Vietnam's *Đổi Mới* Cinema: Navigating Gender Relations in Tony Bui's *Three Seasons* (1999)

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ABSTRACT

As a result of the neoliberal marketization, or *Đổi Mới*, that started in the late 1980s in the hitherto socialist Vietnam and of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the United States, overseas Vietnamese in the U.S. and other Western countries began to return to Vietnam to do business, including making films. Vietnamese-American Tony Bui's *Ba Mùa* (*Three Seasons*), made in 1999, was the first American-produced film that was made in Vietnam after said normalization. Upon its release, *Three Seasons* was deeply appreciated by the Vietnamese-American community in the U.S. and lauded by critics for challenging the stereotypical images of Vietnamese people that have been ubiquitous in Hollywood and other Western "Vietnam movies" (Duong 2012; Janette 2006). This article argues that this applauded Vietnamese perspective in *Three Seasons* is constructed fundamentally as a Vietnamese male subjectivity without due consideration for a relevant female perspective. It argues that through several mechanisms, the film constructs female protagonists whose subjectivity is compromised and whose purpose is ultimately driven by men's agendas. While the male protagonists are portrayed as artists and reliable guardians of Vietnamese traditional values, women are depicted as subscribers and followers of men's beliefs, intellect, and art. The film's reduced characterization of women compromises their agency and subjectivity, which informs them to operate only with a purpose and dream they borrow and/or inherit from men. Overall, *Three Seasons* laments the loss of tradition in the rapidly transforming society of Vietnam under *Đổi Mới* through a didactic tale where men are made superior educators and women are essentialized as learners.

Keywords: cinema of Vietnam, diaspora, Đổi Mới (Renovation), gender relations

INTRODUCTION

In 1975, the North Vietnam Army, under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party, defeated South Vietnam and its ally and sponsor, the United States, thus bringing the 20-year-long American War to an end (1955-1975). In 1976, the North and the South were reunited and in the same year the centrally planned economy[1] that had been adopted in the North was expanded to the South. For many reasons, this command economy failed, leaving the country crushed by poverty and hunger (Elliott 1992), with a poverty rate greater than 60% in 1990 (World Bank 2003).[2] Faced with such a precarious situation, at its Sixth National Congress in 1986, the Vietnamese Communist Party decided to carry out a series of reform policies, commonly known as *Đổi Mới* (Renovation), which kick-started a socialist-oriented market economy (*kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa*). Since then, the originally closed, government-subsidized economy has been opened up for foreign investment and the importation and exportation of commodities have been strongly promoted. A large number of state enterprises have been either equitized or privatized; meanwhile, individuals and private organizations have been entitled to own businesses. Renovation quickly transformed Vietnam's impoverished economy of the 1980s and 1990s into one of the region's most dynamic and one of the world's fastest growing economies (World Bank 2020).

As Vietnam has embarked on its neoliberal economic reforms, the Vietnamese diaspora in the West has become a special demographic from which the Vietnamese state seeks investment and collaboration. Once considered the nation's "traitors",[3] the diaspora has now become "an inseparable part of the Vietnamese nation" (*một bộ phận không tách rời của cộng đồng dân tộc Việt Nam*) (Resolution 36 on Activities Concerning Overseas Vietnamese 2004). With this new configuration, the Vietnamese state extends the symbolic national family to include the resourceful diaspora in what is now a "global transnational family" (Duong 2012, 120). A series of laws and policies were promulgated to encourage overseas Vietnamese (*Việt kiều*) to work and establish businesses in Vietnam, including permission for

[1] The centrally-planned economy meant that the government had nationwide control over the manufacture and distribution of wealth and commodities.

[2] Natural disasters destroyed crops while corruption and incompetent management deprived the people of the meager government subsidies they had been promised. The United States imposed a trade embargo on Vietnam to punish the country for baseless allegations of Vietnam detaining American prisoners of war (Hixon 2013). Under the U.S.'s influence, many other countries also imposed economic sanctions on Vietnam. The invasion of Cambodia and the border war with China in 1979 also cost Vietnam an amiable relationship with China, which had previously provided aid to the country on many occasions. Worse yet, towards the end of the 1980s, aid from its closest and strongest ally, the Soviet Union, was also dwindling as the Eastern Bloc was heading towards dissolution in 1991.

[3] The Vietnamese state has had a fraught relationship with the post-1975 refugee diaspora, most of whom fled from South Vietnam after the North Vietnamese Army defeated Saigon in April 1975. After the war, those who worked for the South Vietnam regime and their family members were persecuted (Koh 2015; Duong 2020a). While the state has considered those who fled Vietnam after the defeat of Saigon as "traitors" (Duong 2016; Võ 2012), the diaspora, especially in the U.S., has also expressed resentment towards the communist government (Duong 2020b).

Việt kiều to register a business on local terms, home ownership rights for *Việt kiều*, visa exemption and dual citizenship (Chan and Tran 2011; Koh 2015; Duong 2020b). These policy changes have created favorable conditions for overseas Vietnamese to return and contribute to the development of the homeland and help the nation to present itself as a modernized country to replace its war-torn image. Eschewing the uneasy past regarding diasporic histories and memories (Võ 2012; Duong 2016), the state now hopes that the diaspora would be "bridges" to connect Vietnam and the world (Resolution 36). In the imagination of the 2nd and 1.5 generations of diasporic subjects,[4] "curiosity vies with nostalgia, and reconciliation often overcomes resentment" (Janette 2006, 254). These new sentiments and the increasingly welcoming environment in the country have enabled the decades following the 1980s to witness substantially growing number of *Việt kiều* returnees who bring considerable remittances and investments into Vietnam (Pham 2010), including a resuscitation of the moribund film industry of the 1990s (Duong 2016). In fact, producing half of the industry's commercial films (Boudreau 2012), diasporic film directors and producers are considered an essential part of the contemporary Vietnamese national cinema (Duong 2016; Tran 2017).

Tony Bui was born in South Vietnam. Soon after the defeat of Saigon and when he was just a toddler, he and his family fled to the United States where he grew up. He wrote the film *Ba Mùa* (*Three Seasons*) and shot it in Ho Chi Minh City in 1999, after President Clinton lifted the 20-year-old postwar embargo imposed on Hanoi which had started the "normalization" of the Vietnam-U.S. diplomatic relation in 1995. Following Tran Anh Hung's *Cyclo* (1995), *Three Seasons* was one of the first films directed by a postwar Vietnamese returnee and was the first American-produced film shot in Vietnam since the beginning of the normalization phase. *Three Seasons* was funded by American studios (i.e., October Films, Open City Films, and Goatsingers), with actor Harvey Keitel as executive producer.

