JOURNAL OF NARRATIVE AND LANGUAGE STUDIES | ISSN: 2148-4066
NALANS
Journal of Narrative and Language Studies – Special Issue 2023, Volume 11– Issue 21

Screening Eco-trauma in the Context of Post-socialism: "The Great Flood" and Local Identity Crisis in Chinese and Vietnamese Independent Films (the Cases of *Taking Father Home* and *2030*)

Hoang Cam Giang
University of Social Sciences and Humanities
Vietnam National University (USSH VNU)
gianghoang@ussh.edu.vn
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1535-6862

DOI: https://doi.org/10.59045/nalans.2023.16

APA Citation:
Giang, H.C. (2023). Screening eco-trauma in the context of post-socialism: "The Great Flood" and local identity crisis in Chinese and Vietnamese independent films (the cases of *Taking Father Home* and *2030*). *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies*, *11*(21), 70-84.

Abstract

As two of the few socialist countries in the Global South today that share a deep root of Confucianism and have had intense contact with capitalism in the last two decades, Vietnam and China have many cultural, ideological, and political similarities. Significantly, China and Vietnam have a similarly long tradition of water control and pride in managing the power of rivers and water, as evidenced in mythological, fairy tales, and historical books. The Yangtze and the Mekong are the two largest rivers that profoundly influence and impact their respective cultural, spiritual, economic, and social lives. Since the 1990s, with the construction of the Three Gorges Dam and industrial plants next to the Yangtze and the mangrove deforestation next to the Mekong, in the context of Post-socialism, these two river deltas have faced unprecedented severe environmental challenges. On the other hand, the images of the two rivers and two river deltas appearing in official state-funded and commercial films are isolated from the actual situations mentioned. By examining two typical independent movies from China and Vietnam about the Great Flood, *Taking Father Home* (2005, Ying Liang) and *2030* (2014, Nguyen Vo Nghiem Minh), this essay highlights the eco-awareness of those affected, especially the sense of eco-trauma, related to the natural disasters in the Yangtze and Mekong deltas. This essay will in particular analyze how the globalization process in these two socialist countries causes multi-level harm in localities, both culturally and environmentally. Moreover, drawing from the concepts of indigenous cinema, we will highlight the aesthetic ability of independent films to question the limitations of commercial and state-sponsored movies, which always romanticize native natural landscapes on-screen and produce eco-ambiguity among the public.

Keywords: eco-trauma, independent cinema, local identity, eco-aesthetics, The Great Flood, post-socialism.

Introduction: "The Great Flood": an upcoming apocalypse and a new eco-aesthetic in East-Asian independent films

Rivers are always the source of civilization and culture in communities; they are an endless source of livelihood, and by themselves, they create complete ecosystems for generations. The Yangtze and the Mekong are two large rivers that profoundly influence and impact Chinese and Vietnamese cultural, spiritual, economic, and social lives (Muranov, 2021; Owen, 2021). China and Vietnam have a long tradition of water control and pride in controlling the power of rivers and water, which is evidenced in mythological, fairy tales, and historical books (Mungello, 2009, p. 97; Cotterell, 1975, p. 24; Nguyễn, 2019; Ly 1329). In their long histories, the two peoples of China and Vietnam have relied heavily on their systems of dykes, irrigation structures, "artificial rivers" (or "Grand Canal"), and "water management" techniques - especially the Chinese, to tame unruly beings such as the rivers of the Yangtze or Mekong (Needham, 1971, p. 284–378; Trinh, 2020, pp. 155–182).

Since the 1990s, with the construction of the Three Gorges Dam and industrial plants next to the Yangtze and the mangrove deforestation next to the Mekong, these two river deltas have faced unprecedented and severe environmental challenges. The press and scientists have continuously reported on the ecological environments around the Three Gorges Dam and the Mekong Delta. Around the Three Gorges, the main visible forms of harm are flooding, geological changes, fluctuations in people's livelihoods, and earthquakes in neighboring areas (Qing, 2016, p. 160; Winchester, 1998, p. 228; Segers, 2005, p. 73). Similarly, the Mekong Delta is predicted to suffer from heavy flooding and be submerged by 2050, and the most significant "rice bowl" in Vietnam will have been engulfed. Millions of people will be displaced. (Le, 2007, pp. 110–116; ICEM, 2010, p. 170; Kulp, 2019; Denise, 2019). The media has also frequently reported severe saltwater intrusion (Tran, 2020, pp. 1029–1036, Le, 2007, pp. 15–68).

On the other hand, the images of the two rivers and two river deltas appearing in official state-funded and commercial films should be in touch with the actual situations mentioned. It should be added that, as socialist countries that share a long tradition of Confucianism, Vietnam and China have many cultural, ideological, and political similarities. Their intense contact with capitalism has significantly changed their entertainment and film industries in the last two decades. Since China joined the WTO in 2001 and Vietnam in 2007, the government-planned films produced by state-owned studios have decreased and only carry symbolic value. Commercial cinema (according to the Hollywood model) is encouraged to maximize foreign investment and strengthen domestic private companies. At the same time, independent cinema (art-house style) peripherally developed its path. (Aranburu, 2017, p. 12; Nguyet, 2018). At present, Chinese and Vietnamese cinemas, therefore, tend to favor the epic grandeur of nature, while commercial films are inclined to romanticization; state films are filled with nationalism, while commercial ones aim at popular and consumer cultures (image). Nature and the critical ecological issues have yet to be given full attention, due to various constraints and propaganda issues related to state films and commercial films' profit and business objectives. In both cases, exposing the ecological vulnerabilities of indigenous lands serves neither propaganda nor entertainment/commercial purposes. Their aesthetics, therefore, prefer beautiful and picturesque images aimed at recreating a complete, original, and unchanging nature, as if kept in a pristine atmosphere.

