

Returning to the Ancestral Home: Vietnamese Ghost Cinema and Cross-Border Cultural Flows

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ABSTRACT

In Vietnam, ghost and horror films rooted in local spiritual traditions and folk beliefs have gained increasing popularity and commercial success, being vehicles for cultural expression. This article seeks to investigate how such films engage younger generations with ancestral traditions and cultural identity, focusing on the ghost-comedy film *Nhà Gia Tiên – The Ancestral Home* (2025) by actor-director Huỳnh (Ngọc) Lập as a case study. The film follows a Gen Z content creator from Saigon who returns to her ancestral home in the Mekong Delta and reconnects with ancestor worship through the ghost of her deceased brother. While evoking supernatural motifs, the narrative also explores broader themes such as patriarchy, intergenerational conflict, filial piety, and guilt in Vietnamese families. The film's domestic box office success was followed by its release in selected U.S. cinemas and promotion by Vietnamese-American influencers online, framing the film as not mere entertainment but as a means for diasporic youth to reconnect with their cultural heritage and ancestral roots. This study argues that *Nhà Gia Tiên* exemplifies how contemporary Vietnamese ghost films can serve as both a site of emotional and spiritual reconnection and a dynamic tool for cultural continuity, engaging younger generations with traditional values, both within Vietnam and across the diaspora. Through digital ethnography and qualitative content analysis of the film and its reception, including online promotional materials and audience responses, the paper investigates how cinema contributes to identity negotiation among Vietnamese youth and diaspora communities. By doing so, it positions Vietnamese ghost films as a vital medium for cultural expression in the global age.

Keywords: ancestor worship, diaspora, digital ethnography, ghosts, Vietnamese cinema

INTRODUCTION

What can a supernatural comedy reveal about ancestral connections, spiritual continuity, and cultural belonging in motion? Perhaps more than one might expect. I first watched *Nhà Gia Tiên* [*The Ancestral Home*](2025), a Vietnamese ghost-comedy by actor-director Huỳnh (Ngọc) Lập, on a warm March evening in Ho Chi Minh City. The cinema was filled with laughter and gasps as the film unfolded the story of Mỹ Tiên, a Gen Z content creator who returns to her ancestral home in the Mekong Delta and unexpectedly reconnects with her family's spiritual legacy, guided by the ghost of her late brother. After the credits rolled, a friend of mine, a spiritual practitioner who runs his own temple, remarked on how surprisingly accurate the film's spiritual elements were beneath its glossy surface and quirky characters. Weeks later, I watched *Nhà Gia Tiên* again together with a friend and fellow researcher of Vietnamese spirituality, this time in a theater in Little Saigon in Orange County, California, one of the largest Vietnamese-American diasporic enclaves. The conversations following the film's release, both in person and online, prompted me to consider the film's deeper impact bridging communities in Vietnam and the United States.

This article takes these encounters as a point of departure to examine how contemporary Vietnamese ghost cinema engages younger audiences with ancestral traditions, domestically and in the diaspora, using *Nhà Gia Tiên* as a case study. Through its fusion of humor, family drama, and spiritual motifs, the film functions as both entertainment and cultural education. It introduces viewers to tangible rituals and intangible values of ancestor worship while negotiating intergenerational tensions and spiritual continuity. I argue that *Nhà Gia Tiên* exemplifies a growing trend in Vietnamese media, where ghost films function as tools of cultural transmission across generational and geographic divides. Drawing on qualitative content analysis and digital ethnography, this article explores how spiritual themes are mediated through cinema and social media, making ancestral practices emotionally resonant for younger audiences and contributing to identity negotiation across borders.

The following sections provide an overview of the methods and framework, followed by a contextualization of ancestor worship and spiritual life in Vietnam and its diaspora. I then present a synopsis of *Nhà Gia Tiên* and analyze its portrayal of cultural elements. This is followed by an examination of the film's reception in Vietnam and the United States, concluding with reflections on the historical development and evolving role of Vietnamese ghost films in articulating cultural memory and cross-border belonging.

METHODS AND FRAMEWORK

This article draws on my academic engagement with religion and spiritual practices in Vietnam since 2017, particularly Mother Goddess worship (*Đạo Mẫu*), and a more recent focus on representations of Vietnamese culture in popular media. My approach combines ethnographic reflection with qualitative content analysis, grounded in field experiences surrounding the release of *Nhà Gia Tiên* in Vietnam and the United States, including a research trip to California in May 2025 where I spoke with spiritual practitioners and temple keepers in Santa Barbara, Sacramento, and Garden Grove. This experience provided me with first-hand insights on how cultural practices are understood and preserved within the Vietnamese-American diaspora.