Bui fought against the studios' demands to make *Three Seasons* an English-language Vietnam war movie with as many American actors as possible (LoBrutto 1999). The film instead centralizes Vietnamese speaking characters struggling in contemporary Vietnam while relegating the only American character (Harvey Keitel) to a secondary role. With Vietnamese as the main language, Ho Chi Minh City of the 1990s as setting, and a predominantly Vietnamese cast, yet with built-in English subtitles, *Three Seasons* was produced for both Vietnamese and international audiences (Janette 2006). To Vietnamese domestic audiences, *Three Seasons* eschews the heroic nationalism and reminiscence of wartime sufferings in Vietnam's "war cinema" (Ngo 1998, 91) – themes that the young postwar generation of the 1990s had lost interest in (Minh and Pham 2003; Hamilton 2009). To international audiences, the film provides a portrayal of a Vietnamese milieu and people that differs from stereotypical Hollywood depictions of Vietnam (Duong 2012).

[4] In this article, the second generation of Vietnamese diasporans include those born as citizens of the host countries while the 1.5 generation Vietnamese diasporans include those born in Vietnam but emigrated to the host countries as very young children. Both the second and the 1.5 generation Vietnamese diasporans are children of Vietnamese refugee parents.

Three Seasons sees Vietnam from a Vietnamese perspective instead of acquiescing to the Western gaze of Vietnam (Janette 2006). It debunks Hollywood's clichés of Vietnam and Vietnamese people, i.e., that of the jungle, the faceless crowd, the ignorant savage, the soulless murderer, or the wanton whore, as depicted in *The Deer Hunter* (Cimino 1978), *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola 1979) and *Full Metal Jacket* (Kubrick 1987). In these films, Vietnam functions merely as a site where Americans fought one another in political and ideological battles, with the Vietnamese remaining "shadowy figures only glimpsed occasionally" (Kinney 2000, 4). When Western films do not view the Vietnamese as a unified crowd, they try to depict Vietnamese subjects with some depth. However, most of these films are diffused with orientalism, a system of signification that, according to Rey Chow (1998, 171), "represents non-Western cultures to Western recipients in the course of Western imperialism, operates visually as well as narratologically to subject 'the Orient' to ideological manipulation." *Miss Saigon* (Schönberg and Boublils), for example, is steeped in "the ideology of wanting to 'save' the 'needy'" (Degabriele, 1996), that is, to save the local prostitute from her degrading work, the lover from a war-torn country, and the bastard children that have been left behind. The remake of *Miss Saigon* under the name *Miss Saigon: 25 Years Anniversary* (Sullivan 2016), although recently produced, keeps this orientalist notion alive. Similar to the Vietnam in *Miss Saigon* where "nothing makes sense" to the American soldier, the Vietnam in *Indochine* (Wargnier 1992) is also a land of perpetual mystery even for the French woman who has spent most of her life in the colony and has been surrounded with Vietnamese subjects.

In this context of prevalent orientalism and lack of Vietnamese subjectivity, *Three Seasons* is significant because it presents one of the rare occasions where the Vietnamese are portrayed differently from Western stereotypes (Janette 2006; Duong 2012). Bui professed that *Three Seasons* strives to "defend" Vietnam by portraying a different version of the culture from that of Hollywood projections (Duong 2012, 41). However, in Bui's version of Vietnam, the Vietnamese subjectivity is portrayed from a distinctly male perspective. Among other themes, the film features prostitution and flower trading – traditionally perceived as feminine trades – from a male point of view. This article provides a text and discourse analysis of the men-women relations in *Three Seasons* and argues that the film constructs female characters as either a quest or a follower of men. To demonstrate Bui's depiction of male characters as superior and reduction of female subjectivity, this article provides an analysis of the relations between prostitute Lan (Zoe Bui) and cyclo driver Hải (Đơn Dương), between Hải and lotus seller Kiến An (Nguyễn Ngọc Hiệp), and between Kiến An and teacher Đào (Nguyễn Mạnh Cường). The right to narrate the prostitute woman's story and to decipher the female lotus vendor's dilemma are not granted to themselves but to the male cyclo driver. In such relations, women appear as sketches without inner complexity, unless prompted by men, thus embodying no subjectivity.

LITERATURE: GENDER IN VIETNAMESE CINEMA

Discussing gender relations in Vietnam, many scholars (e.g., Rydström 2016) have claimed that Vietnamese society is patriarchal and that Vietnamese women suffer from gender inequalities, such as limited property inheriting rights (Pettus 2003), heavier domestic responsibilities than their male counterparts (Phinney 2008; Luong and Gunewardena 2009), and a gender pay gap (Chowdry et al. 2018; Mergoupis, Phan, and Sessions 2018; Vu and Yamada 2018). Some studies (e.g., Goodkind 1995) have concluded that Renovation has shrunk women's freedom and the significant social roles they earned during the anti-colonial revolution and the American War. Other studies, however, have added to the complexity of the gender discussion in Vietnam. Although not denying Vietnamese patriarchy, Hamilton (2009) and Gray (2018) emphasized the complex ways in which patriarchy has played out in Vietnamese society. On the one hand, China-originated Confucianism has long influenced Vietnamese culture to relegate women to a secondary – "internal general" (*nội tướng*) – position that confines them mostly to the domestic sphere. On the other hand, Southeast Asian gender values where bilateral kinship is highly regarded and women are highly socially visible also manifest in Vietnam's gender relations, especially in rural communities and among the working class. Furthermore, socialist gender equality ethics and a history of wars where women fought alongside men or worked in men's stead have also blurred gender expectations and boosted women's social status.

It therefore does not come as a surprise that cinematic engagement in the discussion of gender relations has mostly focused on women. Indeed, female struggle has been a recurrent theme in Vietnam's national cinema. Film director Đặng Nhật Minh once said, "I see my country, in fact, as a young woman. In our society, it is the women who bear the burden, they hold our destiny in their hands and that's why I feel that through them one can understand the problems of life of our country" (Marchetti 1991, 63). Through the image and the psyche of the woman, generations of Vietnamese filmmakers have examined and expressed national identity, collective struggles, and the traumas of war and change (Charlot 1991; Halmiton 2009; Gray 2018). War films, for example, do not depict war, revolution, or social change per se; rather, they are about "female subjectivity, gender inequality and the problem of being a woman in an oppressive world of neocolonial legacies, feudal patriarchal strictures, and war" (Marchetti 1991, 54). Unlike Hollywood war films which often depict the transformation of a man or a group of men through battle and the experience of loss (Hamilton 2009), Vietnamese films most often gauge the trauma of war through the tragedy of a woman in her domestic life and psychological dilemmas. She is "the place where history becomes accessible on the very basic terrain of domestic relations, where change can most dramatically be gauged in the quotidian conduct of seemingly inconsequential matters, where emotions can be openly expressed and thoughts examined" (Marchetti 1991, 54). In fact, while in Hollywood cinema traditions, films with female leads are classified as a particular genre (i.e., "women's films"), sometimes pejoratively (e.g., "chick flicks" and "women's weepies"), Vietnamese films with female protagonists have been more or less the norm.

