

HEADLINE: Good morning Vietnam

COMING SOON: A brand-new day for the Vietnamese film industry

Stories and pictures by WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

Vietnam, Bangkok Post

At a time when Nang Nak (Mrs Nak) is set to become the highest-grossing Thai movie ever, strengthening Thailand's film industry, Vietnam is still in its infancy as far as movies are concerned. But the severe crisis our near-neighbour faces might not be irreversible. Outlook zooms in.

Sitting at her desk, behind the faultless glass of the ticket office, Thu Huong nibbles languorously on some pumpkin seeds. This pretty and all dolled-up Vietnamese ticket-seller at Thang Tam on Hong Bai street \_ Hanoi's oldest movie theatre \_ is not overburdened with work.

A hundred people, at the most, attend each showing of the one and only film displayed for the third week in a row: Shakespeare Dang Yeu (Shakespeare in Love) from British film director John Madden. How about featuring some Vietnamese movies? The young ticket-seller bursts out laughing. "People here don't come to movie theatres to see Vietnamese productions. For that, they'd rather stay home," she explains, with no beating around the bush.

This is the very problem the Vietnamese film industry is facing.

Since 1990, less and less people go to the cinema. Some figures state a fall as dramatic as 80 percent, and the market is flooded with pirated video tapes (mostly smuggled from Thailand, or so many people said). Television screens are filled with cheap, instant-noodle-like serials.

A young seller of roasted-corn on Hong Bai road, for example, whose daily income never exceeds 7,000 VND (19 baht) says she has never stepped inside a movie theatre \_ and probably never will \_ because of the high price of tickets.

The Vietnamese movie industry is going through some hard times, and there are many reasons for it.

When the Socialist Republic of Vietnam opted for the politics of doi moi, literally "change for the new" in 1986, the cinema moved from an entirely subsidised industry to an entertainment activity in a free market economy. It became more exposed to outside influences within Vietnamese society \_ and people's tastes and demands change fast.

The cinema, which was officially created in 1953 by President Ho Chi Minh as part of the Ministry of Propaganda, has been forced to find new legitimacy for itself and regain its initial, clearly-defined role.

"At present, the Vietnamese movie industry has to learn how to rely on itself, in an open market economy. It has to build its own means of survival, without entirely depending on the state's grants," explains Tran The Dan, deputy general director of the Vietnam Cinema Department of the Ministry of Culture and Information. "It is not a tool of propaganda

anymore, but simply a means of entertainment. Yet, Vietnamese movies have to try and preserve Vietnam's cultural identity, its moral, familial and traditional values. Mostly backed with government money, it is normal that it serves the society's general interests."Without the government subsidies (which count for more than 70 percent of a production budget), the Vietnamese cinema would have been dead and gone long ago.

Ms Nguyen Thi Hong Ngat, general director of Vietnam Feature Film Co, the main studio in Hanoi's suburbs, says, "We are working hard trying to produce good quality films. We are not dead for sure, but in very bad health. Everything is lacking, from money to proper equipment and interesting story ideas."The lack of good stories to be transferred to the screen, within the constraints of a reasonable budget, is indeed sorely felt. "The cruel lack of story scenarios is surely one of the main problems which weighs down the sector. I have read a few good stories but it would cost a fortune to transfer them to the screen," comments famous actor Nguyen Ha Phong, who has worked as director assistant on many full-length films. Vietnam lists some 300 film directors throughout the country, mostly graduates from the unique School of Cinema in Hanoi. Employed as government officials, most prefer to work as free-lancers for television, which brings in a fast and more substantial income.

Television broadcasts around five serials a day, for free, as opposed to the 30,000 VND (80 baht) that must be paid for a movie ticket. It's a great force against which the defenceless cinema cannot fight. In the past few years, many cinema managers have had to go out of business or, if lucky, transform their movie theatre into a disco, supermarket or petrol station.

"Knowing that the television remains the main source of information (for 70 percent of Vietnamese people), we have to grant it the main part of our budget," explains Tran The Dan, from the Ministry of Culture, taking a sip of bitter green tea. That means the movie industry has to make do with 10 percent of the ministry's budget, while the television delights in around 60 percent. Thus in 1999, 10 billion VND (26.6 million baht) was spent on 10 Vietnamese productions. That means the budget of one film reaches its ceiling at 1 billion VND (2.6 million baht). In comparison, Titanic, one of the most expensive movies of all time, surfed on a budget of around \$220 million (8.3 billion baht). The number of movies for the big screen has dropped greatly: whereas 30 films were produced in 1980, there were only 10 in 1990.

