Before Luc was drafted to the north he was a good husband to Thai and a dedicated son to his aging father. These social roles defined his male identity within the household during the prewar years and they are reinforced through imagery of the family throughout the film. When Luc and Thai are clearing the wasteland one day, Thai points toward the Family Mountains and describes to Luc, “the husband mountain is taller than the wife mountain...they lean against each other. And there is their child [she points to the child mountain]. Together, they are called the Family Mountains.”<sup>68</sup> The taller height of the father mountain represents the male figure as the pillar (*chu gia dinh*) of the family. Fittingly, this is the point in the film at which Luc tells Thai that he would like to start a family. Luc is never able to fulfill the image of this “happy family” because the war interrupts his plans. Upon his return home several decades later, and contrary to his hopes, he discovers that he has been displaced and erased from his own family.

The loss of his previous male roles in the domestic realm is not the only aspect threatening Luc's masculinity in the new society. The fact that he has become a memory to his family is also a factor. Luc comes across an old photograph in a store

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connection between the deceased and future members of his patrilineage. Rydstorm, “Female and Male Characters,” 75.

<sup>68</sup> This is one of the major differences between the film and the short story by Nguyen Minh Chau. The story refers to the mountains as “Da Vong phu,” which alludes to the East Asian tale of a wife who turns into stone while awaiting her husband's return from war. The name change in the film as the “Family Mountains” further accentuates the important theme of the family and how its fragmentation signifies social disorder and instability in postwar Vietnam.

of himself and Thai before the war. Quang, the shop owner, tells him, “That soldier died (*hy sinh* also meaning to sacrifice one’s life) during the war. He was my wife’s first husband.” The portrait of Luc on the family altar reinforces his death in the memory of his family, a cause that adds to his anxiety.

The use of space, which demarcates the “home” from the “shop” in this scene, further depicts Luc’s lack within the family. When they are still in the “business” space, Luc is regarded as a military commander and customer, an outsider, and the loss of his male positions in the family only occurs to him when he enters Quang’s “home.” This is further emphasized when Luc’s father recognizes him but is too shocked and overwhelmed to acknowledge him (his recognition would have reclaimed Luc’s identity as his son). Luc sees his father and tries to enunciate the word ‘*ba*’, father, but the potential reunion between father and son is interrupted by Quang’s interjection when he asks, “*ba* [referring to Luc’s father] have you seen this man’s [Luc] photos?” Quang’s articulation of the word “*ba*” causes Luc to realize that not only is he no longer Thai’s husband, but that he is also no longer his father’s son. Luc’s sense of loss is further exacerbated when Quang’s two sons, whom he fathered with Thai, run into the house to help search for Luc’s photographs. The boys remind Luc that he has not fulfilled his duty as a man to produce male heirs, while Quang has.

When Quang finally finds Luc’s photographs, he discovers they are too blurry. On the one hand, the blurriness can be interpreted as the ambiguity of Luc’s identity within that moment. Yet on the other hand, the nebulous quality of the photograph allows Luc’s identity to be resurrected through a photo retake—a way for him to reclaim his identity within the new society that has forgotten about him. In fact, Luc’s symbolic resurrection is played out in the next scene when Quang asks Luc’s father to return Luc’s photographs. When the father retrieves them from his shirt pocket, the audience realizes that they are wrapped in the same blue plastic tarpaulin that soldiers

used to wrap the remains of fallen comrades at the martyr cemetery at the beginning of the film. Hence, instead of getting buried along with the other fallen soldiers, Luc's identity is resurrected. It is also crucial that Quang be the one to retake Luc's photograph, so that he can identify Luc as the person whose male roles he has been occupying and return them to Luc.

The crisis of the "happy family" is further complicated by Luc's father's vulnerable position within his new family. With his son presumed dead, his daughter-in-law, Thai, remarries. It is interesting that he continues to live with her and her new husband because this departs from the tradition of patrilocal residence, where the bride lives with her husband's family. He is not their biological father nor does he have any male heir to define his patriarchal status within the new family. This situation causes him to feel displaced; he is an outsider because neither Thai nor Quang, or their sons, are tied to him by blood. The only person that connects him to his old family is his granddaughter, Thom, but she holds no authority within the family to restore his precarious position.