In *Đổi Mới* Vietnam, cinema has evolved from the revolutionary traditions of the socialist era that has often thematized rural life, struggle against alien invaders, and post-war socialist reconstruction (Charlot 1991; Hamilton 2009), to the centralization of contemporary social issues, among which gender, sexuality and women's struggle in a transitioning society have become increasingly prominent. Expressions of queer desires, for example, have been found in many films since the 2000s. Several films have depicted gay sexuality (*Hot Boy Nổi Loạn / Lost in Paradise* 2011), lesbianism (*Chơi Vơi / Adrift* 2009; *Người Vợ Ba / The Third Wife* 2018), and transgender subjects (*Chuyến Đi Cuối Cùng Của Chị Phụng / The Last Journey of Madam Phung* 2014; *Đi Tìm Phong / Finding Phong* 2015). Moreover, a host of "farce and parody" films (Hamilton 2009, 146) have expressed anxiety about gender/sex and a contemplation of gender roles and expectations (*Khi Đàn Ông Có Bầu / When Men Get Pregnant* 2004); *Đẻ Mướn / Birth for Hire* 2005); and *Hồn Trương Ba, Da Hàng Thịt / Truong Ba's Soul in Butcher's Body* 2006).

In the age of Renovation, the figure of the female prostitute – "traditionally the most negated feminine position" in Vietnamese society (Hamilton 2009, 146) – has become a site for the externalization of the anxieties about the negative influences of capitalist ways of life on traditional cultural values. The prostitute in film in the early years of Renovation (1990s-2000s) is a metaphor for the nation's identity crisis as prompted by sudden and rapid cultural changes (Hamilton 2009). In these films, poverty, questions of morality, and the struggle to maintain tradition and meaningful human relations are the main tropes (e.g., *Xích Lô / Cyclo* 1995; *Ba Mùa / Three Seasons* 1999; *Gái Nhảy / Bar Girls* 2003). Films about female prostitution of the 2010s, while still portraying the struggle with poverty and social upheavals, put a growing emphasis on women's sexuality (e.g., *Đập Cánh Giữa Không Trung / Flapping in the Middle of Nowhere* 2014).

Vietnam's most well-known female prostitute figure, the literary character Thúy Kiều in Nguyễn Du's epic poem *Truyện Kiều / The Tale of Kieu* (1820), has been reconstructed in many films, such as *Sài Gòn Nhật Thực / Saigon Eclipse* (2007), *Kiều* (2006)**,** and more recently, *Kiều* (2021), *Kiều @* (2021), *Thúy Kiều Tân Truyện: Làng Cà Khịa / A Kieu Adaptation: The Village of Feminist Hoodlums* (2021), and a stage production in the form of a Vietnamese opera (*cải lương*) called *Đợi Kiều / Awaiting Kieu* (September 2022). Most of these adaptations are loyal to the original in the way that women are depicted as virtuous, a victim of circumstances, or an emblem of female sacrifice.

A Kieu Adaptation is a low-budget film loosely based on the classic poem's characters and relations. Interestingly, the film's construction of gender reverses the roles and expectations of men and women as depicted in Nguyễn Du's original and in Vietnamese traditions. Women are portrayed as occupying public spaces, disrespecting authority, openly promiscuous, and violent and possessive of men. Meanwhile, the male protagonist, Kim Trọng, is objectified and sexualized as a prize for the winner in a contest of sports and talents between two female groups. According to Chow (2003), not only do women occupy feminine positions in fictions but men, objects, and space can also be feminized when

depicted as erotic subjects. In this film, Kim Trọng is feminized when he is guarded, pursued, and lusted after by different women. When he finally rescues himself and earns the right to decide his fate – whereas in the original Thúy Kiều is sold to brothels and bereft of autonomy –, the film seems to express the desire of freedom and autonomy for feminine/feminized subjects. All this is to say that cinematic representations of gender have become a complex scene in contemporary Vietnamese cinema.

Scholars of contemporary Vietnamese cinema have examined filmic portrayals of gender and the changing roles of women in film, which is a reasonable tendency since women have been the focus of Vietnamese cinema (e.g., Dinh 1994; Do and Tar 2008; Duong 2005, 2014, 2017). Some studies have looked at the figure of the female prostitute in film with various inquiries. For example, Do (2006) scrutinized the construction of the power relation between the female prostitutes and the male clients in Lê Hoàng's *Bar Girls* and *Street Cinderella*. Duong (2005), through an examination of the "looking relations" in *Three Seasons*, analyzed the filmmaker's dispossession of the prostitute's subjectivity by depriving her of point-of-view shots. Critiquing the same film text as Duong (2005), Norindr (2001) focused on the estranging and dislocating impact of urban modernization on humans that leads to the troubled sense of self embodied in the prostitute. Interestingly, also analyzing *Three Seasons*, Janette (2006) offered a counter interpretation that concentrates on the ways the film challenges the stock image of the prostitute as a victim of cultural decay. All these studies have situated their analyses of representations of female prostitutes in the context of the transformation of Vietnam's economy and social fabric, the new politics of filmmaking with increasing transnational collaboration with filmmakers from the diaspora and elsewhere in the world, and the world's post-Cold War geopolitics.

As can be seen from the above discussion, scholarship of gender representation in Vietnamese cinema has mostly focused on women and feminized positions (e.g., gay men and transgender women). Rather than only focusing on women and the feminine, this article looks at both sides of the inequation to explore gender relations. Besides, in the existing literature, most of the scholarly investigations into Vietnamese cinema are conducted by international, particularly Western-educated, scholars who apply a Western feminist perspective in their analyses. Although theoretically informed, most of them reveal a lack of Vietnamese sensibility and understanding of subtle cultural interventions. Meanwhile, most pertinent Vietnamese texts are film reviews published in local newspapers. Thus, this article strives to offer a "dialectic interplay" (Marchetti 1991, 51) between a (Western) feminist perspective and a Vietnamese position for a more culturally specific and sensible analysis of a Vietnamese film.

