

# **XICH LO: ECONOMIES IN TRANSITION AND THE APPROPRIATION OF PEOPLE, PRODUCTS AND SITUATIONS IN THE SERVICE OF THE SHADOW MARKETS OF POST *DOI MOI* HO CHI MINH CITY.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

To understand the role of consumer cultural values in the context of contemporary globalization, marketing scholars need to address the interplay of competing cultural values at the societal level. This article develops textual analysis of a Vietnamese film to examine the effects of globalization of markets on culture during the post Doi Moi Vietnam period. Text analysis is employed to establish micro-macro linkages between societal value systems and personal and consumption related values. Film analysis reveals a set of structural oppositions of tradition versus modernity and Confucian versus Buddhist values, and Yin versus Yang elements. We address the marketing implications of this analysis in the context of contemporary consumer globalization in post Doi Moi Vietnam.

## **Keywords**

Consumer culture theory, text analysis, film, Doi Moi, Vietnam, economies in transition, *Xich lo*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Recent years have seen the position of culture raised as both a key analytic concept and as a marketing tool used to underpin culture-based marketing strategies (Holt 2004). Holt argues that during times of intergenerational change dominant cultural beliefs are challenged by emergent ideologies, producing a cultural fissure. Holt posits that periods of cultural fissures present challenges and opportunities for marketing since marketing systems are in a state of flux during this time. The discontinuities produced during periods of cultural fissures can result in misaligned and ineffective marketing strategies. Perhaps the central challenge facing global marketers today, as they strive to mesh marketing strategies with emerging consumer values, is to gain a greater understanding of this process of culture change during periods of significant economic, political, and cultural discontinuity. Holt suggests that we examine cultural values during periods of cultural discontinuity by an examination of a culture's mythologies and stories as represented by a country's culture industries. Cinema is uniquely positioned to chronicle the turmoil of values in transition (Zaniello, 2007).

This article studies the critical period of contested cultural values in Vietnam during post *Doi Moi* or Renovation. This era, beginning in 1986, marked the opening of the Vietnamese

economy to the free market system and to the external forces of globalization. Historically, many of the stories and myths of Vietnam concern the dialectic between values of foreign origin versus those of domestic origin; between values of tradition versus those of modernity. We argue that the current dialectic involving the forces of globalization and the role of contemporary consumerism versus traditional Vietnamese values is best situated in a historical context of a series of debates lasting several centuries. These cultural debates began with the dialectic between native Vietnamese people and the Chinese invaders during the 1,000 year war for independence of Vietnam from Chinese hegemony. Next, was the cultural dialectic between traditional Vietnamese values and those of modernity associated with the colonial French regime. More recently, has been the dialectic between the forces of global capital and traditional Vietnamese Confucian and Buddhist values. We argue that contemporary Vietnam is characterized by a continuation of this dialectical process of reconciling traditional Vietnamese values with those of contemporary globalization and consumer materialism. We examine these issues via a textual analysis of a critically acclaimed film shot in Vietnam during the period of Renovation or opening up of the economy during the 1990's.

### **Cultural Discontinuity in Post *Doi Moi* Vietnam: Shadow Markets, the U.S. Dollar, and the Dissolution of Family in *Xich lo***

The film *Xich lo* (Tran, Cyclo 1995a) speaks to cultural dilemmas of an emerging market re-entering the shadow of neocolonial forces – this time represented by the power of global capital and symbolized in the film by the omnipresence of the U.S. dollar. *Xich lo* is cited as one of the most influential films out of Vietnam by Mark Cousins in his review of world cinema *The Story of Film* (2013), fuses the neorealist style of *The Bicycle Thief* with the kinetic energy of *Taxi Driver*.

