

CINEMA PHU VINH

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Some had lived in their Cinema Paradiso, others had been on their Polar Express... I had Cinema Phu Vinh.

Cinema Phu Vinh is the only movie house in Phu Vinh, a small town and the administrative seat of Vinh Binh aka Tra Vinh, about 200km Southwest of Saigon; like in all small towns, the people are mostly friendly, unsophisticated and very easy going compared to those folks from big cities like Saigon. Most of the major business owners were well known to the town folks by their first names. My Uncle ran the movie house. He lived in a complex attached to movie house with my grandparents and my younger brother. It seemed like my Uncle had this business for some time, just like the movie house Tay Do in Can Tho. After the family business went drastically wrong and took a turn for the worse up in Saigon, they settled in this town since the early 60s. I stayed up in Saigon and over time, lived in different relatives' houses to continue my education. I spent many summers of my adolescent years in Vinh Binh. Until the last recent years, I did not realize how deep this place had found its place in my heart.

I liked the movie house PHU VINH a lot. Every evening, the cinema PHU VINH opened for business around 5ish. The retractable iron gates of the curved structure were pulled back on their tracks, and the people were welcome into the lobby via three wide entrances. PHU VINH was located on the edge of the Centerville, looking from the movie house into the streets, connected to its right towards the center of the town were the row houses of various businesses.



First, we had the popular neighborhood dive Hong Lac, which offered an unimpressive menu of noodles and other beverages such as coffee, beer and soft drinks. A Chinese family ran Hong Lac. The cook prepared the noodles in a small kitchen that occupied a front corner of the entrance where there was always a huge pot of boiling water next to a similarly huge pot of piping hot broth. They normally offered two kinds of noodles, a white flat one made of rice flour and the egg noodle, an angel hair-like yellowish noodle with a small body, supposedly made of flour and eggs. The fresh noodles were placed in a deep perforated ladle then dipped into the boiling water until it was cooked. After the water was well-drained, the noodles were placed into a fresh bowl. A few slices of cooked pork were then placed on top of it with some bean sprouts and chives. It was also customary to add a dash of fried lard to enhance the flavor. Add a few ladles of hot soup, and it was ready to serve. The menu and the layout of the place seemed to be pretty typical as I have seen it in many family restaurants. The menu was poor but the food was always good. I especially craved for those little pieces of hot peppers marinated in vinegar. I always had them in my bowl of hot noodle soup. On the weekends, Hong Lac made an effort to offer a small variety of baked pastries that went very well with a cup of hot coffee and condensed milk. It was definitely a casual place for the locals as a number of patrons could be seen folding and resting one of their legs comfortably on the chair while carefully sucking in their hot noodles. They must have practiced since their early childhood to feel comfortable in that kind of contorted position.

Next to that small restaurant was my friend, Manh's house. He lived with his father, an herbalist, or Chinese doctor, his mom and a younger sister. Manh's house was very humble. It was decorated with a few Chinese paintings and a large mirror on the wall along with a large calendar featuring some popular Chinese actresses or singers. The important thing was that it bears both the Gregorian as well as the lunar dates.

There were a few chairs for the patients or guests and a small table on which there was always a small cushion in the shape of a pillow. It was used mainly for his dad's patients to comfortably rest their left hands on it, palm up. His dad could read their pulses by gently placing three of his fingers on the patients' wrists. By reading the pulses of a patient, the Chinese doctor could potentially detect the sources that caused the imbalance of the Yin and the Yang energy, the root cause of the sickness. He would then prescribe a concoction of various kinds of dry herbs and roots to help the body to regain the harmony of the inner energy emitted by the various organs. As each of our organs is categorized as Yin or Yang, they each have a counterpart. Each pair would emit a certain inner energy, maintaining a balance in a healthy body. If one organ acts up, it could upset the balance and the harmony of the inner workings of our body and therefore it causes us to be sick. The principle is to detect which part of your body was running wild, and the normal cure is to calm it down or trigger its counterpart to regulate it and bring it back to the normal level of activity. On the wall opposite the paintings, there was a built in set of shelves and small drawers labeled in Chinese where all the different kinds of dry herbs were stored. The preparation instructions would normally be to add four bowls of water to the herbs into a pot. Bring it to a boil until there was only two bowls worth of liquid left. The resulting cocktail normally tasted and smelled obnoxiously horrible. You would let it cool down, squeeze your nose and then try to swallow that stuff as fast as you could. Every time I am sick and think about that stuff, my system seems to speed up the recovery by itself.

Then there was a pool hall of only two tables. I wonder how they made ends meet after all. Then there were a few more houses of the same size before we reached the intersection that took us to the municipal bus stop. These houses were pretty narrow but long. I think they were about 14 to 16 feet wide at the most. Connected to the left of PHU VINH was a row of three houses, all connected inside and served as our residence. We used to live in all of them before we opened the one on the end, the widest house, which was about twice as wide as the others, for the Pho Map noodle house. That's right, besides the movie theater business, my uncle ventured into the noodle house business. That was all right for me since Pho is like McDonald here in the States, it could be breakfast, lunch, snack and sometimes dinner too. Every now and then I asked the cook to drop a raw egg into my piping hot bowl of noodles. Beyond the noodle house wall was a small lot of land that ran along the side of the movie house protected by a wall. Next to our residence was the gate to the side of the movie house. The auditorium had three wide double doors that opened to the side. When a show was over, we normally opened all the double doors to let the people leave the auditorium in addition to the front door to the lobby of the theater. Beyond the wall that bordered the side of the movie house was a neighborhood of wooden houses on beaten earth floors. A bicycle ride of about five minutes in this direction would take us straight to the riverbank.



