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## THE REPRESENTATION OF THE MONG ETHNIC GROUP IN THE VIETNAMESE TV DRAMA SERIES “MÙA XUÂN Ở LẠI” (2020)

Hoang Thanh Lan\*, Phan Thi Van Quyen

*Faculty of Linguistics and Cultures of English-Speaking Countries,*

*VNU University of Languages and International Studies, No.2 Pham Van Dong, Cau Giay, Hanoi, Vietnam*

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**Abstract:** This research examines the representation of Mong ethnic group in the TV drama series “Mùa xuân ở lại” (2020) and discusses the implications of this representation for a wide-ranging social and cultural context. Employing the framework of Fairclough (2001) and Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T. (2006), the data analysis has revealed the following findings on the Mong people in the film: (1) Mong people’s living environment is underdeveloped and insecure; (2) Mong people’s economy is agricultural-based with a heavy reliance on nature, (3) Mong people are poorly educated, (4) Mong people still preserve backward social and cultural practices, (5) Mong people play a passive role in the interethnic relationship with Kinh people. Apparently, the way that the Mong people and their life are portrayed in the film tends to perpetuate long-held stereotypes of this ethnic group in Vietnamese media.

*Keywords:* ethnic representation, multimodal CDA, Mong ethnic group, TV series

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\* Corresponding author.

Email address: lanht2706@gmail.com

# CHÂN DUNG NGƯỜI DÂN TỘC MÔNG TRONG BỘ PHIM TRUYỀN HÌNH VIỆT NAM “MÙA XUÂN Ở LẠI” (2020)

Hoàng Thanh Lan, Phan Thị Vân Quyên

*Khoa Ngôn ngữ và Văn hóa các nước nói tiếng Anh, Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội,  
Số 2 Phạm Văn Đồng, Cầu Giấy, Hà Nội, Việt Nam*

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**Tóm tắt:** Nghiên cứu này nhằm tìm hiểu chân dung người dân tộc Mông trong phim truyền hình Việt Nam “Mùa xuân ở lại” (2020) và thảo luận về ý nghĩa cũng như những hàm ý của cách khắc hoạ hình ảnh người dân tộc Mông trong bộ phim trong bối cảnh xã hội và văn hóa rộng lớn hơn. Sử dụng khung phân tích của Fairclough (2001) và Kress, G. và van Leeuwen, T. (2006), quá trình phân tích dữ liệu tìm ra được những phát hiện sau về hình ảnh người dân tộc Mông trong phim: (1) Môi trường sống của người Mông kém phát triển và không an toàn; (2) Kinh tế của người Mông dựa vào nông nghiệp với sự phụ thuộc nhiều vào tự nhiên; (3) Người Mông có trình độ học vấn thấp; (4) Người Mông vẫn duy trì các tập tục xã hội và văn hóa lạc hậu; (5) Người Mông đóng vai trò thụ động trong mối quan hệ liên dân tộc với người Kinh. Rõ ràng, cái cách mà người Mông và cuộc sống của họ được miêu tả trong phim vẫn có xu hướng tiếp nối những định kiến lâu đời về nhóm dân tộc này trên các phương tiện truyền thông tại Việt Nam.

*Từ khoá:* đại diện dân tộc, phân tích diễn ngôn đa phương thức, dân tộc Mông, phim truyền hình

## 1. Introduction

Media is an influential tool for depicting different groups in society and reflecting social ideologies. On-screen representation especially influences perceptions of audiences in the real world (Bertuzzi & Venosta, 2022). TV drama series are among the most popular entertainment media nowadays and as they can reach a huge audience, their representation inevitably helps shape public understanding of a group and its culture.

According to Taylor (2008), Vietnam is home to great cultural diversity, and ethnic minority groups are an intriguing subject that garnered the interest of numerous filmmakers in the cinematic sector. Representation of ethnic or cultural groups in media in general and in broadcasted TV drama series in particular is a compelling topic attracting the attention of many researchers. Often ‘marginalized or overlooked’ (Ross, 2019), ethnic minorities might benefit from precise and respectful media representation. This research investigates how the makers of the TV drama series “Mùa xuân ở lại” portray the Mong ethnic people, aiming to find out whether this portrayal reinforces or challenges the preconceived ethnic stereotypes.

The research question is: *How are the Mong ethnic people portrayed in the TV drama series “Mùa xuân ở lại”?*

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Media Representation of a Cultural Group

Representation is the creation of meaning via language, image, and discourse (Hall, 1997). Hall (1997) also emphasized the significance of representation as a form of

communication and social interaction.

Media representation is not always an objective reflection of reality but is often affected by various factors such as media producers' intentions, the audience's interpretation, cultural and social contexts, and power dynamics. According to Hall's (1973) model of encoding and decoding, media representations are encoded by producers and decoded by audiences. Encoding is the process influenced by producers' intended meaning, interests, and dynamic power (Hall, 1973). On the other hand, decoding refers to the process by which the receivers of the information interpret the code, and recreate the imparted ideology, which reflects the complexity of the communication process and the diversity of society (Murdock, 2017).

A cultural group is a group of people having common beliefs, behaviors, and values (Gilbert et al., 2007). Regardless of size, the groups can be distinguished by their respective philosophies and modes of conduct (Gilbert et al., 2007).