Our reading of *Xich lo* is primarily informed by theories of structuralism (Saussure 1972/1986), Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006; Machin & Mayr, 2012) text analysis (Prince 2004), and the uniformist model of reader response theory (Metz 1974/1991). *Xich lo* depicts how markets affect culture. According to Metz, a film does not just provide entertainment, but constitutes an experience that has the power to transform the spectator into a new relationship with her environment. The film achieves this transformation by revealing new realities and relationships previously unconsidered by the spectator, and interpolates the spectator into a discourse. In *Xich lo* the film focuses its lens on the impact of global capital – symbolized by the circulation of U.S. dollar vying for market attention with the Vietnamese Dong - on the marginalized elements of Vietnamese society. The film is situated in contemporary Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam's most vibrant urban economy.

The story of *Xich lo* begins with a young cyclo driver who, after his pedi-cab is stolen (surreptitiously by his employer, Boss Lady) is forced into working for a gang of criminals. Cyclo's sister comes under the influence of the same gang and becomes a prostitute. She like other characters is simply referred to by her generic appellation of Sister. Prostitution serves as a larger trope for the selling out of Vietnam for the purposes of capital accumulation. Historically in Vietnamese literature (e.g., *Tale of Kieu*) the female body has served as the site of injustice committed on Vietnam by foreigners. A lieutenant in the gang, the Poet, with demons of his own, wrestles with growing feelings for Sister even as he continues to prostitute her out to other men. The brother (cyclo driver) and sister (prostitute) sink to depths they had never thought possible. They must claw their way back from these markets of despair before they can attempt to

reconstitute a family that seems to be held hostage to the claws of the black markets of HCMC criminality. As such, the film serves as an excellent case study of some of the negative side effects of globalization of markets, particularly when viewed from the perspective of maintaining the integrity of traditional family structures.

Although the director, Tran Anh Hung, plays on several registers in *Xich lo*, a central theme is how, in a post *Doi Moi* Vietnam, rampant consumerism and the increased commoditization of markets crushes individuals on the margins of society and strips them of agency. The film paints a dark portrait of the effects of capitalism and globalization on marginalized families in Saigon or HCMC during the period following *Doi Moi* or Renovation. The central characters are all nameless, described only by their activities in the film – the eponymous, the Poet, the Boss Lady, and the Sister. *Xich lo* presents a narrative of a descent into hell that takes place in modern Saigon, where characters are trapped in a circuit of terror and extortion played out in the city's criminal market places. *Doi Moi* has resulted in a shift away from the State as controller of markets, to the privatization of economic, educational, and health systems. Yet, the film does not engage the Cold War discourse of the failures of the Communist system – a difficult task, with the presence of a government censor on the set each day – but indirectly challenges the financial and moral bankruptcy of the State by examining the market spaces which avoid and challenge state control. This is the market space of the shadow economy (Narkunas 2000).

The character of the Cyclo, is an off-used trope in Vietnamese cinema and literature to symbolize a hard-working, honest, “salt-of-the-earth” character. The perversion of his character in the film by forces of the shadow markets, the *yin* or underbelly of society, represents the perversion of all such individuals in Vietnamese society. *Xich lo*, the film, metonymically designates the person who rides the pedi-cab. It is striking therefore that the director chooses this character to represent the violence immanent in the forces of contemporary globalization of markets, and its drive for greater efficiency. This drive to accumulate capital, as portrayed in the film by the omnipresence of the U.S. dollar, annihilates space for individual agency within a traditional Vietnamese cultural framework. Cyclo is caught in an extortionate web of production in the shadow markets which circulate through the social matrix and threaten the traditional family structure. He is part of the shadow economy which occupies a space populated with sidewalk vendors, petty currency changers, smugglers of electronic goods, pimps and prostitutes - all markets where the primary mechanism of exchange is the U.S. dollar. Both Cyclo and the Poet struggle to assert agency in response to the “renovation” of their lives by the demands of the market. It is in this way that the film uniquely functions as a vehicle to fashion micro-macro linkages among individuals, families, and markets.