As a general "secret to success," these films often reuse natural images methodically to appeal to the masses, transforming them into consistent, familiar symbols such as "water," "mountain," and "field"[1].

With the same "water" theme and a seemingly strong emphasis on the environment, Stephen Chow's *The Little Mermaid* (2016) turns the environment into a passionate Hollywood love story, with a happy ending where the mermaid marries the company's boss; while *Cánhđồngbấttận* (*The Floating Lives,* 2010) by Nguyen Phan Quang Binh imagines it with immense and brilliant mise-en-scene. Similar commercial films are viral in contemporary Chinese and Vietnamese cinemas, such as those set in the Yangtze River: *Red Cliff* (John Woo, 2008); or *If you are the one* (Feng Xiaogang, 2008), and those set in the Mekong River: such as *Hai Lua* (Le Quang Hung, 2014); *Cho emgầnanhthêmchútnữa* (*The diary of fireflies*, Van Cong Vien, 2016); *Vòngeo 56* (*56cm Waist*, Vu Ngoc Dang, 2016), etc. In these films, the natural space of the two deltas becomes the background for narrative development (mostly love stories and stories glorifying cultural traditions). The lands, especially those submerged by river water, seawater, climate change, or government policies, are often not mentioned or noticed but are beautified and eternalized, as if they would last forever. In other words, nature serves only as the picturesque setting, without its own story or destiny. Furthermore, Vietnamese and Chinese films before the "Renovation" often emphasized that "water" is the source of culture and life, a peaceful destination for people to return to after facing many hardships in the cities, such as *Thươngnhớđồngquê* (*Nostalgia for country land*, 1995, Dang Nhat Minh), *The road home* (1999, Zhang Yimou), etc. In general, in both of these types of films, the layer of indigenous culture and the dynamic indigenous nature tend to be eliminated and hidden under a sign system—in the same way that Roland Barthes puts it, it becomes a kingdom of signs ("empire des signes").

Contrarily, without receiving funding (and control) from the government like state-sponsored movies, and without the pressure to placate and attract the public as commercial films must, independent films have their own approaches to directly accounting for environmental issues (especially the environmental disasters related to the Three Gorges Dam in China and the fierce sea level rise and salinity problems around the Mekong Delta in Vietnam). The film *Taking Father Home* (Ying Liang, 2005) emerged while Chinese mainstream media were spreading propaganda about the symbolic power of the Three Gorges Dam and its remarkable economic and scientific development. Liang's debut feature deals with environmental disasters and disruptions faced by indigenous people around the Yangtze River basin and the Three Gorges Dam. The film was not screened or welcomed domestically but received acceptance and recognition at international film festivals.[2] In 2014, the State of Vietnam also propagated the importance of eco-tourism in the Mekong Delta, the strategic food bowl of the country (Vietnamese Government Office 2014). In the same year, Nguyen Vo Nghiem Minh, an independent Vietnamese filmmaker, announced his film *2030* at the Berlin Film Festival, presenting the prospect of the entire area submerging in sea water and the misery of the indigenous people. The film also garnered international interest rather than domestic reception.[3]

Both highlighting a "Great Flood," submersion, inundation, land loss, and ecological injustice, and sharing an apocalyptic apprehension, these are two of the first few feature-length films to deal with land issues, impact on livelihoods,and the ecological vulnerability of localities amidst the global environmental degradation and the economic development

policies of the two socialist governments. They can also be considered the first works with ecological discourses that respond to the state and commercial films: *Taking Father Home* (Ying Liang, 2005)[4] related to the "Yangtze eco-region"; and *2030* (Nguyen Vo Nghiem Minh, 2018)[5] related to the "Mekong eco-region." Studies on the Three Gorges Dam from an environmental perspective have been numerous. However, they have not focused on the ecological injustice caused by the socialist government and globalism and the ecological injuries related to indigenous identity and indigenous people. Studies on the Mekong Delta and southern Vietnam in general, following the tradition of "carrying the sword to expand the realm" of the Vietnamese, often emphasize the "tolerance of many forms of beliefs and religions at the same time" and the worship of supernatural forces (whether gods or demons) aimed at overcoming the fear of wild nature. These often associate the worship of gods with worshiping heaven and earth, mountains and rivers, and the country (Phan, 2010, pp. 26-31). In this comparative approach to two national cinemas (*Taking Father Home* and *2030*), this essay focuses on the eco-awareness of humans, especially the sense of eco-trauma related to the Yangtze and Mekong deltas[6]. Besides the concepts of eco-injustice and indigenous cinema, I underestimate the ability of independent films to question the limitations of commercial and state-sponsored films, which always romanticize and commercialize native natural landscapes on-screen and cause lasting harm through a distorted perception of environmental problems among the public.

