

# Vietnamese and Chinese Movies about Royalty: From Confucian Cosmology to Ecological Politics

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## Abstract

Since 2002, with the enormously successful release of the movie *Hero* by Zhang Yimou, we have been witnessing the resurrection of the royal theme in contemporary East Asian cinema, and the return of Confucian cosmology as its philosophical foundation. In this paper, I focus on Vietnamese films which represent royal subjects and court life, like *Heroes of the Tay Son Dynasty* (*Tây Sơn hào kiệt*; Lý Hùng, Lý Huỳnh, and Phụng Hoàng; 2010), *Blood Letter* (*Thiên mệnh anh hùng*, Victor Vũ, 2012), and *Tam Cam The Untold Story* (*Tám Cám chuyện chưa kể*, Ngô Thanh Vân, 2016); and Chinese films, like *Hero* (英雄, Zhang Yimou, 2002), *The Banquet* (夜宴, Feng Xiaogang, 2006), and *Red Cliff* (赤壁, John Woo, 2008). Firstly and most importantly, my essay examines how the cosmic and environmental elements in such movies are manipulated to advocate some particular political discourse as a kind of ecological politics. From this analysis, I analyse and explain the similarities in how the filmmakers in Vietnam and China establish the stereotypes of power and legitimacy of authority utilizing and transforming the Confucian spiritual cosmology. I also try to clarify the difference between the two cinemas in how they express the concepts “the Unity of Heaven and Man” (*tianren heyi*), “Rectification of Names” (*zhengming*), and “Virtue of Loving Life” (*haosheng*) in their political implications. Finally, I will discuss the layers of meaning and visual narratives by analysing the characters and social contexts of the films to reaffirm the varying degrees of influence of Confucian tradition on contemporary forms of cultural and political practices.

**Keywords:** Confucian cosmology, historical movies on royalty, ecological politics, “the Unity of Heaven and Man”, “Rectification of Names”, “Virtue of Loving Life”

## Vietnamski in kitajski filmi o kraljevih družinah: od konfucijanske kozmologije do okoljevarstvenih politik

### Izvilleček

Od leta 2002, ko je bil prvič predvajan izjemno uspešen film *Junak* (英雄, *Hero*) v režiji Zhang Yimouja, smo bili priča ponovnega vstajenja kraljevske tematike v sodobnem vzhodnoazijskem filmu in vrnitvi konfucijanske kozmologije kot njegovega filozofskega

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temelja. V tem članku se osredotočam na vietnamske filme, ki uprizarjajo člane kraljevih družin in življenje na dvoru, kot na primer *Junaki dinastije Tay Son* (*Tây Sơn hào kiệt*; Lý Hùng, Lý Huỳnh in Phụng Hoàng; 2010), *Krvavo pismo* (*Thiên mệnh anh hùng*, Victor Vũ, 2012) in *Tam Cam: Zamolčana zgodba* (*Tám Cám chuyện chưa kể*, Ngô Thanh Vân, 2016), ter kitajske filme, kot so *Junak* (英雄, Zhang Yimou, 2002), *Gostija* (夜宴, Feng Xiaogang, 2006) in *Rdeča pečina* (赤壁, John Woo, 2008). Najprej in najpomembneje, moj esej preučuje, na kakšen način tovrstni filmi ravnajo s kozmičnimi in okoljskimi elementi, da bi tako zagovarjali določen politični diskurz kot vrsto okoljevarstvene politike. V okviru te analize želim preučiti in razložiti podobnosti, kako z uporabo ter preobrazbo konfucijanske duhovne kozmologije kitajski in vietnamski filmarji ustvarjajo stereotype moči in legitimnosti. V članku bom prav tako poskusil pojasniti razliko, kako s sporočanjem političnih implikacij obravnavani filmski industriji izražata »enotnost Neba in Človeka« (*tianren heyi*), »pravilnost imen« (*zhengming*) in »vrednoto ljubezni do življenja« (*haosheng*). Nazadnje bom z analizo likov in družbenih kontekstov v filmih obravnaval še njihove pomenske sloje ter vizualno narativo, da bi tako ponovno potrdil spreminjanje se stopnje vpliva konfucijanske tradicije na oblike sodobnih kulturnih in političnih običajev.

**Ključne besede:** konfucijanska kozmologija, zgodovinski filmi o kraljevih družinah, okoljevarstvene politike, »enotnost Neba in Človeka«, »pravilna imena«, »vrednosta ljubezni do življenja«

## Introduction

### *Hero and the Rise of Historical Movies on Royalty in East Asia*

As socialist countries that share a long tradition of Confucianism, Vietnam and China have many cultural, ideological, and political similarities. In the last two decades, their intense contact with capitalism has significantly changed their entertainment and film industries. Contrary to previous periods in the 20th century, especially 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, while commercial cinema (according to the Hollywood model) is encouraged in order to maximize foreign investment and strengthen domestic private companies. At the same time, the independent cinema (art-house style) peripherally developed its own path. The state has increasingly coordinated with private companies to produce or distribute commercial films, especially in China. Now, the monopolized production of state-owned studios has almost ended in the era of global integration in both Vietnam and China (Aranburu 2017, 12; Nguyệt 2018).