Media representation of a cultural group is the portrayal of a group of people in various forms of media (Teletonusa, 2023), in which specific concepts, cultures, and identities are offered or produced through pictures or languages. In the modern context, media is considered one of the most powerful institutions for shaping viewpoints, informing people, and framing debates around social issues; how media depicts marginalized groups has significant implications for social attitudes (Albany State University, n.d.). Positive and accurate media portrayal could enhance self-esteem for marginalized groups (Nadal, 2021). Moreover, it contributes to eradicating social stereotypes and boosting social diversity. In contrast, biased representation can reinforce stereotypes or discrimination, resulting in negative emotions or experiences for the people of this group.

## **2.2. Ethnic stereotypes**

Stereotype is “a belief system in which psychological characteristics are ascribed more or less indiscriminately to a member of a group” (Jost & Hamilton, 2008, p.209). Stereotypes limit the perspectives of those who hold them and keep them from looking for sufficient, unbiased explanations of the phenomena (Koshmanova & Hapon, 2007). Allen and Webber (2019) reported that people of various racial groups, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic backgrounds are affected by the phenomenon of stereotyping.

Ethnic stereotypes are commonly accepted generalizations that paint an overly simplistic picture of members of particular ethnic groups (Nguyen, 2021). For definition,

“Ethnic stereotypes are perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes that deviate from the cultural characteristics of one group of people to another group or class of people. This process is based on the subjective perception, or simple generalization of a few individual expressions for an entire ethnic community. These perceptions and behaviors can be unconscious or conscious, objective, or subjective, exaggerated, or visual, direct or convex.”

(Nguyen, 2010, p.32)

According to Nguyen (2010), ethnic stereotypes revolve around some main issues, such as cultural inferiority and backwardness, simplicity of social organization, and closed self-sufficient economy. Hogg and Abrams (1998) stated that some ethnic groups were labeled as ‘backward’, ‘ignorant’, and ‘innocent’. Hogg and Abrams (1998) also found that negative stereotypes are frequently connected to members of minorities (for instance, more illiterate or poorer), whereas positive stereotypes are linked to members of the majority group (for example, more intelligent and wealthy).

There are numerous reasons behind ethnic stereotypes. As Nguyen (2010) stated,

those reasons include differences in natural conditions, biological characteristics, culture-language, employment, religions, education; geographical isolation; political system; social organization; the influence of political/scientific doctrines, and rumor mechanism. And one of the most important factors is the media. According to Castañeda (2018), ethnic stereotypes endured because of the significant influence of the media on societal perceptions. The media explosion has further blurred the distinction between fact and fiction, which might make audiences view the broadcast of ethnic stereotypes as true representations of an ethnic group (Castañeda, 2018).

### **2.3. *Mong Ethnic People***

Based on language, culture, and ethnic self-awareness, Vietnamese Ethnologists released a list identifying 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam in 1979 (Nguyen, 2010). The Mong (or H'mong) is one of Vietnam's 54 ethnic groups, contributing to the country's rich cultural diversity.

Mong people reside mostly in the northern mountains and the central highlands of Vietnam. With around one million people, the Mong constitute the sixth most significant ethnic minority in Vietnam. ("The Hmong people, ethnic minority in Vietnam," 2023)

The Mong people's cultural and linguistic diversity is reflected in their unique language, rich traditions, and vibrant traditional attire. In terms of language, the Mong people have their distinct language, a member of the more prominent Austroasiatic language family. Their language features various dialects spoken in different regions. Besides, they can also communicate in other languages such as Vietnamese, Thai, Muong, and Dao (Nguyen, 2021). Concerning the traditions, the Mong possesses a rich tradition of handicrafts, music, and festivals. Strong community sense and natural surroundings worship are two outstanding features of the Mong people. Festivals, which remain vital, are often celebrated. About the costume, traditional Mong clothing, particularly for women, is known for its intricate embroidery and vibrant colors.

Regarding their economic situation, they are among the ethnic groups with a deep-rooted history of cultivating wet rice (Nguyen, 2022). They also practice livestock raising. The Mong people have faced challenges related to economic development, access to education, healthcare, and infrastructure.

Among 54 ethnic groups, the culture of the Mong stands out as particularly unique and well-maintained (Bui, 2014). Efforts are ongoing to promote their cultural preservation and socio-economic development while respecting their traditions and way of life.

### **2.4. *"Mùa xuân ở lại" Vietnamese TV Drama Series***

"Mùa xuân ở lại" (2020), a TV drama series produced by Vietnam Television Film Center and Vietnam Television is one of the numerous films using Vietnamese ethnic minority material. Being aired in prime time during the Lunar New Year holiday on the national television channel VTV1, the series has drawn significant attention from the audience (VTV Entertainment, 2020).

The storyline revolves around Hoa, a Kinh girl who has just been awarded a bachelor of pedagogy. Hoa decides to take the teaching job in a mountainous district where the Mong people reside because, according to state policy, after three years of service in mountainous regions, teachers will be offered a permanent position in lowland provinces upon return. This policy is aimed at encouraging teachers to work in remote and poverty-stricken areas. When

living with the Mong community there, witnessing many families being tricked into selling their land due to their lack of education and information, Hoa feels a profound sympathy for their situation. Her desire is that all the children in the village can go to school and learn to read and write, so they can step out into the world with confidence. During her time working there, Hoa gradually develops a deep love and attachment to the people and the land. Therefore, she faces difficulty in choosing between returning to her hometown for a stable job as her initial plan or staying and continuing her teaching career in the highlands. In the end, Hoa follows her heart and decides to stay in the highlands to continue her teaching mission.

