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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE CINEMA INDUSTRY

Kiều Chinh

*Kiều Chinh is an actress and movie producer who was involved in the development of the cinema arts in the Republic of Vietnam from the beginning. She first appeared briefly in the movie *The Quiet American*, the very first American movie shot in Vietnam in 1956, and played her first leading role in the Vietnamese movie *Hồi Chuông Thiên Mụ* (*The bell of Thiên Mụ pagoda*). By 1975, *Kiều Chinh* had been the leading actress in twenty-two other movies made in South Vietnam, Thailand, India, the Philippines, Singapore, and Taiwan, including several American movies that were filmed in Asia, such as *A Yank in Vietnam*, *The Devil Within*, *Operation CIA*, and *Destination Vietnam*. She relocated to California after April 1975 and has appeared in more than one hundred TV shows and movies such as *M*A*S*H*, *The Letter*, *Vietnam-Texas*, *The Joy Luck Club*, and *Journey from the Fall*. She has won numerous awards and prizes, such as *Best Actress* (Saigon, 1969), *Best Leading Actress* (Taipei, 1973), and three *Lifetime Achievement Awards* at *Viet Film Festival* (2003), *San Diego Film Festival* (2003), the *Cinema Della Donne Film Festival in Italy* (2003), and *Global Film Festival in San Francisco* (2015). Together with the late veteran *Lewis P. Puller* and journalist *Terry Anderson*, *Kiều Chinh* cofounded and cochaired the *Vietnam Children's Funds*, a nonprofit organization that has built fifty-one schools for more than thirty thousand children in Vietnam since 1993.*

Being a movie actress and not a government official or a researcher, my contribution to this volume is simply an artist telling a story about her personal life experiences in a unique time period in the Republic of Vietnam.

I was blessed to be part of South Vietnam's cinema industry from the beginning and to interact with the international motion pictures industry as early as in 1956. The very first "Action" sound—the acting command—that I received in my career was from director Joseph L. Mankiewicz, when I had a brief appearance in the movie *The Quiet American*—the very first American movie shot in Vietnam. Later, in 1957, I actually entered into the motion pictures industry with the leading role in the movie *Hồi Chuông Thiên Mụ* (*The bell of Thiên Mụ pagoda*) produced by Tân Việt Studio, with Bùi Diễm at the helm.

From then, I played the female lead role in twenty-two other movies that were made not only in Vietnam but also in Thailand, India, Taiwan, Singapore, and the Philippines, including a number of American movies that were filmed in Asia, such as *A Yank in Vietnam*, *Operation CIA*, *Devil Within*, and *Destination Vietnam*. The last movie in my twenty-year career in Vietnam was *Full House*, which was filmed in Singapore. The

shooting was completed on April 15, 1975, and I returned to Saigon just when South Vietnam was collapsing.

After many days wandering as a refugee without a country, I finally reached America and was introduced to Hollywood with help from actress Tippi Hedren and actor William Holden. And it was here that I decided to stay for the “seventh art”—knowing that I would have to restart from the beginning. And since October 1975, I have appeared in more than one hundred TV shows and movies such as *M*A*S*H*, costarring with Alan Alda, *The Letter*, costarring with Lee Remick, and *Welcome Home* with Kris Kristofferson. I also had a lead role in several movies, such as *Vietnam-Texas*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *Face*, *Tempted*, and *Journey from the Fall*. Most recently, I was a coproducer for the movie *Ride the Thunder*. I received a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Global Film Festival 2015 in San Francisco.

In the last forty years in the United States, I have played many “roles.” I make movies. I also work with the Greater Talent Network, Inc., in New York, as a professional speaker for cultural and university events throughout the United States. And, more significantly, the late veteran Lewis P. Puller, journalist Terry Anderson, and I cofounded and cochaired the Vietnam Children’s Funds (VCF), a nonprofit organization comprising many American veterans. VCF seeks to build a network of elementary schools in Vietnam in areas that were most damaged in the war—as a dedication to over two million lives lost in that war. VCF aims to seat fifty-eight thousand students in a school year—the same number of the names on the wall of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. We have already built fifty-one schools for more than thirty thousand children.