In this context, Zhang Yimou's movie, *Hero*, released in 2002 created quite a stir in the Chinese-language film market and the wider world for combining state-owned film studios, domestic private film studios, and studios abroad. After *Ju Dou* (1990), *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992), *To Live* (1994), and *The Road Home* (1999), and thus after a long period of examining the topic of the “bottom people” of society using the style of neorealism and the art-house system, the veteran fifth-generation Chinese director Zhang Yimou seemed to have chosen a new career direction. *Hero* marked the first time that Zhang made a historical *wuxia*<sup>1</sup> movie, the first time expensive digital effects were used in Asian cinema history, and the first Mainland film to gross more than \$100 million worldwide.

*Hero*'s substantial financial success quickly made making blockbuster historical films a trend, primarily focusing on the grand and lavish context of the great dynasties in Chinese history, such as *Curse of the Golden Flower* (Zhang 2006); *The Banquet* (Feng 2006); *Red Cliff 1, 2* (Woo 2008; 2009); *The Great Wall* (Zhang 2016); etc.<sup>2</sup>

It was not only a turning point in Zhang Yimou's career but also of Chinese cinema after China joined the WTO, when the “the state acknowledged the important strategic function of the cultural industries in statecraft and declared it would invest in these in order to strengthen its national power”, and this led to the emergence of the “discussion around the concept of soft power” (Zhang 2012, 25). A mixture of long-traditional socialist propaganda films (*zhuxuanlu*) and Hollywood-like blockbusters (*dapian*) helped materialize this soft power (Davis 2010, 125; Aranburu 2017, 12).<sup>3</sup> With this, expensive commercial films produced by private companies are under the control of and co-participate with state corporations (especially large-scale historical films, like *Hero*) to reproduce nationalism in the popular supranational film industry.

In Vietnam, critics highly recommend this Chinese historical film production model for domestic filmmakers to refer to in the new millennium. In Vietnamese

1 “*Wuxia*” which means “martial heroes”, is a popular-genre of Chinese-language cinema that developed from the kind of Chinese fiction concerning the adventures of martial artists in ancient China (Teo 2009, 2–3).

2 These films later significantly affected Korean and Vietnamese cinema, with *The King and the Clown* (Lee 2005), *Masquerade* (Choo 2012), *The King's Face* (Yoon and Cha 2014), *The Fatal Encounter* (Lee 2014), *Rampant* (Kim 2018) (South Korea) and *The Prince and the Pagoda Boy* (Luu 2010), *Heroes of the Tay Son Dynasty* (Lý 2010), *Ly Cong Uan: The Road to Thang Long Citadel* (Cận and Tạ 2011), *Blood Letter* (Vũ 2012), *The Nymph* (Đình 2015), *Tam Cam: The Untold Story* (Ngô 2016) (Vietnam).

3 “*Zhuxuanlu*” or “main melody” movies are the Chinese state-sponsored and propaganda works “glorifying the lives of Party officials, celebrating heroic incidents, or portraying war stories and patriotic melodramas” (Davis 2010, 125).

media channels, crucial formulas drawn from Chinese historical films have created an “effective way of ‘splashing money’ by filmmakers” in order to make “blockbuster works” to “please audiences with grandiose scenery, beautiful techniques, (and) popular stars”, “content that catches up to the trendy entertainment”, “offering many benefits for domestic businesses”, with filmmakers feeling “less pressured to stick to the truth” (Tuyết 2014; Phong 2018; VTV News 2018). However, it was after the 1000th anniversary of Thăng Long-Dong Do-Hanoi (2010) that a series of historical films about Vietnamese royalty was born. Afterward, private filmmakers also started producing historical films, a trend that continued from 2010 to the present.

### *The Ideal Personality Models and the Return of Confucian Tradition*

Going back to *Hero*, besides the recognition of film critics in Vietnam and other countries around the world about the supranational scale of filmmaking, this movie represents a model of the hero in relation to authority as an ideal ruler of society, which has a specific power to unite the whole world. The return of the “ideal ruler of society” reminds us of core Confucian ethics, especially those of primitive Confucianism. The models of certain cultural characters, such as the emperor (*huangdi*), hero (*yingxiong*), Confucian gentleman/superior person (*junzi*), Confucian scholar (*Ruzhe*), etc. are associated with the knowledge base in the Confucian feudal period, and are emphasized and restructured to focus on the theme of royal life based on Confucian ethics and cosmology.

Many scholars in the last decade have acknowledged a Confucian revival in China in the twenty-first century, in parallel with the country’s economic growth, the increase in national soft power and the need to face global challenges such as environmental degradation and the immigration crisis (Tu 2000; Yang, Fenggang 2011; Tan 2012; Hammond and Richey 2015; Hon 2017; Pang 2018; Deng and Smith 2018). In Vietnam, Confucian ideology and Confucian research have also been revived, with many different levels and forms (Phan 1994; Quang 1994; Nguyễn, Kim Sơn 2003; Minh 2005; Vũ 2009; Lý 2015; Cao 2017). The connection between the explosion of movies on royal themes (with feudal historical figures) and the spectacular return of Confucianism in the last two decades, after being rejected during the Cultural Revolution in China and the Land Reform in Vietnam, needs an explanation.