This study uses qualitative content analysis to examine how ancestor worship and spirits are framed as moral agents in the film operating within and beyond the cinematic screen. I also apply digital ethnography (Pink et al. 2015), analyzing how promotional materials and online reactions circulated the film's cultural themes among younger and diasporic viewers. This includes official campaigns, influencer content, and user-generated posts on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Rather than offering a comprehensive reception study, this article uses *Nhà Gia Tiên* as a case study to demonstrate the potential of Vietnamese ghost cinema as a vehicle for cultural transmission. The insights of this study give further historical context to Vietnamese ghost and horror cinema, situating *Nhà Gia Tiên* within broader transformations in spiritual practice, cross-border exchange, and contemporary filmmaking.

CONTEXTUALIZING ANCESTOR WORSHIP

To understand the cultural impact of *Nhà Gia Tiên*, it is necessary to contextualize the spiritual traditions it draws upon, especially the practice of ancestor worship, as well as how these practices are preserved, reshaped, or contested in the Vietnamese diaspora. Despite decades of state-imposed atheism, Vietnam's religious landscape today remains diverse and deeply woven into daily life. Officially recognized religions like Buddhism, Catholicism, and Caodaism coexist with traditions such as ancestor veneration, tutelary spirit cults, national hero worship, popular folk beliefs like *Đạo Mẫu* (Mother Goddess worship), or indigenous shamanism. These practices often blend together, forming a spiritual pluralism that is widespread across urban and rural settings.

Following the country's north-south reunification in 1975, many of these practices were dismissed as *mê tín dị đoan* (superstition) and discouraged as remnants of feudalism (Soucy 2012: 17). However, the 1986 *Đổi Mới* reforms sparked economic liberalization, social change, and a religious revival. Temples were restored, festivals reemerged, and demand for ritual services surged, driven by anxieties about moral decline, rising materialism, and shifting gender roles (Taylor 2003). For many, spiritual practices became a means of re-anchoring values of community and "remoralising" their wealth (Jellema 2005). Meanwhile, a widespread search began for the nation's "cultural roots" (*nguồn gốc văn hóa*) and "national identity" (*bản sắc dân tộc*) occurred among the populace. A discourse on social cohesion emerged by asking what it meant to be Vietnamese, while redefining spiritual traditions as markers of national identity, cultural heritage, or "folk belief" (Taylor 2003, 390).

This trend has accelerated in recent years with younger generations negotiating cultural heritage through social media, fashion, music, and film, where Vietnamese identity is continuously celebrated, debated, and reimagined. These narratives not only resonate within Vietnam but also reach diasporic communities, where many young Vietnamese are eager to reconnect with their roots and explore their heritage, which points to a growing interest that has sparked a creative flow of cultural expression, most notably a new wave of films of various genres that center folk beliefs and ancestor worship, such as *Nhà Gia Tiên*.

Introduction to Ancestor Worship

In the Vietnamese context, the term “ancestors” refers to both familial ancestors worshipped at household altars and mythic or national figures regarded as collective ancestors of the nation. Regardless of religious affiliation, ancestor worship (*thờ cúng tổ tiên* or *nhớ ơn ông bà*) forms the ethical foundation of Vietnamese cultural and spiritual life (see e.g. Salemink 2003, 35 or Soucy 2012, 5). It is not regarded as a religious practice, but a moral obligation rooted in Confucian ideals of filial piety (*hiếu*) and moral debt (*ơn*) (Lauser 2008, 158, 165). In the past confined to the patriarch of the family and the eldest son’s home, ancestor worship today is widely practiced by all household members, not limited to the physical of the ancestor’s home (*nhà gia tiên*) (Nguyen and Vu 2020, 10).

The cosmology underpinning this practice views the world of the living (*cõi dương*) and the dead (*cõi âm*) as interlinked, mirror-like realms. Ancestors, spirits, and ghosts are believed to maintain agency in our world, some offering protection, guidance, or warnings, others, like hungry ghosts, causing harm (see e.g. Kwon 2018, 2). In turn, they all must be cared for through varying rituals such as daily incense offerings, commemorative death anniversaries (*đám giỗ*), and symbolic gifts like paper replicas of money, designer clothing, or smartphones burned for use in the afterlife (see Hühnelmeier 2016). A common proverb, *dương sao âm vậy* (“as it is in the living world, so it is in the spiritual world”), encapsulates this reciprocal bond as the deceased are believed to have material needs similar to the living. Food, flowers, candles, and tea are arranged on the family altar, with the belief that ancestors consume their essence before the offerings are shared among the living. Nowadays such acts of filial piety are at risk of becoming performative displays of wealth. A striking example is An Bàng Cemetery near Huế, dubbed the “City of Ghosts,” known for its lavish family tombs reportedly most of them funded by overseas relatives, particularly from the United States (Culture Pham Travel 2020; Nguyen and Vu 2020).⁽ⁱ⁾ While not representative it still can be seen as a poignant expression of “remoralising” new wealth and how devotion to the ancestors and the homeland is a significant concern for Vietnamese even in the diaspora. Thus, varying by region, class, and individual belief, the meanings of ancestor veneration range from family loyalty to national identity. Whether traditional or adapted, it remains a moral and emotional pillar in Vietnam and abroad.