SIGNIFICANT MILESTONES IN THE HISTORY OF CINEMA

The year 2016 marked 120 years since the world’s motion pictures industry was born. It also marked 120 years since the day that Vietnamese first knew about cameras. This shows that cinema came to Vietnam very early, before many neighboring countries. However, more than a century later, Vietnam’s cinema industry remains underdeveloped relative to other Asian countries.

The reason for this underdevelopment is this: cinema, just like any other profession or enterprise, always shares the same destiny as its country. Therefore, before recalling the development of the film industry during the Republic of Vietnam period, I would like to briefly mention the significant milestones of world cinema.

Cinema officially began in France, when the Lumière brothers invented a set of film camera, film printer, and film projector, which was generally called *cinématographe* (from which the term *cinema* derived). Three days before the New Year of 1896, Salon Indien (an Indian-style guest room), located in the basement of the Grand Café in Paris, was turned into the place to host the first public movie screening at which admission was charged. Since then, the seventh art was introduced to whole world.

Also in 1896, Pathé Studio made a movie introducing France and its colonies, which included a few scenes of An Nam (the old name of Vietnam), from Hué the capital to popular festivals across the country. People were shown how movies were made and got to watch them for free. At that time, the king of electrical equipment in the United States was Thomas Edison, who had just unveiled the Kinetograph, a camera that could only record motion pictures rudimentarily, and the spectators needed to shine a light and watch through a magnifying glass.

Nevertheless, French hegemony in cinema was unsustainable. The *cinematographe*, the amazing invention of the Lumière brothers, did not have the time to develop. Eighteen years later, World War I started in 1914. Though this war lasted for only four years, France and Europe were greatly devastated. Meanwhile, the United States quickly developed into a scientific and cultural center of the world. Hollywood subsequently became the premier player with many illustrious artists in silent films such as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton.

The silent film era, which was initiated by the French, also ended in 1927, when a number of studios such as Warner Bros and Fox Pictures successfully produced the very first sound films, *The Jazz Singer* and *The Lights of New York*. Shortly after World War I, France did attempt to reclaim its dominance of cinema, but it turned out to be too late.

In August 1920, near Hoàn Kiếm Lake (the Returned Sword Lake) in downtown Hanoi, the first movie theater—the Pathé—was inaugurated. Pathé Studio and Indochina Film Studio were also established. From 1923, a series of new movies was made, including the first feature film *Kim Vân Kiều*, which was premiered at the Cinema Palace movie theater, on Tràng Tiền Street in March 1924. Though *Kim Vân Kiều* was made based on the work of poet Nguyễn Du, actors were classical opera singers from Quảng Lạc Troupe. All scenes were shot in Hanoi, but the technical crew and director were from France.

However, at the end of silent movie era, Vietnamese cinematic talent in Hanoi was showcased when Nguyễn Lan Hương made and screened several documentaries such as *Đám Tang Vua Khải Định* (King Khải Định's funeral) and *Tân Tôn Đức Bảo Đại* (King Bảo Đại's inauguration).

Moving to the speaking film era, now it was the turn of Saigon to show the technical ability of the Vietnamese. In 1938, a film company in Hong Kong, the South China Motion Pictures Co., made a movie named *Cánh Đồng Ma* (The haunted field) with collaboration from the Annam Artist Union for the story and cast. Among the actors from Hanoi going to Hong Kong was writer Nguyễn Tuấn. Stories about film making were later recalled in his memoir *Một Chuyến Đi* (A trip). Consequently, people long mistook *Cánh Đồng Ma* as the first speaking film in Vietnam.

The truth is, it was neither Hanoi nor Hong Kong, but Saigon where the first 35mm “speaking movie” was made in Vietnam. That film was *Trọn với Tình* (A love commitment), which was ninety minutes long, produced by Nguyễn Văn Đình of Asia Film in 1938. Everything from scripts and direction to machinery, visual, and sound techniques was created by Vietnamese. In Saigon then, besides Asia Film, there was also Vietnam Film. In 1939 alone, these two studios produced seven feature films.

