

FILM ADAPTATION OF *THE TALE OF KIEU* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ADAPTATION AND TRANSMISSION

Pham Van Hoa

Dalat University

ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT
Received:	23/3/2025	Film adaptation is considered a cinematic genre representing the meeting point of literature and cinema. In modern settings, film adaptation is a popular trend in the transmission and reception of literature. Based on adaptation theory, intertextuality, and reception theory, the article primarily utilizes methods, such as analysis, synthesis, systemization, statistics, and comparison. Examining six fundamental aspects direction of adaptation and reception, subjects of adaptation and recipients, content and form of adaptation, and adaptation methods the article analyzes the situation of adaptation, transmission, and reception of the film adaptation of <i>The Tale of Kieu</i> . It discusses the challenges of adapting and transmitting <i>The Tale of Kieu</i> in film, as well as the aesthetic shifts in contemporary contexts. The article contributes to affirming that the film adaptation of <i>The Tale of Kieu</i> is a completely different and challenging experience. It acknowledges that compared to the genuinely successful original work, the film adaptation still has strides to make.
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PHIM ĐIỆN ẢNH *TRUYỆN KIỀU* DƯỚI GÓC NHÌN CẢI BIÊN VÀ LƯU TRUYỀN

Phạm Văn Hóa

Trường Đại học Đà Lạt

THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO		TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài:	23/3/2025	Phim cải biên được coi là thể loại điện ảnh tiêu biểu cho điểm gặp gỡ của văn học và điện ảnh. Trên thực tế, ngày nay cải biên điện ảnh là một xu thế phổ biến trong việc lưu truyền, tiếp nhận văn học. Trên cơ sở lý thuyết cải biên, liên văn bản và lý thuyết tiếp nhận, bài viết chủ yếu sử dụng các phương pháp như: phân tích, tổng hợp, hệ thống, thống kê, so sánh. Từ 6 phương diện cơ bản: hướng cải biên và tiếp nhận, chủ thể cải biên và đối tượng tiếp nhận, nội dung và hình thức cải biên, cách thức cải biên trong mối quan hệ đa chiều giữa nguyên tác – cải biên – lưu truyền – tiếp nhận, bài viết phân tích tình hình cải biên, lưu truyền và tiếp nhận phim cải biên <i>Truyện Kiều</i> , khó khăn của cải biên và lưu truyền phim cải biên <i>Truyện Kiều</i> , sự chuyển hướng thẩm mỹ trong bối cảnh đương đại. Bài viết khẳng định phim cải biên <i>Truyện Kiều</i> là một trải nghiệm hoàn toàn khác biệt và đầy thách thức, so với bản gốc, thành công thực sự của phim cải biên vẫn còn phía trước.
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TỪ KHÓA		
<i>Truyện Kiều</i>		
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Email: hoapv@dlu.edu.vn