TRANS-VIETNAMESE FEMINISM

Having contextualized *Three Seasons* as a product of transnational collaboration among American

filmmakers, diasporic Vietnamese, Vietnamese living within the national borders, and the Vietnamese state, this article uses transnational feminism for the film analysis. Transnational feminism is an approach that is "alert to the materiality of culture and to the power differentials informed by the intervention of colonialism, imperialism, and global capitalism in national cultures" (Mottahedeh 2004, 1405). More specifically, the article adopted a trans-Vietnamese feminist approach developed and promoted by film scholar Lan Duong (2012, 2017). Similar to a general transnational feminist approach, trans-Vietnamese feminism examines both Vietnam's history and new power dynamics where Vietnam is collaborating with its former enemies such as the United States to mobilize transnational capital and human resources to strengthen its market economy. Whereas Duong (2012) focused on the production and reception of novels and films that are outcomes of artists' collaborative labor and, as she argued, are informed by their gender, this article emphasizes the representation of gender relations in *Three Seasons*. The film is interpreted in relation to a globalizing context where the diaspora has joined the global transnational family of Vietnam (Duong 2012, 120) and where the repercussions of cultural contact with the West are deeply felt by the locals.

Trans-Vietnamese feminism deconstructs cinematic mechanisms that produce representations of men and women in *Three Seasons*. Besides an analysis of the film narrative, techniques such as mise-en-scène, point-of-view filming, and editing are also analyzed in the interpretation of the portrayal of gender relations.

WOMAN AS MAN'S QUEST: REDUCED WOMAN, 'PERFECT GENTLEMAN'

Three Seasons's narrative deals with a common theme in Vietnamese cinema and literature during the early years of Renovation, that is the fast-changing society and the clash between tradition and modernity in the wake of Western influence. The film loosely weaves together separate storylines that are observed by a cyclo driver.

Three Seasons views the prostitution problem not from the perspective of a prostitute but a male character. The prostitute Lan, although initially portrayed as smart, sophisticated, and assertive, is not given the right to narrate her own story. She first comes into the focus of the camera as cyclo driver Hải takes notice of her during an altercation with several men (Figures 1 & 2). From that point on, her story unfolds only via Hải's observation and eventually concludes literally with Lan following Hải's direction. By having the cyclo driver tell the prostitute's story, the film adopts a male subjectivity rooted in a traditionalist view regarding female virtues. Janette (2006, 269) asserted that there are "dangers within the ostensibly loving, restorative gaze, that such looks can fetishize and silence, insisting on rewriting characters into narratives that suit the rescuer more than the rescued." *Three Seasons* indeed

focuses on Hải's path of rescuing Lan while overlooking her journey of transformation, making Lan a conquest for Hải's endeavor of restoring traditional virtues in women. In this way, a potential complex trajectory of the female prostitute's evolution is sacrificed to indulge a male, traditionalist perspective moved from the periphery – prostitution is not Hải's story – toward the central stage of what should have been the prostitute's life story.


Figures 1, 2. First encounter between Hải and Lan. Source: *Three Seasons* (00:12:27).

Unlike the film's other primary characters who are assigned particular roles and struggle with particular dilemmas, Hải serves as the adhesive between different people's stories to create a picture of the struggling society in the wake of the market economy. Hải could be seen as the filmmaker's screen surrogate who connects all narrative strands to lead the spectators through the story. Emigrating with his family from Vietnam to the U.S. after Saigon's defeat, Tony Bui perhaps imagines himself, if remaining in Vietnam under the socialist leadership, as a persecuted Vietnamese subject[5] who would live a materially poor life despite being educated and cultured – someone like the cyclo driver. In possession of a cyclo, Hải is invested with a symbolic significance unseen in any of the other characters. The cyclo is a means of transport adapted from the colonial pulled rickshaw and continues to be a popular tourist attraction. Customers riding the cyclo encompass adventurous tourists and poor, tired Vietnamese vendors struggling with heavy cargoes. As such, the cyclo represents a meeting point of time, space, and classes: past and present, Vietnam and the world, the poor and the rich. In control of this moving vehicle, Hải has a spanning perspective of the city, its residents, and daily events. He is the point that connects all the narrative strands: the prostitute's moral struggle, the street boy's material struggle, and the lotus seller's struggle to discern social changes. The character of the cyclo driver is

[5] After the war, those who worked for the South Vietnam regime and their family members were persecuted. Former South Vietnamese soldiers, teachers, sex workers, and civil servants were sent to re-education camps where they were subjected to political indoctrination and physical labor; their family members were discriminated against in education and employment (Duong 2017; Koh 2015). There was also confiscation of land and property and forced migration of many urban residents to the countryside and the so-called New Economic Zones (Duong 2020a).

invested with a significant depth and wisdom that give him insight and a steady moral anchor in the trying age of a socialist-turning-capitalist society.

Hải is too refined to be a typical, regular blue-collar laborer as he looks, sounds, and behaves like an intellectual. Although being a member of the working class and the poor, Hải is an educated, cultured, and sophisticated character as demonstrated by his main pastime activity, which is reading (Figure 3), and his refined manners. Different from his rather fussy fellow cyclo drivers who jump right off their vehicles and run to potential customers when they are in sight, Hải operates at his own pace, poised, and dignified. Moreover, he is observant and wise enough to see through the surface and arrive at profound thoughts about people's behavior. While Lan battles the constant struggle between materialistic desires and morality, Hải's solid moral ground is continually reinforced as in his spare time he resorts to reading a book titled "Forging Morality". In Janette's (2006) words, Hải is a "perfect gentleman [and] the speaker of home truths, the carrier of traditional values, the protector of the community, the seer of true worth" (246). He is indeed an embodiment of a superior personality who is observant, intelligent, and most importantly, unwavering in his moral beliefs.

Figure 3. Reading an old book. Source: *Three Seasons* (00:21:13).

As for Lan, she is not the traditional kind of prostitute who has the sympathy of the Vietnamese. She is not a filial and dutiful daughter such as the much praised *Kiều* who sells herself to save her father from imprisonment and keep her family together in the 18th-century epic poem *Truyện Kiều / The Tale of Kiều* by Nguyễn Du (1820). As remarked by Williams (2004), Lan is radically different from her literary

counterpart. She is depicted as being far different from the dutiful daughter figure when she disapprovingly denounces her mother who, according to Lan, "broke her back working her whole life for nothing". Lan prostitutes herself not to pay back to her family but to satisfy her own desire for an easy life. She is a personification of the decadence of globalization and consumerism, and a site for the externalization of the concerns for the nation's shifting culture and identity as often portrayed in *Đổi Mới* cinema through the prostitute figure (Minh and Pham 2003).