Yet, 1939 was when World War II began. The allies' aircraft repeatedly bombed both Hanoi and Saigon after Japanese troops moved into Indochina in 1942. (A bomb that fell on the maternity ward in the Phủ Doãn Hospital in Hanoi killed my mother who was there to give birth to my newborn brother.) After this war ended, there came the national resistance movement against French colonialism, and then the Vietnam War. Having the same fate as the country, Vietnam's cinema industry, despite its attempt to rise, continued to be immersed in the darkness of wars and dependence. During this gloomy period, movie theaters in all cities controlled by the French only showed French films or French dubbed films. I witnessed that during my adolescent years in Hanoi when my father took me to the Philamonique Theater or Cầu Gỗ Theater. I still remember watching *Limelight* by Charlie Chaplin, *The Best Years of Our Life* (in French, *Les Plus Belles Anne de Notre Vie*) by American director William Wyler, which

won seven Oscars in 1947, and *All about Eve* (in French, *Ève*) by American director Joseph Leo Mankiewicz in 1950, which received fourteen Oscar nominations.

Reading *Ciné Revue* with my father's explanation, I understood that most movies then were produced by the Americans and that the French were only the exclusive distributors in their colonies. Real French films were indeed rare, let alone Vietnamese films.

FROM 1954 TO THE FIRST REPUBLIC

After fifteen years of complete paralysis due to wars, in early 1954 Hanoi finally produced *Kiếp Hoa* (The fate of flowers), with the script and cast from Kim Chung Troupe, but the director and movie set were from Hong Kong. Just like *Cánh Đồng Mạ* before, only one film was made.

At the same time, in Saigon, Việt Thanh Film made *Quan Âm Thị Kính*, while the director Tổng Ngọc Hạp made *Lục Vân Tiên* with actress Thu Trang playing the heroine in the story. Notably, Alpha Film produced *Bến Cũ* (The old station), which was the first color movie made in Vietnam, even though it was only recorded by a 16mm film camera. The lead male actor was Hoàng Vĩnh Lộc, and the director was Thái Thúc Nha who also owned Alpha Film. These two people would continue to contribute greatly to the development of the Vietnamese cinema industry.

Three weeks after the French defeat in Điện Biên Phủ, in June 1954, an American military mission led by General Edward Lansdale started establishing operations in Vietnam. Two months later, an armistice between Việt Minh and France was signed in Geneva. Vietnam was thereby divided into two parts: the (communist) Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the North, and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in the South. American aircraft and ships brought nearly a million people from the North to the South in a campaign called "Passage to Freedom." I was among this group and became a refugee within my own country.

As the coordinator of this exodus, right after arriving in Vietnam, General Lansdale, together with a few Philippine cinema professionals, quickly finished a film called *Ánh Sáng Miền Nam* (The shining light in the south) as propaganda. Following that, still with the topic of migration, came the film *Chúng Tôi Muốn Sống* (We want to live) with Bùi Diễm as the producer and Vĩnh Noãn the director. More than a year after the exodus, in October 1955, the RVN officially became an independent state. Simultaneously with the last French soldier going home, Vietnam's cinema ended sixty years of French dependence.

At that time, the story of Americans helping dislodge the British and French colonial influences in South Vietnam was truly an enticing topic that inspired a novel called *The Quiet American* by Graham Greene, published in 1955. The female character named Phuong was a Saigonesse girl who was pulled between a British writer and an American CIA agent. It was Edward Lansdale who arranged for *The Quiet American* to be filmed in Saigon by Director Joseph Mankiewicz in 1956, with leading actors Michael Redgrave and Audie Murphy.

I was offered the script and casting invitation for the lead female role by Director Mankiewicz, but due to objections from my family, I could only make a brief appearance in the movie. The consultant for Mankiewicz at that time was Bùi Diễm, who later left the film studio to enter politics. (His last position was ambassador of the Republic of Vietnam in the United States.) Understanding this situation, later on in 1957, Bùi Diễm personally arranged for me to officially undertake a cinema career,

with the lead female role as a nun in the movie *Hồi Chuông Thiên Mụ* (The bell of Thiên Mụ pagoda) of which he was the executive producer.