<http://jst.tnu.edu.vn>

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Email: jst@tnu.edu.vn

1. Introduction

With the development of modern social culture, the initial transmission of *The Tale of Kieu* through manuscripts and oral storytelling has shifted towards visual art forms, including cinema. Film adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu* represent a form of visual art that encompasses a rich and dynamic system of artistic signs. In this new reception environment, film adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu* face challenges in both adaptation and transmission, from the linguistic to the non-linguistic systems. The first article introducing the adaptation of *The Tale of Kieu* into cinema by Nguyen Van Vinh [1] discusses the idea, screenplay writing process, and film production. The article by Dao [2, p. 751] examines the adaptation context and reception of *Cải Lương* (a form of modern folk opera) version of *The Tale of Kieu*. In article *The Tale of Kieu: From literature to cinema - A challenging artistic interpretation*, Nguyen Anh Tuan [3] indicates the challenges faced by filmmakers adapting *The Tale of Kieu* from narrative and ideological perspectives, viewpoints of characters. The film adaptation of *The Tale of Kieu* has been “decoded” through the eyes of modern viewers. This film adaptation has transformed the “artistic space” and “artistic time” of *The Tale of Kieu* through moving images and sounds of life. Besides, based on a survey of 57 stage and film adaptations from *Đoạn Trường Tân Thanh* (The original title of *The Tale of Kieu* in Vietnamese) since 2016, Le [4] identifies ideal conditions for adapting *The Tale of Kieu*. Nguyen [5, p.48] recounts the ideas and production process of the film as well as the complex reception attitudes of contemporary audiences at home and abroad. Dao Thi Diem Trang [6] identifies core characteristics of contemporary theatrical works adapted from *The Tale of Kieu*, thereby highlighting the significance of adaptation work. Le Thi Duong [7], based on Linda Hutcheon’s perspective on cultural adaptation, discusses two issues of *The Tale of Kieu* being adapted into a ballet: the transformation of medium, space, time, and cross-cultural adaptation. Le [8] demonstrates the author’s adjustments in adapting storylines, characters, artistic symbols, genres, etc. Sokolov [9, p. 782] introduces the background of the adaptation of *Kim Vân Kiều* and analyzes the reasons why “the film adaptation of *Kim Vân Kiều* did not succeed as expected”. In addition to the above works, studies by Luong Huynh Duc [10], Nguyen Xuan Dien [11], Le Thi Hoai Phuong [12], Tran Quoc Thinh [13], etc., further affirm that adapting *The Tale of Kieu* from poetry to cinema or other forms of art from the perspective of adaptation is a completely different and challenging experience. Adaptation authors have endeavored to convey new messages through various methods, exploring and creating to enhance the value of the original work. However, true success in comparison to the original work’s genuine success remains ahead for these adapted versions. This article evaluates the achievements of *The Tale of Kieu*’s cinematic adaptations to date and their role in the dissemination and promotion of the work. This study also highlights the enduring value of *The Tale of Kieu* as well as the evolving aesthetic preferences of public today.

2. Methodology

“Film adaptation marks the formation and transformation of a cultural form and signifies a shift in human thought processes” [14]. Film adaptation adjusts the traditional cultural transmission format, aiming for significant changes in cultural reception. According to Corinne Lhermitte, adaptation is “a specific form of translation that allows for a certain degree of creativity. Adaptation implies transformation, adjustment, and appropriation when it was first used in the 13th century” [15, p.25]. “Film adaptation is a work based on the transformation from written text to screen with necessary changes that carry implications” [16, p.16]. From the perspective of cultural reception and transmission, Belton [17, p.195] notes that film adaptation is “filmmakers reinterpreting a story from another era through their lens and projecting their perception of the world onto that story”. Film adaptation is essentially a way of retelling a story, a method of receiving the original work. The focus of studying film adaptation lies in the multidimensional relationship between the original work, adaptation, transmission, and reception. Based on adaptation theory, intertextuality, and reception theory, the article primarily utilizes methods, such as analysis, synthesis, systemization, statistics, and comparison. To collect data for

this research, we have conducted one questionnaire survey and seven in-depth interviews on issues related to traditional culture with students and graduate students from the Department of Vietnamese Language and History, Dalat University as the main informants. The questionnaires were designed on the Google Forms platform with 25 questions, including 16 questions about personal information and 9 questions about the research issues. Examining six fundamental aspects: direction of adaptation, reception, subjects of adaptation, recipients, content, form of adaptation, and adaptation methods, the article analyzes the situation of adaptation, transmission, and reception of the film adaptation of *The Tale of Kieu*. It discusses the challenges of adapting and transmitting *The Tale of Kieu* in film, as well as the aesthetic shifts in contemporary contexts. The article contributes to affirming that the film adaptation of *The Tale of Kieu* is a completely different and challenging experience.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Film adaptations of The Tale of Kieu

In 1924, the Indochine Films et Cinémas company produced the first significant film adaptation of *The Tale of Kieu*, titled *Kim Vân Kiều*. Directed by Ea Famechon in collaboration with Nguyen Van Vinh, this film holds great importance in the history of Vietnamese cinema. Since then, the ambition to bring *The Tale of Kieu* to the screen has continued through several notable adaptations and reinterpretations, such as *Kim Vân Kiều* (1968) by Duong Quy Binh, *A Tale of Love* (1995) by Trinh Thi Minh Ha, *Kiều@* (2021) by Do Thanh An, *Sài Gòn nhật thực* (2007) by Othello Khanh, and *Kiều* (2021) by Mai Thu Huyen. These adaptations reflect ongoing efforts to reinterpret and present *The Tale of Kieu* in various artistic forms over the decades.