Quang's male position is also unstable. In a way, Quang's position within the family is dependent on Thai's relationship to Luc's father, who has allowed him to replace Luc as son, husband, and head of Luc's former family. Quang acknowledges to Luc that he is aware of the special privileges that returning soldiers are awarded for their war efforts: "You've lived through two terrible wars. You've fulfilled your duty to your country. You have every right to return to your family, to happiness. Whatever you desire, we must grant it." He knows that Luc can demand to have his identity back and that when he does, Quang must obey because he is subordinate to Luc. Quang will also become homeless and without a wife or father. Ironically, Quang himself had previously been in a similar predicament to the one that is now threatening Luc,

because Quang's former wife had abandoned him for another man. But unlike Luc, Quang cannot rely on his military status,--he has none--to reclaim his male positions.

The infidelity that springs from the turmoil of war is a reflection of the social wounds brought about by these conflicts. Postwar reality illustrates how social expectations of chastity in marriage are not always upheld. The betrayal of Quang's first wife is so strong that she is not worthy of screen presence, as if to show that Quang has completely erased her from his life for her adulterous behavior. It is a consequence that she must endure, because not even the mayhem of war can excuse her infidelity. Thai's situation is more forgiving because she only married Quang after she found a corpse that she mistakenly thought was Luc's. She shows her loyalty to Luc by expressing her desire to leave Quang at the end of the film, but Luc tells her to stay with Quang and she complies with his order.

The issue of female infidelity is also interpreted as karmic retribution, which is best represented through Nhi's wife. She was raped by a African-American soldier during the war, and her sexual assault is seen as her karma for Nhi's betrayal of the country. Amerasian children in postwar society carried a social stigma, which further alienated Nhi's family from the rest of society--he is stuck with a mixed-race child who is visibly not his. Along with the precarious positions that the male can occupy within the family, the marital issues discussed above mirror the disintegration of the family structure and the social disorder of postwar society which the state sought to repair through the "happy family" campaign.

### ***State's Emasculation and Family Complications in Living in Fear***

In contrast to northern soldiers such as Luc, who hold a high political position in postwar society and whose happiness is guarded by the state, Tai's military defeat undermines his sense of self-worth and masculinity. This is especially true in terms of

how he is demasculinized within his home by the state. Even though he is given relative freedom to move back and forth between his old village (where Thuan lives) and his new village (containing his new home and second wife, Ut), his movement is monitored by the state. He has little means to support himself because the local authorities do not allow him to go into the fishing industry--they are afraid he will follow in the footsteps of his fellow southern comrades who have escaped the country by boat, and who are deemed as traitors to the nation. By restricting even the livelihood of former ARVN soldiers, the state effectively regulates Tai's masculinity through the political policies that govern his rights in the new society. The state also undermines his male role within the family by making him unemployed, thereby engendering his financial uselessness. Although he finds various menial jobs to support his families, it is his wives who are the main providers. Thuan gives Tai her rice ration to take to his other home whenever he visits, and Ut sells tea around the market to financially support them, a humiliating necessity that further emasculates Tai.

The reversal of gendered authority in the new society also challenges Tai's manhood. The task of deactivating the land mines is primarily performed by females and this upsets old gender traditions. Nam Duc, a former Viet Cong and Tai's friend, complains to him: "Deactivating the land mines is a male's job. Why do the women have to participate? Nowadays they are as fearless as this 'Nam Duc.' They aren't even afraid of the land mines." By rejecting Tai's request to take part in deactivating the mines, the state, symbolized by Uyen, undermines Tai's masculinity even more because of her feminine authority. The state positions him as subordinate to a woman, thereby emasculating him socially and publically.