To achieve this, my article will examine what is happening with the rise of the royal court theme in contemporary Chinese and Vietnamese cinema. Why do the products of the modern cultural industry reproduce the values once considered

obsolete? Why are these films focused on the relationship between certain typical personality types in society and the power of the universe/nature, and how do these relationships relate to the power discourses of the current communist rulers in China and Vietnam? Moreover, based on the growing ecological crisis in both countries, do these films, with their return to the typical feudal contexts, lead viewers to an environmental discourse that praises and respects nature and promotes the harmonious resonance between people and the universe? The article not only analyses how Vietnamese films, like *Heroes of the Tay Son Dynasty* (Lý 2010), *Blood Letter* (Vũ 2012), and *Tam Cam The Untold Story* (Ngô 2016), and Chinese films, like *Hero* (Zhang 2002), *The Banquet* (Feng 2006), and *Red Cliff* (Woo 2008),<sup>4</sup> share similar ideologies, but also explains the differences between Vietnamese and Chinese movies about court life related to reproducing the Confucian cosmology and ecological/biological injustice in the context of contemporary politics. This is because through Confucian cosmology the filmmakers have clearly presented a discourse on the “support of the universe” for the current political regime, expressed through signals from the vast and mysterious nature. These are the inherent forces that are highly revered by East Asian people.

From discourse theory, as well as cultural anthropology and ecocriticism, I will analyse the expression and functioning of the discourse of the rulers—universe/nature—people relations in the films listed above; as well as the way natural/cosmic elements are applied to justify the legitimacy and ethics of contemporary authorities. The concepts and ideas of various Confucian schools throughout history will be used to compare with the cinematic texts, especially Confucius cosmology, the theory of the “rectification of names” and “virtue of loving life”; and the philosophy of “Heaven’s Mandate”, “The Unity of Heaven and Humanity” by Dong Zhongshu.

### “The Unity of Heaven and Humanity”: Confucian Cosmology as the Foundational Ethical Discourse

With a deep philosophical foundation based on the relationship between man and Heaven and the issue of human nature, Confucianism is essentially a theory of

4 These particular movies are also prominent commercial products on the subject of royalty and power, have had high box office sales, and received significant attention from domestic and foreign media. In these films, the striking natural images are also always associated with the theme of kingship and emperors/rulers, which I will investigate in this article.

From here on, sometimes these six movies will be replaced by HMOR (“historical movies on royalty”); *Heroes of the Tay Son Dynasty* is shortened to *Heroes*; *Tam Cam The Untold Story* is shortened to *Tam Cam*.

moral cultivation aimed at creating ideal individuals and ideal societies. Considering the interrelatedness between the self, family, community, and the universe as concentric circles, Mary E. Tucker writes:

The moral cultivation of the individual influences the larger circles of society and politics, as is evident in the text of the Great Learning, and that influence extends to nature, as is clear in the Doctrine of the Mean. All of these interacting circles are contained within the vast cosmos itself. (Tucker 2005, 2631)

Rodney L. Taylor and Howard Choy also point out this resonant connection, defining Confucianism as

an in-depth analysis of the nature of the self and its relation to the world at large (...which seeks...) a method of learning that would allow for the cultivation of a self that bore the capacity for the unfoldment of its true nature. (Taylor and Choy 2005, 126)

They also emphasize how Confucianism connects humanity and Heaven and helps in the establishment of social order:

Ultimately, such order within human society is a reflection of the structure and order of the cosmos itself. Heaven, earth, and humankind each has its duties; each has its responsibilities. Duties are manifest in ritual within such distinctions between things. The result is order. (ibid., 117)

In general, the ultimate purpose of the elements of Confucian ethics and cosmology is to propose methods of operation so that society can reach stability (Yao and Shun).<sup>5</sup> In other words, Confucianism is a doctrine of social management through self-cultivation and adjustment, stabilizing human lives/spirituality among the cosmic factors as well.

From that starting point, the Confucian classics often refer to the essential characteristic of the Confucian world view as “Heaven and Humankind as One”

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5 Regarding the motif of the legendary emperors Yao and Shun, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2019a; 2019b) states that: “Shun, formally Yudi Shun, in Chinese mythology, a legendary emperor (c. 23rd century BC) of the golden age of antiquity, singled out by Confucius as a model of integrity and resplendent virtue. His name is invariably associated with that of Yao, his legendary predecessor”; “Yao, formally Tangdi Yao, in Chinese mythology, a legendary emperor (c. 24th century BC) of the golden age of antiquity, exalted by Confucius as an inspiration and perennial model of virtue, righteousness, and unselfish devotion.”

(*tianren heyi*) where the *Ch'i* (*Qi*) or vital force infuses everything.<sup>6</sup> The Confucian tradition advises people to cultivate their *Ch'i* through the practice of *Li* (ritual/propriety) and *Yue* (music), completing the cycle of cosmic resonance: “Rite is the order of Heaven and Earth; Music is the harmonization of Heaven and Earth” (Confucius 1999, 174).<sup>7</sup> Human moral and emotional transformation both affect the universe, and *vice versa*, combined in an inseparable unity. When social order turns into chaos by the degeneration of morality, it will also cause disorder in the flow of *Ch'i* and result in disasters in the universe, according to a famous Han dynasty scholar named Dong Zhongshu:

When he is orderly, salutary *qi* blends with the transformation of Heaven and Earth. When he is disorderly, noxious *qi* blends with the transformation of Heaven and Earth (...) When he identifies with Heaven, there is mutual benefit. When he differs from Heaven, there is mutual harm.  
(Dong 2016, 606)

From Dong’s notion, we can see the ideal order of the world through the relation between Heaven and humankind through the “Son of Heaven” (*Tianzi*) or the Emperor: “One who may be called a king forms a triad with Heaven and Earth (...) Heaven establishes kings not on behalf of rulers but on behalf of the people” (ibid., 232, 606). The Emperor is the only one who has “Heaven’s mandate” (*tianming*) and the “Rectification of Names” (*zhengming*) to rule the “under the Heaven” or “the people”.<sup>8</sup>

