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**RECREATING H'MONG ETHNIC CULTURE THROUGH
THE CINEMATIC PERSPECTIVE: THE CASE OF THE
DOCUMENTARY CHILDREN OF THE MIST**

*(Mencipta Semula Budaya Etnik H'Mong Melalui Perspektif
Sinematik: Kajian Kes Terhadap Filem Dokumentari
Children of the Mist)*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the documentary *Children of the Mist* (2021) represents the material and spiritual culture of the H'mong ethnic group. Material culture includes housing architecture, traditional clothing, and indigo dyeing techniques, while spiritual culture encompasses marriage customs, festivals, religious beliefs, and social practices. Employing content analysis and cross-referencing with

ethnographic literature, the study applies Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic approach to assess the authenticity and symbolic meaning of cultural representations in the film. Findings indicate that the film effectively portrays the distinctive cultural characteristics of the H'mong people, illustrating the tensions between tradition and modernity, particularly regarding child marriage and educational aspirations among younger generations. However, certain details in the film diverge from ethnographic records, such as modifications in marriage practices and ceremonial rituals. This study underscores the crucial role of documentary films in preserving and disseminating ethnic cultures, records of reality but as discursive mediums shaping national and ethnic identity in a globalized context. By depicting the material and spiritual culture of indigenous communities, documentaries can enhance public awareness of cultural heritage while serving as educational tools and platforms for cross-cultural dialogue. To optimize this role, the study advocates for close collaboration between filmmakers and ethnographic scholars to ensure accuracy and representational integrity in cinematic portrayals of ethnic cultures.

Keywords: H'mong culture, documentary film, cultural representation, modernization, ethnic identity.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneliti bagaimana filem dokumentari Children of the Mist (2021) mewakili budaya material dan spiritual masyarakat etnik H'mong. Budaya material merangkumi seni bina rumah, pakaian tradisional, dan teknik pencelupan indigo, manakala budaya spiritual melibatkan adat perkahwinan, perayaan, kepercayaan agama, dan amalan sosial. Dengan menggunakan analisis kandungan serta merujuk kepada literatur etnografi, kajian ini menerapkan teori semiotik Roland Barthes dan pendekatan hermeneutik Hans-Georg Gadamer untuk menilai keaslian serta makna simbolik dalam representasi budaya yang dipaparkan dalam filem ini. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa filem dokumentari ini berkesan dalam menggambarkan ciri-ciri budaya unik masyarakat H'mong, serta memperlihatkan ketegangan antara tradisi dan kemodenan, khususnya dalam isu perkahwinan kanak-kanak dan aspirasi pendidikan dalam kalangan generasi muda. Walau bagaimanapun, terdapat beberapa

perincian dalam filem ini yang menyimpang daripada rekod etnografi, seperti perubahan dalam amalan perkahwinan dan ritual upacara. Kajian ini menekankan peranan penting filem dokumentari dalam memelihara dan menyebarkan budaya etnik, bukan sekadar rekod realiti tetapi juga sebagai medium wacana yang membentuk identiti nasional dan etnik dalam konteks globalisasi. Melalui pemaparan budaya material dan spiritual komuniti peribumi, filem dokumentari dapat meningkatkan kesedaran masyarakat terhadap warisan budaya serta berfungsi sebagai alat pendidikan dan platform dialog silang budaya. Bagi mengoptimumkan peranan ini, kajian ini mencadangkan kerjasama erat antara pembikin filem dan sarjana etnografi bagi memastikan ketepatan dan integriti representasi budaya dalam karya sinematik.

Kata kunci: *Budaya H'mong, filem dokumentari, representasi budaya, pemodenan, identiti etnik.*

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic cultural materials have long been a significant source of inspiration for various forms of art, particularly documentary films. As a distinctive genre, documentary filmmaking not only records reality but also plays a crucial role in preserving and disseminating traditional cultural values (see Muhardis, 2024). In Vietnam, with its 54 ethnic groups, minority communities not only safeguard invaluable heritage but also embody unique narratives that can generate profound impacts when depicted through the cinematic language.

The documentary film *Children of the Mist* (2021) by director Hà Lê Diễm serves as a prominent example. The film not only authentically portrays the cultural life of the H'mong people but also raises critical issues concerning the conflict between tradition and modernity in the context of globalization. Through the story of Di, a young H'mong girl navigating the pressures of traditional customs and the influences of contemporary society, the film not only reconstructs distinctive cultural life but also evokes deep reflections on maintaining ethnic identity amid profound transformations.

