Singapore International Film Festival

Two films from Vietnam: The Wild Field and Collective Flat

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This is the first in a series of articles on the 13th Singapore International Film Festival held from March 31 to April 15. World Socialist Web Site *reporters attended this year's festival, which is, after Tokyo and Hong Kong, regarded as one of the more significant festivals in Asia.*

Founded in 1987, the two-week event screens more than 300 films, showcasing new releases from Asia. Films at this year's festival were organised in several categories: Asian Cinema, with a special focus on films from Vietnam; Sex in Asian Cinema; World Cinema; retrospectives of the work of Jean-Luc Godard and Marlene Dietrich; and a tribute to Greek director Theo Angelopoulos.

Future articles will review some of the more artistically interesting and socially authentic films, with particular concentration on films from Asia, the Indian sub-continent and Iran. WSWS *coverage will also feature interviews with several filmmakers, including acclaimed Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf, as well as critics and festival organisers. The interviews attempt to explore artistic issues concerning filmmakers from the region and other problems, such as increasing government censorship.*

One of the more interesting aspects of the recently held Singapore International Film Festival was the “Focus on Vietnam”. This included five Vietnamese feature films and five documentaries by filmmakers from US, Germany Canada and Australia. Among the features were two films made in the last three years— *The Sawyers* and *Returning to Ngu Thuy* —and two older films—*The Wild Field* and *A Quiet Town*, from 1979 and 1986 respectively. *Collective Flat*, which was released last year, was one of the 14 films nominated for the festival's Silver Screen Awards.

Film production in Vietnam is a difficult affair. Tight government controls, antiquated equipment and limited funds are just some of the problems. Although the former French colonial rulers introduced cinema in the early part of the 20th century, filmmaking is a relatively new phenomenon in Vietnam, with the first locally produced documentary films not made until after World War II.

The occupation of Vietnam, first by France and then the United States, hampered feature film production. In North Vietnam the only films made were propaganda documentaries produced under the auspices of the Stalinist Vietminh government in Hanoi to bolster morale and assist in the war effort. It was not until 1959 that the first feature was made in the north—*On the Same River*, a dramatic story about a married couple separated from each other by the 1954 division of the country along the 17th parallel.

Filmmaking during this time came under the Hanoi government's direct control. Directors, cinematographers, editors and writers were employed by the state. The Vietnam Cinema School, which was established in 1963, provided some basic cinematic education but promising students were sent to cinema schools in China, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe for specialised training.

Reunification of the country after the defeat of the US in 1975 saw the growth of a fledgling film industry. From 1975 to 1987 it produced an average of 10 to 15 features and 50 documentaries a year—small by most countries' standards but significant for a country still attempting to overcome the destruction inflicted by decades of war.

This expansion, however, was short-lived and dropped dramatically after the introduction of Doi Moi, the government's free market policy, which privatised some state-owned industries and cut government funding to film production and many other areas. While the Stalinist regime unleashed market forces, there was no easing of censorship. Government officials still regarded film as a propaganda tool, disallowing any script that attempted to critically examine social relations or mildly criticised the government.

Today, although the government provides limited state finance and allows foreign funding of some productions, the Vietnamese film industry is plagued with problems and produces only a handful of films—four or five features—a year. The annual allocation for one of the country's main studios is only $500,000 a year—not enough for even the lowest budget films in Europe or the US.

Film production equipment is antiquated, decent film stock expensive, and funds are so limited that directors, even after receiving government approval of their scripts, often wait for three or four years before they can start on their films. Some filmmakers have relocated to other countries in an effort to develop or maintain their skills. Others attempt to maintain their art while complying with government controls.

Films produced under these conditions are often technically and artistically flawed. At the same time they have to compete with slick Hollywood blockbusters and Hong Kong action films. This, combined with the ready availability of cheap pirated tapes or video compact disc recordings of the latest movies, has exacerbated the industry's financial problems.

Two of the Vietnamese features screened at the film festival—the recently made *Collective Flat* by veteran director Viet Linh and *The Wild Field*, made in 1979 by Nugyen Hong Sen—are examples of the best of Vietnamese cinema. They rise above the difficult artistic and political conditions in which they were made.

The Wild Field tells the story of a Viet Cong fighter and his family in the Mekong delta. The film is shot in black and white, borrows stylistically from early Soviet social realism and has a strong documentary feel. It graphically captures the heroism of the Viet Cong's peasant fighters in the face of unrelenting US firepower.

The fighter and his family live in a primitive dwelling set on stilts above the marshy land. When not being harassed by US helicopter gunships, they attempt to eke out an existence fishing and farming. The film builds

to a final decisive battle as US forces intensify their efforts to militarily dominate the Mekong. One is constantly forced to recognise that this is not just one man and his family but a portrait of a people confronting a merciless military machine.

The film's strength, however, is not just its portrayal of these conditions but the lyrical beauty of its cinematography and its humane approach to all those involved in the bloody conflict. Nguyen Hong Sen, one of the first graduates of the Vietnam Cinema School, developed his skills making documentaries during the war. *The Wild Field* is an extraordinary film and widely regarded as a Vietnamese classic.

