Urban Vehicles: Mobility and Modernity in Contemporary Asian Cinema
A comparative reading of Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Beijing Bicycle* and Tran Anh Hung’s *Cyclo*.
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Film Synopsis

Beijing Bicycle

Guei has just arrived in Beijing from his village. He lands a job as a bicycle courier and assigned a new mountain bike for his deliveries. After nearly one month, Guei has earned nearly enough to purchase the bicycle and receive a 50/50 commission on his deliveries. His bicycle is stolen.

Jian is a teenage student. His family repairs electronics equipment and his father promises to purchase Jian a new bicycle as soon as they are able to save enough. To Jian, a new bicycle will elevate his esteem among his peers and his new girlfriend. His father reneges on his promise in order to offer Jian’s younger stepsister a better education. Jian steals the family money and purchases a used bicycle from a flea market. Unfortunately, the bike also belongs to Guei.

Guei needs the bicycle to work and Jian needs the bicycle to keep intact his sense of pride among his higher class peers. Both feel justified in their claim to the bicycle. Guei and Jian after several contests agree to share the bicycle but without consequences.
Film Synopsis

Cyclo

An anonymous, gaunt young man pedals his rented xich lo (pedicab) through the crowded streets of Ho Chi Minh City in search of a fare, stopping periodically to rest and clean away the grime and dust of pollution from his feet. It is a legacy of meager livelihood passed down from his father killed years earlier by a motor vehicle. The young man perseveres in devotion to his family. His proud grandfather repairs tires on street corners despite his failing health unwilling to take advantage of an expensive misdelivered electronics package that could provide a temporary source of income. His younger sister joins other poor, enterprising street children alongside the walls of restaurants shining patrons’ shoes. The older sister earns a modest living by delivering water to local grocers and working as a cook.

Their honest existence comes to an end when the young man’s xich lo is stolen by an organized gang and severely beaten by thugs in the street. He pays a visit to his employer, an inscrutable middle-aged woman who dotes on her mentally deficient adult son, in order to seek leniency and make arrangements for repaying her for the stolen xich lo. The employer seizes the opportunity to recruit the hapless young man into her other criminal dealings by assigning him to a brooding gang leader. The gang leader detains him in a nondescript upper floor tenement apartment removing the young man from the support of his family. He is ordered to perform criminal acts for payment in US currency. However, when the young man’s beautiful sister is forced into prostitution by the same gang leader, the two siblings struggle to retain their humanity and dignity against an increasingly desperate and inescapable future in the Ho Chi Minh City’s underworld.
Introduction

Contemporary Chinese and Vietnamese filmmakers are often hard-pressed to create new tactics that express their increasing apprehension regarding the urban fallout from the shifting tides of socioeconomic change and stagnation. For these new directors and writers, gone are the epic melodramas and national nostalgia of the past and in their stead cruel and violent depictions of the individual in a hostile and unforgiving city. These films are no memorials. Under the ominous threat of party censorship, decreased funding, limited distribution and waning local audiences interested in Hollywood imports, a large number of these new filmmakers resort to filming underground. Two films in particular, the Sixth Generation Chinese *Beijing Bicycle* and the French-produced Vietnamese *Cyclo* exemplify these conditions. I intend to use these films to examine the wide spectrum of Asian cultural production while touching upon issues of itinerancy, nomadic and resistant movement, class, alienation, criminality, urban violence and changing market economies. I believe a Chinese and Vietnamese cultural production comparative analysis to be more insightful than within a Western discursive media framework.

Many film critics have compared both *Beijing Bicycle* and *Cyclo* to Vittorio de Sica’s early Italian neo-realist film, *The Bicycle Thief* (1948). Inasmuch as the stories are concerned, these films share in common an impoverished migrant worker confronting a violent and alienating urban environment where the vehicle upon which his livelihood depends is stolen. His search becomes the viewers search for identity and location in a chaotic and cruel city. Critics have also made comparisons to Akira Kurasawa’s *Stray Dog* (1949), where a detective searches for his misplaced weapon in post-war Tokyo.