Amidst the sweeping waves of modernization, ethnic minority groups, including the H'mong, face the risk of cultural assimilation or even the

erosion of their identity. In response to this challenge, documentary films serve not only as visual records but also as powerful tools for recreating, preserving, and raising community awareness about the value of ethnic cultural heritage. By capturing traditional customs and reflecting the changes in contemporary life, *Children of the Mist* poses critical questions: How can cinema continue to bridge the past and present? Can documentary films influence public awareness and attitudes toward the preservation of ethnic cultures?

Despite the significant role of documentary films in cultural preservation, research on their effectiveness in portraying ethnic cultures in Vietnam remains limited. Existing studies primarily focus on technical, artistic, and historical documentation aspects while paying insufficient attention to how documentaries reflect the cultural and social life of minority communities. This research gap is particularly evident in the case of the H'mong—a people rich in traditions yet facing considerable challenges in sustaining their identity amidst modernization.

The H'mong population in Vietnam currently numbers approximately 800,000 and belongs to the H'mong-Dao linguistic group (Nguyễn Đăng Văn, 2021). They trace their origins to Guizhou, Yunnan, and Guangxi (China) and have migrated to Vietnam over the past 300 years, with waves of migration continuing until the late 19th century. The H'mong are divided into four major subgroups: H'mong Hoa (H'mong Lệnh), H'mong Đen (H'mong Dú), H'mong Xanh (H'mong Chúa), and H'mong Trắng (H'mong Đu), primarily distinguished by the traditional attire of women. Today, they predominantly reside in the mountainous provinces of northern Vietnam, such as Hà Giang, Lào Cai, Lai Châu, Điện Biên, Sơn La, Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An, and several other regions (Nguyễn Đăng Văn, 2021).

The H'mong primarily inhabit mid-altitude mountainous areas, typically at elevations above 700 meters, often in remote and isolated regions. Their settlements hold strategic importance in national security and economic development. Historically, the H'mong once thrived in a wet rice civilization but were compelled to migrate to higher mountains due to expansionist pressures and oppression from northern feudal dynasties (Thảo Nhìà Sùng, 1995). In response, the Vietnamese government has implemented various policies to support the H'mong, ensuring equitable development among ethnic groups within the national community.

H'mong culture is an inseparable part of Vietnam's cultural mosaic, contributing to the country's rich diversity. Despite living in different regions, the H'mong have preserved their distinctive cultural identity. However, modernization, migration, and cultural exchanges are increasingly reshaping their traditional values (Nguyễn Đăng Văn, 2021).

Against this backdrop, *Children of the Mist* emerges as a compelling case study, employing cinematic language to portray the cultural life, customs, and familial relationships of the H'mong people. However, research on how this film contributes to the representation and preservation of H'mong culture remains scarce. Key aspects such as the film's ability to convey unique cultural values and its impact on both the H'mong community and public awareness have yet to be thoroughly examined.

Recent international studies, such as those by Zhuofan et al. (2023) on the role of documentary films in intercultural communication and Lay (2015) on the influence of documentaries in shaping social perceptions, provide valuable insights. However, no research has specifically analyzed the case of H'mong culture in Vietnam or the role of documentary filmmaking in preserving the heritage of this ethnic group. This gap represents a critical area that the present study seeks to address.

Therefore, this research aims to analyze how *Children of the Mist* reconstructs the cultural elements of the H'mong, encompassing both material culture (housing, clothing, cuisine) and spiritual culture (customs, rituals, and way of life) within the context of modernization. Additionally, it evaluates how the film reflects cultural conflicts across generations within the H'mong community and the role of documentary films in enhancing university students' awareness of ethnic cultures. Through this analysis, the study proposes methods for utilizing documentary films as educational and cultural preservation tools in contemporary Vietnamese society.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the theoretical framework of documentary filmmaking as a medium for cultural representation, particularly in the Vietnamese context. It elucidates how documentary films not only document reality but also construct new perspectives

on culture, offering a crucial reference for future studies on ethnic cultures in cinema.

On a practical level, this study provides valuable recommendations for filmmakers, cultural policymakers, and educational institutions regarding the use of documentary films in preserving and promoting ethnic cultures. The findings also help audiences, especially younger generations, develop a deeper understanding of ethnic minority cultural values. This, in turn, fosters appreciation and protection of cultural heritage in an era of rapid change.

