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“Mapping Vietnamese Identities in Tran Anh Hung’s and Tony Bui’s Films:
Femininity and Love”

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Abstract

Many Vietnamese diasporic film directors have presented women as conveyors of Vietnamese culture, with their love symbolizing Vietnamese identity. This identity has been characterized by the virtues of sacrifice, endurance, and cohesion within a patriarchal family. On one hand, their femininity, as well as their female beauty, can be fully realized only when they are viewed through the perspective of a man and connected to his love. This remains true even if female love sometimes becomes overly patient or rebellious. On the other hand, women in diasporic films possess characteristics that resemble the image of a woman in a traditional environment, or more specifically, a Confucian space. Love keeps them alive. However, they sometimes break out, their love causing them to rebel. Inevitably, they will return to the original, traditional space. This paper argues that this interaction between love, femininity and tradition creates a mechanism for the resistance of violence. In particular, it examines two Vietnamese diasporic directors' perspective on violence in Vietnam, a place where maintaining a state of harmony and non-violence lays at the core of Vietnamese identity. The two films examined are *The Scent of Green Papaya* (dir. Tran Anh Hung, 1993) and *Three Seasons* (dir. Tony Bui, 1999).

KEYWORDS: Identity, Vietnamese Diaspora, Femininity, Diasporic Film, Love, Violence

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Introduction

Traditional Vietnam is often characterized by the syncretism of common Asian faiths such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. J. R. Hall (2003) asserts that “Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism – leave a little room for violence in either theology or practice” (359). This is because, for him, violence “is often held up as a vessel of peace, both inner and social” (359). Slavoj Žižek (2008) points to three forms of violence, ranging from the most to the least visible: the subjective form, the objective form, and the systemic form. According to Žižek, these forms are defined in relation to the concept of tolerance. When tolerance is absent or eliminated, violence occurs. Thus, intolerance leads to violence, while tolerance is a necessary condition for a peaceful society. Žižek also identifies the mechanism that creates conflict and violence as “antinomy of tolerant reasoning,” that is, “two opposite stories can be told about [the events], each of them convincing and well argued, without any possibility of mediation or reconciliation between them” (109). In other words, Hall and Žižek have associated violence with intolerance and nonviolence with peace and tolerance. If traditional Vietnam has promoted social harmony through its syncretism of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, how would one understand violence in a Vietnamese cultural context?

In the twentieth century, several waves of Vietnamese out-migration have led to the presence of a worldwide Vietnamese diaspora, creating generations of Vietnamese diasporic writers and directors of hybrid identity.¹ This paper raises the question of how Vietnamese

diasporic directors who approach Vietnamese culture from such a hybrid perspective interpret Vietnamese identity through this mix of cultural epistemologies-- femininity, love, and Confucian tradition-- within their film texts. I argue that both love and femininity map Vietnamese identity through their interaction with Vietnamese cultural traditions, especially Confucianism. In particular, Vietnamese diasporic directors point out that violence appears when the principle of maintaining harmony is at risk of being shaken or broken. The condition of non-violence takes place via both the preservation and transformation of tradition. To provide case studies, I analyze two famous films: *The Scent of Green Papaya* by Tran Anh Hung, who belongs to the Vietnamese-French community, and *Three Seasons* by Tony Bui, who belongs to the Vietnamese-American community.

Vietnamese Diasporic Film Directors and their Cultural Translations of Violence

In the 1980s and 1990s, both Vietnamese and foreign audiences enjoyed increasing access to films produced by these directors, especially those by Vietnamese-French and Vietnamese-American directors. Many of them have received attention from audiences, film critics, and, especially, academics in the English-speaking world. These directors include Tran Anh Hung (*The Married Woman of Nam Xuong*, *The Waiting Stone*, *The Scent of Green Papaya*, *Cyclo*, *At the Height of Summer*), Lam Lê (*20 nights*), Tony Bui (*Three seasons*), Timothy Lin Bui (*Green Dragon*), Victor Vu (*First Morning*, *Spirits*), Ham Tran (*Journey from the Fall*), Nguyen Vo Nghiem Minh (*Buffalo Boy*, *Water 2030*) and Luu Huynh (*The White Silk Dress*). Some of these productions were selected to receive prestigious film awards. For example, Tony Bui won the Grand Jury Prize, the Audience Choice Award, and the Cinematography Award at the 1999 Sundance Film Festival; Tran Anh Hung won *Caméra d'Or* in 1993 Cannes Film Festival, *Award of the Youth for Best French Film* – 1993 Cannes Film Festival, *Golden Lion* – 52nd Venice International Film Festival. Their films have allowed foreign audiences to visualize the Vietnamese diaspora more clearly and have inspired the imaginations of the people in these diasporas themselves concerning the complexity of their own identity.