PHU VINH was built on a corner lot; its facade follows a wide curvature that covers the two streets that intersect. The main structure that houses the theater was at least three stories high, and its opening was supported by two columns which divides the front into three wide openings with a set of cement steps that follow the curvature of the structure. Each was well finished with a full bull nose edge. Walking up the steps into the lobby area, the entrance to the auditorium was on the left of the structure. On the right hand side, one could see a recessed area protected by some decorative grids. Equally distanced within the recessed area were two small openings for the ticket windows. Most of the recessed area was covered by a curtain. The lobby was normally decorated with all the colorful posters and black and white photos of the current movies, as well as some of the upcoming films. Above the recessed area was a set of stairs. At the top of the stairs, there was a steel door labeled in red "Authorized Personnel Only". It was the access door to the projection room.

Of course, I had access to the room, but I was not allowed to take any friends up there because of the materials and equipments. The room had a low window open to the auditorium. There were also three other small openings for an old slide projector and the two film projectors. In the back of the projection room, there was a window to the roof which we could easily climb through with the help of a chair. We would be on top of our residence, overlooking the area called 'Lo Heo' across the street and a wide dirt path to a poor residential area that would lead to an area unknown to me. I had a few friends living there, but I never ventured far beyond their houses. The movies were shipped to us from Saigon via buses. They all came in sets of reels of 35mm films. Each reel was about two feet wide housed in a steel box. One of the projectionists, Mr. Trong,

normally examined them for defects at least one day ahead of the first scheduled show. The only furniture there was a work table in a corner and a few chairs. The slide projector was used to project paid advertising slides. Two projectors were necessary to cut over from one reel to another reel. Each reel was numbered; we always loaded up the subsequent reel while the current reel was running. As the end of the current reel was coming close, the lead portion of the subsequent reel was started on the next projector. We would need two people to synchronize the cut over of the two projectors so that the audience experienced a seamless projection of the movies. We then took the finished reel down for rewinding and loaded up the subsequent reel on the same machine.

The Indian movies were normally the longest. They were just about one hour longer than the others because of their songs and dances. We marked the beginning and the end of each dancing and singing sequences during the first show. We would cut them off temporarily and reconnect them before we shipped the movie back to the distributor. It saves us and the audience time and the cost of showing it. The cutting part is self-explanatory. To reconnect two sequences of film, we used a sharp razor blade to thin up the lips of the connection frames of both section of films, lined them up on top of each other aligning the holes on the side then applied some acetone (nail polish remover) and press it down hard for a few second. The lips of the two sections then melted and effectively glued together.

The projection room had a schedule to follow, but it was really controlled by the office downstairs. Depending on the situation of the ticket sales, we would start the show on time or a few minutes late. The person who made that decision would push an electric bell that signaled the projection room to start the show. On cool evenings, I would bring my snack up to the projection room, open the back window for a breeze, prop my feet up on the window towards the auditorium and watch the movie comfortably, like from a first class balcony seat.

In front of the entrance to the auditorium where the tickets were checked and in front of the tickets windows, there were a set of rails that suggested that lines should be formed. But I don't think a lot of folks knew what they are for. When popular movies were showing, the people were always on top of one another. From inside the ticket windows, we would see about five hands sticking through, clinching on their money. Everybody was shouting for their orders of tickets. As we took the money out of one person's hand, we would have to squeeze it and ask the person for number of tickets and the kind of seating because they were priced differently. That was how we knew what that particular person wanted because sometimes we had a hard time matching a hand with a person in the a pile of people out there. I guessed all the girls out there going to the movies like that didn't mind me holding and squeezing their hands.

The entrance to the auditorium, at times, was just as chaotic. We had from groups of people who did not buy enough tickets on purpose and tried to squeeze through the entrance to the kids who asked the moviegoers to take them in as their children. Therefore we normally had two big guys checking tickets at the entrance, Tâm and Xuân, who was a Cambodian-Vietnamese. People who came in late didn't want to pay the full price of the tickets and tried to negotiate at the door. I guess we did allow for that. We always had a wooden box, as tall as a stool. It has a locked cover and a small slot for those occasions. Therefore, a family member or a trusted person was always at the entrance until closing time. Sometimes when I was short of cash, I would 'volunteer' at the entrance at the start of a show. My uncle would not mind as long as I didn't abuse it, just enough for pocket money for the evening.

The blaring music seemed to contribute to the atmosphere of festivities outside the movie house. Sometimes my friends and I feasted on all kinds of snacks out there, like the marinated fruits such as the guava, green mango, tamarinds, and etc.... I loved having my fruits with a touch of salt and mashed red peppers, which sharpened their tastes. Then we would have a variety of sweet soups served warm or those cold fruit smoothies. The activities soon ended as we were about half an hour into the last show of the evening. The merchants started wrapping up, closing down and wheeling their food carts home.

It was then bed time for me as another good and fun day had concluded.

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