Yangtze, Mekong, globalization, and the multiple traumas of localities

The above directors of the films envisioned water and its immensity, biodiversity, and ineluctability simultaneously and in parallel with globalization. A primary feature of water in these two films is that it tends to drown out all the specific imprints related to riverside human life. Moreover, it homogenizes different locations with the same color of water, apocalypse, and dystopia. Therefore, in all those films**,** it is not coincidental that "the land"—the symbol of peaceful settlement by the river—disappears or mostly becomes nonexistent. On the contrary, we only see the constant movement and flowing of the raging current, which wash away everything. Along with water, in all these films, there are images of dikes and large dams—artificial works used for hydroelectricity, showing national strength—large cargo ships from abroad taking up all the space of the river, or ships carrying passengers traversing or crossing the river. In *2030*, we will see floating companies and farms where artificial "clean" vegetables are grown from brine due to scientific invention and technological progress[7]. In *Taking Father Home*, we see buildings, sprawling construction sites, and complete concrete lanes[8]. The cities, skyscrapers, electric lights, ships, and hydroelectric projects are all assimilated through the films, with a pessimistic view and full of irony. All the urban and rural scenes in *Taking Father Home* and *Still life* are equally cluttered, suffocating, and gray. All the local scenes in *2030* and *The unseen river* reflect a significant and cold blue, where the bank cannot be seen and no identity of any locality can be recognized. "Globalization" is also associated with nationalism and cleverly combined with the commercialization of landscapes. For example, in *Still* Life, the character eats a meal in a damp, dilapidated room after a hard day's work while bragging, "the landscape of my hometown is printed on the money." The Three Gorges Dam is built across the Yangtze River, providing a vast energy source and serving as a tourist destination that promotes the beauty and power of China's industrialization. Cruise lines and cargo ships traveling day and night, combined with ferries, motorbikes, and city lights, make the rivers and oceans restless, and the native landscape is indeed something that can be "checked in," bought, or

used for entertainment purposes. That, in turn, serves as the background for life in faraway places (cities) and not a place for settling down, residing in, or sticking with.

In both films *(Taking Father Home and 2030*), the first fierce, uncompromising reality of all the characters is that they are all *chased away by water*, having to leave their land and escape by running away from home. The Mother Rivers of the two cultures become monsters that prey on humans and sow deadly curses on every land they cross. Its most potent effect is breaking all spatial structures, leaving humans—the subjects of native space—with nowhere to cling to. In Vietnam, the concept of "country" is closely associated with that of "home," or "birthplace," and "refuge." The fact that humans are rejected by their own native space and expelled can be seen in events such as when Xu Yun is rejected and abandoned by his own father (in *Taking*); no matter how big her desire, Sao is unable to have a child, or, in other words, the "child," its vitality and existence reject Sao (in *2030)*[9].

Private space, locals' families, regional culture, and the traditional disintegrating structure

In *Taking Father Home*, after Xu Yun's father leaves his impoverished hometown for the city to earn a better living, Xu Yun's mother and he are also forced to migrate to another place because their land will soon be used to build a new factory. Xu Yun then tries to find his father to inform him of this radical change, hoping to bring his father back to make up for the broken fragment of the family amidst the fluctuation of the living space. Nevertheless, when he reaches the city, Xu Yun is chased by a giant flood. He cannot bring his father back, and when he gets home, he and his mother must prepare to move out. There is no land for a young man like Xu Yun, and the traditional family model is broken amid natural disasters. For a generation of rural youth like Xu Yun, losing one's land equals losing one's future and hope, becoming ephemeral beings floating on floodwater. In this case, Xu Yun and the men like him become invisible.

In *2030,* when the water rises throughout the Mekong Delta, Thi and Sao will have to sell their land, even though they deeply regret it. Their ancestors left the land as a material and spiritual link between them and family traditions. It is also a place of residence and shelter, which shapes their identity and the way they cultivate crops, love, and live, and a place that gives them a sense of belonging, anchoring, and stability. When water takes away their land, they cannot cultivate anymore and are forced to live aimlessly every day. Water destroys every person, every family, every life, and most of all, every piece of individual identity. Both films show the tragedy of lone and abandoned individuals facing environmental disasters. They were robbed of their land, possessions, peaceful lives, and identities by floods, natural disasters, and the rising sea. The most important thing related to both films is that, in East Asian cultural spaces, which traditional Confucianism profoundly influences, land ownership is always associated with family, clan, and residence in the village[10]. When land is lost, a family and its structure also disintegrate, leading to a profound crisis among the actors of ecological conservation, prolonging and aggravating the ecological crisis. Poverty and floods cause fathers to leave villages to go to the city for a better livelihood; sons and daughters also follow in their parents' footsteps, leaving villages and fields abandoned and increasingly barren. The encroachment of robust industrialization and modernization causes local landscapes and indigenous ecological spaces to collapse. Leaving their cradle, the indigenous people quickly become disoriented and helpless; they

wander in the middle of the city or become lost, bewildered, and decaying in their hometowns.

In short, in the above two films (*Taking Father Home* and *2030), indigenous* people's natural/living space is always associated with the Confucian and patriarchal family model. When the ecological environment is disrupted, that model also disintegrates, leading to the disappearance of refuge and, later, the traditional family-oriented economic model's disintegration, which disrupts the ecological preservation chain. *At the intersubjective level, Taking Father Home* and *2030* create large pieces of an overall picture that begin to fall apart. In both films, the disintegration of the indigenous cultural-ecological environment does not occur at the family or local level. In *Taking Father Home*, all the people in Xu Yun's countryside near the Yangtze River have to evacuate to a new land, which also means that the entire cultural space of the region is wiped out in the face of extreme environmental changes. In the city, evacuation due to the flood takes place too quickly and widely, and the risk of seeing floating corpses is entirely possible. After Xu's failed trip to find his father in the city, he returns home, and his mother is waiting for him to move to a new land with the whole village:

"- *Xu's mother:* Son, I am waiting for you to come back and help me pack up.

- *Xu*: Where will we go?

- *Xu's mother*: 100km away from here in the mountains.