Many theorists have discussed “diaspora.” The condition of being a part of a diaspora is often conceptualized through images of homeland and the scattering of seeds. The relations between diasporic communities, their home, and host cultures have formed a vital theme in diaspora studies. Jessica Trevitt (2017) once pointed out that “it [the diaspora] implies a form of triangulation in which the many positions can relate directly to each other, as well as back to the one position they each have in common” (19). The triangulation model is based on mutual relationships shared between home cultures, host cultures, and target host cultures. Nostalgia for the motherland, and the way the migrants feel inextricably connected to it, is inevitable. For example, Edward Said (1978) identified himself as an emigrant and determined that he was “an ‘Oriental’ as a child growing up in two British colonies: [...] have I ever lost hold of the cultural reality of, the personal involvement in having been constituted as ‘an Oriental’” (25). Jameson (1991) generalizes that kind of feeling as “Nostalgia for the present.” When mentioning criteria for identifying diaspora, Dorais (2001) emphasizes the “displacement” and “connectivity”, while Safran (1991) points out the relationship between negotiation and assimilation between the origin and the host country. Dorais (2001) argues that the relationship between diasporic community and homeland/home culture encompasses a sense of loss and displacement. However, Tololyan

(1996) emphasizes that migrants who were “willing to contact their homeland” exhibited the most important criterion for identifying as a diasporic community. Irene Soldavini (2017) argues that Vietnamese people living abroad do constitute a diaspora due to the fact that they meet the above-mentioned criteria.

Through their films, such directors as Tran Anh Hung and Tony Bui have explored the overseas Vietnamese community in terms of a diaspora. The directors strive to both locate and identify homeland culture and identity and to express “nostalgia for the present” and the feeling of being “an Oriental”. Identities, as defined by Stuart Hall (1990), “are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past” (225). The “names” that Vietnamese diasporic directors assign to Vietnam evolve out of the ways in which they perceive. However, in many cases their memories are ambiguous because most of them left Vietnam when they were very young. For example, Timothy and Tony Bui departed for California when they were five and three years old, respectively. Victor Vu was born and raised in America. At twelve years old, Tran Anh Hung emigrated to France after the fall of Saigon. Therefore, in order to be able to give “names”-- to discover Vietnamese identities-- they have to make a journey back to the homeland and engage in a quest for self-discovery. Irene Soldavini (2017) argues that “the quest for the American and French Vietnamese, as for all diasporic communities, is about constructing and deconstructing identity(ies)” (32). Many diasporic directors share the desire to seek Vietnamese identity as well as their own identity through imagining the construction and deconstruction of both national and individual identities. As Tran Anh Hung confirmed in an interview, “I think deeply about what Viet Nam is. And I do that because if you ask, ‘Do I feel Vietnamese,’ I’d say, ‘Yes, I feel deeply Vietnamese.’” (Phipps)

Films, as Trinh Thi Minh Ha (1999) argues, “are translations and film-makers are translators, whether the culture they show is their own or others” (60). Translations in the films produced by Vietnamese diasporic directors take place on two levels: translation that expresses what they experienced and felt in reality, and translation of how they envision an imagined community. Most directors have expressed the instructional role of Confucianism in its syncretism with Buddhism and Daoism. Since a significant feature of Vietnamese Confucianism relates to the positioning of the image of the woman, they have used gender and love as central themes in order to highlight their perception of Vietnamese identity. By looking at the interactions between women and traditional culture, they have rendered Vietnamese identity via the lens of Confucian tradition.

Although Confucianism ended its role as an orthodox ideology of the Vietnamese people with the end of Vietnamese feudalism, it maintains its influence in modern Vietnam.¹¹ Tran Ngoc Vuong observes that “Confucianism still persists, of course, [but] no longer retains its state and role” (141). The deep influence of Confucianism has formed two pillars in Vietnamese belief system: the cult of heaven, which emphasizes “*trời*” (heaven) as the creator of everything, and ancestor worship, which focuses on the virtue of “*hiếu*” (filial piety). Thus, the Vietnamese always imagine the world via the model “heaven – human – earth” in order to achieve harmony: harmony in body, spirit, and between humans, heaven and the earth. To them, the world contains harmonious pairs: heaven and earth, river and mountain, life and death, day and night, husband and wife, father and mother. In other words, Vietnamese worldview emphasizes a *yin-yang* harmony. To achieve harmony, the Vietnamese set the world, the state, the family, and the individual in cohesion, believing in a transcendent order.

As for the notion of violence, Confucianism proposed the practice of a non-violent society by promoting an ideal moral society “in which its members, by appropriately controlling their desires through their innate moral emotions, abide by the social order and contribute to the realization of public virtue. Going a step further, it is also a life community in which all the things living under Heaven actualize their nature to the fullest degree possible, so as to form a great, harmonious whole with the Universe” (Choi Young-jin and Lee Haeng-hoon 2016: 407). In Vietnam, Confucianism helps cultivate the idea of a moral society in which conflict can be reconciled by a shared set of values, including those that Kim Dinh (1969, 1970) has pointed out. They are collectivism, rule of causality; life is to endure, harmony and consensus, respect for elders, and benevolenceⁱⁱⁱ. These values are centered around a sense of harmony, commanding all social members to practice nonviolent behaviors in order to promote an ideology of tolerance.

Vietnamese diasporic directors consider violence a sign of the risk of broken harmony and moral values. They also emphasize that the journey to restoring harmony is needed in order to create a tolerant, harmonious, and non-violent society as desired by the Confucian culture as well as the three religions. This stems from the fact that harmony is very permanent in Vietnamese society and thinking. Directors recognize that violence, if present in Vietnamese society, is “subjective” rather than “systemic.” More specifically, according to Galtung's typology, it is classified as direct violence. Structural violence has not yet formed, thus, no cultural violence exists due to the criteria defined by Galtung (1990): “Direct violence is an event; structural violence is a process with ups and downs; cultural violence is an invariant, a 'permanence' (Galtung, 1977, ch. 9), remaining essentially the same for long periods, given the slow transformations of basic culture” (294).

