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## Journey from the Fall

**Vuot Song**

(U.S.)

An Old Photo Film presentation of A Fire in the Lake production. (International sales: Carat Fon, Bangkok.) Produced by Lam Nguyen. Executive producers, Alan Vo Ford, Trung Pham, Joseph Faircrest. Directed, written, edited by Ham Tran.

Ba Noi - Kieu Chinh

Long - Long Nguyen

Mai - Diem Lien

Young Lai - Preston Tri Nguyen

Lai - Nguyen Thai Nguyen

Phuong - Cat Ly

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By **RUSSELL EDWARDS**

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**A post-Vietnam War boat people saga is launched to compelling effect in "Journey From the Fall," a sleek U.S. production. Feature bow by Saigon-born, longtime U.S. resident Ham Tran reps a strong entry on a crucial historical topic. Pusan world preem will lead to additional fest berths, but this glossy production deserves to be seen by a wider commercial audience. Given the breadth of the Vietnamese Diaspora, pic could carve some business in European and Anglophone territories.**

Press material describes pic as a Vietnamese "Schindler's List," but, though there's no denying the magnitude of events on which film is based, it falls short of any Spielberg-like finesse or grand sweep. Nonetheless, impressive undertaking is frequently enthralling.

Opening credits are accompanied by the voice of grandmother Ba Noi (Kieu Chinh) telling the story of Vietnam's 15th-century king Le Loi whose meeting with the Turtle God saw him blessed with a powerful sword to defeat Chinese invaders. With its illustrations and golden parchments, intro sets pic up as a quality experience.

In 1981, Long (Long Nguyen), who is in a re-education camp for his alleged anti-communist beliefs, recalls the 1975 fall of Saigon when he left his family to fight for his country even as he begged his wife, Mai (Diem Lien), their young boy Lai (Preston Tri Nguyen), and his mother to leave Vietnam.

Time jumps are frequent in the opening reels and have a disorienting effect. But this shortcoming fades as pic finds its narrative groove, establishing two narrative threads between which the film criss-crosses.

First thread focuses on Long's tortuous existence in the re-education camp and the impossibility of escape; the other follows his family's experience as refugees/boat people. Despite initial datelines, some auds may not realize initially that the parallel stories aren't occurring simultaneously. By the time they do, however, they should be sufficiently absorbed by the twin narratives and their inter-relationship.

Around the film's halfway point, the emphasis switches to the Long family's new life in Marin County, California. In what the helmer has described as pic's semi-autobiographical strand, a pre-teen Lai (Nguyen Thai Nguyen), who's experiencing problems adapting to Western culture, is branded a

troublemaker at school. This adds to the family's tensions.

The switch to California -- which feels like the start of a new movie -- may seem too severe for some viewers, despite the fact that the entire narrative has been pointing in this direction from the early scenes.

Perfs are all solid, from more experienced players like Long Nguyen ("Heaven and Earth") and Chinh ("The Joy Luck Club") to singers with no acting chops, like the impressive Lien.

Despite some initial unsteadiness, helming shows considerable style as well as ambition. Impression is that Tran the writer should thank Tran the director and editor for saving his skin.

Utilizing two lenses, Guillermo Rosas and Julie Kirkwood, for the Thai (repping Vietnam) and Californian locations respectively, pic has two distinct looks. While both styles serve different functions, the work of Rosas ("Before Night Falls") in lush jungle is particularly striking.

Christopher Wong's Hollywood-style score is quality stuff but its invasive placement often detracts from a sense of authenticity. All other tech credits are high quality.

Camera (color), Guillermo Rosas, Julie Kirkwood; music, Christopher Wong; production designers, Tommy TwoSon (Thailand), Mona Nahm (U.S.); art director, Solarsin Ngoenwicht; costume designer, Bao Tranchi; sound (Dolby Digital), James Berek; associate producers, Jason Black, Truc Ho. Reviewed at Pusan Film Festival (Window on Asian Cinema), Oct. 8, 2005. Running time: 135 MIN. (Vietnamese, English dialogue)

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