

Beyond the American Lens: Examining the South Vietnamese Voice in Films and Documentaries

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the erasure of the South Vietnamese perspective in Vietnam War films and documentaries, arguing that this absence distorts public memory and historical understanding of the conflict. While the narratives of American soldiers and North Vietnamese ideologies are frequently centered in cinematic portrayals, the experiences, ideologies, and motivations of the South Vietnamese—those who fought to defend their sovereignty—are often sidelined, stereotyped, or omitted altogether. This line of research begins by defining the three major perspectives of the war—American, North Vietnamese, and South Vietnamese—to contextualize those which are missing. Through an analysis of documentaries like Ken Burns’ *The Vietnam War*, Lloyd Ellison’s *Vietnam: A Television History*, and other Hollywood films, this article seeks to identify recurring cinematic patterns that contribute to the marginalization of South Vietnamese characters and negates their agency, which together, produce a myopic cinematic representation of the war itself. It then explores historical factors (i.e., the intellectual climate typifying postwar academia, American reactions to refugees, and cultural stereotypes) that have contributed to this erasure. Finally, the article considers methods for addressing such displacement, including the formation of community-led film festivals and the construction of public memorials, that seek to reclaim and amplify the South Vietnamese perspective. By exposing the absence of a crucial voice of the Vietnam War in film and offering paths toward repair, this article calls for a more complete historical narrative of the war itself.

KEYWORDS

Vietnam War cinema, South Vietnamese identity, historical erasure, Vietnamese diaspora, public memory, cinematic representation, Vietnamization

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Introduction

The Vietnam War is often described as “the most televised war in history,” (Mandelbaum, 1982) with images of its horrors being broadcast all over the world and its stories being told decades later. Despite the abundance of footage and popular discussion of the war, one crucial perspective remains largely absent from films: the voice of the South Vietnamese. Even though there is an abundance of documentaries that recount the war, the experiences of those who lived in the South—the people who fought, survived, and were eventually displaced—often remain unheard. Instead, most narratives of the war offered within a distinctly Western context are told from the vantage of American soldiers, Western journalists, and North Vietnamese leaders.

The absence of South Vietnamese voices in Vietnam War films stems from historical misperceptions, such as those surrounding refugees, stereotypical tropes of Orientalism, and academic movements that overlooked the distinct South Vietnamese identity. In light of the myopic perspective offered, cultural events like the Viet Film Fest and commemorations such as Black April have become increasingly important, not just to preserve the memory of the war amidst the diaspora, but also to offer a solution to the continuing absence of the South Vietnamese in cinematic representations.

This article begins by introducing literature speaking to the divergent and often dualistic perspectives of the Vietnam War as they were represented in the media of the time. It demonstrates how these perspectives were often not only inaccurate, but incomplete, leading to a skewed history and an only partial public memory. After illustrating the systematic erasure of the South Vietnamese voice in film, it then proceeds to introduce the ethnographic data informing these analyses, primarily in the form of participant interviews. These interviews provide the basis for the following section, which identifies key themes present across interviews. The article concludes by considering methods for reintroducing the South Vietnamese perspective into accounts of the war, as well as for honoring both individuals’ lived experiences and personal recollections.

Literature Review

Key Perspectives of the Vietnam War

To understand the absence of the South Vietnamese voice in Vietnam War documentaries and films, it is first necessary to define the key perspectives that emerged from the war

itself. The Vietnam War was not a monolithic event characterized by a singular narrative, but a conflict of many different perspectives, all shaped by different and often competing guiding ideologies, national goals, and personal convictions. For example, the Americans sought to contain the spread of communism as part of a broader Cold War strategy; the North Vietnamese fought under a banner of national liberation and reunification; and the South Vietnamese defended what they understood as a sovereign, non-communist republic of their own making. These three dominant perspectives—American, North Vietnamese, and South Vietnamese—each interpreted the war through their own political, cultural, and moral lenses, and they continue to influence how the war is remembered, represented, and understood by each side.