METHODOLOGY

Ethnicity is a highly debated concept in social sciences, with varying definitions and perspectives. Gabbert (2006) defines ethnicity as a form of social differentiation in which individuals use cultural or phenotypic markers to establish group boundaries. He distinguishes between “nation,” “ethnie,” and “ethnic group” to highlight differences in social foundations and political potential. Fennema (2004) focuses on the measurement of ethnic communities, emphasizing the role of ethnic elites in civil society and developing indicators of social capital within ethnic groups. Van de Vijver et al. (2015) broaden the discussion on ethnic identity, arguing that the traditional dichotomy between ethnic and mainstream identities is no longer sufficient in diverse societies. They advocate for an interdisciplinary approach to studying identity shifts in immigrant communities. Collectively, these studies underscore the dynamic nature of ethnicity and its significance in contemporary social and political structures.

The concept of “ethnicity” in anthropology refers to a community that shares a common culture and language, passed down from one generation to the next (Institute of Social Science Information, 1995). In France, this concept is broader, encompassing anthropological, political, and historical characteristics that form a distinct cultural system. In Vietnam, ethnologists define an ethnic group as a stable or relatively stable community formed throughout history, sharing a common language, cultural practices, and a sense of ethnic identity. According to the Vietnamese Encyclopedia (1995), ethnic minorities in Vietnam are groups with smaller populations residing within a multi-ethnic nation, distinguished by their ethnic and national

consciousness. These groups often inhabit remote areas with limited socio-economic development. Therefore, the Vietnamese government implements ethnic equality policies to bridge development gaps among ethnic groups.

This study employs content analysis to examine how the documentary *Children of the Mist* represents H'mong culture, in conjunction with cross-referencing data from academic sources. These sources include books, scientific articles, research reports, and ethnographic fieldwork records related to H'mong culture. The analysis is categorized into two main aspects: material culture (including clothing, architecture, and cuisine) and spiritual culture (including beliefs, festivals, and customs).

This study is based on two key theoretical frameworks. First, Barthes' semiotic theory (1964, 1977) is applied to analyze how images, sounds, and dialogues in the film convey symbolic meanings, thereby decoding how the film represents the cultural identity of the H'mong people. Semiotics helps elucidate how elements such as clothing, rituals, and customs are not merely depicted but also serve as cultural symbols carrying profound meanings. Second, Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic theory (2004) supports the interpretation of the film's content, not only from the researcher's perspective but also from the audience's reception. Gadamer's perspective emphasizes that understanding a work is not solely based on its content but also depends on the context and experiences of its viewers. Therefore, this study will examine not only how the film portrays H'mong culture but also how audiences interpret these cultural elements.

The data collection and analysis process consists of three key stages. First, the study identifies the analytical sample by selecting film scenes that prominently feature H'mong cultural elements. The selection criteria include: (i) scenes containing elements of material or spiritual culture, (ii) scenes with dialogues or sounds that clarify cultural meanings, and (iii) scenes that are symbolic or recurrent throughout the film.

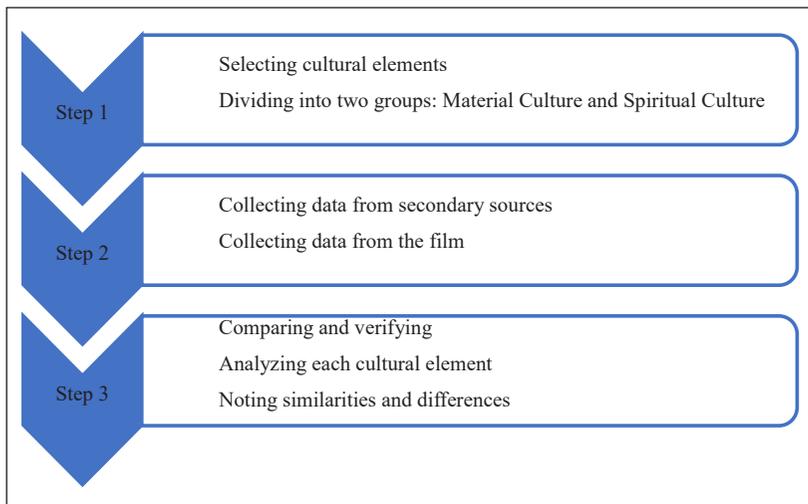
Next, the content analysis of the film is conducted by repeatedly viewing the documentary to document the cultural elements present in each scene. These elements include images, sounds, and dialogues related to H'mong culture. Semiotic theory is applied to decode the

symbolism and meanings of cultural elements in the film, such as how the colors and patterns of traditional clothing express ethnic identity or how rituals reflect the community's spiritual beliefs. Concurrently, hermeneutic theory helps assess the extent to which cultural details in the film reflect the lived reality of the H'mong people.