Vietnamese diasporic directors are those who left Vietnam shortly after the war, thus, the memories of violence caused by the war often haunted them. They translated these emotions into their own films on different levels. This could include the deaths and grief of the Vietnamese people (*The White Silk Dress*) or mental trauma and portrayals of broken families, contrasting with the traditional family model that Vietnamese people would want to maintain (*The First Morning*).

In *The White Silk Dress* by Luu Huynh, war is associated with death and separation. The image of innocent children in a classroom killed by bombs is enough to emphasize the war as a terrible violence breaking peace and cohesion in Dan's family. However, in the bombing scene, *Ao dai* is always supported as a symbol of female beauty in accordance with Confucian values such as housekeeping skills (công), beauty (dung), appropriate speech (ngôn), and moral conduct (hạnh). It reveals that if war creates violence, the traditional culture is an important shield to neutralize the pain and pave a path back to tolerance and harmony. Therefore, war cannot create violence in the form of structure and progress.

In *First Morning*, director Victor Vu captures the human experience of the aftermath of the Vietnam War and draws the attention of viewers to Linh, the protagonist, who lives with the memory of being raped on the refugee boat from Vietnam to the US. This experience of violence leads to a great mental trauma in Linh, the unspeakable suffering of her mother, and extreme behavior by her father, who attempts to hide and permanently eliminate Linh's trauma by trying to find a husband for his daughter. Their traditional family unit is in danger of falling apart. However, after the death of Linh's mother, namely Kim Anh, who was a woman of Confucianism-- who endures, perseveres, lives with unconditional love for her husband and children, and strives to maintain a full-fledged family, the other family members understand the

strength their mother's love brings to their family. All conflicts are negotiated. They now understand that the Confucian culture and feminine love will always exist, even if the Confucian mother dies. Linh, who has rebelled, tries to escape the Confucian culture, saying "this is our home now [meaning the United States]. I don't think she's left us [referring to her mother's spirit]." As such, both directors Luu Huynh and Victor Vu convey that war presents a vicious and terrible challenge to the preservation of traditional values. On the other hand, in the face of war, the sustainability of a traditional culture and the mechanism of harmony are even more strongly emphasized. It is a way for people to escape trauma and conflict.

Not only is it associated with war, but violence also occurs in post-war life, due to the fact that globalization and Western culture affect the lives of the urban poor and lead to disturbance, chaos and imbalance in personal and social lives. That reality is delved into by Tran Anh Hung in *Cyclo* and is translated by the system of signs and images on the screen. The image of the dollar used by the characters becomes their passion as well as obsession and could illustrate the presence of globalization in Saigon - Cho Lon. Through the sound and images of chaotic, bustling streets, Tran Anh Hung depicts a life of hustle and people striving to earn enough money to survive. Opposite sceneries appear. The scenery that involves a Cyclo family life conveys the atmosphere of a traditional family model in which many generations live together and the woman is associated with the family meal. The atmosphere of hustle of the whole family preparing for dinner after a hard-working day reflects the balance that exists in that space. Throughout *Cyclo*'s journey, the camera captures scenes that reveal the rift with traditional culture. These are the buildings and apartments where Vietnamese people enjoy traditional Vietnamese food but seem very out of place and blend into the chaotic sounds of the street. We hear the song of two Vietnamese people mixed in the melody of the English song "Just Like You". The clearest sign of the disruption of harmony and peace, paving the way for the presence of violence, is associated with the image of the Lady Boss. Going out of the norm of the image of the Confucian traditional woman— the family woman— she becomes the controller. All the men are subservient to her. The power and authority of this woman is evident in the image of her smoking. In this social context, when violence breaks out, some members of the traditional Cyclo family are consumed by it. The Cyclo becomes a member of the poet's criminal group. When he bites off a gecko's tail, he agrees to enter the violent world. His sister becomes a prostitute and accepts sexual violence. The poet, who leads the criminals, executes his Lady Boss's orders and indirectly and directly appeared in bloody scenes.

However, the center of the narrative is still not violence, but a process of characters resisting violence in order to return to a state of harmony, peace, and a traditional cultural environment. In an interview on *Cyclo*, Tran Anh Hung says: “If you’re not turned on by violence, you’ll notice it is depicted with an overlay of sweetness; only through that contrast does violence become unbearable” (Behar 1995). The sweetness and innocence in this film are states created from harmony, from a traditional background. Therefore, resistance to violence is constant. To express that resistance, Tran Anh Hung merges and overlaps types of sound, colors, and mixes scenes. As Barnes (2010) argues “The persistence of fluorescent lighting facilitates transitions between spaces and sensations throughout the film, merging the various sites of nefarious activity and blurring the lines between innocence and perversion” (117). The process of “blurring the lines between innocence and perversion” and resistance to violence is also revealed through most of the characters in *Cyclo*.

Cyclo, once a member of the criminal group and a prisoner of his Lady Boss, remains innocent, as he is willing to save a drowning man without permission. Furthermore, he asks his Lady Boss to give him a chance to return the life of a cyclo driver. Since his request was not accepted by Lady Boss, he has to continue committing the crime. He takes the pills that the gangsters give him to create an illusion and thus no longer has thoughts of murder. After this vicious action, he covers his face and body in blue paint to try to forget his violence. Ultimately, returning to daily life after being granted freedom by his Lady Boss, he gets rid of his obsession with immoral life after a dream about his father. The father–son relationship that reflects the structure of the patriarchal family brings him back to his original innocence. Thus, the thread connecting him to the tradition still exists within his unconsciousness. *Cyclo*’s sister becomes a prostitute, the poet’s tool for earning money, and loses her innocence. The love between her and the poet used to separate them from the violent feeling and environment. When she burns incense on New Year’s Eve, she retains the picture of the poet. However, this picture and her money are eventually pickpocketed. This serves as a sign that she will cut off her connection with the remnants of her painful and impure days.