The film *Kim Vân Kiều* (1924) was not only intended to provide the Vietnamese people with a new perspective on literary works but also represented the colonial government's efforts to gain a better understanding of the colonial society and its people [18, p.46]. The film expressed the desire of the Vietnamese to break free from centuries of isolation, including cultural isolation, and become part of the global community [9, p.781]. The film was seen the same as *chèo* (a form of generally satirical musical theatre), *tuồng* (classical Vietnamese opera influenced by Chinese opera), and *cải lương* (a form of modern folk opera) [19, 2013], [20, p.107]. The plot of the film *Kim Vân Kiều*, adapted by E. A Famechon, did not undergo significant changes compared to the original text (cited by [21, p.40], [18, p.54], [22]). The French director paid meticulous attention to the film, from technical aspects of filming, casting, and post-production, to combining with traditional art forms, ensuring that the film was both novel and appealing to Vietnamese tastes [9, p.781], [18], [23]. However, the film was difficult for local audiences to access and left them disappointed due to its silent film format and its inability to fully capture the values of the original work [9, p.784]. *Kim Vân Kiều* marked the first milestone in the history of Vietnamese art cinema, demonstrating the relationship between cinema and national literature. *Kim Vân Kiều* (1968), adapted by Vu Dinh Chi, Toan Giao, Pham Viet Lich and directed by Duong Quy Binh, is a film from Southern cinema. The storyline remains closely aligned with *The Tale of Kieu* by Nguyen Du, with some notable innovations in terms of visuals, costumes, dialogues, and character actions. Despite transforming the classic literary work through cinematic techniques and mediums, the "original text" still retains significant credibility [20], [21]. This film portrays a somber picture of contemporary Vietnamese society in certain scenes (poverty, despair, and moral decay among the intellectuals and upper class) [24, p.75]. The two film adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu* mentioned have been received as "faithful" adaptations: Titles from the original work, maintain the original context, storyline, and characters extracted from the source material. The difference lies in the filmmakers telling the story of *The Tale of Kieu* through a different medium, though without significant advancements.

Trinh Thi Minh Ha's film adaptation *A Tale of Love* (1995) has been given a new attire for *The Tale of Kieu*, perplexing the public with entirely changed settings, contexts of the original story, and experimental forms and styles used to depict it. The film explores themes of women's rights

contemporary society, especially in the context of migration and globalization [25] - [27]. The character Kieu in *A Tale of Love* is portrayed as a conflicted woman torn between traditional and modern values and between loyalty to family and personal freedom. The film incorporates verses from *The Tale of Kieu* (translated by Huynh Sanh Thong), Vietnamese folk songs, and a blend of Vietnamese cultural elements with Western modern music and visuals, creating a mesmerizing audio-visual experience. Trinh Thi Minh Ha employs non-traditional filmmaking techniques with poetic scenes and delicate arrangements, using film effects and warm colors (red, blue, yellow), and artistic nude scenes. Trinh Thi Minh Ha's adaptation of *The Tale of Kieu* in *A Tale of Love* is an exploration, suggesting an alternative approach to using the original story beyond mere "faithful" narrative meanings through filmic imagery [25]. However, the film is aimed at the English-speaking community and is not a film for everyone. It has not been widely released in Vietnam.