Finally, the study cross-references the film's cultural representations with academic literature to evaluate the accuracy of its depiction of H'mong culture. The cultural elements in the film are compared with data from ethnographic research, field reports, and archival materials on H'mong customs and rituals. This comparative method helps determine the authenticity of the cultural imagery presented in the film in relation to reality.

Figure 1

Diagram of Data Collection and Processing Methods



A qualitative measurement scale is applied to assess the accuracy of cultural elements depicted in the film. According to Đặng Nghiê m V ạn, et al. (2000), culture is categorized into two domains: material culture and spiritual culture. Material culture encompasses tools, weapons, means of transportation, architecture, cuisine, and clothing, whereas spiritual culture includes scientific knowledge, customs and traditions, customary laws, arts, religion, and beliefs. For material

culture, elements such as clothing, housing, and cuisine are analyzed based on color, patterns, design, and arrangement in comparison to ethnographic records. For spiritual culture, customs, rituals, and beliefs are evaluated for their accuracy in representation or potential exaggeration. The measurement approach involves a detailed descriptive method to document cultural elements in the film and then compare them with data from academic literature.

The content analysis method is used to describe and analyze key film scenes related to H'mong culture. The study focuses on how the film utilizes elements such as costume imagery, language, and music to highlight H'mong cultural aspects. At the same time, a comparative method is applied to contrast the film's content with scholarly research and fieldwork materials. This comparison aims to assess the accuracy and authenticity of cultural elements in the film. The results of the analysis will draw conclusions on the level of authenticity in the depiction of H'mong culture in the documentary *Children of the Mist*.

To assess the accuracy of cultural elements in the film, this study employs a qualitative rating scale divided into three levels: (i) high accuracy – the film faithfully and accurately reflects cultural elements according to academic sources, (ii) moderate accuracy – the film presents a generally accurate depiction but includes minor differences or adaptations, and (iii) low accuracy – the film significantly alters or exaggerates cultural elements compared to reality. The findings of this study will evaluate the extent to which *Children of the Mist* represents H'mong culture, thereby providing insights into how documentary cinema portrays the lived experiences of a minority community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Material Culture

Traditional Artifacts

In the documentary *Children of the Mist*, the traditional clothing and household items of the H'mong people are intricately depicted, not only reflecting their material life but also deeply conveying cultural, spiritual, and social values. One of the significant objects featured in the film is the bamboo basket. The bamboo basket is not only an

essential tool for labor, helping H'mong women carry crops and goods from the fields, but also symbolizes diligence, skillfulness, and boundless love for their families. For unmarried girls, the bamboo basket serves as a message to young men, showcasing their hard work and ability to manage a household.

Traditional Attire

According to Hà Giang Newspaper in the article “Traditional Costumes of the H'mong People: Present and Future,” the traditional attire of the H'mong people, especially women, is made from natural materials such as linen, silk, and brocade. This vibrant and colorful outfit is crafted using intricate embroidery and weaving techniques, featuring patterns rich in cultural identity. It is not only a symbol of aesthetics but also a reflection of the diligence and skill of H'mong women (Lý, 2023).

Figure 2

The Traditional Costume of The H'mong People in The Film (The Girl in The Bottom Right Corner; Appears At 5:08) (Children of The Mist, 2021)



An essential part of the H'mong traditional attire is the leg wraps. Although they are no longer commonly worn in daily life, they remain an important element in festivals, especially during significant occasions such as the Lunar New Year or weddings. These leg

wraps not only protect the wearer's legs from thorns and insects but also reflect the H'mong people's craftsmanship in utilizing natural resources for their daily needs. The patterns on the leg wraps are often inspired by nature, featuring motifs of flowers, clouds, or sacred symbols that represent their beliefs and ethnic identity.

H'mong jewelry, including earrings, necklaces, and rings, is not only decorative but also carries spiritual significance and represents social status. In the film, these accessories are used to express the personalities and emotions of the characters, particularly Di. Large earrings, multi-layered necklaces, and intricately engraved details not only reflect aesthetic values but also symbolize a longing for change and the internal struggle between tradition and modernity within the character's soul.

Additionally, the brocade bag is another traditional handmade product of the H'mong people, showcasing their skill and sophistication in weaving and embroidery. These bags are made from handwoven linen fabric, featuring distinctive patterns that reflect nature and the spiritual life of the H'mong. More than just a daily accessory, the brocade bag serves as a cultural symbol, deeply embodying the ethnic identity and the diligence and creativity of the H'mong people.