In the central part of this article, I analyse pairs of Vietnamese and Chinese films that have many similarities and differences in how they display issues of

6 Tu Weiming defines the concept of *Ch'i* as the “vital force” that infuses the spontaneously self-generating and constantly transforming world (Tu 2004, 27). Connecting the “cosmic process” and “*Chi'i*”, Tu Weiming argues that: “Forming one body with the universe can literally mean that since all modalities of being are made of *ch'i*, human life is part of a continuous flow of the blood and breath that constitutes the cosmic process. Human beings are thus organically connected with rocks, trees, and animals.” (ibid., 34)

7 Robert Weller analysed this idea of Confucius: “Musical resonance of this type was cited time and again as a prototypical example of cosmic resonance, and this image of two lute strings attuned to one another, vibrating in sympathy, is central to all models of cosmic resonance theory.” (Weller in Tucker and Berthrong 1998, 317)

8 “Rectification of Names” (*zhengming*) is one of the most critical concepts of Confucius thought. In *Analects*, Confucius argues that: “Only when names are rectified, will language be used correctly, and only with the correct use of language, can undertakings be completed. If undertakings are not completed, then rites, music, law, and punishment will also fail and with them the order of society.” (Confucius 2003, 423–24) According to *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Confucianism*, “Confucius suggests that the *chün-tzu* (noble person) should use appropriate names so that he can speak and act appropriately” (Taylor 2005, 48).

Confucian ethics and cosmology. There, the way Vietnamese and Chinese filmmakers promote, strengthen, or question the notion of “*tianren heyi*”<sup>9</sup> will also be examined.

### *Hero and Blood Letter: The Despot Who Carries the Mandate of Heaven and the Converting of Heaven’s Yi*<sup>10</sup>

A key point in the historical movies on royalty (HMOR) from 2000 to the present is the expression of the interoperability and resonance between people and the universe, in the direction of spiritualization. It is because these films focus on portraits of feudal dynasties that we always see a kind of “chosen man”, a hero model that incorporates many typical medieval patterns: kings, knights, nobles, Confucian scholars. This type of character is the only person who is destined from Heaven to lead and teach people according to “the Way” (Dao).<sup>11</sup> These characters have the “mandate of Heaven” and will always have mysterious interrelations with the supernatural forces.

Zhang Yimou’s *Hero* built a strong story to affirm this principle founded on Confucian spiritual cosmology.<sup>12</sup> In the film, Qin Wang is a person who bears a “noble mission” to dominate all realms, unifying China into a single nation. The four great knights, Wuming, Changkong, Canjian, and Feixue, sought to assassinate Qin Wang but eventually gave up that goal because they understood that, despite Qin Wang’s cruelty and violence, “the people” needed him to avoid bloody territorial disputes and disorder. The pain of personal hatred is the price they paid to achieve the “unity of the world” and to follow the “Heaven’s mandate” of the tyrant king. Similarly, in Vietnamese movie entitled *Blood Letter*, Nguyễn Vũ (the grandson of Nguyễn Trãi who survived the Lê Chi Viên tragedy) eventually

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9 From here, sometimes this phrase (“Heaven and Humankind as One”) will be replaced by “*tianren heyi*”.

10 *Yi* (义, Righteousness) is one of the essential concepts of Confucian doctrine. *Yi* is the “fundamental principle of morality”, and “represents this ideal of totality as well as a decision-generating ability to apply a virtue properly and appropriately in a situation” (Cheng 1972, 269, 271).

11 The term means a sort of ethical system for human behavior.

12 The aspects of Confucian cosmology here are profoundly spiritual, as it indicates that every movement of man and the creatures in the universe directly affect Heaven through the vital essence, and *vice versa*, as in Weller’s analysis: “The author (Hoai-nan Tzu) intends us to understand the ‘report’ of the Spirit to be an instance of cosmic resonance. The Spirit, being itself made of quintessential *ch’i*, receives and respond to vibrations arising from other objects or people and carried by the Vital Essence (...) Human consciousness is thus implicit in and susceptible to the same processes of cosmic resonance that affect trees, iron, magnets, and lute strings.” (Weller in Tucker and Berthrong 1998, 318, 321)

dropped his mission to assassinate the Empress to take revenge on the whole family. Like Wuming, Changkong, Canjian, and Feixue, he also did not want the people to suffer from wars and instead recognized their need for a leader with the Mandate of Heaven.

Of course, the heroes/assassins in these movies do not give up their revenge easily. The problem is that they always receive sacred signs from the universe and the natural world to guide their actions and show them who is carrying the “Mandate”. They need to dismiss their sentiment for the benefit of the nation and community. In *Hero*, Qin Wang suddenly discovers the lies of Wuming. The wind blowing the flickering candles in front of the king causes him to figure out Wuming’s mental uncertainty and his false narrative. Similarly, in *Blood Letter*, the night before he planned to kill the Empress, Nguyễn Vũ had a bloody nightmare where his grandfather came back to prevent him from taking revenge. In that dream, Nguyễn Vũ stabbed the Empress, and a monster appeared on the throne wearing the crown, resulting in the whole world being immersed in the blood, smoke, and faces of beasts. That dream led him to give up the mission that he had devoted himself to complete.