Having been denied membership in the de-mining team, Tai's lack of knowledge about land mines further weakens his ability to protect his family within

the domestic space. After their house is built, Ut finds a land mine in front of their home. Tai does not report it to the authorities as Ut suggests. Instead, he orders her to go to the neighbor's house for safety so that he can remove the landmine himself, which represents his reassertion of maleness and ability to protect his family. He does not want to depend on the authorities, who had already ostracized him. As he deliberates how to properly handle the land mine, Tai's fear of the unstable device becomes quite visible. Nam Duc comes to his rescue and tells Tai to vacate the area. He follows Nam Duc's order, which situates Tai in a "feminine" and subservient position, a reenactment of the preceding scene (where Tai is now in Ut's position). Nam Duc's expertise in land mines enables him to quickly recognize that the land mine is inactive (*thui*). Unthreatened by it, he plays with it like a toy, reinforcing Tai's emasculation. Before leaving, he reminds Tai to report any land mines, an order that places Tai in a subjugated and humiliating position in a scene that is witnessed by his family.

The trope of the fragmented family is also a central theme in *Living in Fear*, but it is presented as a complicated case of bigamy involving Tai and his two wives. The political tensions that appear are not only between Tai and the state, but also in family relations. In addition to their different political affiliations, Hai Dan despises Tai even more because of his bigamy. When Thuan tells Hai Dan to stay out of her family affairs, he tells her, "You can continue to protect him. I won't interfere. I will leave it to the government and the laws to do their work and deal with those who do not respect the one-husband, one-wife law." As indicated by Hai Dan, there are political consequences to Tai's bigamy; he is displaced because he is not legally registered at either village where his wives live. Moreover, Tai's marriage to Ut is deemed illegitimate because it defies the state's law on monogamous marriage.

When Tai returns to his old village, where his first wife Thuan and their children live, Hai Dan detains and interrogates him. Hai Dan reminds him, “You are lucky the war is over, otherwise I would kill you. My family is a revolutionary family, but for some unknown reason my sister fell in love with you and married you. [He stirs the cup of coffee in front of him]. It’s different now. There’s peace. [He offers Tai the cup of coffee].” Even though Hai Dan’s friendly gesture to reconcile their differences through the offering of the coffee is superficial, this shows how their double relationship further complicates the situation. On the one hand, they were former best friends who became enemies during the war, and their animosity is carried over into the period of peace. On the other hand, they are also brothers-in-law, a relationship that should have bridged their political differences, and yet it does not.

Interestingly, Tai’s source of fear in postwar society is attributed to his ‘immoral’ lifestyle, his bigamy, while his former political affiliation is de-politicized. When Thuan informs Hai Dan that Tai is afraid of him, Hai Dan replies, “He’s scared because he’s lived immorally. He’s got a wife here, and another one elsewhere. He’s scared because of that, not because he’s being ill treated by the Communists. Many former political dissidents have returned and are living comfortably without any problem.” This significantly points out that Tai’s inability to fulfill his role as a husband and father is the target of his criticism, not his political affiliation. Tai does not fulfill his role as a husband who should support and comfort his wife during childbirth. He actually evades this responsibility, leaving both Thuan and Ut at the hospital when they go into labour at the same time. Instead, he plays with land mines. At one point Hai Dan refers to Tai as the “children’s absent father” to emphasize how his shortcomings are defined by his responsibilities to his family. This may have been a deliberate narrative device on the director’s part because blaming the Communists for Tai’s fear would have been too obvious of a criticism.

In the new Vietnam, Tai's transgression of the marriage law places him in an even more marginalized position since his bigamy contests the goal of the new nation to be politically and socially unified. Tai's bigamy carries a negative political connotation because his first wife's family supports the northern regime, while his second wife represents the southern regime. Even though one can interpret Tai's marriage to the two women as a form of unification where he represents the bridge between the north and south split, it still challenges the state's vision of the nation as one family, or a single, cohesive unit. Bigamy is regarded as "backward," a remnant of the feudal past and an obstacle to the state's reconstruction and modernization projects. The criticism of Tai's bigamy alludes to the anxiety of the state over the continued social and political division of the nation and the unsettling consequences that can arise from it. This is highlighted through Tai's inability to adequately carry out his duty as a father and husband to both of his families. His shortcomings are symbolic of the state's concern about its own inability to fulfill its role and promises to reconstruct the nation and build stability. To resolve this, the state makes its presence felt by propagating government-sanctioned ideology and songs through megaphones located in the public spaces of the village, a propaganda tactic that is still practiced today. This represents one of the strategies of the state to maintain the social and political solidarity that is being threatened by Tai's bigamy.