The series was filmed in Phong Tho district, the habitat of the Mong ethnic (VTV Entertainment, 2020). There appear two ethnic groups in the film: Kinh and Mong. The Kinh characters are mainly teachers, soldiers, and outsiders (e.g. land purchasers). The Mong characters are local people. Because of the setting of the film story, Mong's cultural elements are strongly emphasized, which is a remarkable feature of the series.

### **2.5. Related Studies**

Regarding ethnic stereotypes in Vietnam, according to Nguyen (2021) in the study “*Ethnic stereotypes in the Central Highlands of Vietnam: Minority students’ perspectives*”, Kinh people are seen as having a higher level of economic, cultural, and social development compared to the minorities. Nguyen (2010) in “*Ethnic prejudices: An overview and some proposals for further research steps*” also stated that the Kinh, as a majority group, often place themselves above the minority. Kinh people tend to consider ethnic people as inferior groups. The image of ethnic minorities sticks to backwardness, conservativeness, and inability to do business (Nguyen, 2010). As a result of such ethnic stereotyping, minority people have suffered negative effects. In the research “*Minorities need to catch up with majorities: Prejudices in interethnic relations in Vietnam*”, a major finding is minority people's access to the market, to education, to employment, and to social and health services has been restricted by negative stereotypes about them (Pham et al., 2015).

Ethnic groups are frequently depicted in media in narrowly stereotyped roles: as “less than” dominant groups—in terms of intelligence, wealth, or power (Ross, 2019). According to the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy, and Environment (n.d., p.19), ethnic groups are also often portrayed with “the negative implication one such as poverty/hunger, disadvantaged, shabby, deprived, backward-thinking, depraved customs, child/premature marriage, lots of children” and depicted as “those in disadvantaged situations, being passive and even dependent on external assistance rather than finding ways to overcome difficulties.” Concerning the representation of ethnic groups in Vietnam's media, particularly in the press, minority people are still attached to negative stereotypes (Nguyen, 2010). They are depicted as being poor, passive, superstitious, and dependent on the state (Nguyen, 2010).

To sum up, the aforementioned studies identify ethnic stereotypes in media representation of ethnic groups. However, the subjects of these studies are ethnic minorities in general and there is a lack of nuanced examination of one specific ethnic minority. Although films are considered one of the most popular forms of entertainment that garner the attention of numerous viewers, there is little research investigating the portrayal of ethnic groups in cinematic aspects. Therefore, research into the portrayal of the Mong people in a single media product (a film) is a relatively unexplored area. Besides, the previous studies tend to overlook the underlying factors influencing how ethnic minority groups are portrayed in the media. Since media representation plays a crucial role in shaping or sustaining certain narratives, further in-depth research is then crucial to understand the nuances of how media represents

ethnic minorities like the Mong ethnic group.

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1. Research Method***

Qualitative methods are employed to find out the answer to the research question. The qualitative analysis of the characters, plots, and visual and linguistic elements in the TV drama series gives a critical understanding of the themes and ideologies implied in the TV series.

##### **3.1.1. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a Theoretical Approach**

###### ***Principles of CDA***

The research employs the CDA approach as a theoretical framework for analyzing the linguistic elements of the film. According to Fairclough (1989), CDA aims to uncover the relationships between discourse, society, power, and ideology. CDA is “a type of discourse analysis research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in social and political contexts” (Van Dijk, 2015, p. 466).

###### ***Fairclough's 3-dimension framework***

Fairclough's (2001) three-dimensional framework includes:

**Description:** Researchers are encouraged to focus on the analysis of the linguistic characteristics presented in the text, including vocabulary, syntax, grammar, and rhetorical devices (Fairclough, 2001). The research into the topic “The representation of Mong ethnic group in the Vietnamese TV drama series “Mùa xuân ở lại” analyzes the dialogues between characters and focuses on the language that the characters use to portray the Mong people.

**Interpretation:** This dimension focuses on the broader discursive practices that shape how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed (Fairclough, 2001). By examining contexts in which discourse occurs, researchers scrutinize how particular language choices depict any ideologies, or contribute to manipulative discourse (Fairclough, 2001). The research examines the contextual factors of “Mùa xuân ở lại” and how those factors might affect the description of ethnic people.

**Explanation:** In the last phase, researchers perceive discourse as a component of a social system, demonstrating how social orders influence discourses and how such power relations may be affected by discourses, either maintaining or reforming them (Fairclough, 2001).

The application of Fairclough's three-dimensional framework to this research enables such a nuanced and critical examination of the controversy surrounding ethnic representation in the TV series.

##### **3.1.2. Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Grammar Framework**

The research aims to examine the portrayal of the Mong ethnic minority through both linguistic and visual elements. Wang (2014) pointed out that CDA places the primary focus on verbal texts and considers the visual text as secondary to the verbal text. Therefore, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Grammar is used as a tool to analyze the visual features of the film.

Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework of visual grammar provides a systematic

way to analyze the visual elements within a visual or multimodal text, enabling researchers to comprehend how visual components operate within a particular context and help the texts' meanings. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework consists of three visual metafunctions controlling the organization of visual elements in a text:

**Representational Metafunction:** This deals with how the text's objects, persons, actions, and events are represented visually.

**Interpersonal Metafunction:** This shows how relationships between participants are indicated through visual elements.

**Compositional Metafunction:** This emphasizes how visual elements are laid out and arranged concerning one another.

The incorporation of Fairclough's CDA model and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Metafunctions of Visual Grammar provides a suitable theoretical framework that makes it possible to analyze different categories of data for a comprehensive view of how different modes of communication interact and give meaning to the representation of the Mong group.