The universe and supernatural forces intervened in the governance of rulers, such as Qin Wang in *Hero* or the Empress in *Blood Letter*, so that those who wanted to assassinate them had to be converted by “*Tian Yi*” (Heaven’s righteousness). It is a predestined morality established by Heaven. Thus, the interdependence between man and Heaven is presented as the harmony between Heaven and the “Son of Heaven”, who represents the people. From that, the discourse on “Son of Heaven” joins two other fundamental moral concepts of Confucianism, namely “the right man” (*junzi*) and the “hero” (*yingxiong*) who are holding, decoding, and using the whole mystical energy of the universe effectively. Also, in these two movies, the directors shift the focus of building the ideal Emperor model from the moral aspect (with his great benevolence and virtue) to the spiritual and cosmological aspect (with his Mandate of Heaven).

### **The Banquet and Tam Cam The Untold Story: *The Return of Crowned Prince, the Rectification of Names And The “Cosmic Judge”***

With the second pair of movies, *The Banquet* and *Tam Cam The Untold Story*, the “*tianren heyi*” primarily aims at rigorous deterrence and education at a universe level, especially for those who violate the Mandate of Heaven and are disloyal to the Son of Heaven. Here, the “natural world as a judge” or “cosmic judge” discourse is closely attached to the theme of revenge and the legitimacy of royal

figures. There are some common themes in the two films: the betrayal of the most influential and most trusted mandarin in the court, the death of the king, the escape of the crowned prince, and so on.

Firstly, in this kind of story the biggest issue is the usurper's "rectification of names". For example, in *The Banquet*, when the new king (who was assassinated by his brother) and the courtiers discuss the biological features of the snow leopard, the king also implies satisfaction with the flexible adaptation of the courtiers when the political situation changes: "When the snow flow down, this animal hides in the cave to take care of his fur. On a sunny day, he appears brightly. He knows the weather. He is a mascot." (*The Banquet* 2006, 36: 33). However, Pei Hong (a faithful governor of the former dynasty) says that the new king should give a snow leopard carved of stone to Yin Taichang, who was a Minister of the old king and now follows the new king, because "Taichang is as changeable as a snow leopard." (ibid., 37: 27). After that, General Yin Sun (Taichang's son) gets angry and wants to kill Pei Hong because this is an insult to Taichang, indicating his father's disloyalty. Only after a short discussion about the legendary animal can we see the story in *The Banquet* interpreted not only from the perspective of tragedy and personal revenge, as in *Hamlet*, but it also as the story of the violation of "heavenly law" or the final rituals and morals of Confucianism.<sup>13</sup>

In *Tam Cam*, the Minister Tào Khắc could kill both the king and prince because he avoided becoming a "usurper" but wanted to be a legitimate successor: "If the neighbouring state invades, the king and the prince would be killed by their enemy according to my plan; then as the minister, I would stand up to quell a revolt, so that I have the 'rectification of names' sitting on the throne." (*Tam Cam* 2016, 55: 10).

In both films, the "rewards and punishments" through nature and supernatural forces are based on the "rectification of names" criterion. Here, the discourse "nature as a judge", always tied to revenge against the royal character, turns into the "ecophobia" that marks the atmosphere of both stories. In *The Banquet*, solitary nature is a refuge that comforts the shattered heart of Prince Vo Loan. When his uncle's army came to assassinate him, the lake protected him. Unlike Shakespeare's play, the uncle's betrayal is not the central crime in Feng Xiaogang's *The Banquet*. Finally, Empress Wan seems to be the most unethical Confucian, since she has an affair with three men in the same family, so she must suffer the most severe consequences. Wan must witness the death of all the men who loved her and those she loved, and then she is killed by an unknown knife falling from

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13 *The Banquet* is a loose adaption of the tragedy *Hamlet*. Shakespeare's play depicts prince Hamlet and his revenge against his uncle, Claudius, who has murdered Hamlet's father to seize his throne and marry Hamlet's mother.

Heaven. The knife sinks to the bottom of the water, and the fish swim around, licking the blood to show the punishment coming from the universe, and the wrath of creation when moral orders are overturned.

Similarly, in *Tam Cam*, when the king, prince and his wife (Tấm) were in distress, thunder and lightning appeared in the sky (like the night the traitors assassinated the king, and the minister deceived the prince, Cám, and her mother killed Tấm, etc.) When Cám (the beautiful and evil half-sister of Tấm) seeks to enter the palace to become the new queen replacing her lost sister and join Tào Khắc to gain power from the court, a series of strange natural phenomena acted against her. (For example: the yellow oriole prevents the prince from escaping the dangerous charm of the Cám, the tree branch falls to block the arrow shot at him by a hidden assassin, the tree meshes reach out to lift him when he is pushed down into the abyss, his wife is also reborn from a miraculous gold apple, and so on.) In an extraordinary series of events, he transforms into a monster kills the beast, Tào Khắc, and finally change back to his human form. The folk philosophy “one good turn deserves another” (*ở hiền gặp lành*) fits with Confucian ethics. For example, after acting with inhuman strength, he could still return entirely back to his original human state because the most significant difference between the prince and Tào Khắc is not his strength, but Heaven’s mandate. The mandate is attached to “benevolence” and the “rectification of names”, which are the two core moral standards of the ideal rulers.

### **Red Cliff and Heroes of the Tay Son Dynasty: *The Virtue of Rulers, “Righteous Substitute” and the Flexibility of “Heaven’s Mandate”***

The idiom, “Heaven and Men as Oneness”, manifests in a more complex aspect, through the flow of *Ch’i* circulating between the cosmos and humanity, in *Red Cliff* and *Heroes of the Tay Son Dynasty*. Here, the challenge with Confucian ethics displays itself in the relationship between a knightly assassin and a mandated tyrant (as in *Hero* and *Blood Letter*), or between a “son of Heaven” and a usurper (as in *The Banquet* and *Tam Cam*). Both *Red Cliff* and *Heroes* propose a “righteous surrogate royal force” who is strong enough to defeat the old dynasty’s usurpers.