In the two decades following *Đổi mới* - the economic reforms initiated in Vietnam in 1986, no domestic filmmakers paid attention to this literary work, only adaptations for theater, *chèo* (a form of generally satirical musical theatre), and *tuồng* (classical Vietnamese opera influenced by Chinese opera) [10], [8]. It was not until after the year 2000 that films adapted from *The Tale of Kieu*, such as *Sài Gòn nhật thực* by Othello Khanh, *Kiều@* by Do Thanh An, and *Kiều* by Mai Thu Huyen, were introduced to the audience. They were made with modern cinematic language and directed by directors from Generation X and Millennials or those who matured during the *Đổi mới* period or those living in foreign countries. Films, such as *Sài Gòn nhật thực*, *Kiều* and *Kiều@* focus on themes of love, desire, and the role of women in contemporary society. *The Tale of Kieu* was created for themes of romance and including "hot" scenes to attract the audience. They argue that these three films have failed to capture the beauty of *The Tale of Kieu* and the Vietnamese people [8] - [10], [27]. If these three films had changed the names of the characters or did not have titles associated with *The Tale of Kieu*, no one would likely think they were inspired by Nguyen Du's work. The films were made for entertainment purposes but were not well-received by the audience [28].

In comparison to the original work, these adaptation films all redirect their content to reflect contemporary social meanings. Despite garnering public attention, these adaptations have not surpassed *The Tale of Kieu* in terms of its profound ideological and artistic values, often causing discomfort. Before 1975, adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu* were merely faithful renditions of the literary work. In the context of globalization, market economics, and international integration since the 1990s, adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu* have taken on a new appearance and a different perspective. In films, viewers witness new nuances of *Thúy Kiều*, *Hoạn Thư*, *Thúc Sinh*, *Từ Hải*, characters from Nguyen Du's original work. The construction of these characters makes the audience feel closer to contemporary life. Compared to Nguyen Du's original version, the film adaptations often focus on specific chapters or details, modifying, shifting, and adjusting the content and plot. In Trinh Thi Minh Ha's film adaptation, character Kieu, who collaborates with a women's magazine as a model and meets a photographer who is her lover. Films, such as *Sài Gòn nhật thực* and *Kiều@* focus on themes of love, desire, and the role of women in contemporary society. These "added elements" in the film adaptations have not yet demonstrated skillful adaptation, sometimes seen as "destroying the outset of a poetic tale carrying profound humanistic thoughts of the Vietnamese people" [28]. These films adaptations aim for aesthetic values, emotional values, philosophical values of human life, historical consciousness, political benefits, and market entertainment values, whether or not they are related to the original ideological content. These films adaptations have demonstrated the heritage of Vietnamese literature in various ways, reflecting sensitive issues of contemporary life, serve as clear evidence of the enduring love that the Vietnamese people have for this traditional literary heritage.

3.2. Reception of film adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu*

In the work *A Companion to Literature, Film, and Adaptation*, Leitch [29] asserts that "Adaptations are translations". Adapting literary works is often viewed as inferior and artistically

subordinate, more closely tied to popular culture than to the higher culture that lends prestige to literature [30, p.7]. This bias against film adaptations of literary works is evident in critical discourse, characterized by prejudiced expressions toward literary film adaptations. According to our survey, 56 out of 78 articles evaluate the reasons for adapting *The Tale of Kieu* into films based on the audience's desire to enjoy various forms of art. Despite its potential, adapting such a work poses numerous challenges. Many adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu* have been rejected by audiences for straying too far from the original spirit. Expressions, such as "misalignment", "failure", "disaster", "meager", "vulgarization", "disappointment", "dull", "superficial", "lacking" and "potentially threatening to literary texts" indicate the inferiority of adaptations compared to the source material, highlighting biases against adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu* as second-rate products [2, p.740], [8], [9, p.784], [10, p.1856], [27], [28]. However, it must be acknowledged that "Most adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu* have not been successful" [4, p.106].

At Dalat University, we conducted a small-scale survey among students and graduate students from the Department of Vietnamese Language and History (with 70% female and 30% male participants). All participants had previously studied subjects related to *The Tale of Kieu* and Nguyen Du and had some knowledge of Vietnamese literature from the Classical Literary period. These students had a fairly rich reading background, but when it came to adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu*, only 21% reported having watched one or two of these films, while 79% had never seen them. Among the 21% of people who had watched the films, when asked why they were not interested in the film adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu*, they mentioned that the ideological values were not profound, the ideological significance was not new, the plot and character traits were too distant from the spirit of the literary work, the actors lacked expressiveness, and the content was not engaging. In summary, film adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu* made it difficult for the audience to recognize the value of the original text.