As for the poet who practices violence and pulls *Cyclo* and his sister into a violent environment, he constantly turns to innocence and yearns to return to the traditional culture in his own way. Tran Anh Hung pointed out “when they first arrive [*Cyclo* and his sister], he sees them for what they are, innocents, and the only way he can handle their innocence is to precipitate them into a life of crime. That’s why he becomes his sister’s pimp; that’s why, when she cries after her first trick, for him it’s a sort of consolation: innocence protesting against the hardness of reality” (Behar 1995). Indeed, the poet does not want to deprive *Cyclo* and his sister of their innocence, an innocence that he himself has lost. He is always thinking and obsessed with the existence of tradition and innocence. Each time an act of violence takes place, his mind resounds in verses, verses about the pure beauty of nature, verses about his roots and loneliness. His mother clings to his childhood image, rejecting his new image as a violent man. His father is angry that the poet gives his mother money earned by violence. The final horrific violent action he performs is filmed close-up. He kills the man who took *Cyclo*’s sister’s innocence, stuffing the dollar bills that man paid *Cyclo*’s sister to take her innocence into his mouth. This violent scene is set between two other scenes: innocent children singing in a classroom and a crowded and hectic Saigon street. This signifies the poet’s loneliness and that he does not belong to any world. Finally, he burns the room and himself on New Year’s Eve. This is an act of redemption which allows him to erase his violent image and his past so that all around him can return to a peaceful

state. The violence seems to be eliminated when the Lady Boss comes to show her maternal love for Cyclo. All impressions of violence are erased when Cyclo carries his sister and grandfather on his bike. Thus, violence, though appearing in the film, is not a process nor a structure, but an event.

The mechanism for resisting the formation of structural violence and resolving violent events in the Vietnamese diasporic films mentioned above is at the heart of Vietnamese Confucian culture and the relationship between femininity and love. Women and love play a central role in cultivating harmony in the family and between *yin* and *yang*, while reinforcing the concept of chastity. Since the time of the Doi Moi/Renovation period, when Vietnam was integrated into the rest of the world, Vietnamese people have been greatly influenced by Western cultural ideology. Thus, the traditional view of women and love is subject to change. Western feminism has penetrated into Vietnamese thinking, demanding that traditional thinking be transformed or even replaced.

Love and Femininity as a Confirmation of Confucian Imprints

Most of Tran Anh Hung's films are set against the background of family and family life, in which women are highlighted. Love is another category related to family life, morality, and the family rules that Confucianism promotes. Tran Anh Hung produced *The Married Woman of Nam Xuong* (1991) and *The Waiting Stone* (1991) before *The Scent of Green Papaya* (1993), and this sequence clearly shows his process of finding Vietnamese identity through love, femininity, and Confucian ethics. *The Married Woman of Nam Xuong* is an adaptation of Nguyen Du's short story entitled *Young Married Woman in Nam Xuong*.ⁱⁱⁱ Like Nguyen Du, Tran Anh Hung characterizes his female protagonist as a virtuous woman celebrated by traditional Confucianism. His character embodies the Confucian values of unconditional love and fidelity to her husband. In *The Waiting Stone* (1991), Tran Anh Hung once again creates an image of a woman in the family space faithfully waiting for her husband. By utilizing the legend title and constructing a female character in the setting of a refugee camp related to the figure of the wife in Vietnamese legend, namely *The Waiting Stone*, Tran Anh Hung emphasizes the cohesion of the virtuous Vietnamese woman with Confucian ethics.

When approaching *The Scent of Green Papaya* (1993), spectators have access to a representation of Vietnamese culture in the twentieth century. In this film, Tran Anh Hung once again shows Vietnamese culture in connection with Confucianism. Although filmed in France, the movie is set in Saigon during the 1950s and 1960s.^{iv} However, the camera does not showcase Saigon's full urban vista, but rather focuses entirely on two houses, which correspond to two life periods of the main character, "Mui." Mui moves from the countryside to Saigon to work as a servant. After ten years of service, Mui moves to the house whose owner is a friend of the family she has worked for. Eventually, the owner and Mui become a couple. Corresponding to those two periods, and those two spaces, Tran Anh Hung mentions two levels that express the relationship between love and femininity.

The first level is that love and femininity pertain to sacrifice and tolerance, criteria for the model woman in the Confucian family. Tran Anh Hung expresses that state with the most concentrated image of the "mistress" character. This woman lives with her mother-in-law, husband and four children (three sons and one daughter). Her daughter, around the same age as Mui, has died of a severe illness. In addition, there are two servants in this family-- an older

servant named Ti, and the younger Little Mui. Every day, the mistress is responsible for managing the family and a small shop that runs right from inside the house. The family lives on a street named “Phan Chau Toan.” However, these women, especially the mistress, rarely leave home.