- *Xu*: What if they also build an industrial park there?

- *Xu's mother*: We move again."

The conversation takes place as insects hum, and the low angle of the camera, featuring Xu's loose, bloody hand soaked in soil, shows the endless helplessness and urgent but hopeless inner cries of the people at the bottom of society. In the final scene of the film *2030*, the camera seemingly floats freely underwater, through cafes and the flooded countryside, through submerged cities, through an entire world inundated by the great flood. Ultimately, the curse of water submerges everything, leaving no land. Ordinary people, with no floating farms and no possession of advanced machinery, have almost no choice but to leave themselves at the mercy of water—just like the images of floating seaweed and moss in the film. Both films' warnings of ecological disaster and injustice at the national/global levels are apparent and drastic. The fate of individuals and small families in these narratives tells us the story of the final crisis of humankind. This problem relates to the layers and institutions of power in the films, which lead to environmental destruction at the bottom layer of power, which is inevitable and fateful.

In *Taking Father Home* and *2030*, the sounds of the government's loudspeakers and the announcements from television and radio run throughout the films. These are words in the form of commands, not dialogues. They are one-dimensional, and there is no space for interaction and feedback: for example, Xu's entire village is ordered to evacuate so that a new factory can be built (at the beginning), and the entire city must evacuate to avoid flooding (at the middle and end), following the authorities' declarations. The fluctuations of their living spaces are always extremely passive and unfavorable, pushing them into a

vicious cycle of ecological injustice. When in the countryside, they are pushed out of the lands they have cultivated and tended to for thousands of years, yet they are not allowed to enjoy the fruits of industrial progress on that land. Coming to the city, they sell their labor to wealthy bosses, engage in hard labor, and sacrifice their health to develop the city. Still, they have to live in dirty, cramped houses lacking basic living conditions, not in green, beautiful, fully furnished apartments. In *2030*, the farmers will gradually lose their lands in their own country because the water submerges everything. Unable to cultivate land, they are forced to sell themselves to corporations. In turn, corporations build factories to produce clean water and vegetables that the farmers buy at high prices. If they resist or struggle to get out of the situation, they will be charged with vandalizing state properties or those of the wealthy. In *Taking Father Home*, a group of rural people is forced to move elsewhere to live due to the economic administration of the government; or forced to go to the city with the hope of changing their lives and escaping the poverty-stricken village. However, the urban space itself, especially the living space of poor workers (most of whom are from rural areas), is also very precarious and tentative; they are the most miserable and the last to be evacuated from a flood in the film.

It is driven home that cultural destruction leads to ecological destruction, and vice versa, which is a common theme in both films. The breakdown of two parts of the system leads to a fundamental breakdown of human life, the natural environment, and human civilization. In *Taking Father Home*, the image of two ducks that can swim but are bewildered by the city's floodwater and unable to survive when separated from their native habitat is repeated throughout the film. The two ducks and the farmer Xu Yun are chased everywhere in the city, becoming worthless in the residents' eyes. Until he reaches out to the Buddha's head floating on the floodwater for the last time to confirm his despair and helplessness, Xu does not hope to find his biological father in the city and bring him back to his hometown. At this point, the religious grip has broken, leaving it unable to comfort or free the people from worldly sufferings. The floodwater also washes away the head of the Buddha statue; thus, the last fulcrum of the man is lost. After seeing the Buddha's head one last time, Xu lets go of his last possessions (two ducks), lets them swim back to the river, and decides to find his father to "finish the deal" with him. Xu's patricide is terribly immoral, but symbolically, it is more of a denial and erasure of one's biological identity. That behavior also shows Xu's desperate resistance and extreme anger—as a small, powerless person—after being stripped of his last refuge (the arable land left by many generations and his father) by the powers that be. At long last, he has given up on himself, on his profound being.

In *2030*, according to the accurate indigenous knowledge of Sao, a species of estuarine moss exists that can live in both fresh and saltwater. Nevertheless, when the gene of that moss is discovered by a scientist (Giang) and copied to produce a type of vegetable to be sold, that vegetable causes an incurable disease for humans. Two strange fish do not bring miracles to Sao and her husband either (she wishes to bear a child)—they even die as soon as he perishes. Sao's mother and husband die, and as the two of them want to have their burials carried out according to "customs" and their land is lost, Sao also falls into despair when facing the environmental crisis alone. Before that, when a few signs of the environmental disaster had happened in this land, Giang (the scientist) also warned about the collapse of this indigenous culture (with Sao): "I will write that the sea will rise and engulf this café and the whole shelf, and your books will float aimlessly in the water; I am sure fish will come to read them then, like archaeologists searching for lost civilizations." The image of a small boat bobbing in front of raging waves, being swallowed up by the

shadows of enormous wind turbines and a huge cargo ship, is the last sign of a dying civilization.

When ecological space becomes "signs": the eradication of indigenous knowledge and memory

The film *2030* opens with a bulletin announcing statistics related to the Mekong Delta when submerged in 2030. The entire Mekong Delta region is encapsulated in one chart, a digital graphics map with numbers like sea level, and a 3D delta model; the whole system is molded into one model. In *Taking Father Home*, the entire Zigong and delta region of the Yangtze River are also wrapped into a large map as Xu Yun and the two ducks stand in front of it. The two films' ecological images are envisioned as "done," frozen, and irresistible, not as a living system in motion or having resistance. In the independent films with similar themes to those of the two above, we see a process of signifying natural space, turning it into a cluster of empty things that exist only on the surface: the Yangtze River turned into an image of money (*Still life*); the riverside map (*Taking Father Home*); the "land for sale" signs and the 3D computer model of the Mekong Delta (*2030*); the broken photos (*Mekong Stories*), etc. And the most worrying thing is that, for the indigenous people themselves, having lived so long with the situation, they accept it, and "these weird events are accepted peacefully as if they were normal phenomena … [and] there is nothing to write in the diary. Everything seems so natural" (Goldberg, 2006, p. 134).