### 3.2. Data Collection

The data of the research consists of the transcript and the images of all four episodes of the TV drama series "Mùa xuân ở lại". Each episode lasts 44 minutes. The four episodes of the film are numbered and coded from EP1 to EP4.

Each episode is carefully watched and the scenes with the appearance of the Mong people are captured, synthesized, and categorized based on aspects of representation such as language, discourse, and image (Hall, 1997).

### 3.3. Data Analysis

There are two steps in analyzing the data collected from the TV drama series. First, each episode is individually analyzed based on Fairclough's and Kress and van Leeuwen's framework. Then, the results are synthesized, and put into the themes. These themes are then explained and discussed to uncover the reflection of cultural context and social ideologies in the representation.

**Sample data analysis: Land transaction between Mong people and Kinh people**

**Step 1:** Each episode is individually analyzed based on CDA frameworks together with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework of visual grammar.

#### Figure 1 (EP2)

*Land transaction between Mong people and Kinh people*



**Figure 2 (EP2)***Land transaction between Mong people and Kinh people**Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Grammar Framework*

In this scene, the Mong ethnic man is the seller and the Kinh man is the buyer. The contract of deed is a hand-written small piece of paper instead of the printed contract. The Mong man has his son read the contract, but the Kinh man later on takes the contract to read for a faster process. The Mong man uses a fingerprint stamp instead of a signature.

Analyzing the scene applying Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar framework, some critical findings are gained:

**Representational Metafunction:**

**The contract of deed as a textual representation:** The contract visually portrayed an essential legal document. It indicates the importance and legal aspects of the land-purchasing event.

**Child reading the contract:** The little boy reading the contract serves as a visual representation of a few crucial concepts. First, the fact that the Mong guy relies on his young kid to read the contract—often carefully reviewed by adults—indicates that his literacy level may be poor. Furthermore, his reliance on the young child in such an important event suggests he lacks formal education and social experience.

**Fingerprint stamp:** That the fingerprint stamp, not a handwritten signature, is used to authenticate a legal document is attention-grabbing. It visually represents the act of commitment in the conventional way, a practice often used by illiterate people.

**Interpersonal Metafunction:**

The Mong man plays a totally passive role in this transaction due to his illiteracy

The son is involved in the transaction by supporting his father in reading the contract because he is the only member of the family who knows how to read. However, his reading difficulty limits this support and reveals his low Kinh language proficiency

The Kinh man is a buyer, but he seems to take control of the whole transaction. He writes the contract, reads it, and guides the Mong man in every step. He is confident, active and dominant in the transaction.

**Compositional Metafunction:**

**Framing:** The scene's composition visually frames the key elements, including the



contract, the people involved, especially the fingerprint stamp. This compositional choice emphasizes the importance of these elements within the narrative.

**Fingerprint as a Visual Element:** The fingerprint stamp is visually prominent within the composition. This compositional focus draws attention to the fingerprint as the way the Mong man shows his agreement and commitment.

*Fairclough (2001)'s CDA model*

**Text description:**

During this scene, the Mong man said to his son that “Hán, đọc tao nghe” (Read this for me, Han. And the son spell to read “Ô ngờ ông, cờ ông công nặng cộng...”, and the Kinh man said “Thôi đưa đây, mày đọc thế đến bao giờ cho xong” (Give me, how long will it take you to read it?), then the Kinh man read the paper fluently “Giấy chuyển nhượng đất canh tác...”

**Interpretation:**

**Language choice:** The Mong man's request, “Hán, đọc tao nghe” (Read this for me, Han), is a command, highlighting his need for assistance in reading.

**Phonetic Spelling:** The son's attempt to read the contract using phonetic spelling, “Ô ngờ ông, cờ ông công nặng cộng...”, reflects his struggle with the Kinh language, facing linguistic barrier.

**Kinh man's fluency:** The Kinh man's ability to read the paper fluently, “Giấy chuyển nhượng đất canh tác...”, indicates his linguistic proficiency and his dominant role in the conversation.

**Explanation:**

**Cultural Context:** On account of the larger cultural context, the difficulties the Mong child faces and the usage of two different languages are reflections of the linguistic and cultural diversity of the society. The Mong child needs to be proficient in two languages. One of them is the Mong language with the aim of communicating with people of the same ethnic group, and the other is Vietnamese - the official national language to be able to communicate with people from other ethnicities.

**Interethnic dynamic:** The scene might indicate one aspect of the interethnic relation between the Kinh and the Mong, emphasizing the disadvantage and vulnerability of the illiterate Mong. Two Kinh men express an interest in buying land from the Mong man, but they do not hire an interpreter or seek help from bilingual individuals in the local area to facilitate communication in the process. Instead, they exploit the Mong man's illiteracy for their own profit.

**Step 2:** The results are synthesized and put into the themes. Data analysis sorted out into themes is then reflected in the context of society and culture.

The analysis of the scene using Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar framework (2006) and Fairclough (2001)'s CDA model reveals the image of the Mong in the film as “**low-educated**” or “**illiterate people**”. This is a popular stereotype of ethnic minorities in Vietnam.

#### **4. Findings and Discussion**

The aforementioned aim of this research is to investigate how the makers of the TV drama series "Mùa xuân ở lại" portray the Mong ethnic people to find out whether this

portrayal reinforces or challenges the preconceived stereotypes of ethnic minorities. The data analysis reveals that the depiction of the Mong people in the film remains entrenched in stereotypes and prejudices, offering no fresh perspective compared to the traditional media portrayals of minority ethnic groups.