But this essentialist approach is too simple and amounts to a comparative mismatch both historically and culturally. Regardless of how excellent these films are on their own merit, the Italian and Japanese post-war films cannot be considered critical to the formation of contemporary modes Asian cinema production beyond their stylistic and narrative innovation. Rather obvious differences stand out. During the times *The Bicycle Thief* and *Stray Dog* were produced, both Italy and Japan were confronting humiliating losses to Allied nations and reconciling their own complicity in fascist and imperial atrocities. Their sense of national pride and urban infrastructures were destroyed by war. Political and economic leadership was uncertain. In contrast, the conditions under which *Beijing Bicycle* and *Cyclo* were produced involved an entrenched post-cold war communist political system. Both China and Vietnam were seen internally as victors banishing the imperialists from their borders (at least in a political rather than economic sense).

Technology cannot be overlooked. Twenty-first century technological innovations in imaging and sound allow new filmmakers to be extremely mobile, cheap and light. Digital technologies permit work to be archived and shared in many locations—encrypted and transferred without loss of quality through an array of communication and distribution channels. Hypothetically, film/video pre-production, photography, post-production, and distribution might be performed by an individual.

While contemporary Chinese cinema has in the last fifteen years captured a wide and attentive international audience (benefiting from the pioneering work of the Fifth Generation filmmakers), contemporary Vietnamese cinema remains largely invisible to international audiences (with the notable
exceptions of feature-film work from Tran Anh Hung, Timothy Linh and Tony Bui, the academic and experimental work of Trinh T. Minh-ha, video art from Jun Nguyen-Hatsushima and T. Kim-Trang Tran, and the student work of Ham Tran). Only last year did Pham Nhue Giang received internationally acclaim for her film *Thung Lung Hoang Vang* (The Desert Valley). Regarding this invisibility, Tran Anh Hung remarked, “It bothers me a lot to be labeled as the main representative of Vietnamese cinema. It is not possible for me to play that role because people will then have the idea that I will show all of Vietnam, and of course, that is not possible. If people want to know about Vietnam, they should go read a book.”

If obtaining such books were so easy! Translated reviews, scripts and subtitled distributions of Vietnamese films are hard to come by in English. Furthermore, Vietnamese national films rarely challenge the government-approved formulas or thematically venture beyond national memorial and party dogma. There exist concrete and compelling reasons for the difficult emergence of a national Vietnamese cinema which I discuss in the section, Vietnamese Cinema.

This paper is the natural extension of my interest in the contemporary Vietnamese arts community. Many of the experiments of the Chinese avant-garde were familiar to me at the time I traveled to Vietnam in the spring of 2002 with the intent of locating an emerging avant-garde in Vietnamese cities. Experiments in video, performance art and installation are happening, however mostly in private spaces. This experimentation does not seem to be specific to any one city and examples were found in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi and Hue. It was clear, however, that politics remains a taboo subject even as gender and sexuality issues were permitted under certain conditions. It is my hope that an earnest dialogue will emerge between Vietnamese national artists and the artists of the Vietnamese diaspora (largely in the United States, France, Canada, and Australia). It is likely the artists that will first capture international attention will be those involved in film. These artists might investigate strategies adopted by the Chinese avant-garde and selectively assimilate what is useful into their own work in Vietnamese contexts. The enthusiasm and inertia I feel toward this subject is better expressed by the words of Chinese culture critic Dai Jinhua, “My concern with modernity is one major reason I have been looking back further into film history. As far as the problematic construction and expansion of the discourse of modernity in China is concerned, film history offers the best research material.”

**Stories, Styles sand Shots**

Both films begin with an interview and at once we are confronted with demarcations between inside and outside, the powerful and the powerless, the transient and the established. In *Beijing Bicycle*, several disheveled young men respond to an interrogator’s questions in close-up shot. It is obvious they are out of their environment, at times asking the interrogator to repeat questions and at others simply at loss for the right words to respond. The interviewer asks a young man how much he earns, and not knowing the current city wage, stutters out increasing wages probing for the best possible situation. Guei’s hair is unruly and uncombed. In the next scene, Guei is transformed. Each of the new employees are identical. Their hair is cleanly trimmed and their country clothing has been replaced by the company uniform. They stand in formation while receiving instructions from the boss. It is surrealistically military. In *Cyclo*, the young driver (we do not know his name throughout the film) is interviewed for a new job. The interviewer also asks him how much he earns. In both cases, it is clearly a rhetorical question. They will earn what the employer will pay, regardless of experience or past wages.
Both filmmakers take advantage of hand-held camera photography. Yet, each pays remarkable detail to framing. Color is brilliant and saturated. Tran Anh Hung takes advantage of his DP, Benoit Delhomme, capturing rich interior and exterior detail making for a beautiful film to watch. Close-up shots of faces, hands, vehicle components, money and location specific props (cigarettes, bricks, weapons, shoes) are frequent. Both directors capture a rhythm of people in transit often being in motion themselves, shooting from vehicles alongside their moving subjects. Tran is, however, more experimental. In one scene he uses blue screens with dreaming children against the backdrop of a shantytown and increases the brightness of the subjects while leaving the background intact. In another scene, Tran uses time lapse photography observing apartment dwellers through dimly lit windows in long shot.