In *2030*, the inhabitants consider it normal to queue up to buy clean water and fresh vegetables from Dai Thanh Group, but it is unethical to seek justice for her poor husband when Sao comes there. In *Taking Father Home*, Xu Yun's mother, girlfriend, the policeman, and Xu Yun's father have no intention of protesting against the injustices and impositions around them. As Goldberg wrote of Nazi concentration camps, "the prisoners accept the symbolic order of the annihilator, in which they have neither the right nor the possibility to desire any change [...] a subject petrified by the signifier […]. The result is what I call 'the death caused by the signifier,' which stops the process of metonymic slippage from one signifier to the other that produces meaning and desire" (Goldberg, 2006, p. 135). In other words, not only the native natural environment but also the indigenous peoples who live in it are signified and "frozen" in the system. Meanwhile, Xu Yun or Sao "stays within the realm of trauma but avoids succumbing to one of the two forms of death" (Goldberg, 2006, p. 137). By refusing to compromise or forget about their traumas, Xu and Sao still possess the desire to change reality and the aspiration to fight and resist. Both films emphasize the experience and re-experience of two young people's traumas, as well as the ecological damage and environmental destruction. Recognizing and re-experiencing personal traumas and ecological injuries on-screen requires resisting the mapping and oversimplification of human and environmental issues. Somehow, the characters go against the framing and signifying of the diverse world of human life and against "death by signifying."

From the perspective of trauma theory, we all see that the characters are in a post-traumatic, post-apocalyptic state when their breakdown has become a reality. Now they are facing a shattered and devastating truth, and at the same time, the constant recollection of traumas makes their pain recurring and irreversible. Unlike other environment-themed films, these two films do not emphasize environmental disasters nor precisely describe the 'traumatic events,' but rather the process of experiencing and overcoming them. In the constant remembrance of traumas and actual losses, the identity of the characters, which is

tied to the local cultural and natural environment and collective unconscious genetics, is also shaken, deprived of meaning, and stripped of connotation. In other words, it is the repetition, recall, and re-imagining that distort identity because it is contaminated with individual tragedies amid the general calamity of the community. Both films deal with the rupture/gap between the traumatic "event" itself and its experience—a process that is almost invisible, insidious, and interminable. Nonetheless, the weight of this slow violence is endemic to individuals and an indigenous community as a whole. Independent films carry the power of criticism, awakening deep ecological consciousness precisely from this perspective.

From eco-trauma to eco-aesthetics: independent cinema meets environmental screening

As Karen Thornber writes in *Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crises and East Asian Literatures*, Eastern literature and art have a tradition of praising and promoting the beauty of nature and the harmony between it and humankind (Thornber, 2012). At first, observing the film's poster, *Taking Father Home*, we see the image of a small person standing in the middle of the mountains—a familiar image in Chinese shanshui paintings—a solid tradition of respecting nature and upholding its beauty and immensity. Humans are in harmony with the whole of nature; they love and enjoy it, are surrounded and protected by it, and always feel small in front of it.[11] Nature, as such a vast part of the universe, is home. The consistency, wholeness, and connection between nature, people, and culture in the local environment is a form of community knowledge. This truth has been affirmed frequently through poetry, music, and philosophy. However, the cinematic language and sequence of frames in the two films we are studying lead to the opposite effect: *Taking Father Home* opens with Xu Yun standing and watching all the mountains and hills of his village for the last time before moving to the city - his look is a farewell gaze that separates and alienates a person who has never left his village, hamlet, mountains, and forests, and the countryside that gave birth to and raised him. If the moment when people contemplate nature in the painting is an eternal one, then this moment of *Taking Father Home* is very fragile and short. It begins the breakdown of the human-environment relationship, and nothing can be done. It is a real tragedy because people are uprooted from their native space and are forced to find a new refuge. The film's name conveys a sense of spatial vagueness when it talks about an unfinished action and is ambiguous about its outcome, as represented by the verb phrase "taking father home."

Similarly, the poster for *2030* (and so many hauntingly repetitive frames throughout the film) shows a girl rowing a boat in the vast blue water. This image has also become a cliché in poems, music, and pictures featuring the Mekong Delta. Mainly, it appeared in the 2010 film *The Floating Lives*, which resonated with a majority of the Vietnamese audience in 2010. In that traditional vision, people and nature vibrate, creating a liberal, open, and lively beauty. However, the girl in *2030* is rowing her boat in the middle of the sea carrying her husband, who drowns in the water in the film. In the distance, there is a wind turbine. That anti-mythic, anti-romantic image has radically changed people's feelings about nature, reshaping the ecological aesthetic in Chinese and Vietnamese independent films. Humans are wholly unsure whether they can rely on or control nature because they are being swallowed by it, more precisely, by the water. While the movie *Taking Father Home* was shot in a simple manner with a hand-held camera without the use of lighting or beautifying techniques and held a robust documentary character, *2030* uses a futuristic aesthetic, engulfing the imagination and horror in the viewers' unconscious using a surreal way of

staging and filming. Both films attempt to overcome the limits of commercial and state-sponsored films by bringing nature to the screen. Both directors are intently exploring a world in a state of decay and "death of expression," trying to revive and return that sphere to its original condition before it is damaged by industrialization and globalization. Their films thus simultaneously exist to push the limits of cinematic conventions in a new era.