The first and most well-known perspective comes from the American side where Americans viewed their involvement as part of the Cold War struggle to contain communism. This is why as Do (2012) notes, studies on the Vietnam War frequently focus on,

...two camps of analysis. The dominant view is represented by the orthodox tradition which asserts that the United States intervened in Vietnam with misguided motivations. Orthodox historians claim that the fall of Saigon was inevitable and that America's involvement was "predestined to fail." Revisionist historians challenge the position that America's involvement was detrimental and perceive the U.S.'s role in Vietnam as a necessary, yet flawed effort in which factors outside of governmental and military policies contributed to its failure (p. 5).

It is important to note that both camps of analysis focus solely on American political designs, strategy, and domestic consequences, highlighting the experience of American soldiers, policymakers, and the general public. As a result, discussions of the war tend to emphasize American intentions and outcomes over the perspectives offered by the Vietnamese people. From this perspective, South Vietnam is not seen as a sovereign actor, but as a passive setting for American action and failure. While it is likely of little surprise that American scholars and journalists would focus on matters germane to U.S. decision-making, military strategy, and domestic political issues, such a narrow emphasis resulted in a historiography where Vietnamese actors are ancillary characters and South Vietnam itself is merely a setting—a stage, as it were—for American intervention.

On the other hand, the North Vietnamese perspective of the Vietnam War is rooted in a narrative of national liberation and anti-colonial struggle. Such perspectives, often championed by the modern Vietnamese government, frame the conflict as an effort to

reunify Vietnam and expel foreign imperialist forces: first the French, then the American. Under this framing, the Vietnam War was an act of resistance against US imperialism (50 years since the liberation of South Vietnam and the reunification of the country (30/4/1975-30/4/2025), 2025). This viewpoint emphasizes the sacrifices made by the Vietnamese people, positioning them as patriotic revolutionaries fighting for independence, socialism, and reunification. Rather than viewing the Vietnam War as a civil conflict, the North Vietnamese perspective frames it as a continuation of Vietnam's long resistance against foreign domination.

This interpretation diverges from that of the South Vietnamese perspective, which centers around the fight for a sovereign, non-communist Vietnam rooted in democratic values, national independence, and traditional Vietnamese cultural values. As scholars Tuong Vu and Sean Fear argue in *The Republic of Vietnam, 1955–1975: Vietnamese Perspectives on Nation Building*, the South Vietnamese were "far from puppets or incidental players in the conflict" — instead committed to a robust nation-building agenda of their own. So deep did this commitment run that even ordinary citizens and civil society actors "demonstrated a firm commitment to constitutionalism and republican values" through brave opposition to their own government's authoritarian tendencies, and long before the war's end, a distinctly anticommunist national identity had emerged and crystallized in the South (Vu & Fear, 2019, p. 2). This vision of South Vietnam came from not only opposition to the communist ideology adopted by the North but also opposition to the control of foreign powers like France and later the United States. For many, their country was a fledgling republic striving to build a modern nation grounded in democratic governance, traditional Vietnamese culture, and resistance to totalitarian rule. One such example of this perspective comes from the memoir of an ARVN soldier, Nguyễn Công Luận, whose peers described their motivation for enlisting: "They said in a world where the conflict between communist powers—especially China—and the free world was becoming more and more serious, another war in Việt Nam would be inevitable in the next few years. In such a situation, we should be serving in the army to defend our stronghold of freedom" (Nguyen, 2012, p. 151). This "our" to which Luận refers reflects a sense of nationalism present within South Vietnam rooted in resistance to both French colonialism and Northern ideologies. For many South Vietnamese, the war was a fight to preserve a uniquely South Vietnamese identity: one that sought democratic reform, cultural self-determination, and national sovereignty distinct from the North and other Western powers in the face of both ideological conquest and Cold War superpower politics.

Having now defined the three central perspectives of the Vietnam War, it becomes clear that each side approached the conflict with distinct motivations and self-perceptions. The North

viewed themselves as liberators, the Americans as conflicted interveners, and the South as determined defenders of their sovereignty. Yet, while each of these perspectives coexist in historical reality and cultural memory, they are far from equally represented in documented history and public narratives. One medium where this inequality becomes especially visible is film, where while American and North Vietnamese narratives have historically dominated Vietnam War documentaries and movies, the South Vietnamese voice, though equally as important, remains absent. Film was selected over other media as unlike media such as television, which document events as they unfold more or less in real time, film involves an active process of re-interpreting and reconstructing events in a symbolically loaded way. As a result, film is uniquely suited to provide insight into how the war is remembered, re-narrated, and even entered into the realm of myth at times.