## CHAPTER 6

### LANDSCAPE AND THE RESTORATION OF MALE IDENTITY

Public space is an important instrument in reclaiming both Luc and Tai's masculine crises because it is through the act of recovering the scarred landscape that they are able to reestablish their manhood. In both films, space is intimately tied to gender. *The Wild Reed* genders the landscape in the new society by assigning the task of rehabilitating the landscape to male soldiers. In contrast, the duty of deactivating land mines is mainly performed by female cadres in *Living in Fear*, and, as we have seen, this challenges Tai's manhood by placing him in a subservient position, one where he is marked as weaker than females. The restoration of his manhood requires him to conquer the land mines and re-cultivate the scarred land.

#### ***Gendered Landscape and Paternalistic Duty***

Since Luc's masculinity within the household is jeopardized by his lack of a family, the film does not center on the domestic sphere. Rather, it reconciles Luc's crisis by illuminating his military leadership in the public realm. The nourishment produced by the decaying bodies of fallen soldiers helped the wild reeds to grow and spread abundantly. For that reason, the reeds are the new enemy in postwar society because they destroy the markings, previously made by soldiers, that locate the burial sites of fallen comrades. It is the task of the soldiers to tackle the wild reeds so that they can relocate the missing bodies and construct a new living space for the citizens. Since Luc is the head of this mission, the land becomes the device that allows Luc to illustrate his productivity, and thereby male power, in state projects of rebuilding the country.

Furthermore, in *The Wild Reed* the conflicting issue of male identity needs to be negotiated and resolved by Luc and Quang in a male-dominated space. After realizing Luc's identity, Quang goes to see him at the martyr cemetery so that they can "discuss an issue that concerns [the] two men." Their discussion is juxtaposed with a hunting expedition in the forest, another association with maleness and masculinity. Hunting rifles symbolize the weapons used in war, while the forest is an extension of the battlefield in the jungle where the American-Vietnam War was heavily fought. This space needs to be male-dominated because it is where they reconcile the issue that does not, and should not, involve Thai. This restriction of Thai's presence points to gender theorist Eve Sedgwick's discussion of "homosocial" bond, a link between males where they enhance the status of each other through certain social recognitions that perpetuates a male-dominated kinship system.<sup>69</sup> In fact, Thai is denied entrance into that space because the presence of a female may threaten their maleness--the issue needs to be resolved by the men alone. The situation also reflects Thai's weak position in a negotiation that will ultimately affect her fate as well.

If Quang's position is superior to Luc in the domestic space, then it is in the public domain that Luc's power is exerted. Quang tries to reaffirm his position by legitimating his marriage, and thereby his male position within Luc's family by telling Luc how he knows *his* wife, Thai. He says, "Thai is an old-fashioned woman but I revere her for that. I have suffered greatly but I still respect *my* wife... We have kids together." However, he also acknowledges his subordinate position to Luc by pleading with him:

I beg you, even if she's your daughter [referring to Lan] please allow me to raise her and to care for the aging man [Luc's father]. I've regarded him as my

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<sup>69</sup> For more on this discussion about homosociality, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

own father. Please, let me fulfill my duty because my circumstances are better than yours.

Even though Quang is not as honorable of a soldier as Luc, he has the financial security to care for Luc's father and daughter in a way that Luc cannot. Upset, Luc asks him, "What kind of a man do you think I am to let you care for my father and daughter?" He is angry that Quang sees him only as a soldier, a machine of war devoid of emotion, and, therefore, not given the right to happiness. He reminds Quang, "A soldier doesn't only know how to obey orders, endure the hardship, press the trigger and sacrifice bravely...Mr. Quang, a soldier is first and foremost a human being." At this moment, Luc is no longer acquiescing to the circumstances that await him at "home," but rather he uses his right as a soldier to demand and reclaim his previous male positions. In this "erotic triangle," asymmetrical power is involved in Luc and Quang's rival for Thai. Quang's domestic power is not strong enough to assert his male roles because Luc's military status is more authoritative in reclaiming those roles. It is also appropriate that their negotiation takes place in the forest, a space in which Luc can exercise his military power.