#### ***4.1. Mong People's Living Environment is Underdeveloped and Insecure***

The life of the Mong people in the film is consistently portrayed as being destitute.

The film is set in Phong Tho district, Lai Chau Province, a mountainous area located in the North of Vietnam, and the habitat of numerous ethnic minorities, especially the Mong group. The visual elements show that the village of the Mong ethnic group is nestled in the high mountains with sparse population. The geographical location, and weather conditions, together with the underdeveloped infrastructure, cause a lot of difficulties to their life.

The living environment of Mong people in general, and the infrastructure in particular is mentioned with mostly negative discourses by the Kinh characters. The Kinh characters often describe the living environment of Mong people with negative expressions that frame their situation to be "**deficient**", and "**underdeveloped**" in the film. Specific examples of those discourses include:

“Con đường đến trường của các con rất **vất vả**” (“The road to school for the children was very **difficult**”) (EP1): The statement put emphasis on the hardship and inaccessibility to basic necessities like education. The word "**vất vả**" (**difficult**) suggests a constant struggle, positioning the Mong people as living in harsh conditions that hinder their children's educational opportunities.

“**Thiếu tiền**” (“**Lack of money**”) (EP1): This word reflects financial scarcity, which might reinforce the stereotype that the Mong people are economically disadvantaged.

“**Xa rời văn minh**” (“**Alienated from civilization**”) (EP3): The phrase "**xa rời văn minh**" (“**Alienated from civilization**”) state that the Mong people are perceived as being isolated from civilized society and may underscore the perceived development deficiency of the Mong compared to the Kinh.

“Sóng điện thoại thì **tạm tịt**” (“The phone signal is **bad**”) (EP3): The poor phone signal is a pointer to the lack of modern infrastructure, implying that the Mong village is disconnected from technological advancements and by extension, from modern society.

Those discourses create a narrative that situates the Mong people as “others”, distinct from the Kinh, who are implicitly associated with modernity and development. The repetition of themes related to “**deficiency**” (lacking infrastructure, money, and connectivity) positions the Mong people as “**underdeveloped**”.

The visual framing of the Mong village shows it nestled high in the mountains and isolated from other settlements. This setting conveys a sense of remoteness and separation from more developed areas, reinforcing the idea of the Mong people being deprived of the benefits of modern society. The high mountain location visually emphasizes the distance between the Mong and the Kinh. This distance suggests a natural barrier to progress and development, which is consistent with the verbal discourse of alienation from civilization.

**Figure 3 (EP2)**

*The Mong Village is Located in the High Mountains With a Sparse Population*



Moreover, while the houses of the Kinh people in the film are visually described as grandly and solidly built, throughout the film is the image of the Mong houses mostly built with soil or wood, with roofs made of thatch or fibro-cement sheets. In many scenes, the houses are seen terribly run-down, with numerous holes and cracks in the walls, lacking proper conditions to shelter their owners from rain or sun. Inside the houses, there are no modern household appliances such as televisions or refrigerators.

**Figure 4 (EP2)**

*Mong People Live in Humble Houses*



In terms of the transportation system, there is an absence of flat wide asphalt roads. Instead, most of the roads in this locality are winding, dirty, slippery, and rocky paths. These roads are quite narrow, only suitable for walking or two-wheeled vehicles, not for heavy transport vehicles. Mong people usually have to walk long distances on dangerous mountain passes and upland roads to get to school, to the fields, or to the neighboring villages.

**Figure 5 (EP3)**

*Dangerous Paths on High Mountains*



**Figure 6 (EP3)**

*Mong people walk on winding, dirty, slippery, and rocky paths*



Regarding the vehicles, in all scenes in the movie, the Mong people are seen primarily walking. They walk long distances carrying heavy loads without using any means of transportation. The most common vehicles seen in the film are motorcycles and bicycles, but the drivers of these vehicles are all Kinh people, not Mong people.

Generally, the infrastructure of the Mong village in the film is depicted as quite poor, not yet meeting the developmental conditions of modern society such as well-developed transportation networks or advanced telecommunications infrastructure. The lack of essential facilities to serve the people's life points out the rudimentary and deficient living conditions of the Mong people.

In addition to having deplorable and inadequate living conditions, Mong people may also encounter some dangers resulting from complicated criminal activities in the locality.

Verbally, the living environment of the Mong people is depicted as dangerous, unsafe with the occurrence of various criminal types such as illegal drug trade, human trafficking, or kidnapping.

“Tuy nhiên các hoạt động vi phạm mặc định về cơ chế quản lý biên giới vẫn còn xảy ra hoạt động của các loại **tội phạm** diễn biến phức tạp đáng chú ý là **tội phạm** tàng trữ vận chuyển sử dụng trái phép chất ma túy, mua bán người, buôn lậu thương mại vẫn tiềm ẩn nhiều yếu tố phức tạp khó lường ở địa bàn...” (However, the default violations of border management mechanisms still occur. The **criminal types** are complex. It is noteworthy that such **crimes** as illegal drug trade, human trafficking, commercial smuggling still conceal many unpredictable complexities on the ground...) (EP1)

“Tình hình cuối năm diễn biến **tội phạm** trở nên phức tạp đang có nạn buôn người bắt cóc trẻ em qua biên giới” (“As the year draws closer to an end, the **crime** situation has become more complicated, and human trafficking and kidnapping of children can be detected across the border.”) (EP3)

The text describes the Mong people's living environment as “**dangerous**” and “**unsafe**”, with specific references to “**illegal drug trade**”, “**human trafficking**”, and “**kidnapping**”. The repeated focus on criminal activities suggests that these dangers are an intrinsic part of the community's environment.