In *Beijing Bicycle*, Wang cross-fades several shots showing the exchange of bicycles between Guei and Jian over the course of several days. Several scenes are shot from extreme angles, either below the subject or high above the subject. Tran appears to use a crane to shoot some of his scenes, notably the murder of the businessman on a Saigon apartment complex rooftop. The beat of the films accelerate as the each of the stories proceed only punctuated by scenes of extreme violence and brutality or serene tranquility.

**Motion, Mobility and Markets**

University of California Berkeley Professor and Vietnamese Filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha relates movement with creativity:

“With the expansion of a market-intensive economy of movement, there is a tendency in the mainstream media to emphasize speed as a goal of inventive people, or rather, of smart consumers. To save time and energy, one is told to “go at it” and devise shortcuts so as to take hold of the desired objects as quickly as possible. So, anyone who makes a detour, opts for indirectness, and takes time to move on his or her own can neither gratify the reader or viewer right away, nor expect any immediate gratification in return. But for me, to be able to maintain a certain independence and pace to one’s movement accordingly is always a necessity, if one is to meet cultures other than one’s own, and to embark in any artistic or creative venture—theory, for example, is also a form of creativity.”
The value of autonomous production and editorial control will be more completely addressed in the section Sixth Generation Chinese Filmmakers, who refer to their productions as “independent.” Also, such gratification can be delayed for years as in the case of Wang Xiaoshuai’s “A Vietnamese Girl” (three years of delay and censorship later released as “So Close to Paradise).

Tonglin Lu, Associate Professor of Asian Languages and Literatures at the University of Iowa writes in her book, *Confronting Modernity in the Cinemas of Taiwan and Mainland China* (paraphrasing from sociologist Georg Simmel), “Moveable property, money, has gradually replaced the immovable property, land, as the most important form of ownership in an industrialized society, the money economy detaches people from traditional communities.”

The exchange of money is prominent in both films. In an interview Tran Anh Hung says,

“The Scent of Green Papaya gave me the opportunity to go back to Vietnam. I wanted to shoot the film there. When I arrived in Ho Chi Minh City in 1991 to scout for locations, I was overwhelmed by a purely physical feeling—of the rhythm emanating from the city, of the incredible weariness of its inhabitants—a sort of exhaustion.”

“People were morally worn out after decades of war and struggle to rebuild the economy. Since the lifting of the US embargo, a kind of primitive capitalism has taken over. The problem of the dollar is enormous in the country. Vietnam has a very large, poor population, so when the country opened up, people were willing to do anything to get hold of dollars.”

In both Beijing and Ho Chi Minh City, the bicycle is ubiquitous. Director Wang Xiaoshuai comments:

“The bicycle has always been an icon of Beijing and of China. For years it was the only means of transportation for a family. When I was young, having more than one bike was a sign of prosperity and resourcefulness. Although the bike has lost much of its glory, it remains an important mode of transportation because cars and motorcycles are still not commonplace. It has evolved from being something everybody covets to something everybody wants to replace. It has gradually come to stand for a failure to move forward.”
The bicycle in these films can be seen as a barrier to mobility. In *Beijing Bicycle*, both Guei and Jian realize their dependence on the bicycle and its ability to inhibit their upward mobility. With Guei it is economic and with Jian it is social.

“In the film, Guei is someone who rides the bicycle. It’s an experience of growth and transition. Jian comes from a family in which his parents are still in awe of the bicycle. The purchase of a bike is a major family decision. Jian’s love for the bike has exceeded his practical need for it. His desire to own it or give it up is driven by pride. This is an indication of change and progress.”