The comparison between film adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu* and the original text, as expressed by the surveyed students, is summed up with 55.5% of respondents feeling that the literary work conveyed emotions more delicately than the film adaptations; 17% of respondents appreciating that film adaptations displayed rich imagination and the ability to construct a completely new world compared to literary work; 10% of respondents being intrigued by film adaptations and wanted to explore the ideological content and values of the literary work; 8% of respondents finding that the unfamiliar characters in the films did not match their pre-existing perceptions of *The Tale of Kieu* from their readings; and 9.5% of respondents noticing that the film adaptations addressed current social issues. Overall, viewers do not perceive the depth of inner feelings or subtle emotions in the adaptations.

According to the survey results on preferences between watching film adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu* and reading the original work, 65% of participants expressed a preference for watching films over reading the literary work, 12% preferred reading the original work to watching the film, and the remaining respondents would choose between the two activities depending on the circumstances, conditions, and goals. Our investigation reveals several reasons why young people prefer watching films: 1) Preference for Visual Medium: Many prefer films because they are not bound by the dense, refined, and emotionally rich language of *The Tale of Kieu*. They seek to experience the work from a cinematic perspective. 2) Emotional Engagement: Film adaptations evoke more emotions and provide richer experiences by offering specific visualizations of characters and easily grasping the storyline and spirit of the work, which the literary work might not fully satisfy. 3) Curiosity: There is curiosity about *lục bát* (verse form alternating lines of six and eight syllables) and Thuy Kieu's emotional developments, as well as the humanistic values of the work, would be portrayed in films. Adapting literary works into films has many advantages as it can help readers discover things they may have missed or gain a different perspective on the story through the eyes of others (screenwriters, directors, etc.). 4) Entertainment: Watching films for entertainment purposes is a prevalent cultural phenomenon today, where the "original" is

perpetuated through new media and received by new audiences. Therefore, adapting *The Tale of Kieu* into a film is entirely feasible. However, many film adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu* focus excessively on contemporary social issues and cater mainly to youth audiences, often overlooking the broader social strata and neglecting the audience's fondness and understanding of traditional cultural values. In summary, the preference for film adaptations over the original literary work stems from a desire for visual engagement, emotional immersion, curiosity about cinematic interpretations, and the entertainment value offered by films in contemporary cultural contexts.

3.3. Challenges for the adaption, transmission and reception of The Tale of Kieu

Until now, it is no surprise that classic Vietnamese films have all been adaptations of works by great writers. Despite the filmmakers' efforts, the adaptation of *The Tale of Kieu* remains merely a film version that does not surpass the original. In the film adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu*, we have identified the following challenges.

Firstly, from the perspective of adaptation, Nguyen Du's *The Tale of Kieu* was written in Nom script and the form is in the Luc bat verse. Therefore, Nguyen Du's work is rich in imagery and melodies, suitable for the characteristic thinking of poetry, associated with the rhetorical technique of ancient Eastern aesthetics [18], [31, p.86]. The change in the narrative mode is also a significant difficulty. Furthermore, the translation of unique artistic and humanistic concepts, values, and cultures that "nail down" the work is a major challenge [3, p.792]. From 1924 to 2021, there were two directions for adapting *The Tale of Kieu* into a film: one is "faithful" to the original, the other is inspired by the original, "freely inspired". Filmmakers are at a loss to answer questions: To what extent should they be loyal to the original, to what extent should they "upgrade", or "fictionalize" it, and how to make it suitable for the reception context of contemporary audiences while also conveying a modern message or "deciphering *The Tale of Kieu* from the perspective of modern viewers" [27]. In summary, from the direction, creative subject, and adapted content, to the form and language of adaptation, the film adaptation of *The Tale of Kieu* still faces many obstacles.