This selective remembering of the war not only misrepresents the war but also distorts the legacy of an entire nation and its people. The first of these cultural artifacts to be analyzed here, Ken Burns' *The Vietnam War*, as an illustrative case in point. Released in 2017 by PBS, the eighteen-hour, ten-episode series, co-directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, draws on archival footage, photographs, and first-person testimony from nearly eighty witnesses—American veterans, North Vietnamese soldiers, South Vietnamese civilians, anti-war protesters, and journalists—to chronicle the conflict from its colonial origins through the fall of Saigon in 1975. It was widely promoted as the most comprehensive documentary account of the war ever produced. On the surface, it presents as a documentary praised for covering “all sides” of the war, yet it is noticeably silent when it comes to depicting South Vietnam as a self-determining actor. Such silence hints at a deeper erasure of the South Vietnamese voice: one that warrants closer analysis.

Constructing Absence: How Film Erased the South Vietnamese Voice

The absence of the South Vietnamese voice in Vietnam War films and documentaries is a recurring pattern in cinematic representations. This section seeks to analyze these patterns of representation in film, ultimately defining the absence of the South Vietnamese voice. Such trends include the centering of American perspectives, the reduction of South Vietnamese characters to supporting roles or stereotypical figures, as well as a failure to acknowledge the complexity of the South Vietnamese cultural and political milieu during the war. Together, these patterns contribute to a distorted portrayal of the South Vietnamese, ultimately erasing their independent voice from mainstream film portrayals of the Vietnam War.

One of these patterns becomes especially clear in Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's *The Vietnam War*, a documentary that earned near-universal critical acclaim, celebrated specifically for its breadth of perspectives, with reviewers praising its "refreshing — and sobering — perspective informed by those who fought" (Gawthorpe, 2020). Yet despite this praise, a closer examination of how the documentary treats the South Vietnamese specifically reveals a significant gap: it overlooks the South Vietnamese nationalist identity, failing to recognize them as people with their own ideological identities and independence. Specifically, Burns and Novick's documentary heavily focuses on Ho Chi Minh's ideology but neglects to do the same for the Southern ideology. In this film, the Northern motives and ideals are deeply elaborated upon, yet those of the South Vietnamese do not receive commensurate treatment (Moyar, 2018). This difference in coverage is significant. As the quote from Nguyễn Công Luận introduced above indicates, the South Vietnamese did possess well-defined ideological convictions; however, this fact is ignored in Burns and Novick's film. When the South Vietnamese are portrayed as lacking any sort of ideological commitment or well-thought-out motives, they are defined not as a country with a cause, but as an object onto which America projected its own convictions.

Thus, by serving as a platform for propping up American ideals and ambitions in this way, the South Vietnamese narrative became effectively suppressed. One analysis of Ken Burns' documentary highlights how the South Vietnamese narrative is merged with the American one, noting that,

On the other hand, the South Vietnamese narrative appears to be coupled with the American narrative as though the failures of the United States to protect and guide South Vietnam ultimately decides the fate of South Vietnam rather than the South Vietnamese deciding for themselves. In this way, the lack of representation likewise appears to undermine the very independence of South Vietnam as its own nation and not as an American puppet state, much to the chagrin of its former citizens and soldiers (Aksharanugraha, 2016, p. 100).

Burns and Novick's documentary doesn't just forget the South; it ties their fate entirely to American decisions and thus causes the South Vietnamese perspective to be absorbed into the American narrative. Their voice is suppressed by the framing of the war as a U.S. tragedy rather than a Vietnamese one. Despite the fact that the South Vietnamese indeed possessed a well-developed nation-building ideology of their own, rooted in constitutionalism, republican values, and anticommunist nationalism (Vu & Fear, 2019), this fact is ignored in

Burns and Novick's film. In this way, the prevailing narrative emphasizes how America failed to protect and guide South Vietnam instead of focusing on the South Vietnamese as a whole. By tying the South's fate entirely to American action, these films eliminate its independent voice and by extension, fail to recognize South Vietnam and its people as anything independent at all.