Going deeper into the cinematic language of each film, we further recognize the breakdown and disruption of the balance and harmony of the nature-human relationship. *Taking Father Home* follows the styles of pseudo-documentary and neo-realism, while *2030* pursues a science-fiction motif combined with a surreal, mystical tone. In terms of genre, both films produce a discreet parody of the drama genres: romance and melodrama. While dealing with family and love triangle subjects like many commercial movies, *Taking Father Home* and *2030* shrewdly oppose the romanticization and easy aestheticization of nature. In terms of color, if *Taking Father Home* uses the light gray and white color of floodwater and the ever-gloomy sky, *2030* features the endless, cold, and nihilistic blue that swallows small people. Regarding frame composition, the humans in *Taking Father Home* skew away from the background and foreground: sometimes they cover the background, and sometimes the foreground covers them. Meanwhile, *2030* features an absolute threat and dominance of the environment over tiny humans. *Taking Father Home* often uses external sounds (especially those of speakers, television, and radio); these propagandistic and authoritative sounds do not match the activities and emotions of the characters. In *2030*, the constant monotonous sounds of water and aquatic creatures combine with the artificial sounds of machines (e.g., computer code) to create a strange, surreal, and sometimes grotesque auditory experience, predicting the coming apocalypse. In both films, we will not hear soothing, relaxing music or the comforting sounds of nature, as is typical in other commercial/state films about the Yangtze or the Mekong.

Regarding the scene and frame layout, the film *Taking Father Home* often has many panoramic scenes and in-depth perspectives, but the background is often blurred and difficult to grasp and observe. *2030* has a comprehensive horizontal frame layout, and the blue color covers the space, making the 3D perspective feel like a screen against a flat background. In other words, both films show the anomalies and artifice of the scenes staged and observed by human eyes, with each character seeing only a part of the vast universe and being unable to understand its fury. These deliberately superficial scenes work against habituated cinematic spatial sense**.** They remind us of this reality's distorted, naked, unstable, disproportionate, and unnatural nature instead of comforting us and bringing us to a certain beautiful nostalgia or at least peace of mind in the present like in romantic and romance films.

Conclusion

By constantly conversing with discourses that frame, commercialize, and signify nature in commercial and state films, independent film directors have genuinely acquired the ability to criticize, deconstruct, and reconstruct. As such, we can ultimately put *Taking Father Home* and *2030* into the category of eco-cinema, which transcends attitudes and ways of seeing the environment and provokes the limits of cinematic conventions in the era of anthropocentrism. Compared with other film genres that are often found to praise nature and promote the beauty of local lands, we find that only independent films are interested in a sense of apocalypse, annihilation, extremism, and the choicelessness of humans. In addition,

beyond commercializing images and local identities through commercial films and nationalism and propaganda in state films, only independent films frankly address the fall of the rural paradise and the collapse of the refuges of modernity, science, and technology in the city. Therefore, independent films allow viewers to realize that enlightenment, reason, romance, and fantasy have to pull back and give way to radical realism and postmodernism. With a unique, challenging form of cinematic language accompanying documentary, immediacy, amateur actors, raw images, and slow cinema, the two films *2030* and *Taking Father Home* can de-mystify and awaken human visual curiosity. In other words, the breaking of aesthetic standards and the disruption of cultural symbolism expose an alarming reality of civilizations and humankind as a whole. The image of the river as a mother and the endless energy that nourishes its children has collapsed, taking with it all the tolerance, beauty, and romance garnered through generations. Everything has turned into a threat to human survival and life quality. In other words, with the two films above and other indie films about the environment in general, myths fall apart, and the myth-producing models collapse.

Notes

1. For example, the pellucid stream and the lush bamboo forests in *The Banquet* (2006); the glistening wharf and majestic mountains in *Red Cliff* (2008); the immense and splendid landscape in *Blood Letter* (2012); the pure grassland and river in *Tam Cam: the untold story* (2016), etc.
2. Ying Liang is a filmmaker born in Shanghai, China. He made his directorial debut in 1999, and since then, he has made five feature films and more than a dozen shorts, including *Taking Father Home, The Other Half, Good Cats, When Night Falls, A Family Tour, Condolences*, and *A Sunny Day*. These were greeted with several vital prizes at international film festivals. In 2011, he moved to Hong Kong. *Taking Father Home,* "the debut feature of Ying Liang, is a poetic study of resolve and revenge: When 17-year-old Xu Yun learns that a government industrial zone is replacing his village in Sichuan Province, he sets out to fetch the wayward father who abandoned him six years earlier. Armed with only a vague address and a pair of placid geese instead of cash, Yun heads for the big city of Zigong and the closure he may not even know he needs" (Jeannette, 2018).
3. Nguyen Vo Nghiem Minh is a Vietnamese-American film director. His films include *Mùalentrâu* (*The Buffalo Boy*), for which he won many international awards. He spent 16 years as a physicist at the University of California, Los Angeles, before completing cinematography studies at the same institution in 1998. In his latest film, *Nước* (*2030*), a futuristic feature film set in 2030 Vietnam, the ocean levels have risen, and the land of many farmers is now underwater. Vegetables are cultivated on floating farms, a catastrophic situation from which global corporations want to profit. Nghiem-Minh Nguyen Vo's soggy tale, as the love triangle and the landscape are poised for a crescendo, the conflicts driving the plot are as muddy as the water submerging everything (David, 2014).
4. I also compare this film with another independent Chinese movie that deals with the Yangtze River Delta: *Still Life* (JiaZhangke, 2006).
5. I also compare this film with another independent Vietnamese movie that deals with the Mekong Delta: *The unseen river* (*Giòngsôngkhôngnhìnthấy*, Pham Ngoc Lan, 2020).