When compared to research documents on H'mong culture, these elements in the film *Children of the Mist* are not only depicted in a general manner but also convey emotional depth, reflecting the contrast between tradition and the characters' desire for change. While academic studies typically describe clothing and artifacts from a broader cultural perspective, the film delves into the inner world of its characters, especially Di, through the use of attire and jewelry. These items are not merely external details but serve as a medium to express messages about social pressures, family expectations, and personal aspirations.

The image of the H'mong baby carrier also shows significant differences. In reality, the carrier is made from brocade fabric, carrying deep spiritual meaning and being used in all situations. However, in the film, the carrier is merely a simple blanket, failing to highlight the cultural value and the emotional bond within the family that the traditional carrier represents.

H'mong Traditional Dwellings

Regarding housing, studies show that H'mong houses are typically built on mountain slopes, surrounded by peach and plum trees, creating a warm and harmonious environment with nature. In the film, Di's house is also built in the traditional style, leaning against the mountainside with peach and plum trees. However, the roof is made of corrugated metal instead of the traditional thatched or tiled roof. This detail reflects the changes in H'mong housing architecture in the modern context.

Livestock Pen

H'mong livestock pens are traditionally built right in front of the house using natural materials like wood. However, in the film, the livestock pen is constructed with modern materials such as stone, cement, and a corrugated metal roof. Although its location near the house remains unchanged, the shift in building materials reflects the development and modernization of H'mong life.

Traditional Occupation

The traditional indigo dyeing craft of the H'mong people is depicted in the film through several scenes, such as harvesting indigo leaves and soaking them in a vat. However, in the film, the indigo garden is planted right next to Di's house, rather than along the hillsides as in reality. The dyeing process is not fully shown, with only a portion of the procedure depicted, missing crucial steps like fermentation and oxidation, which are essential for creating the characteristic deep blue color.

The Significance of Alcohol in H'mong Culture

H'mong liquor is a distinctive product made from upland rice, glutinous corn, and herbal yeast consisting of over 20 different medicinal plants. In *Children of the Mist*, H'mong liquor appears frequently but is not explored in detail regarding its production process. Instead, it is mainly shown in hospitality rituals, particularly during wedding discussions. A clear example in the film is when Vâng's family visits Di's home to discuss marriage. Whenever guests arrive, the host always offers liquor as a gesture of hospitality and respect.

Traditional Cuisine

Hanging smoked pork is an essential traditional dish for the H'mong people, especially during festivals and Lunar New Year celebrations. This dish is primarily made from indigenous black pig meat, particularly pork belly, thigh, and shoulder cuts. After the meat is cleaned and dried, it is cut into long strips and skewered onto bamboo strings for easy hanging. The meat is then seasoned with salt and liquor before being stored in earthenware jars or bamboo baskets lined with banana leaves. Once the salt has been absorbed, the meat is hung above the kitchen stove, where smoke from the fire gives it its signature flavor. The drying process continues until the pork rind turns golden and crispy, and the fat becomes translucent.

In *Children of the Mist*, hanging smoked pork also appears in several scenes. The local black pig meat is cut into long pieces and hung above the kitchen stove. One scene in the film features Di slicing the meat to serve her teachers and Vàng's family. The film subtly integrates this traditional dish into the daily life of the H'mong people; however, it does not provide a detailed depiction of the preparation process.

Although both H'mong liquor and hanging smoked pork are prominently featured in *Children of the Mist*, the film does not delve deeply into the preparation process or the techniques used to make these traditional foods. Instead, it focuses more on the cultural aspects of communication among the H'mong people, particularly through drinking and food-sharing rituals. In contrast, academic research provides detailed descriptions of the production process, including ingredients, recipes, and step-by-step preparations.

Both cultural elements hold significant importance in the daily life of the H'mong, serving not only as food but also as a means of communication and hospitality. In the film, H'mong liquor is a way for the host to express respect and extend an invitation, while hanging smoked pork symbolizes communal bonds. However, the key difference is that in the film, these processes are not thoroughly depicted. Instead, they are presented as visual representations of traditional culture, creating a rich cultural atmosphere without exploring the technical aspects of preparation.

Spiritual Culture

The Practice of Bride-Kidnapping and Child Marriage

The “bride-kidnapping” custom is a unique cultural practice in the lives of the H’mong people, passed down through generations in the northern mountainous provinces of Vietnam. According to Vu (2022) in *Understanding the Bride-Kidnapping Custom*, this tradition has long existed in the culture of the H’mong in the northern provinces. From the perspective of those involved, this custom holds significant meaning in local marriage traditions. It is not only a way for couples to unite when they lack the means to hold a formal wedding but also reflects the democratic nature of H’mong marriages, where both parties participate willingly and out of genuine love.