*Red Cliff* begins with a small bird flying into the palace and landing on the hand of King Han. Later, when General Cao Cao threatens and forces the king to let his soldiers go to battle, the small bird leaves in a panic. This opening will explain the entire later part of the film, when Cao Cao betrays Heaven’s mandate, violates the “rectification of names”, and joins the unrighteous side in the war against the

three Liu Bei brothers (originally from the Han family that has the pure royal blood). Thus, Cao still suffers a heavy defeat by the Liu Bei—Sun Quan alliance because the unexpected change in the direction of the wind made the fire turn back suddenly and destroy Cao’s army. At this time, the Liu-Sun alliance could be considered as a new representative of the Mandate of Heaven transferred from an old force (King Han) who could not shoulder the sacred mission anymore.

In *Heroes*, despite having the superior force Nguyễn Huệ always respected the Lê dynasty. During his first time leading the troops into the capital of Thăng Long, Nguyễn Huệ takes the title of “advocating Lê to exterminate Trinh” helping the orthodox “Heaven’s son” (Lê) and ending the Trinh encroachment with Lê’s authority. Not only that, Nguyễn Huệ cements his power by marrying Ngọc Hân, Lê Hiển Tông’s daughter, to enter the royal bloodline as the King’s son-in-law. He also retreats to Central Vietnam, not to Thăng Long to run the court. Only when Lê Hiển Tông dies does the new king, Lê Chiêu Thống, bring the Qing army from China into the capital. Nguyễn Huệ officially accedes to the throne and proceeds to Thăng Long to overthrow the foreign enemy and establish the Tây Sơn dynasty. In this sequence, the narrator’s voice shown over a scene of moving soldiers implies the commitment to protect the nation’s beauty: “Following heavenly will and the people’s aspiration, on November 22, 1788, Nguyễn Huệ was crowned as an Emperor. It was the first year of Quang Trung dynasty.” (*Heroes* 2010, 52: 34).

Similarly, the two heroes (Quang Trung and Liu Bei) both support their suffering people by caring for their welfare. Their ability to show compassion indicates their leadership skills. I suppose that, in Vietnam, the story of the “hero in plain clothing”, the “farmer hero” or hero attached to the working class is a popular stereotype in contemporary literature, cinema, painting, and other forms of pop culture, because of its concordance with the Communist ideology.<sup>14</sup> Liu Bei in *Red Cliff* also appears as a rustic leader who stands up and gathers poor labourers to fight for a just cause.

14 In recent years, the following movies have all praised the figure of King Quang Trung based on the discourse of a “farmer hero”: *Heroes of the Tay Son Dynasty* (Lý, Lý and Phụng 2010); *Quang Trung – Nguyễn Huệ Dynasty* (Nguyễn 2016); *The Hero in Plain Clothing* (Phùng 2017); *Emperor Quang Trung from History* (Nguyễn 2018).

Also, in the historical documents, anecdotes, and literature, the image of King Quang Trung, primarily when written by northern writers (before 1975) and orthodox historians, is honored and recognized by the state, according to the above trend. See Phan Huy Lê, Hoàng Xuân Hãn, and Trần Văn Giàu (2006), and Nguyễn Văn Lược (2014). Nguyen Quang Vinh also had a talk entitled “Emperor Quang Trung Nguyễn Huệ and the Tây Sơn period (1771–1802) in the Historical Consciousness and Commemorative Practices of Modern Vietnam” at Institute of Literature, Hanoi, on March 24, 2011, and discussed more detailed on that issue; see the talk’s outline:

[http://www.khoavanhoc.edu.vn/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=885:ncs-nguyen-quc-vinh-h-harvard&catid=43:thong-tin-khoa-hc&Itemid=102](http://www.khoavanhoc.edu.vn/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=885:ncs-nguyen-quc-vinh-h-harvard&catid=43:thong-tin-khoa-hc&Itemid=102).

It is worth noting that both the “new righteous forces” (Quang Trung and Liu Bei) took the title of pursuing social justice, punishing those who seized the power of Heaven’s son illegitimately. Liu Bei or Quang Trung *do not take the throne directly* from the old king; the throne comes to them after they find justice and protect the former Emperor. The Mandate is thus rightfully handed over to them. These characters often show their self-cultivation and their strict obedience to “Li”, while also demonstrating the virtue of a hero (*yingxiong*) and superior person (*junzi*). Typical examples of these virtues include the scene when Liu Bei plans to throw his child, Liu Shan, away because Zhao Yun (a very loyal general under Liu) nearly died when trying to save him and the scene when Quang Trung leads his troops to hold a service for Heaven and Earth before going to the North.

From all of this, we see that the film’s discourse is very sophisticated in explaining why a new force could become the “righteous substitute” of an old dynasty (which was once “*zhengming*” in the past). The key point here is the issue of “national interests” and “the original class of the new hero”. The common scenario between the two films is as follows: to fight foreign invaders, a working-class hero must stand up to gather forces to fight enemies, protect the nation (when the old dynasty has weakened and cannot do this). After that, the new hero becomes the new king in a righteous manner. This scenario has a great similarity with regard to the path of “overthrowing colonialism and feudalism, leading the people to regain the government” in the two communist states of Vietnam and China.