Both movies, before the premiere day, had a formal reception at the Continental Hotel on Tự Do Street (meaning Freedom), the new name for Rue Catinat under the French. These two American–Vietnamese movies indeed marked a special progress in the film industry of Vietnam, from a French colony to an independent republic.

Due to historical circumstances, Vietnam was deeply influenced by French culture. After the French left, the Republic of Vietnam was assisted by the United States, and American films and English-language films imported by Cosunam began to come into the country. In the South, with nearly a million recent migrants from the North, ethnic cultural heritage still remained its unified identity. Talents came from all regions of the country—for example, in *Hồi Chuông Thiên Mụ*, the producer Bùi Diễm, lead male actor Lê Quỳnh, and lead female actress Kiều Chinh came from the North while director Lê Dân was a Southerner, and the movie was shot in Huế, with crews from both south and central Vietnam!

With these proper first steps, South Vietnam in the First Republic period properly inked the very first page in the history of the national film industry. Whereas cinema and media in the North were under the control of the state, in the South the government only provided support to help the private cinema industry to recover. International studios were invited into Vietnam to cooperate and help develop the private cinema industry.

In 1957 alone, together with *Hồi Chuông Thiên Mụ* by Tân Việt Studio, the South had thirty-seven other movies produced by private studios. Among them were *Người Đẹp Bình Dương* (The beauty from Bình Dương) of Mỹ Vân Studio with Thắm Thúy Hằng, and *Lòng Nhân Đạo, Ngọc Bồ Đề* (The good heart and the Bodhi Jade) with Kim Cương. In addition to actors such as Thu Trang, Trang Thiên Kim, Khánh Ngọc, Mai Trâm, Lê Quỳnh, Nguyễn Long, Long Cương, along with Thắm Thúy Hằng, Kim Cương, Kiều Chinh, and Thanh Nga, there came a new generation of talented actors such as Đoàn Châu Mậu, Trần Quang, Minh Trường Sơn, Xuân Phát, La Thoại Tân, Huy Cường, Ngọc Phú, Hùng Cường, Văn Hùng, Thành Được, Túy Phương, Nguyễn Chánh Tín, Túy Hồng, Kim Vui, Thanh Lan, and many more.

Also during this First Republic period, the foundation for the national cinema industry's technical facilities, from governmental to private sector, gradually formed. In 1959, the National Film Center was established. This was a state agency that assembled directors and technicians to produce movies. From a destitute cinema room in 1955 with neither personnel nor machines, only a few years later, with new technical equipment and a number of professional staff trained in the United States, the National Film Center, under director Đỗ Việt, was then able to produce many kinds of documentaries and feature films. Right after its establishment, its movie *Đứa Con Của Biển Cả* (Son of the sea) won the special prize at the Berlin International Film Festival.

Along with the 1960s came another achievement: the film *Chờ Sáng* (Waiting for daybreak), directed by Thân Trọng Kỳ, received another award for feature film at the Berlin International Film Festival. The leading actors, Lê Quỳnh and Kiều Chinh, were there in person, marking the first time Vietnamese actors representing the government-sponsored film sector attended an international film festival.

And the private movie sector also took a big step forward. In 1954, Thái Thúc Nha's Alpha Film Studio was able to produce *Bến Cũ* in which the picture and sound quality were still bad, but the spirit was high. Only a few short years later, Alpha Film became the first mainstream private film production in Vietnam. A typical success of

Alpha Film is *Mưa Rừng* (Forest rain), an adaptation of Hà Triều Hoa Phượng's opera of the same name. It was in color, with widescreen and starring Kiều Chinh, Kim Cương, Lê Quỳnh, Hoàng Vĩnh Lộc, Xuân Phát, Ngọc Phú, and still directed by Thái Thúc Nha.