*Xich lo* opens with the voice over of Cyclo's departed father, reminding his son that the work of a cyclo-rider is hard, but honest work. Filial duty (*Hieu*) requires that Cyclo honor his father's tradition of honest work. The camera pulls back from examining Cyclo's face to reveal the hustle and bustle of a street scene filled with pedi-cabs and mopeds. Nineteen ninety five, when the film was shot, is still in the early years of post *Doi Moi* Saigon. After reading a report in *Thanh Mien* newspaper about government loans to small business, Cyclo resolves to visit the ministry and apply for a loan to purchase his cyclo. At the ministry we see evidence of the moral and financial decay of the State apparatus. A high stack of files piled along the office walls suggests that Cyclo can expect no help from the State. The abandonment of the individual by the state will lead Cyclo to seek help in the shadow markets of Saigon's criminal gangs. We learn

from the interview with the government bureaucrat that although Cyclo makes only 5,000VND (50c) per day, he is indebted 200,000VND to the Boss Lady for the cost of the stolen cyclo. Cyclo is trapped in what will become a downward spiraling relationship with the shadow economy. Leaving the bureaucrat's office, Cyclo is almost hit by a passing military truck pulling a war era cannon. The spectator is reminded that this is an economy still traumatized by a brutal war of independence. Later, scenes of war cripples begging for charity will reinforce the image of the continuing legacies of the American war.

At the day's end, Cyclo engages in a series of financial transactions, all using Vietnam Dong. Significantly, later in the film, shadow market transactions involving the U.S. dollar – an obvious symbol of the power of global capital – characterize transactions of a much darker quality. This is a film that focuses on the quality of the lives of the working poor and how they are impacted by economic development (Blum-Reid 2003). The noose tightens on Cyclo, when the Boss Lady arranges for his cyclo to be stolen by a local gang. The Boss Lady symbolizes the dark forces of local crime markets – outwardly benign, but deadly in their consequences. Cyclo's financial debt to her leaves little room for individual agency on his part; he becomes her indentured servant. Cyclo seems trapped in a cycle of bad karma, but it is clear that the director attributes this "karma" to the agency of criminal markets and global capital and not to that of the spirit world.

We cut to a grunge music nightclub, where Cyclo and another underling of the Boss Lady assault a rival gang member. Afterwards, Cyclo is holed up at a decrepit apartment; he is physically and emotionally dislocated from his family. Meanwhile, the Poet, who also works for the Boss Lady, is visited by two prostitutes in his more comfortably furnished apartment. We learn that the Poet is a pimp. Significantly, the prostitutes' earnings, which they turn over to him, are in U.S. dollars – symbolizing the commoditization of the body by the forces of global capital. The next day, the Poet sees the Cyclo's sister from his balcony. We learn that they are beginning a relationship, one that will have dire consequences for both of them. The Poet cannot resist the attraction of the American dollar, and in a sequence reminiscent of Scholar's Ma's pimping out of Kieu, in the epic 18<sup>th</sup> century Vietnamese poem *The Tale of Kieu*, the sister reluctantly satisfies the perverted sexual fetishes of local business clients. One client asks her to urinate in front of him, and a second client has a foot fetish that requires a bizarre sexual ritual. That the fetish occupies an interstitial space between capital and the body is noteworthy since fetishes substitute for real human relationships. Capital is thus implicated in the circuit of market transactions that colonizes the body. The "body" in this instance is still a virgin, and as in *The Tale of Kieu*, represents a criminal act on all that is pure about Vietnam. That the market forces of globalization and consumerism are implicated in this crime against the body is clear when the Sister is forced to drink a large bottle of *Evian* water to prepare for her client's fetish ritual. Next time we see Sister, she is wearing a western red dress and matching handbag; her transformation is nearly complete. In *Cyclo*, we therefore see a structural relationship between characterization and consumption practices.