Admittedly, there are times when the South Vietnamese are portrayed as distinct figures, as separate from Americans. However, a common pattern that emerges in this regard is that even when South Vietnamese people appear in Vietnam War films, they often are portrayed as caricatures, distorted through the application of an American lens. While their presence, strictly speaking, may be observed, this misrepresentation still constitutes the absence of voice because it fails to position them as subjects with independent motives and agency. One example of this erasure is present in the PBS series *Vietnam: A Television History*. In this documentary, coverage of the South Vietnamese focuses on helplessness and corruption. Specifically, it depicts the South Vietnamese as victims and survivors, whereas other films of the time portrayed the South Vietnamese as prostitutes, pickpockets, pimps, and drug addicts. One telling example of this victimhood framing within the PBS series is its portrayal of the fall of Saigon, in which South Vietnamese characters appear primarily as weeping refugees and desperate figures clinging to departing helicopters—stripped of any political agency or historical voice and rendered entirely as casualties of American withdrawal rather than as actors in their own national story. Even in films that seemingly offered South Vietnamese characters more screen time, meaningful representation remained elusive. In Barry Levinson's *Good Morning, Vietnam*, the main South Vietnamese character—Tuan, who befriends the American protagonist Adrian Cronauer and is initially presented as a sympathetic local figure—ultimately turned out to be a Viet Cong operative, transforming the film's most prominent South Vietnamese character into a hidden enemy. Rather than offering a genuine window into the South Vietnamese experience, the film ultimately reduced its Vietnamese lead to a narrative device designed to generate dramatic tension for the American protagonist, reinforcing rather than challenging the pattern of erasure.

While their history was erased in Vietnam, South Vietnamese refugees in the U.S. were also met with a degree of ignorance and distortion of their own history (Hoang, 2024). The idea of victimhood and corruption in PBS's depiction of the South Vietnamese constructs the people as immobilized by helplessness, and as such, this creates an image of the South Vietnamese as passive victims incapable of autonomy. By focusing solely on the failures and corruption inherent in the South Vietnamese government, the PBS portrayals silence the true complexity of South Vietnamese political life. Even though the South Vietnamese did possess their own vision of sovereignty, this highly nuanced reality is reduced to

stereotypical or passive roles. This portrayal undermines the idea that they could enact any authority or agency, which, in turn, ensured that their independent identity and motives were completely overshadowed by the American-centric lens of victimhood and corruption.

Yet the reduction of South Vietnamese characters to more simplistic roles while disregarding their nuance is not just a problem plaguing only documentaries. In the decades that immediately followed the end of the Vietnam War, “A spate of Hollywood films on the Vietnam War from this perspective abounded in the seventies and eighties: *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1987), *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987), and *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978). In these Hollywood films, the Vietnamese were most often represented as anonymous peasants, perverse Vietcong, and female prostitutes and snipers who populated a deserted wasteland that fixes Vietnam in the U.S. imaginary” (Duong, 2023, p. 55). Consider, for instance, a pivotal scene in Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* in which a young Vietnamese girl approaches the American soldiers and solicits them for money and sex. She has no name, no backstory, no political identity—she exists solely as a transactional figure in the American soldiers’ orbit. In one brief exchange, the film encapsulates the broader cinematic treatment of the South Vietnamese: they are not subjects but scenery, stripped of selfhood and reduced to whatever function serves the American narrative at hand. The desolate, rubble-strewn urban backdrop that frames this scene further reinforces the idea of Vietnam as a place to be rescued or escaped, not a country whose people had their own stake in its fate. This erasure of South Vietnamese agency—concentrated into a single, unremarkable scene that the film does not pause to interrogate—illustrates how such misrepresentations accumulate into a larger pattern that perpetuates an American narrative of intervention.

Another stereotype, stemming from the “Yellow Peril” narrative, also played a significant role. The Yellow Peril narrative, which originated in the 19th century, depicted Asians as a threat to Western civilization. This evolved into the “Red Menace” during the Cold War, with Asians portrayed as “inscrutable” and “ruthless killers.” In Vietnam War films, this stereotype continued, reducing Vietnamese characters, including the ARVN, to simplistic roles that served simply to contrast the white protagonist (Kleinen, 2004, p. 436-437). By relying on these racial tropes, filmmakers undermined the idea that South Vietnamese people had distinct identities, values, and experiences of war. This reliance on stereotypes, like the earlier discussed academic misrepresentations and perceptions to refugees, further contributed to the image of the South Vietnamese as either victims or enemies. In none of these portrayals is there space for the distinct independent, nationalist identity that characterized much of the South Vietnamese experience—what Vu and Fear describe as a ‘robust nation-building agenda’ driven by South Vietnamese themselves (2019, p. 1).

