

## **CHILDREN OF THE MIST**

*A Vietnamese documentary film*

*Director: HÀ Lệ Diễm*

*Producers: TRẦN Phương Thảo & Swann DUBUS*

*International Sales: CAT&Docs*

### **Logline**

In the misty mountains of North Vietnam, a teenage Hmong girl walks the thin line between childhood and becoming an adult. Over a period of three years, girls in her minority are forced to lose their innocence, discover the traps of seduction and fight for their independence.

### **Abstract of the film**

Di is a 12-year-old girl living in a village lost in the mist of Northwest Vietnamese mountains. She belongs to the Hmong ethnic minority where women get married very young, enduring the controversial tradition of “bride-kidnapping”.

When Di enters puberty, her personality has changed drastically. The carefree little girl has turned into an impetuous, hypersensitive teenager constantly arguing with her mother who is trying to keep her away from reckless relationships that she is not mature enough to handle.

On the Lunar New Year's Eve, when Di's parents come back home after celebrating, the house is silent: Di has disappeared.

### **Directors' statement**

I was born in a small village belonging to the Tay community, an ethnic group in Northeast Vietnam. At the age of 15, my beloved friends couldn't continue their studies in high school. When the first one got married, I remember this as the end of my childhood.

Ten years later, when I observed a group of young Hmong girls playing in the foggy landscape of Sapa province, I felt like I was looking at my own childhood reflecting in a mirror.

I became very close to Di, a 12-year-old girl, who gave me access to the whole Hmong community. In her culture, marriage is linked to a controversial tradition: when a boy is interested in a girl, he organises her kidnapping.

I knew for a long time about “bride-knapping”, but I used to consider it like a folkloric tradition. I didn't realize that most of the parents were favourable to early marriage for their daughter, as they don't trust in social promotion through school.

Women's trafficking is still a serious issue on the Chinese border only 90 km away. Almost every family in these communities has once suffered abduction. As a consequence, sexual abuse and violence are very common in this region. Since I started to shoot, two DI schoolmates of DI were raped on their way to school. One of them was murdered. While becoming teenagers DI and her friends had fear growing in them.

Fear also spreads in me when I realize that I could lose one of my “young sisters” at any moment. These threats gave me even more motivation to carry on this project.

I had already noticed that the camera was a great tool to record the imperceptible changes of DI who was now far from the young girl that I started to film. Watching the material shot, I was shocked to see this transformation that I didn't perceive on the naked eye: DI was now a beautiful but impetuous teenager threatened by all the dangers of the valley.

I thought the camera could also be used as a defensive weapon as I had previously noticed that the tension and the violence was refrained when I was filming. This occurred both outside with boys who annoyed DI and her friends, but also at home on several occasions when DI's father was drunk.

Above all, I wanted to keep on using the camera as a go-between to understand deeper Hmong society and interact with them.

I am also excited to have the opportunity to document from inside this aspect of their culture through DI's metamorphosis and to show to the Vietnamese and international audience the complexity of this process.

### **About the Director**

**HÀ LỆ ĐIỂM** was born in 1991 in Tay ethnic minority group living in the mountains of Northeast Vietnam. She left her hometown to study journalism at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Hanoi, from where she graduated in 2013. “Children of the Mist” is her first feature documentary film project. She is a “Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program Grantee.”

### **Context of the project**

The Hmong are an Asian ethnic minority settled in an area across South China, Laos and Vietnam.

This is a population with a very strong cultural and language identity. The latest census counts 11 million of them, 1 million of which live on the mountains of North Vietnam isolated from the rest of the

Vietnamese population. They have very basic knowledge of the Vietnamese language; most of them can't read or write it. They live out of farming, mostly growing rice on paddies on the mountainous terrain.

The Vietnamese authorities are running programs to develop and integrate the Hmong in their society. Schools have been built and scholarships have been provided in these remote areas. The young Hmong attending school are learning new opportunities, way beyond their ancestral traditions.

Culturally the Hmong population get married at a very early age, some of the girls even start a family by 13-years-old. Hmong's marriage at times is linked to a very particular and controversial tradition: the "bride-knapping". During the Lunar New Year festival, when a boy is interested in a girl, he organizes her kidnapping with the help of his relatives and friends, before forcing her back to his own home where he woos the girl. The girl can reject this by escaping and returning to her home within 3 days. In some occasions this process turns pretty dangerous and dark. Violence can escalate without warning and on several occasions the girls are raped. There are records of girls not being allowed to return home, trafficked and sold over the Chinese border.

Early weddings and "bride kidnapping" are still usual habits in Sapa region even if it is now disapproved and forbidden by the Vietnamese authorities.

### **About the Producers**

**TRAN Phuong Thao** (b. 1977 in Hanoi, Vietnam) moved to France in 2000 to complete her dream of being a documentary filmmaker. After graduating in Political Science in Paris, she studied documentary film techniques and writing in Poitiers University. Back in Vietnam, she directed « Workers Dream » which attended many international festivals and was awarded at Cinéma du Réel 2007 (P. Perrault Award). Since 2011, she directed several documentary films in collaboration with Swann Dubus including « With or without me » (White Goose Award - DMZ Docs 2012) and « Finding Phong » (Grand Prix Nanook - Jean Rouch IFF 2016, Paris).

After a Master of Literature, **Swann DUBUS** (b.1977) completed a PhD about intimacy in cinema at Paris III University in 2006. At the same time, he worked as a DoP and directed several documentary features both in Europe, Africa and Asia. He moved to Hanoi in 2007 and has worked alongside TRAN Phuong Thao since then.

### **Production Company**

Varan Vietnam was founded in Hanoi in 2011 by five young documentary filmmakers willing to develop creative documentary production in Vietnam.

Since then, they produced ten feature-length award winning documentaries including “Bua's Carpet” (Ogawa Shinsuke Award - Yamagata IFF 2013), “With or without me” (White Goose Award - DMZ Docs 2012), “Finding Phong” (Grand Prix Nanook - Jean Rouch IFF 2015, Audience Award & Spotlight Award - Viet FF 2016).

In 2015, the Varan Vietnam's production “The Last journey of Ms. Phung” became the first documentary film widely distributed in Vietnam and was a commercial success selling 35.000 tickets. In October 2018 “Finding Phong” was released in 20 commercial theaters all around the country.

Varan Vietnam directors and producers also organize every two years a three months workshop to share their experiences and knowledge with younger Vietnamese professionals.

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## **Technical informations**

Film title in Hmong: Mev nyuam npaj huab

Film title in Vietnamese: Những đứa trẻ trong sương

Film title in English: Children of the Mist

Length of the film: 92mn

Chroma: Color

Language of the film: Hmong, Vietnamese

Language of the subtitles available: English/French

Screening format available:

Dimension: 16/9

Date of Completion: 2021

Country of Production: Vietnam

Director: Hà Lệ Diễm

Producers: Swann Dubus & Trần Phương Thảo

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