

RACHEL TOUGH

Film Review: *Monsoon*

*Monsoon* (2019) follows thirty-six-year-old Kit (Henry Golding, of *Crazy Rich Asians*) as he returns to Vietnam for the first time since his family fled to the UK via Hong Kong following war's end in 1975. In recent decades, the Vietnamese government has relaxed visa requirements for overseas Vietnamese [*Việt Kiều*], making it easier for emigrants like Kit to visit their country of origin. These trips offer an opportunity for members of the Vietnamese diaspora to “achieve ethnic authenticity,”<sup>1</sup> but they can also be uncomfortable and inconclusive affairs. *Monsoon* recounts the struggles for belonging that one such returnee experiences. Kit arrives in Hồ Chí Minh City having just quit his London animation job. His older brother will join him a week later to scatter their parents' ashes. The film follows Kit as he reunites with his estranged second cousin Lee (David Tran), travels to Hà Nội to locate the ancestral home, and searches for a suitable final resting place for his parents. *Monsoon* focuses on Kit's personal journey, with just a handful of other characters and no dramatic plot twists. He is in almost every shot, often appearing pensive, and cuts a lonely figure, especially in the early scenes.

Director Hong Khaou fled Phnom Penh with his Chinese Cambodian parents when the city fell to the Khmer Rouge, moving to Vietnam when he was just months old before the family migrated to the UK as political refugees when he was eight. While *Monsoon* is not an autobiopic, Khaou

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FIGURE 1: Kit (Henry Golding) at a Hồ Chí Minh City sidewalk café. Photo courtesy of Peccadillo Pictures.

has clearly drawn on the “weird feeling of not quite belonging” that he has had on his return trips to Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> Malaysian British actor Golding brings his own experience of growing up between cultures to his role as the movie’s protagonist, and his status as an outsider in Vietnam has similarities to Khaou’s position. Actors from Germany, New Zealand, and Australia were also considered for the part,<sup>3</sup> but it is not clear whether a Vietnamese national was ever in the running. Some will question the casting of a lead who is not ethnically Vietnamese, viewing this as a missed opportunity to tell a more authentic story. Tran, who puts in a quietly powerful performance as cousin Lee, for example, could have been a strong choice.

Early in the movie, Kit heads to his old neighborhood to find Lee’s mother’s house. The landmarks he knew as a child are gone, and he struggles to locate the property. An almost reverential atmosphere pervades the film; in this and in other outdoor scenes, as Kit takes in the sidewalks, alleys, and other mundane spaces that his late parents once occupied, he seems to conduct “an act of remembrance . . . engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past.”<sup>4</sup> He eventually locates



FIGURE 2: Lee (David Tran) and Kit in District 5. Photo courtesy of Peccadillo Pictures.

the house and, in an awkward meeting (with Lee translating—Kit has lost his Vietnamese), presents Lee’s mother with a water filtration bottle, which he belatedly recognizes as a slight on the quality of their tap water. He also produces a tin of biscuits adorned with a picture of the British royal family, which he later admits to his family back home was “archaic, patronizing.” His embarrassment at these gift choices speaks to the difficulty many overseas Vietnamese experience during the “global magnified moment” of the return trip to Vietnam when positioning themselves relative to family members who stayed behind.<sup>5</sup>

Awkwardness turns to discomfort as Lee takes Kit to his mobile phone shop and viewers learn that Lee’s father had worked for a South Vietnam government official and was sent to a reeducation camp, ending the family’s attempts to flee overseas. That Kit was apparently unaware of this seems to upset Lee who, although he is now part of Vietnam’s burgeoning middle class, endured the privations of the postwar subsidy period and the consequences of Vietnam’s failed socialist programs. When Kit describes, almost nostalgically, “everyone leaving together,” Lee responds curtly, “it wasn’t quite like that.” That evening, as Kit silently sips a beer on the

balcony of his rental apartment overlooking the broad sweep of the Sài Gòn River, he seems unsettled, perhaps thinking through Lee's disclosure and the challenge it poses to the narratives that have anchored him since childhood.

As well as reuniting with Lee, Kit strikes up a romantic relationship with Lewis, a gregarious Black US expat and son of an American Vietnam vet he meets online. Lewis takes Kit to the networking events, rooftop bars, and riverside restaurants of the thriving new Sài Gòn that Kit—evidently out of touch with life in Vietnamese cities despite his family connections—confesses he had not expected to find in the former southern capital. Gradually, they reveal their personal connections to Vietnam's recent history, contrasting their feelings of uneasiness with the apparent indifference of local youth: "The kids here, they don't care about the war anymore. They want their dreams, their careers," shrugs Lewis. The notion that young people are apathetic when it comes to Vietnam's legacy of conflict has been challenged by scholars who have suggested that young Vietnamese use the new opportunities presented by the global market to contribute to national progress and prosperity—goals similar to those pursued by their ancestors during the revolution.<sup>6</sup> Both characters clearly carry some of the trauma of those who came before—a phenomenon of "postmemory"—and through their deepening personal connection, they relate to each other not only on a romantic level but as members of the "generation after" the war.<sup>7</sup>

Khaou has described Vietnam as undergoing "an incredible transitional period, when you see the past and you see the future sitting side by side."<sup>8</sup> Nowhere is this more visible than in Hồ Chí Minh City's rapidly transforming urban landscape. A high-end building boom has spawned a slew of new housing developments, "luxurious spectacles of modernity that both give birth to and emerge from the rubble."<sup>9</sup> During his time in Hồ Chí Minh City, Kit's base is an upscale apartment in Thảo Điền—a new master-planned urban zone east of the city center. His anonymous Airbnb acts as a liminal space that mirrors Hồ Chí Minh City's own seemingly transitional state, the sterile silence of the apartment offering both Kit and the viewer periods of relative calm to reflect on life taking place outside. Hồ Chí Minh City's ongoing, frenetic transformation into a global megacity evokes a "world of contingency where events and ideas and 'reality' itself can be