Rather than examining this shifting through other aspects of prostitution, such as poverty, violence, and demand-supply mechanisms, Bui reduces the problem of prostitution to a moral one. When Lan announces that she will marry a rich man to remain in the rich people's world, Hải replies, "I'm not sure that would solve the problem," implying that the problem is not poverty. At the end of the film, he gives her his book *Forging Morality*, which concludes what he sees as the problem: loose morality. In other words, the root of the prostitution problem is perceived as the moral decadence of the prostitute, the corrupted woman (Worthy 2004). The stance Bui takes seems to align with the view that because prostitution is wrong, prostitutes are inherently wrong (Sullivan 2020) and what needs to be corrected is the corrupt nature of the prostitute woman. However, "the patriarchal assumption that prostitution is a problem about women ensures that the other participant in the prostitution contract escapes scrutiny" (Pateman 1999, 56). *Three Seasons* indeed looks only at the prostitute to fix her without scrutinizing the client or, more importantly, the system in which prostitution is created and reproduced. In this film, the client and the system are obscure elements in the prostitute's struggle: her clients' faces are never shown, their figures visible only in long shots, and "the system" is only referred to generically as "they" and through images of urbanization and globalization such as construction sites and billboards advertising American commodities.

The film also notably voids the prostitute's life from any violence by potential malevolent forces such as pimps, mamasans, gangsters, or rival sex workers, projecting a fairly smooth life for the prostitute: no pimp, good money, luxurious hotels, and little violence. This sanitized picture of prostitution could be explained in many ways. For one thing, after the American war and in the first two decades of *Đổi Mới* (1990s-2000s), the Vietnamese state was still wary of "foreign elements" (*yếu tố nước ngoài*) in fear of "peaceful evolution" (*diễn biến hòa bình*), and a suspicion about U.S.-led attacks on socialist systems through economic and cultural means. Making the first American-produced movie in post-war Vietnam while being a member of the Vietnamese diaspora – a population once considered traitors by the Vietnamese state (Duong 2016; Võ 2012) – Bui understandably had to avoid sensitive materials to risk offending the authority and losing his license to shoot the film in Vietnam. It would have been unwise to depict a violent society or to blatantly criticize the system that was working hard to justify

its recent ideological compromise and maintain its legitimacy in the neoliberal era.[6] Alternatively, not living in Vietnam to experience firsthand the turbulences of life-reshaping renovations perhaps afforded Bui a distance from the complex social structures within which prostitution is produced – structures that are beyond the question of mere morality. It could also have been Bui's exploration of a domestic and submissive female identity – a desirable female figure that many men in the diaspora seek on their trip back to the homeland (Hoang 2015). No matter what the reason is, the film is utterly absent of any other problems in a prostitute woman's life except for her moral corruption. In the film, a moral message is adamant as expressed through the cyclo driver's ceaseless endeavor to "drive her home" where traditional values are restored – the message being the solution to the question of prostitution is domestication.

The film's emphasis on female morals as the main problem of prostitution is also demonstrated through Lan's dream of becoming good and pure. Lan dreams of returning to being a carefree student, wearing a white *áo dài* (a Vietnamese traditional gown for females) and enjoying the sight of phoenix flowers. Her dream could be interpreted as a wish of purification since, in Vietnamese culture, white *áo dài* and the red phoenix flower constitute symbols of childhood purity. As such, Lan is depicted as an inherently innocent woman who is corrupted by materialism, a typical "fallen woman" figure (Campbell 2006). According to Campbell, the prostitute is usually cinematically represented as a fallen woman who has descended morally as a result of difficult circumstances and is characterized as both innocent and guilty, both pure and polluted. Lan exhibits materialistic desires as a result of poverty while embodying innocence and an appreciation for non-materialist natural beauty, as seen in the symbol of the phoenix flower. Therefore, she is redeemable, and *Three Seasons* entrusts the restoration of the good and dissipation of the bad in the prostitute to the male protagonist.

Beside her inner depth, Lan also demonstrates wisdom. In the beginning, Lan is portrayed as an intelligent and assertive woman who does not shy away from stating her sharp thoughts and strong opinions. Her savvy comment about the owners and customers of luxurious hotels reveals her sophisticated perception of the renovated Ho Chi Minh City under the influence of the encroaching forces of marketization and globalization: "They are not like us. They have a different talk, a different walk. The sun rises for them, not for us. We lie in their shadow and it grows larger with each hotel they build. One day I will remain in their world even if I have to marry one of them to become like them." The symbolism and lyricality of her words reveal Lan's insightful and nuanced perception of the capitalist encroachment over the city. In Norindr's (2001) words, Lan is indeed "quite an astute observer of, and active participant in, modern life in Vietnam" (80).

[6] The film *Cyclo*, made by Vietnamese-French filmmaker Tran Anh Hung in 1995, was never released in Vietnam despite being filmed in Ho Chi Minh City. It is perceived to portray the Vietnamese state as "either unwilling or unable to provide for its citizens in an increasingly globalized market" (Barnes 2010, 108).

Besides her inner depth, intelligence, and a keen awareness of her surroundings, Lan harbors a moral struggle, which grows fiercer the more she interacts with Hải. She represents a confused Vietnamese identity in the era of change and transition. As Vietnam under *Đổi Mới* has been metaphorized as a prostitute (Duong 2012), Lan seems to represent an ambivalent Vietnam that wants to advance economically but questions herself during the process – not unlike the ambivalence manifest among the Vietnamese leadership at the beginning of the economic reforms (Elliott 2012). With her perceptiveness and an inner struggle that characterizes part of the Vietnamese youth and the nation itself in the age of rapid marketization, Lan could be constructed as an appealing, relatable character with invested depth and a more self-experienced transformation. Nevertheless, through Bui's emphatically male perspective, the character simply switches from one extreme to the other on the outspoken/voiceless and innocent/impure spectrums: while the first scene with Lan features her in a public commotion with men, her final scene depicts a strikingly demure version of her. From being a rebellious, materialistic prostitute unafraid to voice her opinions, Lan switches to being docile and literally speechless. This sudden reversal makes it look as if she is portrayed as sharp and recalcitrant at the beginning only to later embolden Hải's success at taming such a delinquent. It is important to note that Lan's moral struggle only manifests and is eventually resolved thanks to Hải's intervention. As the film unfolds, while the cyclo driver is portrayed as "perfect" (Janette 2006), the prostitute's personality is reduced until she becomes an image without a voice at the film's conclusion. The following section analyzes in detail scenes of Hải and Lan's interaction to illustrate his moral superiority and the eclipse of her personality.

Discussing Hải and Lan's relationship, Janette (2006, 261) wrote that Lan dominates her early scenes with Hải by paying for the cyclo rides, assuming the role of a "provider" when gifting him a cake, and even controlling his access to her. Lan is indeed outspoken and even blunt, for example when her intention to marry one of the rich is challenged by Hải, she retaliates: "What would you have me do? Marry a cyclo driver?" However, Hải wields the power of agency and is anchored in deep-rooted moral values while Lan wavers in her beliefs and eventually becomes his passive, docile follower – a quest in his journey.