Preserving Cultural Practices in the United States Diaspora

Among the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States, especially in places like San Jose and Little Saigon (Orange County, California), ancestor worship continues to shape cultural identity across generations. First-generation refugees, mostly from Southern Vietnam who settled in the United States after the ‘Fall of Saigon’ in 1975, tend to maintain strong ties to the homeland, sending money, building community by establishing temples or pagodas, and upholding what many of them perceive as more ‘authentic’ cultural practices than in modern Vietnam. In conversation with spiritual practitioners in Southern California, several temple keepers described their efforts as preserving a pre-*Đổi Mới* cultural memory, consciously insulated from what they saw as modern dilution, shaped by commercialism and (social) media exposure. While some maintain strong connections to Vietnam, others see Vietnamese and diasporic practices as two diverging paths. Yet even these practices evolve. Rituals adapt, depending on access to goods and services, and on how

identity is negotiated across generations (Personal conversation with “Anh” [pseudonym] in May 2025). These patterns echo the insights of Fjelstad and Nguyễn (2011), demonstrating how spiritual traditions transform to meet new diasporic needs. While concepts often remain intact, they are reinterpreted through the lens of displacement, generational shifts, and cultural change.

The 1.5 generation, who came to the United States as children or adolescents and are therefore considered ‘in between’ the first generation (born and raised in Vietnam) and the second generation (born in the U.S.), often balance two worlds. Growing up at home, they spoke Vietnamese and followed familial customs; in public, they adapted to American norms. Despite this cultural balancing act, many continued to engage in traditional practices such as incense offerings and daily prayers at ancestral altars, finding in them a source of continuity and belonging (Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2016). Second and third-generation Vietnamese Americans, by contrast, tend to relate to ancestral practices in more symbolic or fragmented ways. Many were raised seeing altars and participating in rituals at home but lack a deeper understanding, partially due to parental fears that teaching them the Vietnamese language or traditional values might hinder their integration (see Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2016). Some in this generation later in life express regret over this and attempt to reclaim their cultural heritage through language learning, travel, or engagement with Vietnamese American organizations. In recent years, social media has become a major space for this rediscovery, with TikTok and Instagram allowing *Việt Kiều* (Overseas Vietnamese) youth to share their stories of returning to Vietnam or reconnecting with their identity, finding solidarity with others raised between cultures. As Nguyễn Thị Hiền (2016) notes, these hybrid expressions foster “an adapted identity” (447–448), allowing Vietnamese traditions to change while affirming belonging.

In many households, especially among first-generation immigrants, ancestral altars remain sacred spaces for daily offerings and prayers, signifying their enduring filial piety. Yet, meanings continue to shift, reflecting broader efforts to preserve culture and continuity in a globalized world. Southern California in particular, home to the largest overseas Vietnamese American population (U.S. Census Bureau 2010 cited in Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2016, 445), offers a unique setting in which films like *Nhà Gia Tiên* find strong resonance. Within this complex diasporic landscape, such films open new avenues for reflection on identity, tradition, and the transformation of spiritual life across generations and borders.

NHÀ GIA TIÊN – THE ANCESTRAL HOME (2025)

The film *Nhà Gia Tiên* [*The Ancestral Home*] (2025) by director Huỳnh Lập follows the main character Mỹ Tiên (played by pop-singer Phương Mỹ Chi), a Gen Z content creator from Ho Chi Minh City who returns to her ancestral home in the Mekong Delta. The Huỳnh family had built their livelihood on selling traditional pancakes (*bánh xèo*) until their business collapsed following the death of Mỹ Tiên’s father and later of her older brother, Gia Minh (played by Huỳnh Lập). Blamed by villagers and estranged from her mother, she builds a new life as a content creator in Ho Chi Minh City. Years later, prompted by a slump in followers and views, her best friend Phát Phì (Chí Tâm), encourages her to start vlogging about supernatural occurrences at the old house she grew up in, despite not believing in it herself. Upon their arrival they learn that the house is on sale, as the health of her grandfather, the patriarch of the family, is quickly deteriorating and the other family members are fighting over

the inheritance. Soon after, she meets the ghost of Gia Minh and learns that due to some unfinished obligations he cannot move on. They then start working together to protect the house from the greed of their family members, while mending the relationship with their mother and with each other, leading Mỹ Tiên to discover a new appreciation for all ancestors and uncover the true circumstances surrounding Gia Minh's death. Mỹ Tiên ultimately reconciles with her family and reclaims her role in the ancestral line, inheriting the house and continuing the family business.