**The City**

Both films employ extreme shooting angles from rooftops, among crowded alleys and congested streets, and within underground plumbing and tunnels. Several scenes juxtapose poorer residential sections of the old city against the backdrop of modernist architecture and western-style commercial spaces. The films direct POV shots through spaces in decaying walls, fences and pipes to antiseptic worlds of steel and glass. Within these climate-controlled structures live women who change clothes several times a day and tycoons who conduct business over massages. Corporate interiors are removed from the street rhythm of the exterior. Absent are the sounds, voices and smells of the city and in their stead muzak and forced smiles. A dynamic exterior rhythm is controlled and quantified within by time clocks and agendas. The interior is a slow death while the hostile outside is a minute-by-minute struggle for survival. Neither are attractive. The courier Guei finds the modern architecture uninviting and becomes disoriented by the revolving turnstile doors of a hotel. When Jian wants to brood, he climbs to the rooftops.

The city is no sanctuary. Families are fractured, employment is unreliable and the next day is always uncertain. Characters are covered in the debris of the city. Guei becomes powdered in cement after crashing his bike into a truck. The *xich lo* becomes covered in river mud after eluding police.

**Urban Violence**

Both protagonists at the start of the film are moderately non-violent, innocent and moral yet by films end, Guei, Jian and the *xich lo* are hardened urban survivors. Guei is tormented throughout *Beijing Bicycle* by several groups. He is mocked and ignored by the girls at his delivery company, bullied by hotel security, and beaten severely on more than one occasion by teen gangs. At his threshold, he smashes a brick over the head of a juvenile delinquent intent on destroying his bike.
In *Cyclo*, the young man from the start is beaten in broad daylight in the street while his *xich lo* is stolen. His witness to and complicity in criminal activity only increases his tolerance for violent acts. He is forced to observe the brutal torment and murder of a gang rival, is on several occasions abused by his own gang. Death in the city is ubiquitous, scenes cut from pig slaughterhouses, bleeding fish, and mutilated geckos to people getting run over by automobiles in chaotic street traffic. The young man smack a board and nail across the face of the gangster who first stole his *xich lo* and is tasked to throw a molotov cocktail into a warehouse resulting in the burning of a man. A woman beats servants who do not prevent her mentally disabled son from covering himself in paint, and a pimp stabs a client who rapes one of his prostitutes.

### Alienation

It is difficult to become emotionally attached to these characters. We feel as alienated as they. They are people living on the edge of existence: poor, desperate, rebellious, and often immoral turning to criminal activity and violence. Sometimes they are at best contradictions, attractive villains, postmen who read your mail, suicidal artists, and sentimental ex-cons. In *Cyclo*, we gaze upon sexual deviants: a man who forces women to drink water and urinate and another with a foot fetish who enjoys cutting hosiery and listening to feet walking in dough through a stethoscope. We view in long shot a facade of a tenement building at night. We are at a distance able to peer into dimly lit windows. The camera tracks in closer and we discover each room occupied by loners under the wash of green/blue light. An old woman gazing into the camera riled with senility. Unsupervised young children occupying their time in play. People eating alone. In *Beijing Bicycle*, Guei and his uncle gaze through a fence hole to a young and attractive woman in a nearby condominium complex. She seems to pass the day by trying on designer outfits. They later discover she is a housekeeper. Each person is alone to deal with their misery.

These filmmakers are eager to dispel the glamorized shell of the city. They see the with rage, despair and mockery. They mean to contest the illusion of unprecedented growth and prosperity mouthed by Party public relations. Instead of celebrating, the 1989 Beijing Film Academy graduates witnessed the Tiananmen crackdown. Seemingly overnight the hopes for artistic free expression and support evaporated. The crushed dreams of the characters in these films are the dashed hopes of their makers.

### Sixth Generation Chinese Filmmakers

Wang Xiaoshuai is considered to be one of China’s most talented new filmmakers. A graduate of the Beijing Film Academy, he wrote and directed his first feature, *The Days* in 1993. The film garnered praise from Western film critics but was blacklist by the China Film Bureau, as was the director. In 1994, he completed the independent production, *Frozen*, entering it into various international film festivals under the pseudonym Wu Min (Anonymous). At the end of 1995, he entered the Beijing Film Studio and made *A Vietnamese Girl*. However, the film did not pass the censors. It was only after undergoing three years of cuts (and a title change to *So Close to Paradise*) was the film selected for the 1999 Cannes Film Festival.
In a broad sense, the Sixth Generation of Chinese filmmakers refers to those graduating from the Beijing Film Academy after 1989. These filmmakers mark a departure from the focus on collective memory and national history of their Fifth Generation predecessors (notably Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige) who in large part were responsible for introducing Chinese cinema to an international audience. However, in doing so, several have criticized the films of the Fifth Generation for being orientalist, that is, exoticizing their films to appeal to a Western gaze by fulfilling stereotypical notions of the East. Gone are red lanterns, child acrobats, firecrackers, rural folksongs, and styled kung-fu in the Sixth Generation films. But the differences for the break with earlier films is more complex. The Sixth Generation films must not only be examined in contrast with the Fifth, but indeed the historical trajectory of Chinese mainland (as opposed to those films produced in Hong Kong and Taiwan) cinema.