## **Below the Confucian Ethical Discourse: Utilitarianism, Paradoxes, and Ecological Injustice**

### *Unfolding “the Virtue of Loving Life” of the Emperor and the Challenge of Environmental Justice*

The films on the royal court that I am analysing in this paper seem to include a logical expression of the discourse on harmony between humans and nature from the perspective of East Asian cultural traditions. However, underneath that harmony and cosmic resonance, many contradictions and paradoxes also need to be explained.

In the movies, *Hero* and *Blood Letter*, we need to return to the concept of a “son of Heaven” and also a great Emperor. In the feudal period, the king’s virtue is “loving life” (*haosheng*): “Whether it is a person, an animal, or a plant, just having a life, all of them have the right to survive, so with those who have the ability

to give birth and nourish all things is called a person of virtue” (Trần 2013).<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the “Emperor used his power to extend the protection of sentient beings in his dominion, which could be called a substitute for Heaven’s power. It also implies the equality between the virtue of emperor and the virtue of Heaven and Earth” (ibid., 32). In *Hero*, the journey of the king of Qin conquering the states displayed as a kind of divine mandate to bring unity, stability, and peace to all “under of Heaven” (*tianxia*). However, in the process of carrying out the mission of “protecting sentient beings”, Qin Wang killed countless lives, with their destruction necessary for the existence of the Han people and a supreme Emperor. In *Blood Letter*, the one who caused the terrible catastrophe to befall the Nguyen family is not punished at all, because Nguyễn Vũ decides to give up his revenge to protect “all people from the bloody wars”. But the hidden part of the story is that no one can guarantee, under the power of the Empress, that there are no further tragedies, like those that happen to the Hoa Xuân family or Nguyễn family. Both films pursue the direction of reconciliation and neutrality, the ending of individual oppositions, pushing the political focus to loyalty, and justifying the necessary existence of rulers who have a considerable responsibility and need to be kept from harm.

With *The Red Cliff* and *Heroes of Tay Son Dynasty*, we once again see two categories: *righteousness* and *unrighteousness*. People can only belong to one type or the other. Of course, if they are on the unrighteous side, their death is reasonable and undisputed. The contradiction here is when the “righteous leader” declares his virtue of “Loving Life” he is ready to kill his enemies. What I have called *ecological/ biological injustice* also arises from here. In *Red Cliff*, Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang express their respect for living creature through a very romantic and emotional scene when they help a horse to give birth. But soon after this we see a series of opposing sequences when they burn thousands of Cao troops. They were extremely excited when they saved Zhou Yu’s pregnant wife, while around them there were countless corpses of young soldiers’ piled on the ground. Similarly, *Heroes* shows a close-up of a river full of dead bodies floating in the presence of the Emperor. The meeting points between the two films are that they both show epic scenes of battle in which thousands of people die because of two elements: water and fire (for instance, the fire burning on the river in *Red Cliff*, the fiery dragon in Fort Ngoc Hoi, and the bloody river in *Heroes*). These two factors are the result of the continuous transformation of *Ch’i*, but with the aim of killing

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15 “The Chinese word *Haosheng*, as quoted from the *Yi Jing (I Ching)*, means ‘heaven has the virtue of loving and promoting life.’ The Confucians added their own interpretation to this sacred concept, broadening it to encompass the human soul. They believed that the virtue of loving and promoting life is the ultimate desire in people’s hearts.” (Natural Medicine Clinic 2019)

people, not leaders. Cosmology in these films, along with Confucian morality, is utilized and manipulated as a tool to restrain personal thoughts and the right to life of every living being. It also classifies people into righteous or unrighteous groups to justify the ruling discourse and the wars for power, which are the leading causes of the destruction of human and non-human creatures, as well as the natural environment.

In *The Banquet* and *Tam Cam The Untold Story*, the natural forces become a kind of symbolic tool to prove moral lessons and warn people, rather than to manifest the environmental issue itself. The ecological ambiguity is revealed in that even though these narratives seem to honour and praise natural beauty, the narrators and the characters almost forget the existence and fate of nature. Epistemologically, people become the metaphysical vehicle carrying moral propositions. Ontologically, they turn into extraordinary creatures surpassing human influence with an infinite elasticity. In both aspects, nature is very distant from its ecological interrelations in the context of the medieval period from the perspective of modern people.

So, are there any joint and separate issues which challenge the manifestations of contemporary Chinese and Vietnamese films on royalty in close connection with Confucian cosmology?

Firstly, we can see the implications of the Confucian cosmology that is reproduced in these films. All the Emperors in the movies talk about Heaven's mandate and cultivation as the only ways to connect with the universe. Natural elements are mystified and become an "omnipotent judge" that protects or punishes people based on whether or not they are cultivated according to pre-established moral principles. On the one hand, the filmmakers advocate respect for all living beings (including those in the lower classes or animals), but on the other hand, through the classification of ethics they also rationalize the process in which rulers could kill countless civilians and other living creatures. There are many extreme long shots of sky-high smoke, bodies on the ground, and broken plant life.

Secondly, utilitarianism<sup>16</sup> is combined with the principle of "Heaven's mandate" and "rectification of names" to create a political discourse about the top leaders of countries and institutions. In the Chinese films (*Hero*, *Red Cliff*, *The Banquet*), the institution or the representative is always identified with the "nation", so obedience to the Emperor means faithfulness to the country. In contrast, in the Vietnamese movies (*Heroes of the Tay Son Dynasty*, *Blood Letter*, *Tam Cam The*

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<sup>16</sup> According to the *Cambridge Dictionary* (2019), utilitarianism is "the system of thought that states that the best action or decision in a particular situation is the one that brings most advantages to the most people".