While *Nhà Gia Tiên* includes supernatural elements and was rated 18+ in Vietnam, it departs from conventional horror. Instead, it aligns with the popular Southeast Asian ghost film genre. As Bräunlein and Lauser (2016) argue, films of this genre do more than visualize supernatural beings to scare audiences as they mediate unresolved issues between the visible and invisible, the past and present, not simply through fear but via deeply embedded beliefs. Ghosts, in this context, are part of a lived cosmology, often positioned as narrative agents that navigate grief, memory, and shifting social dynamics in a rapidly changing cultural-specific society (see Bräunlein 2016, 12). This perspective resonates in Vietnam, where ghost films frequently address ancestral obligation, disrupted spiritual continuity, and the emotional labor of maintaining harmony with the dead. Tilman Baumgärtel (2015) notes that Southeast Asian horror departs from Western conventions: "The ghosts in horror films from Southeast Asia [...] are not primarily literary inventions [...] but are part and parcel of a mythology that is still very much taken for granted by many people in the region" (4). Asian ghost films often portray spirits as part of everyday reality, being tied to unresolved relationships, ancestral obligations, and karmic consequences within the cultural context. In this view, 'the ghost' is not just a source of fear but exists within actively lived and shared cultural belief systems, a perspective clearly visible in *Nhà Gia Tiên*, where Gia Minh's spirit is in many ways a figure of love, loss, and moral obligation born out of Vietnamese ancestor tradition and harmful Confucian concepts of gendered roles affecting all characters in the film.⁽ⁱⁱ⁾

Nhà Gia Tiên blends this spiritual framework with a fast-paced, comedic style inspired by Vietnamese web series, appealing to young urban audiences. Huỳnh Lập's earlier webdrama *Ai Chết Giơ Tay* (Land of the Spirits, 2018–2022) also explored spiritual themes through humor and pop aesthetics, following the life of a young shaman (played by himself). While *Nhà Gia Tiên* is not formally part of that universe, it inherits its quirky, emotional tone and its empathetic portrayal of spirits and ghosts. Unlike other supernatural (romantic) comedies like *Yêu đi đừng sợ!* [Kiss and Spell, 2017] or *Duyên Ma* [My Boyfriend is a Ghost, 2022], focusing on entertainment, *Nhà Gia Tiên* stands out for its pedagogical dimension.

In its promotional materials, the film is explicitly portrayed as a vehicle for cultural education while entertaining, with Huỳnh Lập framing the film's comedic style as "a chance to introduce Vietnamese cultural jokes to all" (Skylinefilm.us, April 26, 2025). This positions the film within a larger trend in Vietnamese popular media that draws on folk beliefs and traditional spirituality. It reflects a growing appetite for stories that resonate with shared cultural knowledge rather than imported horror tropes, as Baumgärtel's (2015) framework suggests. *Nhà Gia Tiên* stands uses comedy and emotion to introduce spiritual practices and challenge patriarchal legacies. By doing so, it exemplifies how Vietnamese ghost cinema can act as a cultural text, a mediator between tradition and modernity, especially for younger and diasporic audiences. The next section explores

how this cultural knowledge is visually and narratively constructed, particularly through the material and spiritual dimensions of ancestor worship depicted on screen.

ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN *NHÀ GIA TIÊN* AS A NARRATIVE AND PEDAGOGICAL TOOL

The film *Nhà Gia Tiên* introduces a wide range of cultural elements related to ancestor worship (*thờ cúng tổ tiên*), presenting them not only as aesthetic and narrative devices but also as tools for intergenerational education and cultural transmission. Starting with the promotional material and the opening title sequence, a central reoccurring visual motif in the film is *tranh kiếng*, or reverse glass paintings, traditionally used in Southern Vietnam for religious and ancestral veneration. They often include the phrase *Cửu Huyền Thất Tổ* ("Nine Generations, Seven Ancestors"), encapsulating the core values of Vietnamese ancestor worship. Their prominent presence in the film underscores its thematic emphasis on familial continuity while introducing the audience to this art form.



Figure 1: Mỹ Tiên consulting the neighbor, a *tranh kiếng* artist and ritual specialist.

Source: Screenshot from *Nhà Gia Tiên*, 00:25:44.



Figure 2: A common camera angle used throughout the film showing the mother, Phát Phì, and Mỹ Tiên (left to right) in front of the ancestor altar. Source: Screenshot from *Nhà Gia Tiên*, 00:21:02.