In sum, the absence of the South Vietnamese voice in Vietnam War films has occurred through two key pathways. First, the South Vietnamese narrative, as seen in Ken Burns' documentary, is often intertwined with the American story, portraying the nation as dependent on U.S. intervention. This erases any sort of agency or self-identity on the part of the South Vietnamese. Second, when South Vietnamese figures do appear in film, they are often reduced to stereotypes: victims, criminals, or faceless soldiers. This misrepresentation disregards the South Vietnamese perspective that Nguyễn Công Luận cites, in which many viewed their role in the war as defending the values of freedom and self-determination. Despite such evidence, films and documentaries continue to frame South Vietnam as little more than a byproduct of U.S. intervention.

Together, these two portrayals reveal that the South Vietnamese perspective has not simply been ignored, but erased within the annals of history. The question then becomes: how did this erasure occur? What historical and political factors allowed for an entire nation's voice to be silenced in popular media?

Foundations of Erasure: The Historical Forces Behind the Absence of Voice

The absence of the South Vietnamese voice in Vietnam War films can be traced back to a variety of historical factors that shaped both the public's understanding as well as film portrayals of the war. The representation of South Vietnamese people in the media was influenced not only by their portrayal during the war itself, but by initial American reactions to the ensuing Vietnamese refugee crisis following the Vietnam War's end in 1975, the role of postwar academia, and the continuing prevalence of Asian stereotypes in film. These factors worked together to create a cinematic environment that often silenced the voices of the South Vietnamese, portraying them as either victims or enemies within the larger context of the war.

The end of the Vietnam War in 1975 saw unprecedented waves of South Vietnamese refugees fleeing their collapsing country and seeking a new life in the U.S.. While many Americans were sympathetic to Vietnamese refugees, some communities displayed extreme hostility to Vietnamese refugees. A town ironically called Niceville, for instance, witnessed the creation of a "Gook Klux Klan," as over 80% of the town's residents disapproved of the Vietnamese refugees who resettled there (Borja, 2018). This violent rejection and othering of the South Vietnamese highlights a crucial part of the erasure: the South Vietnamese were not viewed as individuals capable of defining their own narrative, but as a threat to the social order. This hostility reinforces the idea of South Vietnamese people being seen as "outsiders" with little or no place in American society. In this way, the Vietnamese refugees'

narratives were shaped by the biases of others, leaving them unable to assert their own identities and perspectives on the war.

On the other hand, while many other Americans were sympathetic to the refugees, they viewed them primarily as victims of communism, often failing to see these individuals as autonomous agents with their own history (Hoang, 2024, p. 508). While this perspective may come from a well-intentioned place, it nonetheless disregards the South Vietnamese's autonomous self-identity by emphasizing their dependence on U.S. aid and support.

Though contradictory on the surface, both reactions—hostility and victimization—produced the same cinematic effect. Films are ultimately driven by public demand, and when the prevailing American perception of the South Vietnamese oscillated only between burden and victim, filmmakers had little incentive to portray them as anything more complex as the American public was only familiar with those two caricatures. The South Vietnamese were thus denied agency not only in public life, but on screen.

Another significant contributor to the erasure of South Vietnamese voices in film pertained to the academic climate in the years immediately following the Vietnam War. Academia at the time frequently overlooked the ideological identity of the South Vietnamese and diminished the contributions of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The work of Edward Miller (2013) supports these claims as he argues that previous scholarship portrayed South Vietnam as dependent on the United States and as generally lacking political legitimacy. In particular, Vietnamese anti-communism efforts, which originated with longstanding ideology prevalent in South Vietnam that long preceded the Vietnam War, was often interpreted through an American political lens. As shown in Nguyễn Công Luận's memoir previously, the South Vietnamese viewed themselves as defending their "stronghold of freedom" from northern ideologies. This ideology was distinct from its northern counterparts in that it had its roots in historical Vietnamese experiences with French colonization and communist oppression. However, many scholars and policymakers interpret this political stance as a simple extension of American Cold War ideology, effectively leaving out the history and politics of Vietnam itself (Hoang, 2016, p. 46). Thus, once more, the South Vietnamese are reduced to passive objects within America's larger narrative of its intervention in Vietnam.