Via a combination of long takes with close-up shots, the fusion of cultural signs, and the construction of a slow and undramatic narrative stream, Tran Anh Hung creates a particular space characteristic of a woman’s life. The house is depicted by scenes filmed from an objective point of view. It has many characteristics of an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Vietnamese Confucian home. For example, it consists of the master’s room, the servant’s rooms, the rooms for children, the dining room, a small kitchen, a garden, and a shop. Significantly, there is an altar in the room upstairs. The family’s grandmother lives in this altar room, chanting and burning incense in order to express love for her deceased relatives. Even in the small room where two servants live, Ti sets up a small altar and burns incense there every day. The rooms are basically undivided, but all are in order and have spatial functions and practical delimitation. The kitchen is a very small space in which the servants or mistress use firewood to cook Vietnamese-style dishes according to each person’s taste. To make the atmosphere of a Confucian family clearer, Tran Anh Hung combines the objective camera point of view with the subjective point of view of Mui, who is a child and has just come into this space. Along with her point of view, the use of close-ups is fully exploited. When the camera focuses on Mui’s eyes, they fall upon the altar and the garden, while conveying strong emotion. A close-up of the altar, along with images of incense sticks and pictures of people who have passed through Mui’s curious eyes, makes this space both strange and familiar. It is a symbol which emphasizes Vietnamese identity and the family atmosphere which cloaks the entire house. Just by looking at this image, every Vietnamese, wherever he or she lives, feels nostalgia. The garden is another image that emphasizes the traditional Vietnamese family model, providing self-sufficiency through vegetable cultivation and cattle-breeding. This is a glamorous space to Mui because of the visible papaya trees, papaya, and papaya milk. The extreme close-up of papaya and the stream of papaya milk evokes a sense of vitality and sensuality. Finally, Tran Anh Hung does not create too much sound or dialogue. Instead, he creates a static and closed space to evoke the atmosphere of calmness and harmony of Confucian family.

Not only space but also family organization reflect the model of the Confucian family in *The Scent of Green Papaya*. When analyzing the Confucian family model, Tran Dinh Huou (1989) observes that “in Confucian thinking, living together and living with many generations brings well-being to the family” (33). The family in which Mui works as a servant includes three generations: grandmother, parents, and children. These generations interact with one another in accordance with the principles organizing the Confucian family. The first principle is that “the family has an owner and this owner is the man” (Tran 1989, 34). He appears infrequently, appearing like a Western intellectual in the early twentieth century. His clothes typically include trousers, buttoned-shirts, and vests. However, his behavior and role in the family prove that he is truly an amateur Confucian.^v He is not involved in the family business, and he shows passion only when it comes to singing. There are even a few instances in which he squanders all of the family money just to come back home empty-handed. However, he always *acts* as an authoritative pillar, the master of the family. The way he positions himself at the dining table positions him as the family’s owner.

The family also exists within and fully complies with Confucian moral relations, including the relations between father and son, husband and wife, brother and sister. Tran Dinh Huou (1989) clearly analyzes the nature of this relationship from the Confucian perspective: “In each pair, one is in a high position and another is in a lower position. The lower one submits to the person in a higher position. It means that the son obeys his father's words, younger brother obeys older brother's words, the wife obeys the husband's words” (34). Tran Anh Hung does not provide many details or on-screen events to clarify that point, but a few fleeting scenes show the harmony in these three pairs of relationships within the family. In the three brief dialogues between the husband and wife, the husband makes a request in a single sentence, to which his wife immediately acquiesces. At the dining table, the two boys follow their father's directions seriously. As is usual, when dining, only the men sit for each meal, while the grandmother eats upstairs. Sometimes, the grandmother asks her son if they can eat together, and he moves upstairs as a sign of obedience to her request.

Within this space and familial organization, Tran Anh Hung shows femininity and love as factors of Confucian culture's deep influence on Vietnamese life. The mistress is a traditional woman, compatible with the Confucian family space and behavior, from her appearance to her personality. She possesses angelic beauty, gentle speech, and calmness even in the hardest situations. It can be said that this is a woman who possesses the Confucian conception of feminine beauty: housekeeping skills (*công*), beauty (*dung*), appropriate speech (*ngôn*), and moral conduct (*hạnh*). In other words, through this woman, love and feminism are placed in very crucial categories that Confucianism emphasizes, such as the harmony of *yin* and *yang* and the promotion of the categories of love (*tình*), decorum (*lễ*), uprightness (*ngĩa*).

The concept of *yin* and *yang* harmony in the family leads to a reimagining of love and femininity, which inevitably blend together. In *The Scent of Green Papaya*, love is both an expression of and a constituent part of femininity. The presence of this woman in the family represents the “*yin*” that a family needs to be fully harmonized. Therefore, even though the man acts as a pillar and owner, the person who cares and arranges everything in the family is a woman. The way that the woman manages the family so that it can maintain the *yin-yang* balance is both an expression of feminism in Confucian conception and an expression of the quiet and silent love of a woman for her husband. Tran Dinh Huou (1989) points out, “Women are never family heads. However, the relationship between men and women must be visualized in the *yin-yang* relationship in which a person acts as the master and the other obeys but they cannot lack each other, they must rely on each other” (34). Tran Anh Hung focuses much attention on the scene of the lady taking care of the meal and the family's tea to demonstrate her femininity. He also emphasizes her efforts to support her family after her husband takes all of the money they have saved and leaves without warning. She maintains the family's routines, despite her husband's absence. However, she never occupies the “pillar” position of the man in that family, and constantly waits for her husband to return. She compresses all this pain into silence, without a word of resentment.