Traditionally, if the girl does not agree to the marriage after spending three days at the boy’s house, she has the right to refuse without coercion. In such cases, the boy must perform certain rituals to compensate for the broken engagement, ensuring that the relationship ends peacefully (Vũ, 2022).

However, in the documentary *Children of the Mist*, this custom is depicted from a distorted perspective, where female characters like Di and her sister are drawn into forced marriages. Di’s sister, who got married at 15 and became a mother at 18, serves as a clear example of child marriage—an unfortunate consequence of the misinterpretation and misuse of the bride-kidnapping tradition. Similarly, Di, at just 15 years old, is subjected to this act by the groom’s family without her consent being respected. The film vividly portrays the struggle between Di and Vâng’s family, highlighting the coercion and pressure she faces as she tries to reject the marriage.

Another notable aspect is the film’s portrayal of the conflict between tradition and modernity. Di, the main character, represents the younger generation struggling between maintaining traditional values and the desire to break free from societal constraints in search of personal freedom. The process of modernization and cultural exchange brings opportunities but also poses challenges in preserving ethnic identity. The film highlights this reality through details such as Di’s aspiration for education and her wish to escape early marriage, despite being bound by family and social expectations.

Figure 3

The Scene Depicting The H'mong Marriage by Capture Tradition in The Film (Appears At 41:21). (Children of The Mist, 2021)



Child marriage within the H'mong community is a pressing issue that the film vividly portrays. It is not only the story of Di and her sister but also a reality faced by many other H'mong girls. Child marriage deprives young girls of opportunities for education and personal development while also leading to severe consequences for their health, mental well-being, and the future of an entire generation.

Marriage Customs and Traditional Values

Another aspect highlighted in the film is the wedding rituals in H'mong culture. According to the Lao Cai Provincial Department of Tourism (Phan, 2020) in *Exploring the Unique Features of H'mong Weddings in Sa Pa*, the groom's family must prepare the required bride price, which includes pigs, liquor, chickens, cash, and tobacco, as requested by the bride's family. Once an auspicious date is chosen, the groom's family presents these offerings at the bride's home to conduct the wedding ceremony. In the film, Di's family discusses a bride price of up to 45 million VND, along with additional demands, which is significantly higher than the traditional amount. This reflects changes in H'mong wedding customs, partly influenced by economic and social modernization.

Religious Beliefs and Their Influence

Additionally, the film highlights the shift in religious beliefs among the H'mong people who have converted to Protestantism. According to Nguyễn (2016) in *The Culture of H'mong Protestants in Lao Cai Province*, during meals, even on special occasions such as festivals, weddings, or funerals, H'mong Protestants rarely consume alcohol. If alcohol is present, it is only served to guests who are non-Protestant H'mong and still follow traditional customs. Traditionally, alcohol is an essential part of H'mong celebrations and weddings. However, for those who have converted to Protestantism, refusing alcohol has become an expression of their faith and a symbol of their new way of life. This contrast is reflected in the film when a husband explains that his wife does not drink alcohol because she follows the faith, illustrating the divide between traditional and modern lifestyles.

The Struggle Between Tradition and Modernity

Children of the Mist not only depicts the traditional customs of the H'mong people but also raises profound questions about the meaning and value of these traditions in a modern context. Di, the protagonist, by rejecting a forced marriage, represents the young H'mong generation who courageously challenge outdated customs in pursuit of freedom and self-determination. The film delivers a powerful message about the need to preserve traditional culture while also adapting it to contemporary society to protect human rights, particularly those of women and children.

One notable aspect is the ritual of drinking alcohol to reject a marriage. According to the Lao Cai Provincial Department of Tourism (Phan, 2019) in *Understanding the H'mong Bride Kidnapping Custom*, in this tradition, after staying at the groom's house for three days, if the girl does not agree to marry him, she is allowed to return home without coercion. In this case, the groom must bring money to the girl's family as a penalty and offer gifts such as chicken and alcohol to share a meal with them. During this meal, the girl and the boy drink a cup of alcohol together, symbolizing that they will remain friends from that moment on. However, in the film *Children of the Mist*, each character, Di and Vâng, drinks two cups of alcohol, which differs from the traditional ritual.

Terraced Rice Cultivation

Regarding terraced rice farming, Nguyễn (1999) in *Some Thoughts on the Role of Terraced Fields for the H'mong People in Sapa - Lao Cai* defines this form of agriculture as a harmonious combination of swidden farming and wet rice cultivation. The H'mong people practice a mixed farming method using tools adapted to mountainous conditions. However, in the film, agriculture is depicted only through brief scenes, focusing less on the labor-intensive process and more on the carefree and playful nature of the young characters. The children in the film are shown playing while working, without emphasizing the hardships of agricultural labor.