Luc's male identity is also reconciled by the paternalistic quality he represents in postwar Vietnam. He is a replica of Ho Chi Minh's image as the father of the nation and the Vietnamese people. The wifeless myth of Ho Chi Minh that the Vietnamese state has promoted and perpetuated to this day reinforces Ho Chi Minh as the loving father of the nation who regards the people of Vietnam as his children.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, as a soldier, Luc restrains and controls his sexuality by refusing romantic advances from Hue, a young woman who helps Luc's battalion search for the bodies of fallen

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<sup>70</sup> However, some historians have contested this claim and point out that that Ho Chi Minh had many lovers and a wife. For example, see William Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Hyperion, 2000).

soldiers, including the body of her dead fiancé. Luc also chooses to be a filial son instead of being Thai's husband at the end of the film. By reclaiming his role as a son, he is still able to fulfill his male responsibility within the family and perform the important task of tending to the ancestor worship altar, a responsibility that had been carried out by non-family members in his absence. In short, his self-inflicted failure as a husband is repaired through his paternalistic and moral responsibilities to the new nation.

The paternal strength of Luc is especially underscored in the last scene of the film. Luc's fatherhood is amplified by the double meaning of the names and familial symbolism that the mountains possess. Despite being renamed as the Martyrs' Mountains, the image of the family still resonates. The film ends with the happy reunion between Luc and Thom. After embracing one another, Luc lifts her onto his shoulders and they walk off into the distance toward the same "family" mountains where he and Thai had discussed family planning. What has changed from the past is that Thai is no longer a part of the picture. In the old society, the backdrop of the Family Mountains would have painted Luc as a father embracing his daughter. But in postwar Vietnam, the image resonates with the paternalistic image of Ho Chi Minh. In the new society, Luc is identified as a soldier, signified by his uniform, who looks out for the well being of the citizens, symbolized by Thom who, in turn, represents the new generation that will lead Vietnam into economic success in the *doi moi* period. The image of the moral soldier at the end of the film reminds viewers that military power and leadership is necessary to bring peace and order to the war-devastated country. In fact, the film opens with the same message--a soldier steps out of his truck with a rifle in his hands to scare off the group of thugs carjacking him. Luc is able to rely on his military leadership to negotiate another type of masculinity and reclaim his

male social and political positions when his vision of the happy family as a young adult is never fulfilled.

### ***Scarred Land and Masculine Recuperation***

Unlike Nhi in *The Wild Reed*, Tai is a former enemy who gets readmitted into the new society. He does not accept the disenfranchised status imposed on him by the state. Rather, he finds his own way to renegotiate his position, and part of the prerequisite is to overcome the dangers inflicted by the mine-laden land and the social and political obstacles dictated and regulated by the state. Tai ultimately resurfaces as a valuable citizen in the new society, which shows the fluidity of his identity compared to Nhi.

The opening scene of the film situates the scarred land as a hazardous territory for the new people, a majority of whom are former state enemies. Upon their arrival at the new economic zone, Tai and the other men are afraid of the war-devastated areas laden with land mines. Ironically, while the war may have ended, dangerous elements still linger long after combat has ceased. Uyen takes them to their allotted land and they quickly discover that it is hazardous, evidenced by the barbed wire and a “prohibited” sign positioned in front of it. A young boy runs in the prohibited area, but his father stops him. Sensing apprehension, Uyen reassures them, “this area is fine-- there are no mines here. Just don’t go in there,” she says, pointing in the direction of the prohibited sign. An ominous silence hangs over their heads until one of the men bravely speaks up, “We are fine but our wives and children are naïve. They don’t know anything.” Offended by the man’s remark, Uyen nails several wooden poles into the ground to demonstrate the area’s safety and to reassure them that she is also building a house there. Uyen’s authority and boldness is a threat to the men because they are not accustomed to having a female occupy an authoritative position. The men,

who are visibly afraid, try to appear unthreatened by stressing their concerns about their wives and children's safety, and by referring to them as "naïve."