Figure 3: Mỹ Tiên seeing the ancestors for the first time. Source: Screenshot from *Nhà Gia Tiên*, 01:12:16.

Building upon this visual introduction to ancestral belief, the narrative turns to a central symbolic and physical structure: the *nhà gia tiên*, or ancestral home, which serves as the center of each family's spiritual life as it contains the family altar (*bàn thờ*). The film's main conflict revolves around the fate of this home while reuniting the estranged siblings, Gia Minh and Mỹ Tiên. Over the course of the narrative, the audience is gradually shown that the *nhà gia tiên* holds meaning far beyond its monetary worth, as it embodies spiritual, historical, and emotional values. The significance of the home is further reinforced through the film's visual language.

A series of carefully composed shots show the ancestral house in the Mekong Delta and its altar space, often filmed from angles that mimic the perspective of the ancestors themselves, gazing down from the altar on the characters praying and making offerings (*lễ vật*) such as incense (*hương*), flowers (*hoa*), lotus-shaped candles (*đăng*), tea (*trà*), fruits (*quả*), and traditional food (*thức ăn*). Throughout the film, Gia Minh is shown engaging with these offerings visible re-charging from them. In one scene, he explains to Mỹ Tiên, and by extension to the audience, that once the incense has fully burned down the offerings may be consumed by the living, signifying that the ancestors have accepted them. Extending this focus on ritual practice, the film gives special prominence to the tradition of *đám giỗ*, or death anniversaries, visualizing and transmitting ancestral customs. In a key scene, the ancestors appear as ghostly guests (in black and white representing old family pictures) seated around the table during Gia Minh's death anniversary celebration. When a young boy steals a snack before the incense burned down, Mỹ Tiên scolds him, leading to approving comments from the ancestors. This dramatization subtly teaches viewers the correct etiquette of ancestor worship.

The film features two *đám giỗ*, forming a narrative thread that connects past, present, and future while acting as significant plot points. The first commemorating the siblings' father and showing Gia Minh's emergence as a responsible successor, recognized by their patriarchal grandfather just shortly before his premature death, kicking off the story. The second is set in the present and marks Gia Minh's own death anniversary which represents a turning point in Mỹ Tiên's emotional journey. As they prepare for the celebration, both she and Phát Phì record a vlog about "typical Southern death anniversaries," during which they introduce the practice of *tảo mộ* (grave sweeping).

Performed during the lunar new year or on special commemorative days, this act of care for ancestral graves is explained in a way that directly addresses both her online followers and the cinema audience as Mỹ Tiên poses the question “When was the last time you visited your ancestors’ graves?” This functions as a call for reflection, particularly aimed at younger Vietnamese viewers. The anniversary itself contains multiple story threads, one significant one being Mỹ Tiên, while being temporarily possessed by Gia Minh, standing up against rude remarks by their relatives, making this scene very relatable for many Vietnamese growing up. As the anniversary continues a big fight breaks out, involving debt collectors storming the celebration and leading to the final dramatic events of the film, mentioned in the following section.

Intangible and Spiritual Concepts

Beyond material practices, the film delves into several deeply embedded spiritual and social concepts, revealing how ancestor worship intersects with broader cultural norms and tensions. Among the most prominent is a critique of *trọng nam khinh nữ* (lit. transl. male preference, female contempt), the patriarchal ideology that privileges sons over daughters in matters of inheritance and responsibility, following the principle “Sons inherit names, space, and power. Daughters and daughters-in-law? They serve” (Reelcitrus May 12, 2025). This mindset is the underlying cause of the rift between the siblings, the conflict surrounding the inheritance of the house and ultimately contributed to Gia Minh’s death. By centering familial conflict around this generational imbalance, the film exposes how gendered expectations shape not only material legacies such as inheritance but also burdens and emotional labor within the structure of ancestral obligation until today.



Figure 4: Mỹ Tiên being encouraged by Gia Minh to fight back on the comments made by their relatives.

Source: Screenshot from *Nhà Gia Tiên*, 01:17:23.

Somewhat intertwined with this critique is the film’s exploration of the spiritual categories, *tổ tiên* (ancestors) and *ma/quỷ* (hungry ghosts or malevolent spirits). When Mỹ Tiên first encounters Gia Minh’s ghost, she reacts with fear and seeks help from a neighbour (a *tranh kiếng* artist and ritual specialist). Despite their efforts, she is unable to dispel Gia Minh, ultimately revealing that “family cannot expel family.” As the story unfolds, Mỹ Tiên comes to view Gia Minh not as a ghostly threat

but as her brother, an ancestor lingering on. This distinction comes up multiple times throughout the film, in particularly in his death anniversary scene, where the ancestors observe Gia Minh's inability to transition fully into the spiritual realm, implying that closure in the living world is necessary for spiritual peace.