Depending on any one film critic, each might offer different criteria for the categorization for “generational” Chinese cinema. Perhaps the fact that each generation has its detractors, ideological rivals and contradictions makes a definitive taxonomy difficult. Thus, the table below should be considered only as an approximation for a generational comparison.

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<th>Table 1: Generations of mainland Chinese film</th>
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<td><strong>First Generation</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Second Generation</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Third Generation</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Fourth Generation</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Fifth Generation</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Sixth Generation</strong></td>
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Sixth Generation struggles against censorship and distribution were also shared with by the Fifth Generation. However, it is largely their tactics of negotiating these obstacles which form a distinction. Although on occasion Fifth Generation filmmakers made parts of their films covertly and encountered cash shortages, they largely worked within a state studio system and were able to secure partial financing and script approval. While at the mercy and whim of the state studio system, their reception and distribution very often relied on the disposition of the Party. Their reservations with the PRC were often obliquely portrayed in their films. As a way of escaping this vicious cycle, the Sixth Generation filmmakers deliberately made the decision to in many cases to work outside of the state studio system, either going underground or relying on foreign co-production.
Two points should be made here. First, the terms “underground” and "dissident" are labels largely used by the West to describe these new filmmakers. The filmmakers themselves prefer to use “independent” and refer to the work as “new documentary.” Secondly, The tactics of the Sixth Generation are by no means homogenous. Chinese cultural critic Dai Jinhua defines three praxis in classifying the work of Sixth Generation filmmakers (although she resists and doubts the actual existence of a "sixth generation"). The first praxis includes co-productions financed with foreign private investment or European Cultural Fund underwriting allowing filmmakers to remain autonomous and unencumbered from the official state production system and its routine censorship. Secondly, a praxis constituted of filmmakers graduating between 1989 and 1991 working within the state studio system whose content and aesthetics mark a departure from the Fifth Generation. Lastly, those filmmakers working outside the state studio system not relying on foreign involvement interested in allying themselves with visual artists and making documentary-style films. Given Wang Xiaoshuai's miserable experience with A Vietnamese Girl (retitled, So Close to Paradise) Beijing Bicycle would mostly likely fall into Dai Jinghua's first praxis. Beijing Bicycle was co-produced with Taiwanese writer/producer Peggy Chaio (recognized as bringing Taiwanese directors Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Edward Yang, Ang Lee and Tsai Ming-Liang to international attention). It is common for Sixth Generation films to feature non-professional actors and unnatural conditions.

When asked about shooting underground, Wang Xiaoshuai says:

"Underground or above, it all depends on subject matter. If what I wanted to do were not allowed, then I would consider going underground. The different approaches require different frames of mind. When shooting above-ground, getting approval is a constant concern, and it affects the way one thinks about a film. After a while, it becomes a restriction. This is not good for the director. Shooting underground is only a mode of production with more freedom. Independent of any established production units, each seeking its distributions market and each searching for its own definition. Under the present system, shooting underground allows for more versatility and independence. But as long as its illegal, the scale of the projects will remain small and you have to work in conditions that are not natural."

Another tactic that has been employed by Sixth Generation filmmakers has been using the media infrastructure against itself. Many of the Sixth Generation filmmakers have extensive experience in advertising and television production. For example, Lou Ye obtained a television license (which is less strictly controlled than film) to produce his 2001 film, Suzhou River. Filmmaker Zhang Yuan financed Beijing Bastards with his own savings from directing music videos.

It is not surprising that there is no love lost between the Fifth and Sixth Generation of filmmakers. Zhang Yuan has said, “They have a slogan: ‘Not like the past.’ It motivated us to create our own: ‘Not like the Fifth Generation.’” Indeed, they are not beyond making explicit their rebellion. In Beijing Bicycle, when Guei cannot find the right Mr. Zhang to accept his package, another Mr. Zhang replies, “There are a thousand Zhang’s in this city, why don’t you ask Zhang Yimou?” In these cities of “a thousand Zhangs”, Sixth Generation work is extremely personal. Wang Xiaoshuai described making films as “writing our own diaries.”