Weedy-looking, the young Vietnamese movie industry also seems lacking in inspiration, tortured by its past. "Our history is punctuated by wars. We have endured nearly 100 years of wars. Heavy losses are haunting the survivors," comments Nguyen Thi Hong Ngat. "We have a quota of five movies a year. I do my best in order to diversify the topics. Obviously, it would be good to have more entertaining topics, on everyday life and on the present-day society," she acknowledged. Despite this black picture of the movie industry, there are still some glimmers of hope (see side-bar). Most people working in this field predict that by the year 2005, the Vietnamese cinema will be back on its feet.

"I hope that in the 21st century, peace and prosperity will be the dominant mood, which will allow the living standard of Vietnamese people to rise. People will think of having children and entertaining themselves," says Nguyen Thi Hong Ngat, with a big smile. "I strongly believe that within five years, Vietnamese cinema will regain the place it has lost. The trigger mechanism for this industry to enjoy a new boom could come like a shooting star in the sky, marking the start of a new era," she said.

In comparison, many newly-released Thai movies are looked on as little marvels by Vietnamese professionals.

Tran The Dan said the living standard of some well-off Thai families, who could afford to send their offspring to Hollywood or renowned American movie schools, had done much for

the development of this art. "I am very impressed by the way Thai movies have taken off, in terms of technique and creative achievements," he said, referring to success stories like Fun Bar Karaoke and Nang Nak. "When we can catch hold of the right topic, we will have a great chance of creating a good film. But I think Thai films, like all Asian films, have to make sure to protect their national identity. If we try and follow American culture, we get nowhere," the former, and eminent, film director explained, hoping that more collaboration on film-making would develop within the framework of Asean.

Faint glimmer of hope

On the outskirts of Hanoi, a brand new building graces the dusty sidewalk: the National Cinema Centre (NCC). Opened recently, it is working hard to reverse the engines of a dying movie industry. We talked to the NCC's director Mr Tran Thanh Hung

\* The National Centre of Cinema (NCC) opened with great pomp around a year ago. What does the project consist of?

"The construction work started nine years ago and (the centre) was inaugurated in November 1998. The investment totalled 35 billion VND (93.3 million baht), mainly put up by the Vietnamese state. The centre is composed of six movie theatres, ranging from a hall that seats 400, to a small theatre seating 48 people, used for showing video films. In fact, the present centre comes within the framework of a huge project with a second part which is still under consideration.

"The second portion of the project will appeal to entertainment fans in general, offering a giant-screen movie theatre, an exhibition hall presenting the evolution of Vietnamese cinema , a museum showcasing Vietnam's traditional arts \_ with live performances \_ as well as another complex including restaurants and shops."

\* When do you expect this project to start?

"We hope this second part of the project will be approved by the government this year and that by, let's say, 2010, the National Centre of Cinema will become the number one entertainment complex in Vietnam."

\* At present, how many people are coming to the centre?

"On weekends and during public holidays, we make use of three theatres, but only two during weekdays. Actually, we are usually providing our smallest rooms for rent, for educational purposes \_ foreign language classes. But we can say that the National Cinema Centre is already the most busy and frequented cinema. We ring up around 3,000 entries a month, although during some film festivals we can record up to 13,000 entries. Even the movie theatres in Hanoi which show only American movies do not attract more visitors than we do."

\* Is it the success you expected?

"No. Especially considering the quality of the equipment we offer here. There used to be times when people were queuing in front of movie theatres but by now, many cinemas have turned into supermarkets or petrol stations.

"The Vietnamese cinema has endured a crisis, following the opening up of the country (since 1986 and the doi moi policy). People have an increasing range of choice as far as entertainment is concerned, and the quality of Vietnamese movies often leaves much to be desired and the equipment of movie theatres are getting outdated. Many studios have gone

out of business as they could not make a profit, even 50 percent of their initial investment in producing a film. For most of the cinemas, even the amount paid for the distribution rights of foreign movies can never be paid back. Without the financial support of the state, the whole sector would be completely paralysed. The National Cinema Centre also demonstrates the government's strong will to speed up this industry's recovery."

\* What do you hope for the Vietnamese cinema?

"The first thing to do, in order to help the cinema come back to life, is improve the quality of Vietnamese movies. The films' content must suit more closely the people's demands. Then, the quality of the equipment \_ theatres, armchairs, etc \_ must improve, together with the provision of service. The public is getting increasingly demanding as far as the quality of the service is concerned. Furthermore, the price of the ticket should remain within everyone's reach.

"Luckily, there are some encouraging signs, like young film directors who, by presenting their productions at various film festivals here and abroad, get recognition. Thus, they can help draw crowds back into movie theatres and little by little, integrate themselves completely in the cultural life of our country.

"A few years ago, only young people would visit movie theatres; now we can find some people aged from 30 to 50 years old, up to elderly couples sometimes. This is something very new and as professionals, we read it as a very positive thing for cinema in Vietnam. Hopefully, there will also be an increasing number of co-productions, with countries such as Thailand for instance, within the framework of Asean. The recovery will take time but surely within the next five or ten years, the Vietnamese movie industry will have completely changed, for the better."