The reclaiming of Tai's citizenship, and the recovery of his maleness, involves his ability to overcome his fear of the scarred land that has undermined his manhood. His re-integration into society depends on his talent in deactivating the land mines, and on demonstrating that he is as fearless as the women on the de-mining team. Since the state prohibits him from deactivating the land mines officially, he does it illegally after learning the techniques from Nam Duc. Formerly deemed a threatening and dangerous weapon, the land mines eventually gain monetary value. Tai sells the land mines he deactivates to feed his family. Even though Tai is incarcerated several times for breaking the law, he continues to deactivate the land mines. The perpetuation of the illegal business transaction among the disenfranchised members of society reflects the failure of the government to adequately exert its control over all levels of society. By ignoring the law, Tai not only contests the state, but forces it to recognize his talent.

Deactivating the land mines recharges Tai's masculinity. In fact, the act of deactivating the land mines is sexualized, and unlike *The Wild Reed*, sexual prowess in *Living in Fear* is used to affirm Tai's masculinity. Nam Duc only agrees to teach Tai how to deactivate the mines after the latter promises to share his seduction techniques with him. Tai gets a sexual thrill and exhilaration from deactivating and removing the land mines, which contradicts, and contests, the serious implications of the project as performed by state cadres. The process of deactivating the land mine is similar to sexual penetration: the act of inserting a pin into the notch of the land mine to release the air (*khi*) reflects the release of semen during intercourse. His deactivation of the land mines is juxtaposed with his violent sexual penetration of Ut, as if to celebrate his defiance of death and authority. The release of Tai's semen into Ut's body is a form of

domination and virility. This is especially true since Tai impregnates his two wives at the same time. More importantly, clearing the ground of land mines also allows the earth to be reborn, as it is at the end of the film.

Tai's recovery of his male identity requires the approval of a male authoritative figure such as Hai Dan. Through the homosocial bond between the two men, Hai Dan is able to restore and enhance Tai's social and political status. Over time, Tai refines his deactivation technique. Instead of digging from the ground downward, he discovers that digging from the ground upward eliminates the danger of stepping on the land mines when locating them. In addition, his method ensures that no land mines are missed in the process; it proves to be a more effective technique than the one introduced by the state. More than admiring Tai's talent for his innovative deactivation technique, Hai Dan recognizes Tai's audacity and fearlessness of the land mines, and realizes his own fear in that domain. Even the film's director agreed, and he explained to me in correspondence that compared to Hai Dan, Tai is more "manly" (*nam tinh*) in this area. Tai is no longer the vulnerable, fearful and disenfranchised member of society who is constantly discriminated against due to his former political affiliation and the social stigmatization of his bigamy. He reclaims his status in the new Vietnam by making a contribution that will benefit the state's reconstruction project. Tai deserves a second chance in the new society because he succeeds in negotiating his worth. Yet, it is crucial to note that the discovery of his talent and the important contribution he makes needs to be recognized by another male authority--Hai Dan--which reinforces the importance of the homosocial bond. It is only through the recognition and appreciation of the latter that Tai gets re-accepted into society.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

Prior to *doi moi*, many Vietnamese films in the postwar period continue to draw on war as their major thematic content. When these films are not glorifying the war through images of strong comradeship on the battlefield, they tend to focus on the plight of women during and after the American-Vietnam War. I suggest that part of the popularity for privileging female subjectivity may stem from the fact that women are seen as a politically neutral group that is non-threatening to the regime and its policies. For that reason they have come to symbolize the grief of the nation in postwar society. In other words, by focusing on the emotions of women and their sorrows brought about by war, filmmakers can avoid addressing issues such as social and political disillusionment that grew out of the war experience. For that reason, the experiences of former southern soldiers, and in particular the disillusionment experienced by former northern soldiers in postwar society have largely been absent in films. As I argued in chapter four, *The Wild Reed* set the stage for subsequent Vietnamese filmmakers to explore more controversial political issues. As we have seen with *Living in Fear*, revisiting postwar society through the eyes of a former southern soldier became a more accepted topic to share with an overseas audience. In this thesis, I have attempted to illustrate how films that privilege the male perspective, such as *The Wild Reed* and *Living in Fear*, articulate the issues surrounding the social roles and identity of men in postwar Vietnam, as well as political questions related to nation building--topics that the state has censored in the past.