**Figure 7 (EP3)***Teacher Hoa is Assaulted by a Robber at Midnight*

Visual elements also consolidate the image of an insecure living environment. From the first episode to the last episode of the series, there are a lot of scenes featuring various types of crimes, such as property appropriation fraud, border crossing, and kidnapping.

The portrayal of Mong people living in such deprived and vulnerable environments may spot the underdevelopment of the Mong ethnic group, which may contribute to shaping societal perceptions of the Mong people as **"underdeveloped"** and influence the audience's attitude towards this group of people.

**4.2. Mong People's Economy is Agricultural-Based With a Heavy Reliance on Nature**

The series consistently depicts the Mong characters in agrarian roles such as farmers or craftsmen, emphasizing the fact that the main sources of Mong people's livelihood are cultivation and craft occupations.

**Figure 8 (EP4)***A Mong Farmer is Gathering Firewood in the Forest***Figure 9 (EP4)***Mong women are doing handicraft work*



Throughout the four episodes, Mong people's subsistence is primarily on agriculture and forest. They do the farming (“**lên nương lên rẫy**”), go to the field, go to the forest to harvest cardamom and firewood (“**đi rừng**”, “**thu hoạch thảo quả**”) (EP1, EP 2) and cultivate the natural resources. They engage themselves in the fields, utilizing rudimentary working tools like sickles and machetes, and employ no advancements offered by modern machinery to increase labor productivity, naming tractors or harvesters. This absence of technological assistance and a firm adherence to traditional farming methods, results in low labor efficiency. Their work is not only physically demanding but also time-consuming. Hence, they have no time for other pursuits such as educational endeavors or home maintenance. For them, the primary concern and the most important necessity is securing a livelihood.

On the days not spent in the fields, they venture into the forests to gather firewood or harvest medicinal plants with economic value for sale. During the season-off periods, they revert to handicraft tasks such as weaving or sewing, also embracing manual techniques without the aid of advanced machinery. The repeated references to activities like “**farming**”, “**going to the field**”, and “**going to the forest to harvest cardamom and firewood**” might reinforce a stereotypical image of indigenous or minority groups as being bound to traditional, nature-based livelihoods. This portrayal may cast Mong people as fundamentally different from more industrialized or modern societies. By focusing exclusively on traditional agricultural practices, the text may inadvertently contribute to a perception of the Mong people as living in a static and unchanging world. This can obscure the complexity and diversity of their experiences and ignore any engagement that they may have with modernity or technology.

The Mong community's economic precariousness has resulted from their being predominantly anchored in agriculture, which is substantially reliant on nature, and limited diversification in occupational sectors. Therefore, strenuousness and poverty are characteristics of the life of the Mong characters in the film.

#### ***4.3. Mong People are Poorly Educated***

Another focus of the film is the barriers (both subjective and objective) to Mong people's access to education as well as the challenges encountered by Kinh teachers when bringing knowledge to ethnic minorities. The filmmakers have dedicated significant attention and screen time to this theme. The educational elements emphasized here include education infrastructure and resources in the locality, the Mong people's perception of education's importance, and their educational levels.

TV viewers are strongly disturbed by the underdeveloped infrastructure and the limited resources for education in this mountainous area.

#### **Figure 10 (EP1)**

*Mong Children Study in Dilapidated Classrooms*



As seen in this scene, Mong children's classroom is a ramshackle room with a lot of cracks in the walls and roof, which cannot protect people from the harsh weather. A bed in the corner of the room might suggest that this is also the teacher's living space. The so-called "classroom" is confined and poorly equipped: inadequate seating and learning materials for students, and no proper blackboard for teachers. The miserable physical facilities arouse pity for the disadvantaged children and worries about the quality of education in such conditions.

**Figure 11 (EP4)**

*A Mong Elementary School Student is Compelled to Carry her Little Younger Sister to School*



In another scene, a Mong elementary school student is compelled to carry her little younger sister to school instead of sending her to a kindergarten. In order to continue her learning path, she needs to simultaneously study and care for her sister, which surely interferes with her learning. This scene highlights a severe lack of educational infrastructure, particularly at the preschool level. The paucity of educational provision for children of different age groups not only hinders Mong children's access to education and their right to receive proper childcare but also put great pressure on teachers who have to teach and take care of children of different ages and levels in the same classroom.

The Mong people have not yet placed significant emphasis on or prioritized education. Rather than encouraging their children to attend school, many Mong families prefer them to stay at home to handle household chores.

**Figure 12 (EP1)**

*A Mong Elementary School Student is Compelled to Drop out of School*



Throughout the series, there are numerous scenes revolving around Kinh teachers or border guards going to Mong students' homes to persuade parents to permit their children's school enrolment. Despite the passionate and persistent persuasion from the teachers and

soldiers, these Mong families are reluctant to send their children to school or opt for them to discontinue their education midway due to labor shortage at home. Notably, there are situations where teachers are scolded and even chased away by parents (“cô giáo đi về đi”- “you leave”). Those parents hold the belief that schooling is not as necessary as fetching food to fill the stomach.

### Figure 13 (EP1)

*Teachers are Scolded and Even Chased Away by Mong Parents*



Given the arduous nature of their subsistence, nothing is deemed more crucial than earning a living and generating income for the family. Poverty is often held accountable for their disregard for education. The parents' dismissive attitude toward the teachers, resistance to formal education, and insistence on their children's involvement in family livelihood are familiar stories that are easily and commonly found in various media reflections. Therefore, they may strengthen the pre-existing stereotypes of ethnic minorities' low education.