This is further explored in a later scene when a *thầy cúng* (ritual specialist) is called to cleanse the house, warning that Gia Minh is at risk of becoming a hungry ghost if he does not complete his spiritual passage. Rather than guiding spirits or helping families, he represents institutionalized detachment from familial compassion. Audience are led to empathize with Gia Minh and Mỹ Tiên's desperate attempts to stop the cleansing, reinforcing the film's message about familial loyalty. Further portraying the connection between two worlds is the theme of spirit possession, a phenomenon deeply rooted in Vietnamese spiritual practice. Gia Minh is shown temporarily possessing Mỹ Tiên on three occasions: first to help her make *bánh xèo*, reconciling with their mother, standing up against their relatives, and later to convince their grandfather to pass the ancestral home's inheritance to her. These scenes underscore the permeability between the living and the dead, where ancestor spirits have agency and can temporarily intervene, empower, and even speak through the living. In this sense, spiritual inheritance is not merely symbolic, it becomes active and embodied.

All of these threads culminate in the film's symbolic climax, which offers a visual display of the Vietnamese saying *Ông bà gánh công lưng* (transl. Ancestors carry the burden on their bent backs). After the ancestral home catches fire, Mỹ Tiên attempts to rescue the photographs from the family altar but becomes trapped beneath a collapsing beam. In a moment of supernatural intervention, Gia Minh and the entire ancestral line appear, lifting the burning roof to save her. This scene brings to life the notion of *tổ tiên độ*, which is the ancestral blessing and protection passed down through generations, portraying the film's core message literally and metaphorically.

The film closes with a time jump, showing Mỹ Tiên running the family *bánh xèo* business at a newly renovated ancestral home. Her successful assumption of this role signifies a reconciliation with her family, both the living and the dead, while marking not only a personal transformation but also a broader commentary on the evolving role of women in maintaining and transmitting ancestral legacy, offering almost a resolution to the film's underlining critique of *trọng nam khinh nữ*. Through this final scene, the film affirms the continuity of cultural memory, now upheld by female agency and perhaps modern reinterpretation.

ONLINE PROMOTION AND PUBLIC RECEPTION

Nhà Gia Tiên premiered in Vietnam in February 2025 and quickly became a box-office success. Within three months, it grossed nearly USD10 million and attracted over three million viewers, making it "the highest-grossing spiritual-themed film in Việt Nam to date" (Vietnam News, April 15, 2025). Its international rollout was strategically timed, debuting in Taiwan during the Qingming (Tomb Sweeping) Festival, followed by releases in Australia, New Zealand, Southeast Asia, and finally North America in May, where it opened in 144 theaters, selling over 17,000 tickets in the first weekend (*Variety*, April 13, 2025; *ReelCitrus*, May 14, 2025). The United States launch coincided with Asian

American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month and was framed as honoring the 2.2 million Vietnamese Americans living in the country (ReelCitrus, April 14, 2025).

The film's success owed much to its resonance with younger audiences, particularly through its digital promotion and cast. The casting of pop singer Phương Mỹ Chi and the well-known previous works of director Huỳnh Lập helped attract viewers to the screens. Also, Mỹ Tiên's relatable character of a skeptical content creator reconnecting with spiritual traditions, mirrored the experience of many young Vietnamese navigating cultural heritage in the digital age. The scene during Gia Minh's death anniversary, when she defends herself against their relatives unwanted comments struck a chord with viewers for its relatability and was widely reposted on TikTok, as it speaks to most young people growing up in Vietnamese households. In this scene Mỹ Tiên says what many wish they could say aloud at their next family gatherings, demonstrating the deep resonance of her character with the audience.

The film's transnational promotional campaign was extensive and strategically targeted to domestic audiences but arguably even more the Vietnamese diaspora, spanning major platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook by using official accounts, community partners, and influencers to bridge cultural contexts. The media company ReelCitrus played a central role, targeting diaspora and Gen Z audiences through a campaign emphasizing cultural pride and community engagement, following the theme 'English-subbed. Ancestors-approved' (ReelCitrus, April 23, 2025). Posts ranged from memes and behind-the-scenes content to explainer videos on ancestor altar setups and Vietnamese idioms. Influencers and popular Asian American pages such as Phodaculture, VietQMedia or Vietnamese American student associations (cross-)shared promotional material and reactions from screenings, contextualizing the film for the diasporic audience.