Unlike Vietnamese films of the past where war is generally glorified, both *The Wild Reed* and *Living in Fear* present war as a tragedy. The films explore the emotional wounds of war, and in particular, the break down of the patriarchal family

structure. More than that, the two films illustrate the crisis that returning soldiers experienced when they returned home to discover their inability to uphold the prescribed male roles. It is not only former southern soldiers who experience this masculinity crisis, but DRV soldiers, such as Luc, are also confronted with their inadequacy when they return home; their lack of a patriarchal position within the family complicates their male identity. *The Wild Reed* highlights the male identity crisis that Luc experiences within the family and how he is able to reconcile his deficiency through his military leadership and his paternalistic duty to the nation. Tai's crisis, on the other hand, is imposed by a state that not only regulates the activities that define his masculinity but also rejects his membership in the new society. Disenfranchised, he needs to show his worth in order to doubly repair his male identity and social status.

Both films illustrate how the reconstruction of the scarred landscape is primarily a male duty, as well as an activity that is admitted only to the citizens of the new society. This illustrates that females continue to occupy a supplementary and secondary position in postwar reconstruction of the nation. Thus, if the rebuilding of society is a male task, *Living in Fear* demonstrates how gender tensions develop when females dominate the task of deactivating the land mines, or when a female holds authority in the new society. This not only causes panic among the males who are denied participation in the reconstruction project, but it also represents a deliberate de-masculinization of the men on the part of the state. Partaking in the reconstruction project is a task primarily reserved for citizens, whether they want to participate or not, and the fact that Tai and other former ARVN soldiers are deliberately excluded from it affirms the state's power in deciding the inclusion of member in the new society. This is particularly evident when the hard work of this peripheral group is not recognized during the village ceremony to celebrate the success of the de-mining

team, even though they, too, had deactivated the land mines. However, by critiquing and challenging the dominant power that sought to regulate their rights in the new Vietnam, the subjugated former ARVN soldier can reclaim his own history as well as his citizenship status.

Compared to *The Wild Reed*, postwar society is explored in drastically different ways in *Living in Fear*. As I have discussed, it is the first film in Vietnam to highlight the issue of the integration of the former southern soldier into post-revolutionary society. Another difference is the portrayal of the northern soldier, represented in the film by Hai Dan. Unlike Luc, Hai Dan does not possess all the qualities that epitomize the moral soldier. For example, he does not suppress his personal desires the way Luc does. Throughout the film, he expresses his romantic feelings for Uyen. He is a good uncle to Thuan's children, but his paternalistic duty to the nation is not prominently depicted compared to Luc in *The Wild Reed*. Hai Dan uses military force for personal retaliation, such as when he beats Tai and threatens to shoot him for taking Thuan's rice ration home to his second family. This is contrary to the altruistic soldier who only uses his force to benefit the people. Moreover, Hai Dan is not a selfless soldier who sacrifices his personal comfort for the sake of the nation because he actually allows Tai to continue with the illegal land mine trade at the conclusion of the film in order to gain material benefits for himself. Even though he has many good characteristics, such as financially supporting Thuan, he is not a moral soldier in the way that Luc is. The transgression of Hai Dan from the image of the "Ho Chi Minh soldier" illustrates the possibility for filmmakers such as Bui Thac Chuyen to explore the war and its related themes from a radical perspective, albeit with caution, that was not possible several decades earlier.