Collective Flat is directed by Viet Linh and based on a story by Nguyen Ho. Viet Linh was born in 1952 and like many other Vietnamese directors began her film career at the Giai Phong Film Studio. She completed her cinematic studies in the former Soviet Union.

This is a simple story which revolves around the life of a Saigon hotel caretaker and the changes he has to make in his life following the 1975 victory and then the early years of the government's free market policies in the late 1980s. Although the political underpinnings of these social changes are not spelt out, the film hints at some of the more complex questions now emerging in Vietnamese society.

The story begins on May 1, 1975 with Viet Cong troops marching through Saigon celebrating their victory. Tham (Mai Thanh), caretaker of Victory Hotel, a relatively small establishment in downtown Saigon, nervously observes these celebrations. The owners have fled Saigon and the hotel is to be requisitioned by the new government. Tham wonders what his fate will be under the new regime.

The next day he is told that that the hotel is to be transformed into a collective flat for the Viet Cong cadre and their families now entering the city. Tham is not hostile to this but is concerned about his place in the new set up. Will he still have a job? Will he be treated as an enemy?

Minh Ly (Hong Anh), a teenage girl whose parents have fled the city fearful that they will be prosecuted for associating the enemy, also shares Tham's concerns. He decides to provide refuge for the young girl and tells Ba Tuan (Don Duong), the leading Viet Cong cadre at the hotel, that she is his niece.

The soldiers, with their families and meagre possessions, immediately start arriving in army trucks. After years of dangerous jungle fighting, they are overwhelmed by the facilities at the hotel. The building has a small lift and the rooms have running water, baths and hot showers and the caretaker has a television. As one of the cadres bluntly tells Tham, “the only water we had was in the streams”.

The new tenants and their young children, unused to the modest refinements of the hotel or city life, quickly transform the building. Chicken coops and gardens are established on the hotel's rooftop, nails are hammered into the walls and washing lines are strung across hotel rooms.

Despite this difficult beginning, which provides the film with some of its humorous moments, Tham and the new tenants begin to adjust to the new arrangements. Tham grows closer to the teenagers and young children at the hotel and Hung (Quyen Linh), a young soldier, and Minh Ly become close friends and fall in love.

The war, although ended, is present in every aspect of social life. One of the young fighters still has a bullet lodged in his head, which causes flashbacks and delusions that he is still fighting the war. Tensions emerge between some of the tenants and Tham; doubts are raised about Hung's friendship with Minh Ly. Anh (Nguyen Minh Trang), Ba Tuan's wife, still carries with her suspicions about those who collaborated with the US forces. She is concerned about the emerging relationship and quarrels with her husband, asserting that he favours those from the south. She tells him that she has doubts whether a happy marriage is possible with someone from the south of the country.

These conflicts are resolved, however, and the young couple is married. Life in the Victory Hotel seems to stabilise and after a trip to his home village with Ba Tuan and others, Tham begins to understand the difficulties endured during the war by those now residing at the hotel.

The most difficult challenge for Tham, and one with which ultimately he is unable to deal, is produced by the government's free market policies in the late 1980s. Some families begin to leave the collective flat and pressure mounts for a revival of the tourist industry to attract foreign currency. One of the tenants leaving the hotel tells Tham “don't worry, individuality is now acceptable”. This puzzles the caretaker but after a conversation with a manager at a nearby hotel, he begins to realise that another major change in his life is now demanded. Back at the collective flat he gazes sadly at television documentary footage of the US evacuation in 1975.

The residents are soon told that the government has decided to bulldoze the Victory Hotel and erect a new luxury tourist hotel in its place. Although they will be compensated, they must find new accommodation. Tham, who has been through many traumas in his life, cannot cope with this final challenge. His behaviour seems at odds with other hotel residents. Older residents of the collective flat are satisfied with their lives and all the young people are studying or about to embark on new careers. The film ends with Tham leaving the hotel. The old man tells no one about his decision but simply leaves a note and his share of the government compensation money to Tien Cong, one of the young tenants.

Is Tham's departure simply because he is getting old or is it a product of social changes that he and many others are unable to cope with? *Collective Flat* provides no clear answer. In fact, Tham's distress and disappearance probably points to the wider malaise that affected ordinary Vietnamese people during the late 1980s and early 1990s when pro-market reforms turned thousands of lives upside down.

While *Collective Flat* does not attempt to venture beyond some vague references at the circumstances that have produced the caretaker's crisis, Viet Linh's decision to show Tham gazing blankly at television footage of 1975 is suggestive that something more fundamental is wrong. There is an obvious contradiction between the departure of the defeated US military forces and the new scramble for the tourist dollar.

Collective Flat, which has been made on a shoestring budget and under difficult artistic and political conditions, is an important glimpse of social life in post-war Vietnam. The next article from the Singapore International Film Festival will be an interview with the film's director Viet Linh.