Apart from poverty, Mong parents' disregard for their children's education may also result from their own lack of awareness of the significant role of education in changing people's life. Mong's parents themselves are poorly educated people. In the film, while Mong children are portrayed as starting their learning journey (EP 1,2,3), Mong adults are depicted as “*illiterate*” (EP2), and “*uninformed*” (EP1), leading to their gullibility or vulnerability to manipulation or deception (EP1, 2). “*Poorly educated people*” is a recurring theme since 2 of the 4 episodes of the series emphasize Mong adults' illiteracy as the major reason for their being deceived by the cunning Kinh land purchasers (EP1, 2).

### Figure 14 (EP1)

*An Illiterate Mong Man Realizes That he has Been Deceived by The Cunning Kinh Land Purchasers*





In a striking scene in episode 1, the ruthless Kinh land purchasers take advantage of a Mong man's illiteracy and innocence to deceive him to sign an unfavorable land trading contract. In episode 2, the Mong man cannot read the contract and he demands his son to read the contract out loud: “Hán, **đọc tao nghe**” (Read this for me, Han) (EP2). Unfortunately, the son is not a fluent reader as he struggles to read by spelling every single word in the contract, “**Ô ngờ ông, cờ ông công nặng cộng...**,” or “**Chờ ung chung sắc chúng...**”. Several other scenes in this series also describe Mong children's difficulties in learning Vietnamese language. These scenes reflect the low educational level as a perceived reality in the Mong community.

After that, when the Kinh teacher accidentally comes and helps the Mong man read the contract, he then realizes that he has been deceived and gets frustrated. Linguistic evidence of Mong people as uneducated people is demonstrated in the conversation between the Kinh teacher and the Mong man: “**Nếu như anh biết chữ** thì anh đã không để **bị lừa.**” (“**If you were literate**, you would not **have been deceived**”) (EP1) and “**Có giỏi thì đi lừa những người có học ấy lên đây lừa bà con làm gì**” (EP1) (“**If you're so skilled, you go and deceive the educated people; why do you come here to trick the villagers?**”). The discourses connect Mong people's little education and limited social understanding with their disadvantage and even loss in business transactions with better-educated but wicked people. It's also these weaknesses that place the Mong people in a subservient role in power dynamics in interethnic communication (e.g. communication with the Kinh land purchasers in this case).

### Figure 15 (EP2)

*A Mong Child Struggles to Read the Contract in Vietnamese Language*



The repeated theme “**poorly educated people**” and its association with disadvantage and vulnerability is not only reminiscent of popular stereotypes of “**ignorant**”, “**naive**” ethnic minorities but also aligns with previous studies of ethnic representation in media where ethnic people are often depicted as “**less educated**” individuals.

**Figure 16 (EP2)***Mong Children Learn to Read Vietnamese Language***4.4. Mong People Still Preserve Backward Socio-Cultural Practices**

The ethnic identity of the Mong people in the film is emphasized through not only their ethnic raiment and adornments but also their preservation of many traditional social and cultural practices, including the backward and harmful ones.

Mong people keep believing in supernatural forces rather than science.

**Figure 17 (EP1)***A Mong man is Ignorant of Medical Knowledge*

The Mong people in the film seem to be superstitious because they keep believing that many aspects of their life are under the control of supernatural forces. Low education and lack of scientific information are partly responsible for their distrust, even rejection of science. When a Mong woman is seriously ill, her husband, instead of taking her to a medical center for examination and treatment, invites a shaman to perform exorcism rituals to expel the evil spirits which are believed to cause her illness: “Vợ anh bị bệnh nặng nhưng vì **thiếu hiểu biết** mà **mời thầy cúng**, chữa trị muộn nên mới mất” (Your wife was seriously ill, but due to a **lack of knowledge**, you invited a **shaman** and started treatment too late, which is why she passed away). His bigotry, superstition, and ignorance later on led to the death of the woman.

Many traditional cultural practices of the Mong are still preserved, including some harmful ones such as child marriage or wife-kidnapping.

**Figure 18 (EP1)***Mong Girls are Victims of Child Marriage*

Although there is no scene of wife-kidnapping or child marriage, these cultural practices are mentioned in the conversations of the characters: “trên này có tục **bắt vợ**” (there is a custom of **wife-kidnapping** here) (EP2), and Mong children are forced to enter early marriages (“bị ép **bắt về làm vợ**”) (EP1). The excuses for these practices are either to settle family debts or to adhere to community customs. Even as parents of the victims, Mong adults perpetuate and endure this practice, subjecting their children to early marriages. Those customs could be considered depraved and harmful as they disrespect women’s human dignity and self-determination.

Constructing an image of Mong people with ignorance, outdated practices, and evil customs may lead the viewers to the perception that Mong people nowadays are not different from the stereotypes that they have held for a long time. Viewers may consequently feel an aversion to or have a prejudice against Mong people's culture.

**4.5. Mong People Play a Passive Role in the Interethnic Relationship With Kinh People**

In terms of interethnic relations, the film features the presence of two ethnic groups, the Kinh and the Mong. The Kinh characters in the film are teachers and border guards. The Mong are locals and they are depicted as always in need of assistance from these Kinh people, from crucial areas such as education or social security to personal things like personal hygiene.