Seeing Lan running from an altercation, Hải offers her a ride away from the troubled scene. He soon learns of her occupation and her innocent dream of admiring phoenix flowers while clad in a white *áo dài*. Although wishing to sleep an uninterrupted night in an air-conditioned room, Lan never spends the night with a customer in a hotel. Therefore, Hải always waits for Lan outside the hotels where she practices her trade and offers to drive her home afterward. While talking to Lan during one of these rides, Hải asks how much Lan charges for a night, to which she answers "50 dollars". To spend a night with Lan, Hải participates in a cyclo race and wins the first prize, which gives him more than enough to pay for a night with her. However, Hải does not buy Lan's commodity, which is her body and her sex.

Instead of making that body work, Hải allows it to rest by letting Lan spend the night sleeping in the air-conditioned hotel room that he rents, as she wishes. Thus, Hải pays Lan to realize her dream.

Requesting Lan to remove her makeup and put on a long gown that covers her body, Hải takes pleasure from the sight of Lan, yet not erotically. Despite the narrative where a man in love with a prostitute finally gets the chance to spend a night with her, the hotel scene is visually rendered nonsexual by the choice of loose, unflattering costume for Lan, the platonic look on Hải's face, and the absence of sexual activities. Gazing at Lan, Hải appears satisfied with her modest looks rather than aroused by the body of the prostitute. Standing with Lan by the window, Hải pulls the curtain aside to reveal Lan's doubled image in the window glass (Figure 4). Now, next to Hải is Lan and her reflection, "as if he has split her from her own image" (Janette 2006, 266). With this action, Hải simultaneously shows Lan what she can become if she shrugs off her promiscuous appearance and way of life, and exhibits her innocent self to the audience. Heard for the first time in Lan's presence, traditional music emerges to fill the room, signifying her increasing association with traditional culture and values. In this scene, Hải, who has already become aware of Lan's innocence and inner beauty, reminds her of her purity and shows this side of her to the viewer. By reaching out to spectators and calling their attention to the spectacle on the screen (i.e., Lan), the cyclo driver breaks the fourth wall to disseminate his moral message to the viewer. As such, Hải is an active educator for both Lan and the spectators, the director's screen surrogate indeed.

Figure 4. Reflecting innocence. Source: *Three Seasons* (01:14:09).

Hải later comes to find Lan where she lives, which breaks the illusion of her ever having control over his access to her. He asks to spend another night with her but she refuses. When Hải turns to leave,

she collapses, which Janette (2006, 266) interprets as the outcome of an "existential crisis" after Lan has had a glimpse of her "true" self that was shown to her in the window glass. Practicing the Vietnamese medical treatment *cạo gió* (literally: 'scraping wind'), Hải uses a silver spoon to scrape Lan's naked back to cleanse toxins from her body, a metaphor for the removal of the Western toxic influences from her soul, returning her to her pure self (Williams 2004). Duong (2005) called this scene a "rebirth". The newborn Lan is – metaphorically – delivered by the traditionalist cyclo driver.

Not only providing an allegory for treatment of capitalist poison, this scene also affirms Hải's incorruptible moral ground. Lan and Hải are together in a room twice, yet none of the temptations is strong enough to corrupt Hải's moral stance. The second of the occasions is erotically charged when Lan is half-naked, trembling at Hải's touch and suggestively clutching his thigh while Hải is applying the detoxing treatment. Nonetheless, he simply walks away and leaves her to recover afterward. The fact that Hải does not entertain the possibility of intercourse with Lan makes him an incorruptible moral figure. Williams (2004) remarked that the characters in *Three Seasons* struggle to "recover their humanity in a complex and paradoxical world." However, only the prostitute struggles morally while the cyclo driver's morality is unshakable. Both being part of the "displaced population" in a transitioning society (Duong 2005, 2), whereas the prostitute is unsure of her choices, the cyclo driver is a beacon for her and other characters. Hải is constructed as a guardian of traditional values and navigator for troubled identities, as he also demonstrates in his conversations and actions with other characters in the film, such as the lotus seller Kiến An. He even volunteers to share the struggle of his working-class fellows by forgoing his modest room to sleep with them in their "thousand-star hotel" – a playful reference to homeless people's rooflessness.

With an agenda of restoring traditional values back to the delinquent prostitute, the film offers an unsurprising concluding scene. Smiling with contentment, Hải carries Lan to her dream in his cyclo. When he lifts the vehicle's convertible roof to help Lan off the cyclo, she is seen clad in a white *áo dài* and blindfolded with a red silk strip. As he guides her steps on a street showered with bright red phoenix petals, he comes behind her, aligning their perspectives. He then takes off her blindfold, allowing her to take in the beautiful sight around them. While she is admiring the scenery with, literally and metaphorically, unblinded eyes (Figures 5-7), Hải presents her with his relished old book (Figure 8). With a lingering close-up shot, the book is presented to Lan and the viewer. Overlooked by many scholars, except for Lan Duong (2005), is the telling title of the book: *Forging Morality* (Rèn Nhân Cách), which is an unmistakable ideological apparatus. After cleansing Lan of symbolic poison, Hải now proceeds to educate her about morality. Handing over the book with sincerity, Hải announces: "From now on you won't have to pretend anymore," effectively denouncing prostitution as a facade and a falsity. Lan receives the book with a smile and in silence, which marks her transformation from being outspoken to being voiceless and obedient. Concluding the sequence with a close-up shot of Hải's face, the film reiterates his central role as narrator of her story of transformation, or rather his story of

transforming her. With a smile on his face, he takes off his cap, a gesture showing respect and resolution now that he has accomplished his quest of restoring tradition back to the wayward prostitute.

Figures 5, 6, 7. Admiring phoenix flowers. Source: *Three Seasons* (01:37:35 – 01:38:17).

Figure 8. Presenting the book *Forging Morality.* Source: *Three Seasons* (01:39:34).

Emerging from the beginning and getting increasingly prominent towards the end of this sequence is the eerie traditional music that is noticeably absent from Lan's earlier scenes. In the beginning, her appearance is usually distracted by the noises from the surrounding crowds or vehicles. Traditional music only starts when her "existential crisis" (Janette 2006) begins to manifest itself and after Hải reveals her innocent image in the hotel room's window. From being a materialistic prostitute who can only perceive and invoke noises from the material world, when Lan finally subscribes to Hải's moral principles through docilely accepting his book and by extension, his moral standards, she has now transformed into a traditional Vietnamese woman whose presence deserves the compliment of folk music. By superimposing Lan's image with the image of the authentic, 'good woman' lotus vendor Kiến An and by merging their presence with the same music, this sequence marks Lan's full restoration of her virtuous, authentic Vietnamese self (Duong 2005) (Figure 9). Her musical voice is now in sync with traditional Vietnamese melodies. Hải's insistence on driving Lan home after many times she has refused his service is an allegory of his adamant commitment to shepherd her back to Vietnamese traditional womanhood. The final scene with his cyclo parked outside her house marks the accomplishment of his quest, that of domesticating a sexually unruly female subject. To use Campbell's (2006) terms, the prostitute is "back within the patriarchal fold" (257).