Saigon had more than thirty private film studios, which made hundreds of new films (which cannot be listed here due to space constraint). This achievement was due to the steady technical and professional support both from the government (the National Film Center) and from the private sector (Alpha Film). These two entities and other private film studios had exchanged personnel and technology support, regardless of origin. Besides nationally acclaimed directors such as Hoàng Vĩnh Lộc and Bùi Sơn Duân, there were several French-trained directors like Lê Dân, Lê Mộng Hoàng, Hoàng Anh Tuấn, Võ Doãn Châu, and Đặng Trần Thức. And they all worked comfortably with directors Lê Hoàng Hoa, Thân Trọng Kỳ, and other film professionals trained in the United States. It was from this foundation that the Vietnamese cinematic talents were able to grow, as I will show below.

THE VIETNAM CINEMA INDUSTRY TOOK OFF

With two studios fully equipped and staffed, the owner of Alpha Film, Thái Thúc Nha, became chair of the Vietnam Movie Producers Association. As a producer and director, fluent in both English and French, Thái Thúc Nha established a stellar international reputation. Alpha Film Studio would be the first studio that foreign studios looked for, and Thái Thúc Nha would be the first person to help integrate Vietnam cinema into the international arena.

In 1963, when a Hollywood filmmaker came to Saigon to make *A Yank in Vietnam*, Thái Thúc Nha became the coproducer and I the lead actress. And also at this time, Vietnam started to attend Asian film festivals. In 1965, Thái Thúc Nha and I took part in to the Tokyo Film Festival and, in the following years, Taipei and Hong Kong. Joining us were Mỹ Vân Film and actresses Thẩm Thúy Hằng, Kim Vui, and Thanh Lan.

In the mid-1960s, when the war escalated, U.S. troops officially entered the war, and television techniques also came to Vietnam. Initially, the U.S. military TV stations broadcast from aircraft, with tucked antenna, hovering over the city. Later, the Vietnam television system was formally established, and technical facilities were built, one by one, gradually covering all of South Vietnam. With five local TV stations and more than 350,000 TV sets, 80 percent of the population was able to watch television at home.

The war continued to escalate. U.S. military personnel increased. The television network of the U.S. military (the Armed Forces Vietnam Network/AFVN) was established, showing a number of then popular series, such as *Combat!* starring Vic Morrow and *Rawhide* starring Clint Eastwood. During this period, I was also invited to a few shows on AFVN to welcome U.S. celebrities and dignitaries who came to Vietnam to visit the troops. Thus, I had the opportunity to meet many Hollywood stars such as Tippi Hedren, Diane McBain, Glenn Ford, Danny Kaye, and Johnny Grant. I also recall receiving President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Minister Hoàng Đức Nhã, when they visited AFVN to send New Year's wishes to the allied soldiers.

At that time, the presence of a large number of American and allied troops in Vietnam led to many profound changes, attracting the attention of international media. Saigon became an international exchange center. Many new techniques from the United States, such as electronic music and the latest movies, were always updated.

Influenced by the small TV screen and the widescreen at newly built theaters such as Đại Nam and Rex, the audience of the seventh art in Vietnam increased rapidly. Hence, although it recovered in the mid-1950s, only in the 1960s, in the Second Republic period, did Vietnam cinema really become matured and was officially recognized as an important art form.

In 1969, an annual award dedicated to cinema was approved. I was honored to receive a national film prize in the first year, awarded by President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu. The year 1969 also saw the launch of an annual film festival called “Vietnam Cinema Day.” With effective support from the government, on September 22, 1969, all movie theaters showed Vietnamese films free of charge. The Movie Producers Association (chaired by Thái Thúc Nha) successfully organized this special activity.