This academic framing shapes how Vietnamese characters are portrayed in Hollywood and documentaries. When the ideology and values of the South Vietnamese are misunderstood in academic communities, filmmakers, who rely on the prevailing intellectual discourse to render their films authentic, therefore succumb to the follies of the same misguided narratives perpetuated in scholarly circles. Without a nuanced understanding of South

Vietnamese perspectives, filmmakers thus default to portrayals that either victimized or villainized them--never as independent actors with their own political goals. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), in particular, suffers from this neglect. As Nguyen (2017) explains, "Today the courage and sacrifice of the ARVN soldiers is all but forgotten — in Vietnam, it was erased by the victorious side; in America, by historical neglect." In Vietnam, this erasure was a product of political control, where the South Vietnamese perspective was erased to legitimize the North's postwar regime. In America, the erasure results from the narrative that was created that centers U.S. military contributions, neglecting South Vietnamese contributions to the war. However, all of these patterns in erasure reflect more than just cultural misunderstanding of the South Vietnamese; they represent a larger political and academic process which has shaped academic and film understanding of the South Vietnamese.

This process is defined by Long T. Bui's concept of Vietnamization, which he defines as a political and historical framework that has rendered the South Vietnamese as "disempowered" figures. They appear as tragic, voiceless subjects unable to exercise modern agency (Bui, 2011, p. 73). Vietnamization was not just a wartime strategy; it evolved into a postwar narrative framework that shaped South Vietnamese memory and who would be allowed to speak.

The concept of Vietnamization may offer some clarity in helping to tie all of these factors together. The initial American reactions to refugees, the academic misunderstanding of Vietnamese anti-communism viewed from the lens of Cold War politics, the neglect of South Vietnamese contributions to the war, and the racial stereotypes that reduce the South Vietnamese to shallow, stereotypical characters all resulted in a common effect: they denied the South Vietnamese agency and suppress their voice. Each of these factors contributed to the larger erasure of South Vietnamese identity from the historical narrative of the war. Under the framework of Vietnamization, the South Vietnamese are not treated as distinct subjects of history but as passive pawns in the American narrative of intervention. This erasure is especially evident in film, where South Vietnamese characters are often pushed to the margins in order to spotlight American intervention in their own country, denied a distinct ideological identity, or excluded from films about the very war that fundamentally shaped the course of their lives.

Data Collection

Methods

As a Vietnamese-American whose family traces its roots to the South Vietnamese diaspora, I am personally connected to the subject of this research. My interest in this topic stems from encountering Vietnam War narratives that frequently centered American experiences while giving comparatively little attention to South Vietnamese perspectives. Because of this personal connection, I recognize that I may be particularly attentive to questions of representation and historical memory. To mitigate potential bias, I incorporated perspectives from a variety of different interviewees including scholars, historians, and community leaders and grounded my analysis in both primary and secondary sources.

A qualitative research design employing thematic analysis and content analysis proved ideally suited for addressing the missing South Vietnamese voice in Vietnam War films. Thematic analysis enabled the identification of recurring patterns and perspectives across expert interviews, while content analysis provided a structured framework for examining the representation of South Vietnamese characters and narratives within films and documentaries. Together, these methods serve the present study's aim to explore personal experiences, historical contexts, and potential solutions to the issue of representation, uncovering the nuances typically overlooked in traditional scholarship of the Vietnamese diaspora.

Two methods used in the data collection process were chosen to meet these goals. The first method was historical archival analysis. This methodological approach allows for a deep analysis of the historical factors behind the representation in film, giving crucial context of how certain factors, like the media, shaped perceptions of the South Vietnamese over time. It also serves to investigate how perceptions of the South Vietnamese can be shaped in the modern day using knowledge gained from historical events, movements, and trends. On the other hand, the second mode of inquiry in this two-pronged approach, ethnography, aims to discover the inner workings of Vietnamese diasporic communities, exploring not only how they view themselves but also how they understand their role in modern narratives of the war in order to develop solutions to the issue at hand. By combining these methods, the present research aims to uncover the ways in which different factors, past and present, have hindered the portrayal of an accurate South Vietnamese voice, and how interventions can be developed to promote accurate representation going forward.