FIGURE 3: Kit scents lotus tea with Linh (Molly Harris) and her family in Hà Nội. Photo courtesy of Đạt Vũ / Peccadillo Pictures.

carried in different directions.”<sup>10</sup> As Kit shuttles back and forth between the seemingly disorderly inner districts and this elite enclave—to meet Lewis, sightsee, and catch up with Lee—these repetitive movements effectively highlight the contrast between the social worlds of “old” and “new” Sài Gòn.

After a few days, Kit heads to Hà Nội. On arrival he meets up with Linh, a young art curator he first encountered in Hồ Chí Minh City, and after she helps him locate his family’s rundown former tenement home, they go for dinner. *Monsoon* is an introspective film, but it never gets too somber, and as Linh and Kit share anecdotes about growing up as part of the first postwar generation, they find plenty to laugh about. Linh is conscious of her family’s expectation that she capitalize on the opportunities that the older generations never had in pre-reform Vietnam. They nearly bankrupted themselves paying for her overseas education and are now desperate for her to secure a well-paid position in Vietnam’s increasingly competitive job market. Yet simultaneously, she is expected to fulfill traditional roles, including helping to run the family’s lotus tea business with its antiquated customs (such as banning menstruating women from touching the lotus



FIGURE 4: Lewis (Parker Sawyers) and Kit. Photo courtesy of Peccadillo Pictures.

flowers, lest they affect the scent) that seem to bemuse her. Despite the competing pressures she faces, Linh accepts that her family means well, and as dinner ends she invites Kit to join them for the tea scenting process the next day. Kit relaxes noticeably on his trip to Hà Nội—smiling more, moving less awkwardly—and he is particularly at ease at the tea scenting, where the vibrant yellows, hot pinks, and dark greens offer an undeniably rewarding visual spectacle. This ritual offers Kit respite from the intensity of the trip, perhaps even engendering a sense of belonging that had, until now, evaded him. But given that tea scenting is a disappearing practice, it is unlikely that Linh’s family would still engage in this activity. These scenes and the selection of certain other locations—Hồ Chí Minh City’s so-called oldest alleyway, Hẻm Hào Sĩ Phường, and District 2 riverside restaurant The Deck, for example—seem to be included primarily to contrast “traditional” and “modern” Vietnam.

In the film’s denouement and most dramatic scene, Kit returns to Hồ Chí Minh City and calls on Lewis, who is not his usual ebullient self. In Kit’s absence, Lewis has engaged in some uncomfortable soul-searching. He reveals for the first time that his father had been a GI—“he had confirmed kills”—who struggled after returning to civilian life and died by suicide only three and a half years ago. In the close confines of Lewis’s cramped

apartment, this revelation hangs heavily in the air between them, threatening to sever the intimate bond they had developed since the start of the movie. Both characters look anguished and the scene ends inconclusively. The final scene opens with Kit standing alone at the bar at another stylish downtown nightspot. Viewers may assume he has come to drown his sorrows, having parted ways with Lewis, or maybe he has arranged a rendezvous with a new date. Yet Lewis soon materializes, and they kiss wholeheartedly before the camera pans away and the credits roll to signal this as the film's understated ending.

Given the warmth of their greeting, it appears they are finding ways to work through Lewis's feelings of guilt over his father's wartime exploits and Kit's identity struggles together, demonstrating that those grappling with secondhand memories of war need not have their lives forever dictated by them. Yet Lewis's experience as a "wounded subject of war and history" arguably overshadows Kit's,<sup>11</sup> mirroring some American Vietnam War films that dwell on the efforts of ex-combatants to find answers and only use Vietnamese characters in a few circumscribed supporting roles.

*Monsoon* unfolds at an unhurried pace, which allows the viewer's gaze to linger on everyday spaces and practices and pick up ethnographic details that are lacking in big-budget, fast-paced pictures set in Vietnam. The opening rising drone shot of a bustling Hồ Chí Minh City intersection, for example, lasts several traffic light cycles, which is long enough for viewers to decipher an efficient system for organizing traffic from what looks like a disorderly mass of vehicles. And when Lee and Kit meet at a sidewalk café, the viewer has time to absorb the background chatter, beeping of scooter horns, and slow rising steam from a nearby *phở* pot. Though *Monsoon* is well shot, it perpetuates some orientalist tropes in visualizing Vietnam, particularly in terms of how it repeatedly juxtaposes "traditional" and "modern" in, at times, clichéd ways. Kit recounts how his mother's decision to move from Vietnam to the UK was linked to her fondness of the queen. Yet beyond this and a couple of similar anecdotes throughout the film, Kit shares little of the richness of the lived experience of Vietnamese refugees in Britain, which is surely recorded in the British Library holdings consulted by the director and production team.<sup>12</sup> In sum, *Monsoon* is an engaging account of the war's variegated impacts on the

identities of a variety of characters who comprise the “generation after.” Yet the film misses some important opportunities to achieve authenticity and, despite its merits, lapses into tropes commonly seen in more mainstream Western depictions of Vietnam on screen.

*For information on cinema screenings and online streaming visit <https://www.monsoonfilm.co.uk/>.*

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#### Notes

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