6. As stated by Anil Narine, the eco-trauma experience can be understood as "a sensory overload—an experience also consistent with psychological trauma" (Nadine, 2018, p. 2). Narine analyzed the paradoxical nature of that situation: "On the one hand, we want to take action to protect the natural world (…) On the other hand, it is also undeniable that we disavow our knowledge of climate change and dwindling natural resources in order to function more happily in a global economic context replete with unsustainable practices." (Nadine, 2018, p. 2). From this observation, we believe that commercial films and state-sponsored films (two streams representing the post-socialist economy with a capitalist spirit) are different ways to "actively retreat from uncomfortable realities." (Nadine, 2018, p. 2) Therefore, independent films, because market rules (must "beautify" the landscape like commercial films) or propaganda requirements (must emphasize nationalism as in state films) do not bind them, have outstanding advantages in directly and frankly facing and exposing ecological wounds through their language of "slow cinema" and "raw cinema."
7. In *The unseen river*, we also see the temple transformed into a place with magnificent Buddha statues; there are proud, looming cities and haunting electric lights across the river.
8. In *Still life*, we see the great bridge spanning the Yangtze River.
9. In *The unseen river*, the novice is afraid to go to the river to fish at night, and "the monk goes to bed early." In *Taking Father Home*, the whole city population has to flee lest the flood overcomes it. In *Still life*, the evacuees are frightened but unable to do anything as the water rushes constantly forward.
10. "Rural housing"—and above all, the garden, the land that Vietnamese people often stick to for many generations according to the model of inheritance—is considered "the unit of ecological balance, the closed ecological cycle that always exists, and remains unchanged for thousands of years in the living space of the village" (Nguyễn, 2020).
11. The shanshui paintings are "all ancient Chinese paintings with mountain and water images" (Sirén 1956, 62, 104), which emphasize "spontaneity and harmony with nature." (Perkins, 2013, p. 232)

Acknowledgement

This research is solely funded by VNU University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi, under project number USSH-2022.12.

Notes on contributor

Hoang Cam Giang is a tenured lecturer and the Head of the Arts Studies Department, Faculty of Literature and Sino-Nom, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University (USSH-VNU), Ha Noi. She received her Ph.D. (2013), majoring in the theory of literature, from Vietnam National University, and a certificate of film writing course (2010) from the Film Studies Program sponsored by the Ford Foundation (USA). She was the Harvard-Yenching Institute's Visiting Scholar for 2018–2019 and the Harvard Asia Center's Visiting Scholar for 2019–2020. In addition, she was selected for the "University Grant for Prominent Researching Project of Faculties" (VNU); "Grant for Strengthening Capacity-building in National Science and Technology" (The National Foundation for Science and Technology Development - NAFOSTED, Vietnam); "Researching Grant for

Excellent Doctoral Students" (USSH-VNU); "Training Grant for Film Studies Researcher" (Ford Foundation); etc. Hoang Cam Giang's research currently centers on the relations between cinematic ecocriticism and the socio-political discourses in East Asian and Southeast Asian movies. She has published one monograph about contemporary Vietnamese novels, *Vietnamese novels at the beginning of the 21st century: structure and tendencies* (Vietnam National University Publisher, Hanoi, 2015). Her papers are included in many books such as *Contemporary Asian cinema: history, aesthetics, and style* [National University Publisher, Hanoi, 2015]; *The film industry of Vietnam and Korea: several argumentative and practical issues* [University of Theatre and Cinema, Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam) and Dankook University (Korea) co-publish, 2017]; Literature*, arts, and cultural institutions* [World Publishing House, Hanoi, 2017]; etc. Her publications have appeared in the *Journal of Urban Culture Research* (Thailand, SCOPUS indexed); *Asian Studies* (Slovenia, SCOPUS indexed); *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (USA, ISI indexed); *Journal of Literature Studies* (Vietnam); *Journal of Theatre and Film Studies* (Vietnam); *VNU Journal of Science* (Vietnam); *Vietnam Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities; Journal of Culture and Arts* (Vietnam); *Journal of Literature and Art Criticism* (Vietnam); etc. Her ORCID ID is: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1535-6862

References

Aranburu, A. M. (2017). The Film Industry in China: Past and Present. *The Journal of Evolutionary Studies in Business, 2*(1), 1–28.

Cotterell, A., & Yap, Y. (1975). *The Early Civilization of China*. G.P. Putnam's Sons.

David, D. (2014, February 7). Nuoc 2030. *Screendaily*. https://www.screendaily.com/nuoc2030/5066381.article

Denise, L., & Christopher F. (2019, October 29). Rising Seas Will Erase More Cities by 2050, New Research Shows. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/29/climate/coastal-cities-underwater.html

Edwards, A. A., Steacy, L. M., Siegelman, N., Rigobon, V. M., Kearns, D. M., Rueckl, J. G., & Compton, D. L. (2022). Unpacking the unique relationship between set for variability and word reading development: Examining word- and child-level predictors of performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *114*(6), 1242–1256. https://doi.org/10.1037/edu

Goldberg, A. (2006). Trauma, Narrative and Two Forms of Death. *Literature and Medicine, 25*(1), 122–141. https://doi.org/10.1353/lm.2006.0019

ICEM (International Centre for Environmental Management). (2010). *Strategic Environmental Assessment of Hydropower on the Mekong Mainstream: Final Report*. Mekong River Commission.