Director Huỳnh Lập also actively promoted the film on his own social media, sharing vlog-style behind-the-scenes content, cast interviews, and a short reality series with the cast on his YouTube channel (Huỳnh Lập Official, *Phim Điện Ảnh Nhà Gia Tiên* 2025). He described the film in an interview as rooted in nostalgia, sharing the connection to his own family's *bánh xèo* business growing, noting "As someone who deeply loves Vietnamese culture, I put everything I know and cherish into this movie" (ReelCitrus, April 22 and May 14, 2025), while for international viewers "it will naturally evoke memories of the home where they came from" (Skylinefilm.us, May 19, 2025).

Other video content adopted a more playful and educational tone, such as Huỳnh Lập, explaining trending Vietnamese phrases featured in the film to American audiences, like *gánh công lưng* ("ancestors are carrying your weight"), *+1 Gia Tiên* ("+1 ancestor"), and *trộm vía* (similar to "knock on wood," related to the soul, a phrase to ward off bad luck). These culturally specific elements, presented in humorous yet informative ways, made the film more accessible while affirming cultural authenticity (Skyline.us April 26, 2025). His posts also included personal footage of a death anniversary at his family home, paralleled by Phương Mỹ Chi showcasing her own altar, reinforcing the film's theme of ancestral veneration beyond the screen.

Việt Kiều (Overseas Vietnamese) influencers and content creators played a crucial role in making the film resonate emotionally with second-generation Vietnamese American audiences. Multiple creators such as Sophie Bảo Trân (@mommyandmevietnamese) shared heartfelt reflections on the

film, praising it for being “unapologetically Vietnamese” and for sparking meaningful conversations, highlighting the film’s intergenerational impact (May 13, 2025). Others posted trailer reactions, short viewing vlogs, and other themed content, such as Julie Mai Tran (@sharemyroots) baking *bánh xèo* (traditional pancakes) while watching the trailer with her parents. In her caption, she wrote: “Seeing my parents’ reaction to the film and the fact that our Vietnamese traditions will be front and center in American theaters made us so proud!” (April 24, 2025).

Others, like the creator @losangeles4everybody, sharing footage of her own ancestor veneration practices during past visits to Vietnam, wrote: “It’s not religion – it’s memory, tradition, and love passed down” (May 2, 2025). One particularly poignant post by Victoria Lôi captured the emotional weight of the experience in a short vlog: “[...] seeing my motherland and our people on the big screen outside of Vietnam [...] i longed to understand more of who i am and where i come from”[sic] (May 17, 2025). These reactions underscore the film’s success in activating memory, identity, and cultural pride, especially for those navigating in-between spaces of cultural heritage and assimilation.

The campaign also inspired a ripple effect across social media, making traditional practices accessible to an English-speaking audience with users sharing their own experiences growing up Vietnamese in the United States. Posts like “What’s on Grandma’s Altar?” provided beginner-friendly guides to Vietnamese ancestor worship, prompting followers to share their personal practices in the comment section. One user wrote: “[...] It may not be traditional looking, but it [their ancestor altar] still holds the same meaning for me.” Another reflected on the generational disconnection: “My mom Americanized early so never taught me these things. I had to learn from Ngoại [maternal grandmother] in my 20s” (ReelCitrus, April 27, 2025).

My personal experience of watching *Nhà Gia Tiên* both in Vietnam and the United States offered a firsthand sense of the film’s transnational emotional resonance. In Ho Chi Minh City, the cinema was filled with laughter, audible gasps, and clear understanding of quirky cultural jokes and references. In contrast, during the screening in a half-empty cinema in Orange County, I observed a different kind of emotional response, quiet tears, some nods of recognition, and more shared post-film conversations discussing intergenerational memory, trauma, guilt, and healing, between the homeland in Vietnam and the newfound home in the United States. These different yet equally valid reactions highlight the film’s capacity to carry shared cultural values across geographic borders. This includes those living with and rediscovering their roots through community building.

VIETNAMESE GHOST FILM: HISTORY AND CROSS-BORDER FLOWS

As Lan Duong (2016) wrote: „To look at ghost films is to touch on ‘ghostly matters’ indeed, for the genre in Vietnamese film history is ghostly itself” (153). With this she is firstly referring to how Vietnamese ghost cinema has long been shaped by political repression, cultural anxiety, and diasporic return. After the reunification of Vietnam in 1975, supernatural themes were effectively banned under the Communist government’s atheist stance, as national cinema shifted its focus to war-themed propaganda films (Saigoneer 2024). Except for some rare exceptions, horror filmmaking halted until the late 1980s, when the socioeconomic *Đổi Mới* reforms began to loosen ideological constraints.