The Gầu Tào Festival and Traditional Folk Games

According to Mã (1998) in *The Gầu Tào Festival of the H'mong People*, cited in *Ethnology Journal*, the Gầu Tào festival is described as an important celebration among the H'mong. The festival is held for one of two main purposes: to pray for blessings or to seek protection. If a family is unable to have children, they consult a shaman and organize the Gầu Tào festival to pray for fertility—this is known as the blessing festival. Alternatively, if a family struggles with illness, weak children, or even the loss of a child, they seek the shaman's guidance to hold the festival as a means of praying for health and protection.

The folk games in the festival are diverse and rich, serving not only as entertainment but also carrying deep cultural significance. Activities such as horse racing, crossbow shooting, tug-of-war, spinning top competitions, and pao throwing create a lively atmosphere and strengthen community bonds. Additionally, the festival is an opportunity for people to interact and express their emotions through games and other activities like khèn dancing and sticky rice pounding competitions (see Cowell, 2024).

In the film *Children of the Mist*, the Gầu Tào festival is recreated with a vibrant springtime atmosphere. However, the film does not depict the festival's purpose and rituals as clearly as documented sources do. Instead, it primarily focuses on folk games, emphasizing the joy and excitement of the community during the event. Prominent games featured in the film include horse racing, crossbow shooting, top spinning, tug-of-war, and balance walking, but there is little depiction of religious rites or ceremonial offerings.

According to Phuong (2021) in *Promoting the Folk Games of the H'mong People*, swinging (đánh đu) is a cultural and athletic folk game commonly played by the H'mong in Sa Pa during festivals and the Lunar New Year. Besides its role in sports, training, and entertainment, the game also serves as an opportunity for young men and women to interact and express romantic interest in each other. In the film *Children of the Mist*, the swinging game is portrayed with six children participating simultaneously, rather than just one or two players as in traditional practice. While the number of participants differs, the film maintains the core elements of a strong, sturdy swing built near a terraced field.

The bamboo bridge walking game, also known as corn bridge climbing, is an essential part of the H'mong people's spring festival. According to *People's Army Newspaper* (2023) in *Unique Folk Games in the Spring Festival*, this game has historical and traditional significance, allowing participants to recall their ancestors who once crossed streams and canals using a single bamboo pole. The game requires skill and steady footing to avoid falling into the water while walking across the bamboo bridge. In the film, this game is portrayed with a large number of participants, with the bamboo bridge set up over a muddy field. However, the film does not include detailed depictions of players falling into the water, which is a key element in the traditional game that creates a lively and humorous atmosphere.

According to the Yên Bái Provincial Electronic Information Portal (2024) in *The Gầu Tào Festival of the H'mong People in Trám Tấu, Mù Cang Chải, and Văn Chấn Districts, Yên Bái Province*, the crossbow shooting game requires players to hit a target as small as a leaf or a corn kernel from a distance of 20 to 25 meters. Each participant brings their own crossbow and takes turns shooting to determine the winner, who is rewarded with a fine jar of wine. Consistent with this description, the film shows that not only H'mong men but also women enthusiastically participate in crossbow shooting.

The Role of Documentary Films in Cultural Communication

The film *Children of the Mist* is a prime example of how media can be used to preserve and promote the culture of ethnic minorities. However, to enhance its effectiveness, filmmakers should pay attention to balancing artistic expression with accuracy in encoding messages. Additionally, providing more context or supplementary

information about traditional customs can help audiences decode the messages more effectively, minimizing the risk of misunderstandings or missing key cultural meanings.

Schramm's Encoding and Decoding Theory suggests that cultural communication through documentaries is a complex process, dependent on the interaction between the sender and the receiver. *Children of the Mist* not only succeeds in portraying H'mong culture but also sparks profound discussions on how to understand and preserve cultural values in the age of modernization.

Additionally, the findings of this study align with several international studies, which suggest that documentaries have been identified as an effective way to facilitate intercultural communication through local cultural experience programs (Yang et al., 2023). Documentaries provide viewers with a deeper understanding of cultural contexts and social issues, contributing to emerging social awareness (Lay, 2015). The preservation and accessibility of documentaries are crucial for the development of language, culture, and human understanding, emphasizing their importance in documenting and sharing cultural heritage and knowledge (Edmondson, 2015). In the educational context, documentaries serve as valuable tools for teaching communication and cultural awareness. By exploring various cultural settings, documentaries can enhance students' awareness of different cultural practices and norms, fostering effective communication skills in diverse environments.