These diaries were raw and shunned the melancholy, reverence and fidelity of earlier films, or what Chinese feminist and cultural theorist Rey Chow refers to as “primitive passions” utilized to “produce a cultural history and anthropology of modern China through the technologized visual image.”
Xiaoshuai’s “writing” is hard to locate in Chow’s “ultimate argument that contemporary Chinese cinema, as a kind of postmodern self-writing or autoethnography, is nonetheless also a form of intercultural translation in the postcolonial age.” The Sixth Generation by and large is not interested in an abstract theoretical discourse with the past but rather are overwhelmed with the immediacy of the present. Translation is not the issue; rather any form of intentional intellectual coherency is subordinate to the emotional experience of the now. Dai Jinhua writes, “the Sixth Generation’s cultural experiences and the contingencies of the moment took the stage.” They wish to experiment with a fragmented narrative often employing music video and television techniques “of broken scenes, momentary moods and ‘spectacle.” This blurring of narrative and technique is clearly evident in Lou Ye's *Suzhou River*. Dai Jinghua adds that critics often attributed to Sixth Generation filmmakers lauds and innovations that they were either a) not responsible for or b) not interested in.

“In the cultural landscape of 1990’s China, another discourse on the Sixth Generation also bypassed the reality of the films to constitute a picture of postmodern, postcolonial cultural resistance. The Sixth Generation’s narrative techniques, including their flaws and failures, were gilded with postmodern art description. Some of their obvious or naïve modernist attempts were described as Third World cultural resistance in accordance with postcolonial theories of “mimicry” and “appropriation.”

The Beijing Film Academy presently has seven departments: scriptwriting, directing, cinematography, art design, sound and acting. It is quite common for filmmakers to have extensive experience in more than one discipline, at times directing and others designing sets in collaborative projects. It shall be interesting to see how the Academy evolves and reacts to the experimentation of the Sixth Generation.

**Vietnamese Cinema**

Annemieke Rodenberg writes, “During the National Art Exhibition in 1951, President Ho Chi Minh urged artists, writers, and film-makers to use their art as a weapon in the struggle for independence. Ho Chi Minh was very aware of the strength of film as an instrument in his propaganda policy, the number of people he could reach, and the impact film could have on the population. In North Vietnam, film was used in the battle against the French and the Americans and in the South against communism. Only after the departure of the American army in 1975 did Vietnamese film really have a chance to develop itself artistically. And since ’Doi Moi’ (the politics of reform in 1986), Vietnamese film has been given more liberty in choosing topics and contents, although some subjects (violence, sex, and politics) must still be avoided.

In Mark Phillip Bradley’s essay, *Contests of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting War in Contemporary Vietnamese Cinema*, he writes:

“The embrace of market economic reforms at the Sixth Party Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1986 brought with it a significant loosening of state control in the cultural realm. As one scholar of this period has argued, the policy of Renovation (Doi Moi) in the arts allowed intellectuals to work with a degree of freedom unknown since the Popular Front Period in colonial Vietnam in the late 1930’s. But if official censorship relaxed somewhat, so, too, did the state subsidies for the arts that had provided the single source of funding for the Vietnamese film industry. The demands of the market economy put new pressures on filmmakers to ensure that the content of the films they produced resonated with potential filmgoers.”
The “significant loosening of state control” that Bradley describes applies in large to aesthetics rather than content. Artists and filmmakers were able to shirk soviet-influenced social realism. However, the loosening did and does not apply to the discourse between art and politics. This blaring, screaming contradiction is perhaps best captured with the following December 2002 ArtNews quote from Ms. Lan Tran Cao, co-owner of Gallery Vietnam in the Tribeca section of New York City, “Until about five years ago artists were very controlled by the party and had to work within its guidelines. Now they have almost complete freedom—as long as they don’t venture into the political world.”

Trinh T. Minh-ha makes a brilliant observation, “More and more, there is a need to make films politically (as differentiated from making political films). We are moving here from the making of a genre of film to the making of a wide range of genres of film in which the making itself is political.”