### *Cinematic Vision of National Unity*

I would like to end the thesis with a discussion about the depiction of reconciliation in the two films. The positive reimagining of the reunification of the country through the theme of reconciliation in the films represents the cinematic desire to resolve the continued political and social partitioning of Vietnam in postwar society. Yet, the way in which each film depicts that reconciliation represents another point of difference. In *The Wild Reed*, reconciliation is mostly experienced through Luc and his family, since the film problematizes the issues arising from the reunion of family members and the displacement experienced by the northern soldier after the war. The reconciliation of family members is an extension of unifying Vietnam as a nation. This is also depicted in *Living in Fear*. Tai's bigamy is no longer condemned by the state, rather, his family problems are resolved when his dilemma is repaired. Thuan, the emblem of the humble and caring first wife, accepts Ut into the family and Lan (Thuan and Tai's daughter) mediates their conflict and promotes family reunion when she goes to live with Tai and Ut at the end of the film. Moreover, Tai and Hai Dan, former best friends who became enemies during the war, finally reconcile with one another on both familial and political levels. The location of the films is also significant. Both are set in central Vietnam, a region that represents the physical reunification of the country. Yet, the reconciliation that is depicted in *Living in Fear* transcends family reunion, as well as the physical and geographical reunification of the country, because it strongly represents the desired political pacification of the nation through Tai's repaired relationship with Hai Dan and the state.

*Living in Fear* has paved the way for filmmakers to revisit the theme of war from a more nuanced and sometimes controversial perspective. To examine postwar society through the eyes of a former southern soldier represents the beginning of a dialogue that aims to project a different narrative of postwar Vietnam to an

international audience. *Dung Doi* [Don't Burn It] (2009), a recent film by Dang Nhat Minh, is another example of a film that has portrayed the American-Vietnam War much differently than previous films. The film is based on the events recorded in the diary of Dang Thuy Tram, a DRV doctor who died in 1970, and the circumstances surrounding the return of her diary by Robert Whitehurst (the American soldier who found it during the war) to her family. The film not only humanizes American soldiers, such as Whitehurst and his Vietnamese interpreter, but it also cinematically depicts the reconciliation of Vietnam and America three decades after the war ended. This theme is particularly underlined when the film concludes with original photographs documenting Whitehurst's return to Vietnam in 2005 and the warm welcome he received by Dang's family. The adoption of Whitehurst into Dang's family further reflects how the Vietnamese state is offering reconciliation with its former enemy. The desire is clearly expressed when *Don't Burn It* was selected among other films to represent Vietnam at the Academy Awards for the category of Best Foreign Film of 2009. By delving into alternative representations of the war, these films show that Vietnamese film is moving away from propaganda, and they demonstrate that there is growing room for a broader discussion about the impact of war in postwar Vietnamese society in general.

Another similar theme that *The Wild Reed* and *Living in Fear* share is the optimistic note on which they both end. At the conclusion of *The Wild Reed*, the camera fades out with an image of the developing community and houses that are developing in the space that the soldiers reconstructed. This final shot indicates the peace and stability in the new society, especially since it is preceded by the reunion scene between Luc and his daughter, which, as suggested, can either be read as a family reunion or the paternal image of the soldier helping Vietnam through postwar hardships. The new society of Vietnam is even more optimistically presented in *Living*

*in Fear*. Tai's family is reaccepted into the new society, something stressed in the concluding scene in which Lan gets ready for school with the other children. Their family now has access to the same rights as other members of society. The red necktie, symbolic of the Young Pioneers that Ho Chi Minh advocates, which Lan adorns affirms how Tai's political affiliation has shifted; he now embraces the new political regime.

Contrary to the war image that is often associated with the male soldier, Lan, like Thom, represents the young, future generation of Vietnam. It is significant that they are females because their "politically neutral" status and innocence cinematically underscores the peace and war-free environment that Vietnam desires for its citizens. This is especially true when *Living in Fear* concludes with the message that life in the war-torn landscape is no longer a threat to its citizens; their lives have returned to normal again. The people have habituated to the danger that lurks in the background, and nothing captures this reality better than when nobody pays attention to or feels threatened by the land mine that explodes in the distance at the end of the film. The scarred land that once threatened Tai's social position and masculinity is now conquered and repaired by Tai himself. No longer naked and dangerous, the land is reborn and filled with life, an optimism captured in the last shot of the film where Tai is removing the land mines amid a field of green vegetation--a symbol of the rebirth of the new nation in postwar society.

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