After that, the film industry became a foreground industry to be boosted. Thanks to supporting policies to promote investment, the businesses in the film industry could join force in making better movies. It was then that Liên Ảnh Company was formed. With the participation of many studios and coordination by Quốc Phong (publisher of *Phim Ảnh* magazine), Liên Ảnh quickly gathered sufficient funds needed to make the films that met audiences’ demands. Larger capital meant bigger movies and stronger support. From the success of *Chân Trời Tím* (The purple horizon), story by Văn Quang and directed by Lê Hoàng Hoa, starring Kim Vui, Hùng Cường, Quốc Phong, and Lưu Trạch Hưng, Liên Ảnh made many more successful movies and enjoyed a large number of spectators. In addition, with specific aid measures for private filmmakers, the artists were encouraged to produce movies themselves. Kim Cương, Thẩm Thúy Hằng, Tuý Hồng, and other artists eventually established their own studios.

For me, it was time for Giao Chi Studio to be established. With special help from the Ministry of Information and Mass Mobilization (under Ngô Khắc Tinh and Hoàng Đức Nhã), the National Film Center, and many branches of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam, Giao Chi Film and Hoàng Vĩnh Lộc successfully produced *Người Tình Không Chân Dung* (The faceless lover). In this movie, besides working as the executive producer, I costarred with Vũ Xuân Thông, Minh Trường Sơn, Trần Quang, Tam Phan, and Hùng Cường. This was the first Vietnamese film to receive the best movie and the best actress awards at the Asian Film Festival in 1972.

Also on this occasion, the Third Film Festival was set out to increase cooperation between Vietnam and foreign countries. The chair of the Movie Producers Association suggested that only one association specializing in production would be inadequate, and hence all artists and professionals would need to participate. Therefore, the conference decided to establish a Vietnam Cinema Association, and I was nominated to be the first chair.

After the establishment of Vietnam Cinema Association, due to the contacts made at the many film festivals and from starring in U.S. movies shot in Asia, I was able to help improve international relations. In 1973, the Republic of Vietnam became the host country of that year’s Asian Film Festival. Saigon turned into the meeting venue of the international film industry, including filmmakers, directors, and actors from Bangkok, Tokyo, Taipei, Hong Kong, Singapore, Seoul, and other Asian capitals. Thanks to support from the government’s National Film Center, as well as generous assistance from many officials, businessmen, studio owners, movie theaters, and especially the dedication of all artists and professionals in the Vietnam Cinema Association, the Asian Film Festival Week 1973 in Saigon was a great success. From these activities, many contracts were made, and many joint projects between Vietnam and Thailand, Singapore, Taiwan, and Japan were discussed.

The Paris Accords of 1973 on the cessation of hostilities in Vietnam were announced early in the year; therefore, even though skirmishes still happened, most Southern cities were relatively unharmed. During Christmas in 1973, New Year's Eve in 1974, and then the Lunar New Year of the Tiger in 1974, Saigon was more crowded than ever, and all major theaters were showing Vietnamese movies.

On the Sixth Vietnam Cinema Day, in September 1974, the chair of the Movie Producers Association excitedly declared that the Vietnam cinema industry had truly taken off. Lư Trạch Hưng, the owner of Mỹ Vân Studio, announced the promotion for the construction of a large film set on Biên Hòa Highway. Tôn Thất Cảnh and Đỗ Tiến Đức, directors of the National Film Center, were really confident that the Vietnamese People Watch Vietnamese Films movement would be stronger and stronger.

Everyone was excited about the future. The Vietnam Cinema Association and I were requested to quickly invite a few international actors to participate in the VII Vietnam Cinema Day in September 1975. And then the Vietnam Cinema Day of 1975, or any since, never came!

A BEAUTIFUL DAWN IN MEMORY

From 1920, when the first movie theater was inaugurated near Hoàn Kiếm Lake in Hanoi until the country was divided in 1954, Vietnamese citizens mostly watched foreign films. Vietnam's cinema industry at that time was just scattered fragments buried in the shadows of wars and dependence.

Yet, in just twenty years, even during the most intense times of the war, the cinema industry in South Vietnam was able to produce all movie genres. In the Lunar New Year of 1975, all major theaters in Saigon were still full of audiences who came, not for Western, Chinese, or Indian movies, but for Vietnamese movies.

That was the twenty-year history of the cinema industry during the Republic of Vietnam period as I personally experienced and based on my recollections. It was a beautiful dawn, an exciting beginning.