Cyclo's obligation to perform "tasks" for the Boss Lady, draws him into a downward-spiraling cycle of crime. First, he destroys a competitor's store of food by pouring black water on rice bags. Rice here serves as a larger trope to indicate the destruction of the source of basic sustenance for body and soul. Cyclo subsequently attempts to end his criminal relationship with the Boss Lady, but is brutally beaten by her thugs for the effort. His subject position in the new market economy is one of powerlessness. Next, Cyclo throws a Molotov cocktail into a

competitor's garage. An employee is severely burned. Cyclo is rewarded for this crime with a wad of Vietnam dong, and notably, a single American dollar. Later, we will see that the level of violence and brutality perpetrated on others is directly calibrated in the U.S. dollar value of the payment.

From the Poet's balcony window one can hear a crashing sound from the street. The camera reveals a captured U.S. military helicopter has fallen off a transport truck. The camera pans across the intersection, lingering for a moment on a store advertisement for *Black & Decker*. The juxtaposition of the images of the military helicopter and the multinational tool company symbolically implicate consumerism and globalization of markets with the "American War". The director seems to be arguing that Vietnam has been twice violated; once militarily, and now by the forces of global markets. Later on, in a scene with the Poet and Sister at a posh restaurant in the grounds of the War Museum, we see similar war remnants employed as decorative sets in service of the tourist market. The State apparatus of Vietnam is also implicated in the commoditization of the sacrifices of the war heroes. To drive home this point, we see one of the Poet's prostitutes leave the restaurant with a business client. The implication is clear; in modern day Saigon there are few sacred places left not colonized by the market.

Next, we cut to a pig slaughterhouse. Foreshadowing the narrative's descent into an increasing spiral of violence, we see blood everywhere. Moving from the flesh market to the drug market, we see workers stitch bags of cocaine into pig carcasses. Cyclo will transport the drugs from the slaughterhouse to the city. The informed spectator will recall that the British tried to control the Chinese through sale of opium, and that the French colonists monopolized and taxed the profitable opium trade in Vietnam. Cyclo is intercepted by the police, but escapes when a truck hits another cyclo. That night Cyclo dreams that his father's spirit interceded to save him. Cyclo studies a U.S. \$10 bill. The camera pans a close-up of Alexander Hamilton's face, the emblem of the Department of the Treasury and the Federal Reserve, the signatures of the Secretary of the Treasury and the Treasury, and ends with the camera slowly rolling over the statement: "This note is legal tender for all debts, public and private." The montage opposes the ties of family to those of the market. Both compete for Cyclo's allegiance. The portrait of Alexander Hamilton suggests a continuing U.S. presence in Vietnam. As if to underscore this point, the camera pans outside the balcony to focus on two war cripples on the sidewalk; we are reminded that this is still a war torn economy. The totality of the scene also suggests a transformation of the sources of power from the sovereign exercise of power by colonial regimes to the neocolonial application of soft power under globalization and consumer materialism. Cyclo crushes the U.S. 10\$ note in his hand, and in doing so symbolically rejects the call of the dark forces of the market.

Cyclo subsequently returns to the neighborhood of the Boss Lady, and implores her to let him free. She will release him only after one final assignment; a pistol will be the method of assassination. Cyclo is paid in 20\$ bills, and given pills to numb his conscience. The circuit of dollars, drugs, arms, and markets is completed. Critically, Cyclo seems to be unaware of the forces that are undermining his family. He does not know that Poet, who also works for Boss Lady, is prostituting his sister.

In one of few scenes of escape from the city, Poet and Sister enjoy a sojourn in the countryside. At four points in the film, Poet speaks through poetry, the authentic voice of traditional Vietnam. Here he recites: "*Without a voice/O river, O passerby/In the closed cycle/Of*

*the months, the years/I cannot forget my debt to my roots/And I wander through worlds/Toward my land.*” The words speak to Poet’s sense of displacement from his roots, his lineage, and his heritage. Cut to a scene in an up market, Saigon nightclub. Sister dances seductively in front of a wealthy business client. Presaging an act of bondage, she is wearing a pair of handcuffs on one hand. Poet is a voyeuristic onlooker from a side table. The western music group, Radiohead’s song *Creep* is playing: “*Your skin makes me cry/You float like a feather/In a beautiful world... But I 'm a creep/I 'm a weirdo/What the hell am I doing here?/I don't belong here.*” If Sister represents the contemporary version of modern *Kieu*, then the lyrics suggest that Poet is unworthy of her.