Figure 9. Superimposing images of Lan and Kiến An. Source: *Three Seasons* (01:38:19).

WOMAN AS MAN'S FOLLOWER: LEARNED MAN, LEARNING WOMAN

Beside Hải's successful quest of restoring Lan's virtuous and authentic self, the superiority of male personhood in *Three Seasons* is also demonstrated by the other relationships between the two sexes such as between Hải and peasant woman Kiến An, or between Kiến An and teacher Đào.

Kiến An works as a lotus picker and vendor for a self-exiled poet named Đào whose title (*thầy*) refers to a male teacher or, more colloquially, to a learned male. With her co-workers, every day Kiến An rises early to harvest white lotus blossoms from a pond and is transported to the city on a truck. Kiến An shoulders the lotus blossoms around to sell in the city streets. Discussing the film's "looking relations", Duong (2005) wrote that Kiến An is stripped of her point-of-view and suggested that she is rendered naive to accentuate Hải's knowing gaze in their encounter. Janette (2006), on the other hand, perceived Kiến An as an "iconoclast" (263) for the initiatives she takes in investigating her employer's exiled life. Negotiating these two rather divergent standpoints, I argue that although Kiến An is allowed some looking subjectivity and portrayed neither as ignorant nor naive, she still assumes the role of a follower and assistant rather than being an iconoclast or a woman of her own autonomous intellect and artistry.

The film introduces the beautiful lotus pond in *thầy* Đào's plantation from Kiến An's angle of looking as she admires it for the first time. Kiến An sees natural beauty in the lotus flowers and actively looks and finds cultural beauty in the poetry of her employer, a leper poet. Setting foot in teacher Đào's home and going through his manuscripts uninvited, Kiến An demonstrates audacity and curiosity unseen among her co-workers. Shouldering white lotuses around the city, she seems puzzled when she witnesses people buying lotuses from a truck instead of her fresh flowers. To investigate, she goes and buys a lotus from the truck to have a touch and smell, but still seems baffled. While still inspecting the lotus, she hears a voice asking to buy her flowers, looks up and sees Hải who then explains to her the city dwellers' novel infatuation with fake lotuses:

> *Hải: Cho tôi mua mấy bông hoa nào. An bán hoa phải không?*
> *Kiến An: Dạ, em cứ tưởng anh cũng muốn mua…*
> *Hải: Hoa sen nhựa chứ gì? Tôi không thích mua mấy bông hoa đó đâu.*
> *Kiến An: Hoa giả đắt hàng quá, làm em cả ngày hôm nay ế ẩm, chưa bán được bông nào.*
> *Hải: Ngày nay người ta muốn bỏ ra nhiều thứ để chọn cái tiện nghi. Bông giả, hoa lớn, trắng muốt như bông của An, mà lại không héo. Thậm chí người ta lại xịt nước thơm để cho nó có mùi thơm như nhau. Dường như lúc này người ta có chiều hướng mới để biến đổi tất cả mọi thứ.*

> Hải: Can I buy some flowers? You're An, the lotus vendor, right?
> Kiến An (looks up, sees Hải, and smiles): Yes, I thought you'd also be interested in…
> Hải (interrupts Kiến An): Plastic lotuses? I wouldn't buy those.
> Kiến An: The fake flowers are so popular that I haven't been able to sell any of my flowers today.
> Hải (sitting down to face Kiến An): People these days give up on many things in favor of conveniences. The fake flowers are as big and white as yours, but they won't wither. They even spray the flowers with a scent to make them smell real. These days it seems that people have found new ways to change everything. (author's translation)

Dissecting this sequence, Duong (2005) interpreted Kiến An's confused expression as an indication of her inability to tell the difference between real and fake lotuses, between authenticity and falseness. In my view, her expression of confusion is more likely to be caused by the fact that she does not comprehend why people would prefer fake lotuses to real ones. Her perplexity is reasonable given that she is rather new to the city and the trade. Meanwhile, Hải's mobile gaze of the cityscape makes him more knowledgeable about city dwellers' behavior. Kiến An's gesture of gifting Hải a couple of lotus blossoms after his lamentation of city people's fad for inauthenticity is to show her appreciation for someone who shares her sentiments about authenticity and feeling of sadness about people's cheap taste.

The shared admiration for authenticity may render Kiến An Hải's equal in terms of ethics and aesthetics. Nevertheless, Hải is still superior intellectually. In fact, being interrupted in her speech ("I thought you'd also be interested in…"), Kiến An is deprived of the opportunity to express her interpretation of the situation and to announce the new knowledge (i.e., "plastic lotuses"). Instead, this new information is saved to be declared by Hải. Moreover, while Kiến An can only associate the popularity of fake flowers with her own trouble ("The plastic flowers are so popular that I haven't been able to sell any of my flowers today."), Hải uses abstraction to arrive at a generalized observation and a philosophical theorization of contemporary people's behavior ("People these days give up on many things in favor of conveniences… These days it seems that people have found new ways to change everything."). In this way the film lets Hải and his informed perspective help to clear Kiến An's bewilderment about the popularity of fake flowers instead of allowing her to arrive at her own conclusion (Figure 10). This, rather than in the film's looking relations, is where Duong (2005) was right in saying that the lotus vendor is stripped of subjectivity.

Figure 10. Artificial lotus blossoms. Source: *Three Seasons* (00:53:12).

Kiến An's employer, *thầy* Đào, is another male character through whom Tony Bui realizes his depiction of superior male personhood. Like Hải, *thầy* Đào is superior in his moral, intellectual, and artistic capacities. *Thầy* Đào is most probably inspired by the well-known Vietnamese romanticist poet Hàn Mặc Tử (1912–1940) who had leprosy and died in exile at a young age. Like Hàn Mặc Tử, *thầy* Đào is a leper poet who lives an exiled life in a temple on a lotus pond. Through his butler Huy, *thầy* Đào hires a group of peasant women to work on his lotus plantation and to sell lotus blossoms to city dwellers. Commenting on this, Norindr (2001) argued that the leper poet represents a "crucial link to a modern form of market exploitation" (80). Despite the film's setting in a marketizing society, this assertion is debatable. First, through Huy, we know that *thầy* Đào takes great pride in his white lotuses for their beauty and fragrance, rather than their commercial value. Secondly, as someone whose soul "has transcended above the bondage of man," he may have also transcended capitalism. When being confronted by Kiến An about confining himself in the temple, *thầy* Đào bursts into an emotional poetic response: "*Càng vô lý! Mỗi sáng, tai ta thoát ra khỏi cửa sổ này ôm lấy tiếng chim. Mũi ta xuyên thủng bức tường ra ngủ trên hương thơm của những đóa sen. Mỗi buổi sáng, mỗi buổi chiều, mắt ta bay lượn khắp không trung. Còn lòng ta, lòng ta đã thoát trên cao, thoát khỏi sự ràng buộc của con người*" ("Nonsense! Every morning, my ears escape these windows to embrace the songs of the birds. My nose pierces these walls and naps in the fragrance of my lotuses. With every sunrise and sunset, my eyes flutter into the air. And my heart...my heart has transcended above the bondage of man" – original English