Secondly, from the perspective of transmission and reception, "an adapted work, like its original, is always framed within a context - a time and place, a society, and a cultural background; it does not exist in a vacuum state" [16, p.153]. The film adaptation of *The Tale of Kieu* also faces certain challenges in how it is received by the audience at the time of its release. "Knowing Audiences" do not see the complete transmission of the original values. This audience type has predefined value frameworks for the work. Breaking the habit of comparing the original and the adaptation is extremely difficult. "Unknowing Audiences", on the other hand, find the adaptation not compelling enough, failing to evoke new emotions or convey new values to the community, and not delivering new discourse. While different messages may have been conveyed by adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu*, both the reception of *The Tale of Kieu* and its film adaptation are within the reception of national culture in collective memory. Most adaptations have not yet portrayed a Vietnamese Kieu in the hearts of their audiences and conveyed new messages, which is an obstacle that has not been overcome. A major challenge for the transmission and film adaptation of *The Tale of Kieu* is its compatibility with the reception of the times, cultural contexts, and different aesthetics. Naturally, these receptions can creatively produce different suitable plots and details to replace them, and sometimes they are fertile ground for creativity.

3.4. Film adaptations of The Tale of Kieu and their reflection of contemporary Vietnamese aesthetic shifts

The Tale of Kieu was seen as a classic work of Vietnam. *The Tale of Kieu* meets all the criteria of a classic work as enumerated by David Tracy [32]. The aesthetic value of the work primarily lies in artistic creation and objective reality containing entirely different aesthetic worlds. With its idealized artistic creation and aesthetic imagery, *The Tale of Kieu* has portrayed a realistic world full of

criticism, demonstrating the flourishing of aesthetic subjects. In terms of traditional significance, aesthetic activities are mainly confined to the realm of spirituality and emotions, unrelated to socio-economic activities, even completely excluding economic benefits. The film adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu* carry additional meanings of aesthetic activities. To a certain extent, it can be said to oppose traditional cultural aesthetic activities. In general terms, the aesthetic reorientation of contemporary adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu* demonstrates the following characteristics:

Firstly, entertainment value and populism are fundamental characteristics of the current development of aesthetic culture. In modern society, this visual art form is being perfected, meeting the expectations of entertainment and aesthetic taste in the public's appreciation of art. The public's demand is the primary criterion for the dissemination of visual art, with "entertainment" being a trend highly emphasized in the adaptation and circulation of *The Tale of Kieu* in film. The entertainment aspect is particularly evident in the interweaving of scenes, storyline details, screenplay content, actor choices, film music, and filming locations.

Secondly, aesthetic activities are no longer confined to the traditional realm of art but are closely intertwined with socio-economic activities, namely the high degree of integration between economy and aesthetics, the commodification of art, and the industrialization of culture. Pursuing material enjoyment, focusing on immediate gratification, and self-centering are all aspects of consumer culture. This trend has caused the film adaptations of Nguyen Du's *The Tale of Kieu* to step down from the pedestal of literature and be labeled with commercial characteristics, bearing the imprint of commercialism, entertainment, and contemporary relevance. Film adaptations are directed by the cultural market and the demands of cultural consumers. The public plays an unprecedented role in the production and consumption of culture. In reality, we can see that the adaptation and reception of the work *The Tale of Kieu* are manifestations of the direction of the cultural market and the demands of cultural consumers. The audience guides the adaptation authors to focus on exploring and addressing contemporary public tastes and concerns.

4. Conclusion

Since the advent of cinema in Vietnam at the beginning of the 20th century, *The Tale of Kieu* has been a preoccupation for filmmakers. The value of *The Tale of Kieu* lies in its ability to encapsulate cultural discourse, zeitgeist, and different messages of each era. The film adaptations of *The Tale of Kieu* reflect an awareness of national culture and serve as an introduction and transmission of traditional Vietnamese culture, providing opportunities for dialogue and exposition of new ideas and approaches. In modern times, visual art increasingly holds a prominent position, significantly influencing the transmission of traditional cultural values. The adaptation of *The Tale of Kieu* in cinema is sure to continue, awaiting further breakthroughs.

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