Through this very slow narrative process, Tran Anh Hung highlights the image of the woman in two frames. The first frame utilizes an American shot, portraying a woman in *áo dài*, a female traditional costume, with a gentle and sad look, in the small family shop. The second frame is created by using an extreme close-up, which is a very specific technique for Tran Anh Hung's particular montage-style. It is the shape of the woman's feet which evokes signs of her patience and endurance. In certain scenes, her son wants to touch her foot, as if to show that he

understands the suffering his mother is carrying. The two frames combine to imply that she is always the woman, possessing all of the feminine beauty and endurance to maintain a family model that the man desires. Her fate does not interfere with the man's fate in any circumstance.

On the other hand, the *yin* nature that women embody, from the point of view of the *yin-yang* relationship, is expressed in their presence, which causes life and love to sprout. Tran Anh Hung connects the image of the mistress and Mui with the image of a lively home garden. The papaya and its milk are symbols of the desire for love. It is in that house that Mui's love has "sprouted." Thus, the image of papaya and papaya milk are still present in her mind, urging her to come to her love more fervently. In that garden, little creatures continuously grow, a signal of life, of the harmony between nature and people, and of the *yin* and *yang* harmony.

Love and femininity should also be seen in relation to the three crucial categories in Confucian thought, namely "love" (*tình*), "decorum" (*lễ*), and "uprightness" (*ngĩa*). These three factors make the family peaceful and help prevent conflict and discord. "Love" is understood as the affection of father and son, as well as brotherly affection; it pertains to the natural feelings between people. "Decorum" is a way of expressing love and harmony, keeping an attentive attitude, and performing beautiful rituals. "Uprightness" is a sense of duty among family members in accordance with the value of "love." Love and femininity are not directly expressed, but rather expressed through daily life, especially through the regulation of family relationships and the promotion of peace, roles of women.

In *The Scent of Green Papaya*, the scenes of the house are all static, possessing almost no sound. The sound outside the street does not seem to penetrate further inside. Dialogue is also very scarce. A gentle, peaceful atmosphere is created even when the family is in the most difficult situation. For example, there are only two scenes in which the mistress cries. In one of these, she cries when talking to her mother-in-law, although the viewer does not actually hear the sound of crying. Rather, Tran Anh Hung uses a distance shot with the point of view of the second son to symbolically convey this emotion. Viewers only see a woman sitting in front of her mother-in-law, bowing her head as if crying. This scene shows the ability of the woman to endure suffering and maintain harmony within the family. In another scene, she cries when Mui has to leave her home due to the family's difficulty in supporting the servants. In saying farewell, she calls Mui her "daughter." Tran Anh Hung displays her sobbing not in silence but rather aloud in order to express this woman's sincere attachment to and love for her daughter Mui. To her husband, who returns after enjoying many nighttime pleasures, she does not say a word of criticism. Rather she immediately invites the doctor to help him recover. Furthermore, because she understands her husband's love of song, she still hires a music player to perform for him. All of these actions are manifestations of the specific way of "practicing" love and femininity in the form of a combination of the three Confucian categories-- "love" (*tình*), "decorum" (*lễ*), "uprightness" (*ngĩa*).

The second level of love and femininity in *The Scent of Green Papaya* is tied to the quest for love's affirmation. This level is displayed through Mui herself and the domestic space into which she moves. Unlike her previous home, the new house has a Western style of decoration, and the owner is a Western intellectual. He is a well-dressed man and a pianist, who often plays Western music. He does not live with his parents, and his girlfriend occasionally comes to visit him. They show love and open intimacy to one another. Nevertheless, Mui presents an image of the typical "Oriental" woman in that Western space. Tran Anh Hung focuses on implicitly comparing Mui's face with the image of the Buddha. Mui introduces an Oriental atmosphere to

the house and a new lifestyle through meals, customs, and costumes. However, Mui is no longer a little girl but rather a beautiful woman. The image of papaya, reminiscent of the desire for love from previous years, still captivates her. She tries lipstick. She wears the *áo dài* and jewelry that her old mistress gave her. When describing her, Tran Anh Hung always focuses on her eyes. Her eyes show that she is nervous, worried that the owner might see her. But her eyes also express her wish to show off her youthful beauty. Tran Anh Hung depicts a seductive and sexy girl through very delicate frames and angles in distant scenes. For example, the image of a young girl washing her hair, or the scene of her donning the *áo yếm* with her adolescent body lines, is enough to capture her feminine charm.^{vii} This girl, although stricken with eyes full of bewilderment and fear, is fiercely in love with her owner, Khuyen, and is ready to come to him with sensuality despite knowing that he is already in a relationship. Love and femininity in this context seem to have moved beyond the strict range of tolerable Confucian ethics. Terminating the relationship with Thu, a Western-style girl, to fall in love with Mui, a traditional girl, symbolizing that Khuyen has made a journey from the West back to the original East.

However, the atmosphere of a Confucian family immediately returns to the visual narrative. Mui becomes Khuyen's wife and remains focused on her family, taking care of her husband and eventually becoming pregnant. Khuyen subsequently begins teaching Mui to read and write. This new dynamic emphasizes the fact that Mui has the opportunity to become a modern woman. In whatever manner, Khuyen, who is now a part of Mui's family, becomes part of a traditional Vietnamese family.