subtitles). Besides, Norindr failed to consider the symbolism employed by Bui in choosing the lotus – Vietnam's national flower and an untainted, unrivaled beauty[7] – as an image representing Vietnam. In Bui's works, the lotus has been established as a symbol of purity and dignity since his first (short) film, *Yellow Lotus* (1997) (Duong 2012). Thus, instead of a capitalist, the poet could be interpreted as a disseminator of beauty and a reminder of virtue and dignity when material desires and mindless consumerism spread throughout society. Being a disseminator of the lotus, thầy Đào is best understood not as a "crucial link to a modern form of market exploitation," but as that which keeps the society from being tainted albeit surrounded by encroaching materialism and consumerism. As such, like Hải, *thầy* Đào is also portrayed as a vehicle of beautiful traditional values (Gray 2018).

The title *thầy* identifies Đào as a respected, knowledgeable teacher. In their relationship, *thầy* Đào is the teacher and Kiến An is his pupil. Learning that *thầy* Đào's fingers have been damaged by leprosy, Kiến An offers to be his amanuensis to write down his poems while he reads them aloud. This act renders Kiến An the body and *thầy* Đào the brain. As the body, she functions as the manual labor executing his intellectual and artistic endeavors. Although academically curious and appreciative of poetry, Kiến An is not an artist like teacher Đào, nor is she a philosopher like Hải. At best, she is a learner and a follower of ideas initiated by men.

Figures 11, 12. In the world of poetry. Source: *Three Seasons* (00:43:32).

Kiến An's final act is a tribute to the poet who has passed away: she drops lotus blossoms in the river where local boat women are singing a folk song that represents *thầy* Đào's youth and freedom from confinement. The film also suggests, as Kiến An promises the butler, that her future endeavors will ensure that *thầy* Đào's legacy – his poetry collection and by extension Vietnamese traditional values –

[7] A Vietnamese folk poem goes "*Trong đầm gì đẹp bằng sen/Lá xanh bông trắng lại chen nhị vàng/Nhị vàng bông trắng lá xanh/Gần bùn mà chẳng hôi tanh mùi bùn*". In English: "In the pond, no flower rivals the beauty of the lotus/Green leaves, white blossoms, and yellow pollen/Yellow pollen, white blossoms, and green leaves/Surrounded in mud, and yet untainted" (author's translation).

"will not be wasted and fall into oblivion" ("sẽ không bị mờ phí, lãng quên"). As such, Kiến An's purpose and course of action are shaped by the man's aspirations. She is but his follower.

CONCLUSION

Unlike many Vietnamese films about prostitutes where men and women are pitched against one another in abusive relationships, *Three Seasons* portrays a rather harmonious bond between the two sexes. The prostitute Lan, the cyclo driver Hải, the lotus vendor Kiến An, and the poet *thầy* Đào, despite their initial discrepancies, eventually develop and maintain an amicable rapport because they all fall neatly into their culturally predetermined roles: men are educators and creators; women are learners and assistants. Male power is omnipotent in the elevation of women's moral and cognitive statuses. While the male protagonists are constructed either as artists, intellectuals, or custodians of traditional values, women either fluctuate in their beliefs and behavior or subscribe to men's morality, intellect, and art. Despite being intelligent and perceptive (Lan) or inquisitive and appreciative of genuine beauty and art (Kiến An), women in this film are deprived of the right to narrate their own story or the position to produce knowledge and art. The film's reduced characterization of women compromises their subjectivity, which informs them to operate only in accordance with a purpose and dream they borrow and inherit from men. As such, *Three Seasons* laments the loss of tradition in the rapidly transforming society of Vietnam under *Đổi Mới* through a didactic tale where men are superiorized as educators and women are essentialized as learners.

As a film intended for both Vietnamese and international audiences, *Three Seasons* introduces a Vietnamese perspective that counters the stereotypes about Vietnam and the Vietnamese in Western films. In *Three Seasons*, the Vietnamese are no longer the faceless, the victims, or the savages. By centralizing the life stories of Vietnamese subjects and introducing the American character through a Vietnamese perspective (Hải's), the film reclaims subjectivity for the Vietnamese. However, this regained subjectivity is embodied by male characters while women are still enlightened and guided by men. The prostitute and the lotus vendor are made peripheral from their own stories so that the cyclo driver can take the central stage from which he leads one and educates the other. Thus, while *Three Seasons* contests the orientalism and effacement of Vietnamese subjectivity in Western films, it keeps women in a place where they can only follow men's instructions. In this way, the film is traditionalist in its simplistic and reduced constructions of women. Interestingly, while challenging Hollywood portrayals of Vietnam and the Vietnamese, *Three Seasons* shares a Hollywood preoccupation with male development and action (Hamilton 2009) rather than upholding a Vietnamese cinematic tradition in which women are transforming (as opposed to transformed) agents who represent the nation (Charlot 1991; Marchetti 1991; Minh and Pham 2003; Hamilton 2009).

In the wake of *Đổi Mới*-entailed social upheavals, part of the Vietnamese people advocated a return to traditional values, especially in relation to women's social position (Hamilton 2009; Gray 2018). *Three Seasons* resonates with such nostalgic sentiment in its depiction of gender relations. Leaving the country as a toddler, Tony Bui professed that in his mind, Vietnam is "a past-tense word" (Winters 1999). Through poetry, folk music, and an unmissable emphasis on the beauty and importance of traditional values, *Three Seasons* searches for an "inner world of the Vietnamese" (ibid.) that is purer, better, and more "authentic" (Norindr 2001, 78). Commenting on Bui's statement, film director Đặng Nhật Minh said, "For those filmmakers who are living and working in Vietnam, this type of search doesn't exist, because Vietnam is the environment of their daily life… Tony looked for the first spring that feeds the beginning of the river, but we are soaking in this river" (Winters 1999). With the "Vietnamese river" having been fed by a plethora of cultural tributaries from its neighbors in Southeast Asia, Chinese colonizers, French colonizers, American imperialists, and Western and East Asian investors and business partners, it would be difficult to navigate cultural norms, in this case in regard to gender relations, as neatly and simplistically as seen in Tony Bui's *Three Seasons*.

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