Later, Sister will be brutally raped off-camera. After an ellipsis, we see Sister the next morning, viciously beaten. Just as *Kieu* has been caught up in a circuit of powerful others, so too has Sister been brutalized and commoditized by shadow market forces. Poet is paid five hundred American dollars in one hundred dollar bills for offering up Sister to the businessman. Once again the level of the crime is calibrated in the currency of global markets. Soon after, Poet will seek revenge by stabbing dead the business client on an apartment building rooftop. The bloody scene of savagery recalls the pig slaughter house. As the businessman is about to expire, Poet stuffs the bloody five hundred dollar bills in his victim’s mouth.

The off-camera, diagetic sounds of fireworks signal that *Tet* (Vietnamese New Year) is approaching. The camera cuts to Sister shopping for festive flowers required for the family celebration. The atmosphere is one of noisy street festivities. Meanwhile, Poet has concluded that living has become an unbearable burden. The only escape from this existential condition is suicide. He sets fire to his apartment. His cache of U.S. dollar bills scatters from its hiding place, and like Poet, is consumed by the fire. This act of self-immolation reminds the spectator of the numerous acts of resistance by Vietnamese monks during the American war, when in the face of what they believed to be an oppressive, all-powerful regime of President Ngo Diem, they protested in the only way left to them, by martyrdom through self-immolation. Fire is an act of symbolic purification. The message seems clear; the corrupting force of global capital threatens the essence of the nation state. Sister visits Poet’s burned out apartment. She is now wearing the traditional *Áo Dài* dress, symbolizing a return to her roots. Next, Sister visits a temple, she lights incense candles, and prays to ancestors for better luck next year.

The final crane shot in the film offers the possibility of a different type of “renovation” in post *Doi Moi* Vietnam - that of renovation of family. *Cyclo* is seen reconstituting his nuclear family of older sister, younger sister, and grandfather, as they together ride out of Saigon. A final montage of images from the crane shot includes a modern office building, a reflected image of a building crane, an abandoned tower building, a statue of the warrior hero, Tran Hung Dao. The image of Tran Hung Dao offers hope; in 1284 a powerful 500,000-man Chinese invasion army, led by Kublai Khan, was defeated by Vietnamese guerrillas. Having gained independence from the Chinese, the French, and the Americans, could Vietnam now lose its identity to the forces of globalization and consumerism?

The film stands as a testament to the corrupting influence of globalization in early post *Doi Moi* Vietnam, where the weak and the powerless are susceptible to victimization. In the postface to the published script of *Cyclo*, director Tran Anh Hung argues that *Cyclo* interrogates the meaning of economic opening, the loss of innocence, and the loss of values of those whose poverty only equals their desire to step out of their condition, and who find themselves

confronted by the seduction of money. The concept of the potential corrupting impact of economic development on culture is perhaps best expressed by the director himself in an interview at a press conference for the New York Film Festival in 1995:

The Poet is someone who, on a spiritual level, considers himself dead to himself and to society. He sold his innocence for easy money to enter the world of crime, and he's nostalgic for it. Innocence is at the heart of the film. Vietnam today is opening itself to market forces at their wildest--which is a kind of pollution--and in so doing, we might lose our innocence. The gangster-poet is aware of the problem, his sister and Cyclo are not. When they first arrive, he sees them for what they are--innocents--and the only way he can handle their innocence is to precipitate them into a life of crime. That's why he becomes his sister's pimp; that's why, when she cries after her first trick, for him it's a sort of consolation: innocence protesting against the hardness of reality (Tran, Xich lo 1995b).