In short, *The Scent of Green Papaya* maps the deep connection of Vietnamese culture with Confucian thought by showcasing different levels of love and femininity in a very narrow space—the traditional family home. Tran Anh Hung clearly subscribes to the idea that Confucianism is a doctrine based on the family because it imagines that the ideal society would follow a model of the harmonious family. People are therefore generally “people of the family” (Tran 1989, 28), while love and femininity are intertwined to achieve harmony. Tran Anh Hung, with a European art-house, slow-stream, symbolic narrative, has subtly expressed that Oriental blend of love and femininity.

Love, Femininity, and the “Transformation” of Traditional Culture

Three Seasons is the first film about Vietnam by Tony Bui. It sets up an image of Saigon in the city itself, not in France, as *The Scent of the Green Papaya* does. While Tran Anh Hung constructs a linear narrative, focusing on the context of the family, Tony Bui builds a fragmented structure, alternating between three lines which correspond to three seasons: the dry season, rainy season, and “growth season.”^{viii} The first narrative line relates to the dry season and two characters, namely Hai and Lan. Hai is a xích-lô (or cyclo) driver in Saigon, while Lan is a prostitute. Every day, Hai takes Lan from the hotel to a rented place. Hai soon comes to fall in love with Lan, who ultimately reciprocates. The second narrative line centers on the story of Woody, who often appears with a raincoat and a box during the rainy season. He sells cigarettes and other gadgets on the street, in the bars, and sometimes in front of the cinema for foreigners. Once, when chatting with an American at the bar, he loses his box and then wanders off to find it. The American who Woody spoke with sits in front of the hotel every day and waits for something. He has come to Vietnam with the sole purpose of finding his lost daughter. On the last day before leaving Vietnam, he recognizes his daughter, who is sitting opposite him at the

bar table where he had met her mother before. The “growth season” is described in the third narrative line, which tells the story of Kien An and teacher Dao. Kien An picks lotus to sell on the street. She works with many other women on the lotus plantation. Her master, the teacher Dao, is a mysterious man living in a separate pagoda in the middle of the lotus pond. To clarify the relationship between femininity and love, and how Tony Bui shapes a Vietnamese identity through that relationship, I will focus on analyzing the first and the third narrative lines while pointing out the connection of these two to the second narrative line.

Tony Bui in the narrative line about Kien An and teacher Dao maps Vietnam in accordance with traditional beauty and the process of constructing new traditions through depictions of femininity and love. In this narrative line, Kien An originally appears as a traditional woman. Her clothing and her conic straw hat let spectators know that she is from a village. Tony Bui uses long shots to describe the space surrounding her. It is a pastoral image: a peaceful lotus plantation with women picking the flower, singing a very familiar song of Vietnamese people. The lyrics of this song are: “The lotus is the most beautiful flower in the marshes. Green leaves, white flowers, and yellow stamens. Yellow stamens, white flowers, and green leaves. Near mud but they do not stink like mud.” (*Trong đầm gì đẹp bằng sen; Lá xanh, bông trắng lại chen nhụy vàng; Nhụy vàng, bông trắng, lá xanh; Gần bùn mà chẳng hôi tanh mùi bùn*). In Vietnamese thought, the lotus evokes the traditional beauty and moral values of Vietnamese people, especially women. Along with the lotus pond, the image of the pagoda is described using a panoramic and wide angle from Kien An's point of view. This highlights the pastoral. However, it is a mysterious pagoda due to the fact that teacher Dao lives here and never appears directly. Kien An only knows him as a strict and unforgiving man when she arrives and meets with his assistant. Thus, Kien An sees and feels a cultural tradition that is both sensitive and mysterious. Her appearance in the lotus pond represents a connection between women and traditional values that have persisted for a long time. In this context, the camera focuses attention on Kien An's eyes, showing her desire to explore the nature and values of tradition. Indeed, she not only gradually discovers a somewhat mysterious world of tradition around her but also changes this world through her female instincts and femininity. The first change is that she does not sing the traditional songs with the other women anymore; in the vast lotus pond she sings her own song. Because of this independence, she is ordered to meet teacher Dao in the pagoda. She becomes the one who the teacher Dao trusts to record his poems. The eyes of the woman make the man lonely. He quietly lives in a separate world for many years, suffering from leprosy, ready to share the feelings and memories of the past about pure love and his dream of bringing lotus to the children. By the end of the film, when the teacher Dao passes away, Kien An keeps the poems he left behind. Her song is accompanied by images of boats full of lotus. This scene implies that a new tradition is being constructed by this woman upon the background of the old tradition. Kien An can be considered a symbol of beauty, the soul, and femininity, possessing the strength to construct and change the tradition. Love exists through the power of femininity.

In the narrative line related to Lan and Hai, femininity and love appear in the context of a Vietnam set in a traditional moral discourse, but which also possesses the ability to change it. Lan, as mentioned above, is a prostitute. She smokes and drinks alcohol, details that show that she is a non-traditional woman. During the times that Hai takes Lan from the hotel to the inn, Lan is confident, active in dialogue, and not ashamed of her “job.” The camera does not focus on the girl's face but rather films from her shoulder. This choice of perspective implies that Lan's true feelings are hidden. There seems to be no way for the viewer to explore her inner world.