To achieve this goal, five participants were interviewed from a wide range of fields. These participants were recruited via convenience sampling and snowball sampling. They were already in the researcher's professional network, and each individual often facilitated referrals or introductions to another. Each of these experts shed a different perspective on the issue. The interviewees and their descriptions are as follows:

- Andrew Gawthorpe, a historian of U.S. foreign policy, provided insight into how American political narratives shaped the media's framing of the Vietnam War.
- Kevin Hien Pham, a Vietnamese American community leader in Fairfax, VA, offered first-hand accounts of memory preservation and identity-building efforts within the Vietnamese diaspora.
- Tuan Hoang, Marguerite Nguyen, and Y Thien Nguyen, scholars of Vietnamese diasporic identity and literature, contributed academic perspectives on memory, trauma, cultural representation, and the diasporic struggle waiting to be heard.

Results

Theme #1: American films tend to ignore the South Vietnamese political situation because it was complicated, resulting in a shallow, one sided portrayal of the South Vietnamese (Marguerite Nguyen, Gawthorpe).

As Y Thien Nguyen notes, the South Vietnamese history and stories are indeed complex. This presents a challenge for filmmakers when it comes to accurately portraying the South Vietnamese, begging the question, "Even if a director were to effectively tackle the South Vietnamese perspective on the war in a film, who would be interested in viewing it?" Often, American filmmakers do not want to tackle this complex perspective, and even if they could, they have no motivation to do so because the mainstream narrative does not align with the South Vietnamese perspective. Ultimately, this theme provides further insight into the reasons behind the absence of a South Vietnamese perspective in film, opening the door to further discussion on what can be done to highlight voices traditionally silenced or obscured.

Theme #2: The media has an influence on the public perception and representation of the South Vietnamese in film

The media and its effects on the portrayals of the South Vietnamese is a topic that has not been adequately explored in academia, but when interviewing subject matter experts, it nonetheless surfaced time and again. Specifically, every person interviewed had the same

thing to say about the media's role in the war's narrative construction: historically, it misrepresented the South Vietnamese people, portraying them in a negative manner without seeking to truly understand the Vietnamese people. This provided valuable insight into one of, if not the biggest, factors behind the misrepresentation of the South Vietnamese (Marguerite Nguyen), reaffirming one of the main arguments advanced by this treatise.

However, it is equally important to mention that in addition to the media, Y Thien Nguyen also acknowledges the impact of academia, which misrepresented the Vietnamese. He believes that film representation is a reflection of contemporary academic beliefs about the war, which in addition to the media, promoted a narrative that omitted the voice of the South Vietnamese.

Theme #3: Modern solutions to the issue of a lack of South Vietnamese voice in film

While answers varied, most interviewees described the main reason for the absence of a proper South Vietnamese voice in film as being because the South Vietnamese diaspora has simply not pushed for film representation enough. As Pham, Hoang, and Marguerite Nguyen describe, most modern Vietnamese diasporic parents aren't pushing for the new generation to become filmmakers and writers; they're pushing for a new generation of doctors and engineers. As a result, this lack of emphasis on the exploration of culture has become a hurdle for the Vietnamese diaspora in getting their voices heard in film. Interviewees stressed that a resolution of this issue within the Vietnamese diaspora would greatly assist in getting voices heard.

Theme #4: Benefits that the Vietnamese diaspora would reap from the presence of their stories in Vietnam War films

While answers varied, a pervasive theme that resurfaced in the interviews pertained to the "pride" and "validation" the Vietnamese community would receive—pride and validation they had historically been denied (Pham, Hoang, Marguerite Nguyen, Y Thien Nguyen). Pham stressed how many of the older generations of Vietnamese still harbor trauma from the war, and how increased film representation may help them open up, sharing their story in a cathartic way. Y Thien Nguyen, however, shared the opposite perspective, believing that much of the older generation do not want to share their personal stories with the wider public because, "To them, these were deeply personal experiences, not meant for mainstream media or public consumption." However, he did stress the importance of the Vietnamese community's commemorative events as a possible platform for sharing these stories.