This period and the transition of the country to a free market economy marked a grave change in Vietnamese cinema as more relaxed censorship rules in regard to topics and themes, a shift to more commercial projects, new funding opportunities from abroad, and the return of Vietnamese filmmakers from the diaspora (Win 2019, 179–80) gave rise to a post-Socialist revisionist cinema and productions that offered critical perspectives on war trauma, displacement, and repressed histories. Ghosts were used not merely for horror but as metaphors for unresolved war trauma on an individual level (Win 2019, 183). Diasporic return significantly shaped this revival as Vietnamese refugees and their descendants, once deemed “traitors to the national family [...] viewed as symbolically dead by the state” began returning as tourists, investors, and creatives, reshaping the genre from both sides of the Pacific and adding to the ‘ghostliness’ of it (Duong 2016, 154).

It was not until the 2000s that commercial horror made a more visible return on screens, often influenced by foreign co-productions and Western horror films, like *Mười* (2007), a Korean–Vietnamese collaboration. A turning point came with *Quả Tim Máu [Vengeful Heart]* (2014) by Vietnamese American director Victor Vũ, which combined horror and comedy and became the highest-grossing Vietnamese horror film at the time, sparking a wave of similar productions in the mid-2010s. By the 2020s, the genre had evolved again, focusing more on culturally specific narratives and folklore. Recent titles include *Kẻ Ăn Hồn [The Soul Reaper]* (2023) by Trần Hữu Tấn, which incorporates folk curses and water puppet aesthetics; *Quỷ Cẩu [Crimson Snout]* (2023) and *Linh Miêu [Spirit Whisker]* (2024) by Lưu Thành Luân, both drawing on urban legends and regional traditions; and *Thám Tử Kiên: Kỳ Án Không Đầu [Detective Kiên: The Headless Horror]* (2025) by Victor Vũ, a mystery thriller weaving local ghost stories into a broader historical narrative.

These films exemplify a growing trend toward “folk horror,” where Indigenous cosmologies, gender roles, and ancestral beliefs are both explored and questioned (Saigoneer 2024). This resurgence is significantly fueled by the return of diasporic creatives, especially 1.5 and second-generation Vietnamese-Americans, who bring not only financial resources but a fervent desire to reconnect with their cultural roots, reshaping the genre from a transnational perspective (Boudreau and Yamashiro, cited in Duong 2016, 156). While *Nhà Gia Tiên* by Vietnamese director Huỳnh Lập is neither explicitly a horror film nor a diasporic production, its focus on current ancestor worship practices, exploring national identity along with its highly promoted release in the United States, actively bridged Vietnamese and U.S. American communities and cinema, serving as a tool for transnational cultural transmission.

CONCLUSION

The success of *Nhà Gia Tiên* demonstrates how contemporary Vietnamese ghost cinema is shaped by transnational flows, digital participation, and evolving modes of cultural transmission. Centering ancestral veneration, the film presents spiritual traditions not as fixed heritage, but as living practices that remain meaningful today, both in Vietnam and across the diaspora. Its focus on family, memory, and identity reflects how Vietnamese filmmakers are reimagining the ghost genre as more than just a space for jump scares. Films like *Nhà Gia Tiên* use ancestor spirits to engage with deeply rooted cultural traditions, and in doing so, open space for generational healing and reconnection. As this article has shown, *Nhà Gia Tiên* is not simply a work of entertainment but a cultural tool that

activates memory, sparks intergenerational dialogue, and revives interest in traditional practices, particularly among second-generation Vietnamese youth in the United States.

By crossing national and digital borders, the film exemplifies an emergent form of 'spiritual media,' where cultural heritage is not merely preserved, but dynamically reshaped through new platforms and audiences. Vietnamese ghost and horror films function as vital vehicles for transmitting memory, navigating collective anxieties, and negotiating identity. Far from marginal, these films function as transnational storytellers, bridging generations, surfacing suppressed histories, and offering pathways back to tradition. In these stories, the past does not simply haunt, it speaks, remembers, and insists on being carried forward, pointing to a broader trend within Vietnamese cinema, where spirits may linger, but so do stories that connect us across time and place.

NOTES

(i) The cemetery was recently used as filming location in the horror-film *Linh Miêu: Quỷ Nhập Tràng* (Spirit Whisker: The Revenant, 2025). While there are not any verifiable sources confirming this, the shots in the film match the landscape and aesthetics of the tombs (based on a personal visit and photographs taken). The film's release, alongside the site's rising popularity, supports this conclusion and ties together ancestor worship, U.S. diaspora practices, and Vietnamese horror cinema.

(ii) This is also reflected in the popularity of female ghost figures in contemporary Southeast Asian cinema, often navigating themes of suppressed desire, familial duty, or gendered injustice. Loosely relating to Mỹ Tiên's (and the daughter in law's) complex struggles with the patriarchal values reinforced by the grandfather and society, being the cause for all conflicts in the film. For a comparative gendered reading of Vietnamese and Thai ghost narratives, see Vu Thi Trang's study on *Female Ghosts in Southeast Asian Culture* (2025).

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