A structural analysis of relationships among key plot concepts in the film reveal many examples of cultural concepts, relationships, and social units such as family, typically considered to be protected cultural categories, but which have become commoditized, or have had their symbolic function perverted in the service of capital accumulation. These relationships are illustrated in Table 1 below.

Contemporary globalization, as we have seen in *Xich lo*, represents an example of cultural discontinuity, as traditional values are interrogated by a new global consumerism. A major challenge therefore in designing effective marketing systems for emerging markets is to recognize the need to align cultural aspects of marketing systems and consumption related values with traditional value systems.

### **Effects of Globalization of Markets on Culture and Quality of Life (QOL)**

In less affluent economies such as Vietnam, the transition to a globally integrated economy can be a very uneven experience. Economically disadvantaged groups may become vulnerable populations, preyed upon by newly powerful market players (Ger 1997). In *Xich lo*, we see the underbelly of capitalism in the growth of shadow markets that prey upon the weak and defenseless. We also see the transforming role of the U.S. dollar, filling the vacuum of economic spaces abandoned by the State apparatus. While new marketing systems in the aggregate clearly contribute to higher economic growth (Wilkie and Moore 1999), the benefits may be spread very unevenly in emerging economies. The promotion of materialism can have a negative impact on cultural values, undermining traditional concepts of family and role based behavioral expectations. In the final scenes of *Xich lo*, we see these contrasts between the lifestyles of the “haves” and the “haves not’s”, of the tennis courts and swimming pools of the rich in close proximity to the rubble and uncollected garbage of the poor. Awareness of these inequalities may not only engender discontent among marginalized groups who have not benefited economically from the broader economic gains of *Doi Moi*, but but may also encourage individuals to participate in shadow markets in a fruitless attempt to catch up.

As we have seen, *Xich lo* addresses how global capital, as symbolized by the role of the U.S. dollar, can affect culture. A neocolonial perspective on the film sees *Xich lo* it as a cautionary tale of the negative effects of markets on culture. As such, modern marketing systems are implicated in a political and cultural process that is historically and geographically specific.

**Table I*****Xich lo: Economies in Transition and the Appropriation of People, Products, and Plot Elements in in Service of the Shadow Markets in Post Doi Moi Ho Chi Minh City***

<b>Cyclo (rickshaw)</b>	Appropriated as a vehicle for smuggling drugs
<b>Dance Club</b>	Appropriated as a location for prostitution
<b>Pig Slaughterhouse</b>	Appropriated as a location for the distribution of drugs
<b>Fireworks at <i>Tet</i> Celebration</b>	Sounds appropriated as a distraction for petty theft
<b>Evian bottle of water</b>	Appropriated in the service of sexual fetish
<b>River water</b>	Appropriated as a means to destroy stores of rice
<b>Painting toenails</b>	Appropriated in the service of sexual fetish
<b>Urination</b>	Appropriated in the service of sexual fetish
<b>Building materials (plank)</b>	Appropriated as a tool to commit violence
<b>Female student</b>	Appropriated in the service of prostitution
<b>Butcher</b>	Appropriated labor in distribution of drugs
<b>Washing feet</b>	Appropriated in the service of sexual fetish
<b>Razor blade</b>	Appropriated as a tool to commit violence
<b>Restaurant</b>	Appropriated in the service of prostitution
<b>Gasoline</b>	Appropriated as a tool of property destruction
<b>Lizard</b>	Appropriated as an object of violence & entertainment
<b>Downed helicopter</b>	Appropriated in the service of tourism market
<b>Plastic bag</b>	Appropriated as a tool to commit violence
<b>Nylon stockings</b>	Appropriated in the service of sexual fetish
<b>Rave party</b>	Appropriated as location to commit violence
<b>War museum</b>	Appropriated in the service of tourism & prostitution
<b>Sister</b>	Appropriated for prostitution
<b>Cyclo (Brother)</b>	Appropriated for acts of violence
<b>Poet</b>	Appropriated to become a gangster

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