Overall, documentaries play a multifaceted role in cultural communication, acting as a bridge between different societies and promoting mutual understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity.

The Reflection of the Conflict Between Tradition and Modernity

One of the most prominent aspects of the film is the reflection of the conflict between tradition and modernity through the character Di, who struggles between maintaining traditional values and her desire to break free from societal constraints in search of personal freedom. With her aspiration for education and resistance to early marriage, Di represents the younger generation standing at a crossroads—choosing between preserving family and social values or stepping into a more modern and liberated future.

The process of modernization and cultural exchange brings opportunities but also poses challenges in preserving ethnic identity. The film highlights this reality through details such as Di's desire for education and her resistance to early marriage, even as she remains bound by family and societal values. This conflict not only reflects a personal struggle but also represents a broader challenge faced by many ethnic minority communities as they adapt to the modern era.

Children of the Mist is not only an artistic film but also an important documentary reflecting the cultural life of the H'mong people. Despite some limitations in its approach, the film has contributed to creating a forum for discussions on the intersection of tradition and modernity while emphasizing the role of culture in shaping ethnic identity. From vibrant brocade clothing to religious rituals and the "bride-kidnapping" custom, the film provides a profound insight into H'mong culture while raising critical questions about preservation and adaptation in the context of modernization.

CONCLUSION

The study aims to analyze how the material and spiritual cultural elements of the H'mong people are portrayed in the documentary *Children of the Mist* by director Hà Lê Diễm. The primary objective is to highlight the distinctive cultural aspects of the H'mong ethnic group, including labor tools, traditional clothing, jewelry, as well as aspects of daily life such as housing, animal shelters, traditional indigo dyeing, corn wine, and smoked meat.

At the same time, the study also focuses on spiritual cultural elements such as the Gầu Tào festival, folk games, unique customs like the "bride-kidnapping" tradition, early marriage, wedding rituals, drinking culture, and daily activities such as rice cultivation and baby-carrying. Through this analysis, the study not only provides a deeper understanding of H'mong culture but also reinforces the role of cinema in depicting and preserving the traditional cultural values of ethnic minority communities. Additionally, it creates an opportunity to introduce and share this cultural heritage with both domestic and international audiences.

The research findings indicate that *Children of the Mist* vividly and authentically portrays the material and spiritual cultural elements of

the H'mong people, highlighting the richness and diversity of their cultural life. The film provides detailed depictions of traditional labor tools, such as bamboo backpacks, reflecting the deep connection between the H'mong people, their agricultural work, and nature.

Traditional clothing—including skirts, shirts, pants, hats, headscarves, and leg wraps—along with jewelry such as earrings, necklaces, and embroidered handbags, appear throughout the film, offering audiences a deeper understanding of the unique cultural values of the H'mong. Additionally, the documentary captures images of H'mong houses, animal shelters, traditional indigo dyeing, and signature culinary elements such as corn wine and smoked meat, further illustrating their close relationship with nature and daily life.

In terms of spiritual culture, the film skillfully conveys the unique cultural elements of the H'mong people, including the Gầu Tào festival, traditional games (such as crossbow shooting and swing games), and customs like bride kidnapping, child marriage, wedding rituals, and the drinking culture. The documentary vividly depicts rice cultivation and mothers carrying their children on their backs, reflecting the H'mong way of life and social organization. Through these portrayals, the film not only reconstructs but also communicates the distinctive cultural values of the H'mong people, contributing to greater community awareness about the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage.

However, the study has certain limitations. Primarily, it focuses solely on *Children of the Mist* without expanding to other films, which limits its ability to represent the broader depiction of H'mong culture in Vietnamese cinema. Future research could broaden its scope by analyzing how other documentary or feature films portray H'mong culture. Comparing different cinematic approaches to representing H'mong traditions would offer a more comprehensive perspective, aiding in the preservation and promotion of ethnic minority cultural heritage while also increasing public awareness and interest in the role of cinema in safeguarding traditional cultural values.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

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Methodology: Truong Nguyen Khanh Dan, Nguyen Tan Khang

Analysis: Truong Nguyen Khanh Dan

Findings: Nguyen Thi Thao Ly

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. No financial, personal, or professional affiliations influenced the research, analysis, or conclusions presented in this study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study are derived from publicly available sources, including the documentary *Children of the Mist* (2021) and related academic and media analyses. No proprietary or restricted datasets were used in this research. Any additional qualitative observations and interpretations are based on the author's analysis of the film's content and contextual materials. Further details can be provided upon reasonable request.

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