Overall, the interviewees' responses pointed to a shared theme on the potential benefits incorporating the South Vietnamese voice in film, and suggest that foregrounding this perspective would have a rippling positive effect within Vietnamese diasporic communities. More specifically, the respondents touched on the enduring missing sense of pride and the acute pain of the war—feelings which are compounded by a lack of voice—and indicated that a healing process is possible with proper film representation.

Discussion

The results of this study have served to respond to several questions about the origins of South Vietnamese people's missing voice, as well as avenues for remediation. Historical factors like media framing have played a crucial role, though contemporary resources embedded within these communities may present as a viable solution. The results point to the development of new and innovative solutions to this problem, building on the mistakes of the past and acknowledging the imitations of the present. With greater unity and a stronger emphasis on filmmaking and storytelling within the Vietnamese diaspora, the Vietnamese community will finally be able to have its voice heard. This simple act will, in turn, initiate a restorative process, whereby the individuals who lived through the wars are provided with a space and means for healing and validation.

Restoring the Narrative: Community Solutions to Cultural Erasure

One of the primary mechanisms for preserving and showcasing the voices of the South Vietnamese diaspora is the Viet Film Fest, located in Orange County, California. As Duong (2023) notes, this community-led event serves as a space where Vietnamese filmmakers can document stories often excluded from dominant Vietnam War narratives. Unlike government-sponsored efforts, the Viet Film Fest, hosted by Vietnamese-Americans, enables Vietnamese American filmmakers, who may often not receive the same resources and coverage as their white American counterparts, to tell their own stories. By offering a platform for the independent storytelling of the Vietnam War by Vietnamese people, the festival directly challenges the cinematic erasure of South Vietnamese voices, carving out space for more nuanced portrayals of the South Vietnamese for public consumption.

Other Vietnamese diaspora-led community events such as Black April commemoration days can also contribute to this effort. Vo-Dang (2008) explains that these memorials function as informal public history projects where Vietnamese refugees not only mourn the loss of their homeland and loved ones, but also assert their presence in the United States. Through pro-democracy and human rights narratives, these events make the diasporic memory of South

Vietnam visible in a country where South Vietnamese stories have often been overshadowed. These gatherings preserve the cultural identity of the Vietnamese diaspora and challenge the erasure of South Vietnamese memory created by mainstream film narratives by making space for collective remembrance so that it may be witnessed by the wider American public.

Together, the Viet Film Fest and other community events like Black April offer viable solutions to the erasure of South Vietnamese voices. They empower diasporic Vietnamese to reclaim authorship over their history, establishing their own narratives that resist dominant portrayals shaped by Vietnamization. These events not only offer healing and pride for the Vietnamese diaspora but also serve to challenge the erasure of the South Vietnamese in the cinematic landscape, allowing for a more complete depiction of the Vietnam War.

However, despite existing research on this topic, significant gaps remain in the coverage of the topic of Vietnamese diaspora in film. Most discussions now focus on Vietnamese-American relations or are dedicated to analyzing representations of the Vietnamese diaspora in academia, rather than film. There is little exploration of the historical factors behind the lack of representation in film or the potential impact of increased representation for the Vietnamese diaspora. This study therefore sought to address this gap.

Conclusion

South Vietnam's refugees have not enjoyed the same level of representation in war films and documentaries as their American or even Northern Vietnamese counterparts. Indeed, they have been historically misrepresented by both academia and the media, leading to later inaccurate and unjust Hollywood portrayals. While nowadays, anti-Vietnamese hostility has dissipated, the burdens of a missing voice from a war remain--along with the trauma that stems from it. The issues of representation remain, leaving one lingering question: What can be done to highlight this crucial perspective?

The answer lies with mobilization. The Vietnamese diasporic community must work together. By collectively seeking to integrate authentic stories into the public discourse, in part through commemoration and film events and a stronger push for Vietnamese filmmakers and storytellers, the Vietnamese-American community will be one step closer to healing, and most importantly, their missing voice finally present.

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