Jeannette, C. (2018, September 18). Taking father home - a city in flux. *The New York Time.* https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/19/movies/19fath.html

Kesharwani, P. (Ed.). (2020). *Nanotechnology-based approaches for tuberculosis treatment*. Academic Press.

Kulp, A., & Benjamin H. S. (2019). New elevation data triple estimates global vulnerability to sea-level rise and coastal flooding. *Nature Communications, 10*(4844). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-019-12808-z

Le, A., T., Chu T. H., Fiona M., & Bach T. S. (2007). Flood and Salinity Management in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. In T. B. Tran, T. S. Bach & F. Miller (Eds.), *Challenges to Sustainable development in the Mekong Delta: regional and national policy issues and research need* (pp 15–68). The Sustainable Mekong Research Network (Somerset).

Le, T. V. H., Nguyen H. N., Wolanski E., Tran T. C., & Haruyamaa S. (2007). The combined impact on the flooding in Vietnam's Mekong River delta of local man-made structures, Sea level rise, and dams upstream in the river catchment. *Estuarine, Coastal and Shelf science, 71*(1–2), 110-116. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecss.2006.08.021

Ly, T. X. (1961). *Việtđiện u linhtập* (*Yue dianyu ling ji*) (Le H. M., Trans.) Khai-tri Publisher (Original work published in 1329).

Mungello, D. E. (2009). *The Great Encounter of China and the West*, 1500–1800 (3ed.). Rowman& Littlefield.

Muranov, A. P., & Charles E. G. (2021). *The Yangtze delta*. Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/place/Yangtze-River/The-Yangtze-delta

Narine A. (2018). *Eco-Trauma Cinema*. Routledge.

Needham, J. (1971). Civil Engineering and Nautics. *Science and Civilization in China*: *Volume 44 Physics and Physical Technology*. Cambridge University Press.

Nguyen, L. (2020, November 25). Housing in the traditional countryside of North Vietnam. *Architecture Journal of Vietnam Association of Architects.* https://www.tapchikientruc.com.vn/chuyen-muc/ve-nha-o-nong-thon-truyen-tthong-bac-bo.html.

Nguyen, M. T. (2019). *Vietnamese fairy tale bookshelf - Son TinhThuyTinh*. My Thuat Publishing house.

Nguyet, N. (2018, July 15). Remove the Boundaries of State Movies and Private Movie ("Xóabỏlằnranhphimnhànướcvàphimtưnhân"). *Nation Magazine*. http://toquoc.vn/xoa- bo-lan-ranh-phim-nhanuoc-va-phim-tu-nhan-99240170.htm

Owen, L., Gilbert F. W., & Jeffrey W. J. (2021). Mekong River. *Encyclopedia Britannica.* https://www.britannica.com/place/Mekong-River

Perkins, D. (2013). *Encyclopedia of China: History and Culture*. Routledge.

Phan, A. (2010). The Southern Vietnamese from the religious perspective ("NgườiViệt Nam Bộtừgócnhìntôngiáo".) *Journal of Art and Culture, 311*, 26-31.

Qing, D., John G. T., & Michael R. W. (2016). *The River Dragon Has Come!: Three Gorges Dam and the Fate of China's Yangtze River and Its People*. Routledge.

Segers, H., & Koen M. (2005). *The River at the Center of the World*. Springer.

Sirén, O. (1956). *Chinese Painting: Leading Masters and Principles.* The Ronald Press Company.

Svendsen, S., & Løber, L. (2020). *The big picture/Academic writing: The one-hour guide* (3rd digital ed.). Hans Reitzel Forlag. https://thebigpicture-academicwriting.digi.hansreitzel.dk/

Thornber, K. (2012). *Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crises and East Asian Literatures*. University of Michigan Press.

Tran, T. P. L., Tran T. T. H., Tran L. C. T., Nguyen V. K., Yutaka H., & Tran M. P. (2020). Salinization intensifies the effects of elevated temperatures on Channastriata, a common Tropical freshwater aquaculture fish in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. *Fisheries Science, 86*, 1029–1036. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12562-020-01463-9

Trinh, V. D. (2020). The Chinese Tradition of Geopolitics: Unifying and Extending the Empire by River: The Case of the Mekong River in the Context of China's Realization of Its One Belt and One Road Initiative. *Collaboration in Water Resource Management in Vietnam and Southeast Asia*. Nomos Publishing House.

Vietnamese Government Office. (2014, June 20). Decision approving the task of adjusting the construction planning of the Mekong Delta to 2030 with a vision to 2050 [*Quyếtđịnhsố 1005/QĐTgcủaThủtướngChínhphủ:phêduyệtNhiệmvụđiềuchỉnhQuyhoạchxâydựngvùngđồngbằngsôngCửu Long đếnnăm 2030 vàtầmnhìnđếnnăm 2050*]. Vietnam Government Portal. https://vanban.chinhphu.vn/?pageid=27160&docid=174530&tagid=1&type=1

Winchester, S. (1998). *The River at the Center of the World.* Henry Holt & Co.

Zeleke, W. A., Hughes, T. L., & Drozda, N. (2020). Home–school collaboration to promote mind– body health. In C. Maykel & M. A. Bray (Eds.), *Promoting mind-body health in schools: Interventions for mental health professionals* (pp. 11–26). American Psychological Association.