As such, the development of “genres” and “generations” of new Vietnamese filmmakers speaking against official party dogma has been difficult. It is not that the artists are unaware of socioeconomic and political problems rather they must develop specific strategies to address them. Using art as a challenge to political authority is nothing new to the Vietnamese (and Chinese). Scholar and painter Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072) wrote during the Chinese Song dynasty, “Politics operating independent of the arts are destined to develop without soul and to increase corruption, and the arts, on the other hand, if operating independently from politics, will lose all contact with reality and will degenerate into superficiality.”

We might now consider filmmaking now among pivotal political events in recent Vietnamese history.

Table 2: History of Vietnamese Film

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<tr>
<th>Period</th>
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<tr>
<td>1945-1954:</td>
<td>This period produced mainly war documentaries, dealing with military activities, the battlefield, the heroic victory, and food transportation to the front. These documentaries are now of historical value. In spite of the technical failures, these propaganda films had a great influence on raising the fighting spirit of the Vietnamese people.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Resistance To France</td>
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<td>1954-1975:</td>
<td>In this period North Vietnam mainly produced revolutionary films. Every film had to be a weapon for the revolution and had to carry the message of social realism and represent the national spirit. The theme (again) was war. Most films were not successful as they were too shallow and too dogmatic. When it was all said and done they were not meant to entertain the public. At the same time, South Vietnam was producing commercial films, following the example of Hong Kong.</td>
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<td>The Separation Of Vietnam</td>
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<td>1975-1987:</td>
<td>New genres and themes were developed. The choice of social themes, such as daily life during and after the war, was striking. More attention was paid to the character’s psychological developments. There was also a growing interest in the formal aspects of film. For the first time film was used as a medium for emotional and artistic expression.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Post-War Cinema</td>
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<td>1987-Present:</td>
<td>The Vietnamese government now only subsidizes four films a year, therefore the principal motive behind the contemporary cinema is to make a profit. The film productions must be as economical as possible. These factors, in combination with the unremitting censorship of the contents (no violence, sex, or political criticism), the Vietnamese contemporary cinema seems to be deadlocked.</td>
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<td>The Contemporary Cinema</td>
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Vietnam is often seen in the historical and cultural trajectory of China given the one-thousand year occupation of Vietnam by China and that both nations are among the only remaining communist governents. Vietnam maintains a rather unique relationship with China. At times the larger and more powerful neighbor has been considered an ally, at others, an enemy; a political and cultural model and a malignant force to be resisted. This tenuous relationship has existed for thousands of years. While it is true that much of has been assimilated into Vietnamese traditional culture (Confucian sensibility, mandarin political systems, and art), the Vietnamese have been resistant to the Chinese, if not always successfully. Even in contemporary history Ho Chi Minh once remarked that he would rather accept a temporary return of the French colonizers rather than allow the Chinese to return to Vietnam. To this day Vietnam and China enjoy economic and political relationships as much as they continue to fight unresolved land disputes. Internally artistic and political movements within Vietnam and China have considerable difference. As a starting point in considering these differences, I would like to first address the ability of each nation to suppress insurgencies. Secondly I would like to address the scale of protest movement and lastly, how suppression is executed.

In Vietnam, the ability to crack down on small political and artistic movements is indeed very easy and these types of counter-measures are commonplace. In contrast to China, very few large organized protest and avant-garde movements exist and when they do infrequently occur, Vietnam seems to have limited recourse. The inability to effectively deal with large-scale movement in Vietnam must be seen both geographically and historically. Vietnam is, comparatively, a small nation and large-scale movements have the potential to quickly engulf the nation in turmoil, as the several twentieth-century Vietnamese revolutions speak to. Having a small land mass compared to the expansive China, Vietnam becomes very easy to monitor and survey, particularly in the urban settings. Movements and rhythms are very quickly noticed.

However after the American War, many of the national heroes of the war settled outside of the cities and formed intimate relationships among the villages in which they settled. When these generals become frustrated with the perceived failures of the Party to address the needs and concerns for which they had fought, they potentially become the main catalysts for protest organization. When rural movements gain momentum, they become very difficult to extinguish with violence, and the government often adopts a strategy of temporary placations and promises and dismisses a few cadre leaders. These negotiations are done quietly. Ideologically, it becomes very difficult to demonize the generals that fought for the revolution. There exist very few political prisoners in Vietnam when compared with its Southeast Asian and East Asian neighbors. The government will often simply denounce someone in the media and let the social pariah mechanism run its course. Such action can occur in either of two extreme forms of mobility, the first catatonic: house arrest and the inability to travel and speak freely. The other being flight and exile: granting the accused the ability to leave Vietnam without prospect of return. Both forms of punishment were recently applied to Vietnamese national actor, Don Duong for his portrayals of the Vietnamese in foreign-financed films such as *When We Were Soldiers* and Timothy Bui’s *Green Dragon* (Bui is Duong's nephew and resides in southern California). After several months of house arrest and public condemnation as a national traitor throughout the Vietnamese media, Duong was in the last weeks granted permission to leave Vietnam to join his extended family in California.