However, in the endless stories that Lan tells Hai, the one in which she talks about high school girls with *áo dài* shows that this non-traditional woman is captivated by images of the traditional Vietnamese woman. Lan's words to Hai at the door of the inn confirm that she is obsessed with traditional moral discourse, especially the discourse on chastity that has existed in Vietnamese thinking from many centuries past up to the present time. Pham Van Hung (2016) confirms that "As a product of Confucianism, the virtuous women who went into the spiritual life of the community [...] proved to have an obsession, though not too extreme, about the chastity in Vietnamese thinking" (220). According to the traditional Confucian conception, women like Lan will not be happy. However, in this film, Hai is the one who breaks the discourse. His love for Lan is not dominated by traditional conceptions of morality. He tries to win in the race of cyclo drivers in order to get fifty dollars, which is equivalent to the price of Lan's "service" per night, so that he may be with Lan and observe her sleep. He realizes Lan's innocence when hearing her story about her time in high school and experience with the *áo dài*. He patiently waits for Lan so that he can take her home every day, although she chases him away. Viewed from the perspective of gender relations, if Kien An embodies a woman's salvation, Hai's presence is considered a confirmation of the man's salvation of woman. However, I would like to suggest that Hai is the embodiment of love and salvation. Holding Hai's hand is an action that confirms that Lan felt his love and was persuaded by it, and this proves that the traditional moral discourse can be changed. Thus, the image of Hai driving Lan by cyclo back to a space in the past, and image of Lan in *áo dài* as a high school girl walking in the middle of the street full of flamboyant flowers, confirms the return to traditional beauty by love, and the neutralization of traditional moral discourse.

It is no coincidence that Tony Bui attaches the sound of Kien An's singing to the image of Lan. In the stream of film narration, when ending the plot line of the dry season, Kien An's voice is heard. While she sings, the image of Lan appears on screen. Paralleled with the dialogue of Kien An and teacher Dao at the latter's death, the sound of Kien An's singing following his request is joined with the image of Lan lying on the bed next to Hai and the image and sound of a running train. All of these details show that Tony Bui is both positioning Vietnam within the limits of tradition and emphasizing the ability to change and create new traditions. The narrative line related to Woody is presented as a prediction that there will be many changes in Vietnam: there will be growth, and hatred, suffering, and war will cease. Tony Bui also shares this idea when interviewing with CNN (2000): "I began to see Vietnam in both its present tense and its future sense. I would begin to see a country not at war but at peace."

Conclusion

Viewed through the relationship between femininity, love, and tradition, *The Scent of Papaya* and *Three Seasons* confirm Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) statement on feminism: "One is not born, but rather *becomes*, a woman" (330). One also can read these films as expressions concerning the coercion of discourses of power, which Foucault and Kristeva have discussed. As the productions of Vietnamese diasporic directors, these films show how the "source" country is imagined and experienced by members of the diaspora. Tran Anh Hung and Tony Bui, through the use of a Western filming style, have mapped a contemporary Vietnam by highlighting the ability to preserve the Confucian tradition while changing the discourse that surrounds that tradition. The Vietnamese mechanism of resistance to violence by means of maintaining a state

of harmony and non-violence has endured both the preservation and transformation of tradition. Therefore, in their films, Vietnam in particular, and the Orient in general, “is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought imagery and vocabulary” (Said, 32).

Notes

- I. The largest Vietnamese migrant communities are those whose members settled in France and the US. For more details about the history of French and Vietnamese American communities, please read: Irene Soldavini (2017), pp.17-21.
- II. Vietnam's last Confucian examination took place in 1919. Vietnamese feudalism weakened and no longer played a unique role in the test-taking process since 1858, when Vietnam was colonized by France. However, it was not until 1945 that the Vietnamese feudal regime officially ended its role in Vietnamese history.
- III. For a detailed analysis of these characteristics, please see: Pham Duy Nghia (2005), “Confucianism and the Conception of the Law in Vietnam”, *Asian Socialism and Legal Change: the Dynamics of Vietnamese and Chinese Reform*. ANU E Press and Asia Pacific Press The Australian National University Canberra ACT 0200, Australia, pp.79-81.
- IV. Nguyen Du (Nguyễn Dữ) is a Vietnamese writer of the sixteenth century. He is known as the compiler of a collection of short stories entitled *Collection of Strange Tales* (傳奇漫錄/ *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*). These stories were based upon traditional Vietnamese folktales.
- V. It should be noted that, historically, this is the period of the Vietnam War. However, viewers would not find traces of war in Tran Anh Hung’s film. The director insists on bringing Vietnam to life from the depth of its cultural values, not from its wars.
- VI. According to Tran Dinh Huou (2007) and Tran Ngoc Vuong (1999), the three types of Confucianism that appear in Vietnamese history include the following: the formal and retired Confucian scholar and the amateur Confucian. The formal Confucian scholars are those who take part in political affairs in feudal court. The retired Confucian scholars are those who were the former formal Confucian scholars. However, they felt disgusted by the feudal court and retreated from public life to live with nature. The third type relates to the Confucian who live in urban areas. They are “multi-talented and amorous,” enjoying pleasures.
- VII. “Áo yếm” is a traditional undergarment of Vietnamese women.
- VIII. When answering Yabroff’s (1999) interview, Tony Bui shares that “The three major stories have the characteristics of different seasons.” According to him, they are “the dry season”, “the wet season” and “the growth season.” In approaching this film, both Michele Janette (2006) and Irene Soldavini (2017) analyze three lines of plot according to the three seasons that the director suggests.

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