**Figure 19 (EP2)***Kinh Teachers Help Mong Students Do Personal Hygiene*

The Kinh border soldiers and teachers help Mong people to build schools for children, and persuade Mong parents to permit children to go to school:

“Còn một nhà nữa chị đến **thuyết phục**” (I need to go to the last household to **persuade**) (EP1)

“mà đi **vận động** chán chê các mẹ gửi cho là mừng đấy” (we’ve tried our best to **persuade** the parents and it is great that they agree to send their children to school) (EP1).

The repetition of the word “**persuade**” reveals the perseverance and the great efforts of Kinh teachers in making Mong villagers understand the importance of education. It is also the Kinh teachers and soldiers who contribute their money and physical labor in building schools for them. The Kinh teachers not only impart knowledge but also conscientiously instruct Mong students in such trivial things in daily life as cutting hair, washing faces, and doing personal hygiene.

In the film, the Mong people are often positioned as passive recipients of adversity, whereas the Kinh people are consistently portrayed as assistance providers.

It seems that whenever the Mong villagers are in need or face hardship, they all turn to the Kinh people to seek help, otherwise the Kinh people fortunately turn up to provide timely help, offer useful advice, or suggest solutions. This portrayal may underscore Mong people’s role as passive recipients rather than active agents in their own narratives, which might create an impression of their reliance or overdependence on external support. In contrast, the Kinh people appear on screen with the image of the supporters or saviors who assist the Mong people in various aspects of life with all their strength, energy, and enthusiasm. The striking contrast in the depiction of the two groups of people may reinforce the taken-for-granted role of the Kinh people as the dominant majority in Vietnam, who are responsible for providing support (and they are powerful enough to do so) while the Mong people as a disadvantaged minority ethnic group who cannot get through without government aid. The representation of such power dynamics tends to be unfair to both ethnic groups.

To put it briefly, this study has found evidence of several stereotypical portrayals of Mong ethnic people in “Mùa xuân ở lại”. In this TV drama series, Mong people continue to be seen through stereotypes as a “less than” group (Ross, 2019), entrenched in outdated customs and lacking proactivity in improving their own life.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1. Summary of major findings

The study was conducted to examine how the Mong ethnic people are portrayed in the TV drama series “Mùa xuân ở lại”. With the application of Fairclough’s (2001) model of CDA together with Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) framework of visual grammar to the analysis of visual and linguistic data from the film, we could answer the research question. We also tried to unfold the status and power inequalities between ethnic groups which may be revealed in the portrayal of the Mong ethnic group in the film.

The first major finding is that the Mong community in the film is living in conditions of insecurity and considerable deprivation in various aspects. They are depicted as experiencers of significant economic difficulties, due to a heavy reliance on nature; therefore, their lives are characterized by hard labor and miseries. Another discovery is that the filmmakers represent Mong people as a “poorly educated” group, facing substantial challenges in accessing education, lacking attention to and prioritization of educational

opportunities, which results in their low educational levels. In terms of social and cultural activities, Mong people consistently preserve their ethnic identity and cultural traditions including some outdated customs that negatively affect their lives. Finally, in their interactions with the Kinh people, the majority ethnic group in Vietnam, they are positioned as the passive receivers of assistance from the Kinh in almost every aspect of life.

These findings are consistent with a plethora of previous studies on the representation of ethnic people in media. The representation of the Mong people in the film aligns with their portrayal in previous media products in Vietnam because they continue to be seen through long-held stereotypes of ethnic people as being poor, passive and dependent on government support, having superstitious practices (Nguyen, 2010). In conclusion, “Mùa xuân ở lại”, by leaving out the revolutionary changes and dramatic improvement in Mong people’s modern-day economy, education, and lifestyle, tends to perpetuate negative stereotypes about ethnic minorities rather than breaking them.

### ***5.2. Implications of the Findings***

The TV drama series depicts the various aspects of the Mong people’s life; however, this depiction may not be completely true to life. The filmmakers tend to exaggerate the limitations of the Mong people possibly in order to highlight the image of the main character, a Kinh teacher, who accepts the hardship of living and working in a poor mountainous area to help ethnic minorities. The Mong people in the film are seen through the lens of the Kinh characters and filmmakers, so it is also possible that the depiction harbors their own biased perceptions of ethnic minorities. Such a portrayal may contribute to a limited understanding and appreciation of the Mong culture and people. Consequently, this representation might disregard or even deny the diversity and dynamism of the Mong community. The flexibility of the Mong and the range of roles they take in society nowadays should also deserve media attention.

To film/TV viewers, media literacy is an essential skill in a time when we are exposed to an abundance of media content every day. With a view to critically understanding and evaluating the messages of a film, for instance, we should equip ourselves with updated background knowledge (so that we can realize the gap between films and reality) as well as cultivate the ability to identify the purpose, intention, and perspectives of filmmakers through the way they present the facts. It is desirable if we can enjoy the film and learn a lot from it but simultaneously be able to realize misrepresentations and biases, if any, spread through the film.

### ***5.3. Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research***

Despite considerable efforts, this research cannot avoid certain limitations. Initially, due to the constraints imposed by the length of an article, the data analysis and supporting evidence are presented only in a summarized form, which may not fully capture the nuances and complexities of the findings. Second, the study's reliance on the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method introduces a degree of subjectivity in the researchers’ interpretations. Subsequent research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issue if Mong viewers are interviewed to give the insiders’ evaluation of the representation of their own ethnic group in the film. Besides, that this study analyzes a single film suggests an opportunity for future research to examine how ethnic groups are portrayed across a range of films produced in a certain period of time or throughout different periods, thereby broadening the critical understanding of media representations of ethnic diversity.



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