In contrast, small movements in China either go unnoticed or deemed unworthy of action. The sheer expanse of China makes small movement difficult to detect. However, large movements seem to occur with much greater frequency. These movements are very quickly dealt with, if the Tiananmen and Falun Gong movements are any indication. And unlike Vietnam, punishment is extremely severe including torture and imprisonment. The issue of imprisonment symbolically has held great significance in Vietnam. Indeed, as Harvard professor Hue-Tam Ho Tai writes, a whole genre of “prison memoirs” is widely recognized and imprisonment is almost required of any national hero. It is not then surprising that the imprisonment of dissidents in Vietnam might very easily be perceived as martyrdom and therefore an extremely counterproductive way of dealing with rebellion.
Adding to the complexity of dealing with dissident and avant-garde movement, Vietnam tends to use a network of police forces: local, familiar and highly integrated into the fabric of the society. It is unlikely to witness a military confrontation against the people in Vietnam. In China, where small protests often remain undetected or ignored, large movements are very often confronted with a large and intimidating military presence. As such, these large movements are easily seen as repressive and framed as in a dichotomous “we” vs. “them” relationship (for example, students vs. the military) whereas in Vietnam the censors and repressors are more likely to be neighbors.

In this light we might better understand how underground and avant-garde movements are performed in Vietnam and China, particularly with respect to filmmaking. In China, Sixth Generation filmmakers have discovered circumventing the state studio policy fairly simple and straightforward. They just go out and shoot it (providing they are able to assemble the financing, cast and crew.) In Vietnam, underground filmmaking in the cities is very difficult. The panoptic eye of the government can very quickly detect guerilla filmmakers and cease production. As many who work on film crews can attest, even in officially sanctioned films, filmmaking is a tedious task, infiltrated with timeline delays, financing obstacles and regular editorial intervention. In most cases, there must be police on every shoot to enforce strict adherence to any approved script. Bribes are paid regularly to police details and considerable mark-ups paid for goods and services to merchants during on-site location shooting.

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This is precisely what Tran Anh Hung knew he'd encounter when he decided to film much of Cyclo underground. Without the official permits required of all artistic endeavors in Vietnam, a moving target himself, he filmed from rooftops and vehicles and on improvised sets in inconspicuous buildings. His unsympathetic depiction of contemporary Ho Chi Minh City received unanimous party condemnation and to this day is banned (although as in the case of most things banned, it can be found bootlegged on next street corner).

**Future Momentum**

Perhaps another indication, if one be needed, that the Sixth Generation of Chinese filmmakers and an overall thematic and aesthetic shift of Asian films is occurring is noticeable recycling of cast and crew among several productions. In Beijing Bicycle, Zhou Xun (who first appears in Lou Ye’s 2001 film, Suzhou River) portrays a domestic worker who dreams of material comforts. Cyclo features actor Tony Leung Chiu Wai, perhaps the most famous of contemporary Asian actors with a filmmography that expands over twenty years and sixty films. Crew sharing among Asian filmmakers is becoming increasingly commonplace. Cyclo Director of Photography, Benoit Delhomme, has also been cameraman for Tsai Ming-Liang. Beijing Bicycle’s sound designer, Tu Duu-Chinh, has also been lead sound man for Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Edward Yang, and Wong Kar-Wai. An almost ubiquitous presence in contemporary Asian cinematography has been Australian Christopher Doyle, responsible for many innovations among directors Wong Kar-Wai, Tran Anh Hung, Chen Kaige, Stanley Kwan, and Zhang Yimou.

The struggle remains, perhaps as it always has, in finding a voice that connects to both local and international audiences while avoiding censorship and persecution. This must necessarily involve working at least to some degree with the national governments, locating reliable sources of funding and having the ability to freely comment about their work. Currently, neither environment in China or Vietnam look promising and it will be up to a new generation of filmmakers, artists, and writers to discover and create an environment that works best for them.
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