*Untold Story*), fidelity to the country will default to the voluntary duty of loyalty to the top leaders who represent the country. What these stories have in common is that they care about people from the perspective of maximizing the benefits that their actions can bring to the “community”. This logic also leads to another point: by keeping the current state and social order stable and not rebelling or opposing the superstructure, humans and other living things will not fall into chaos.

The third concern which is directly related to the two ideas presented above is that the personal identities and lives in these movies have been dissipated or blurred, giving way to the issues of territory and country. Constructing a world house under the roof of Confucian ethics coloured by the mystically spiritual cosmology, the “great narratives” mentioned here are stories of and about the Emperor, not the story of the common folk, whose lives are not worth much. Regarding this, Tu Weiming affirmed,

The strong belief in the inseparability of morality and politics and the correlation between the self-cultivation of the ruler and the governability of the people makes it difficult to conceive of politics as a mechanism of control independent of personal ethics. (Tu 1993, 6)

I argue that this non-individual feature is a particular intersection between Confucian moral discourse (here mainly Han Confucianism) and the philosophy of socialism, such as the ideas of “be loyal to the country, be filial to the people”, “collective spirit”, “one for everyone”, and so on. They are the necessary foundations for the current socio-cultural management in both Vietnam and China (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China 2006; Yu 2008; Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training 2018).

### *Uncovering the Cinematic Framing of Landscape Beauty and the Commercializing Process of Natural Images*

Utilizing and visualizing the so-called “*tianren heyi*” to produce propaganda to support the legitimacy of the current governments is also manifested in the aesthetic aspect of creating a series of picturesque frames. The beauty and tranquillity of natural landscapes signify the consonance between the “will of heaven” and “the rightful ruler”, even when this world had to experience many bloody battles. In other words, in the films discussed in this paper, the association of the authorities/rulers with beautiful nature clearly shows that Heaven’s will supports them. When an usurper takes over the throne, the universe is disturbed, and Heaven sends down angry messages through unprecedented natural disasters. When the

legitimate successor takes his position, the natural landscape returns to its original state of complete beauty as if nothing had happened. This is the logic that is repeated stereotypically throughout all these movies. We realize the spectacular appearance of the lush bamboo forests in *The Banquet*, the glistening wharf and majestic mountains in *Red Cliff*, the pristine lake and dreamlike red leaves in *Hero*, the immense and splendid landscape in *Blood Letter*, the pure grassland and fields in *Tam Cam*, and the vast, stunning beach in *Heroes*. This *mise-en-scene* uses drone cameras and extreme long shots to create flawless portraits of nature in the medieval era. It is a refined, vivid, and recoverable world, despite devastating wars.

We need to remember that all these movies belong to commercial cinema, and with that, the framing of image aesthetics of feudal royal family is the most visible expression of the so-called “cultural industry”, whose technologies were summed up in two terms by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno: “standardization” and “mass production” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2012, 47). Here, creating a picturesque landscape as a common denominator will help attract domestic and foreign audiences to the exoticization of the natural and social scenes in East Asia. However, this exoticization, the featuring of feudal society, and the Confucian spirit are not synonymous with Western romanticism or the search for an uncontaminated and pastoral scenery without industrial machinery. In these films nature is only a platform for expressing moral discourses (and then political discourse) when adhering to spiritual cosmology as an appropriate way for the self-regulation of the people’s attitude towards the leaders. In addition to creating a refined green world utterly different to the state of severe environmental crisis seen in contemporary society, the directors also nationalized such scenes, considering the natural landscapes in the past *as* the unchangingly national identity in the present. In other words, they are “coding national identity” through famous and clichéd landscapes like “photography, postcards and posters”, thus representing images of the nation which are commercialized, mass-produced and sold everywhere for tourists (Thiesse and Norris 2003, 31).

So here, what is contradictory when the filmmakers borrow Confucian morality to express a discourse of power following the socialist ideology, while the capitalist spirit is behind the production and promotion of these movies? In fact, due to the desire to increase soft power internationally, both China and Vietnam still maintain strict censorship of cultural products, whether domestic or imported (Yang 2016, 73).<sup>17</sup> Not only that, but because commercial films occupy a signif-

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17 See more in *China Film Industry Promotion Law* (中华人民共和国电影产业促进法) (2016) and *The National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam* (2010).

icant market share in both countries, their impact on people is much faster and broader than that of independent art films. The cultural management agency of both countries has many policies on controlling and using commercial cinema as a sophisticated propaganda machine. This is the way that non-state studios can survive and remain profitable under the strict control of the socialist governments—by attracting an audience, “meeting the demands of the digital era” and satisfying the government’s requirements. In more concrete terms,

non-state firms have been churning out works that have the kind of impact the party craves. The goal of such businesses is to make money, not to create propaganda for its own sake. But to survive, they need to stay in the party’s good books. So they have found ways of producing pro-party entertainment that is popular. A common technique is appealing to youthful patriotism. (The Economist 2017)

Another remarkable issue is that the independent art movies (IAM) of both countries do not focus on production centred on royal court life, as the commercial cinema does. Firstly, this may point to one direction for a new study on how the discourse of Confucian cosmology relates to mass audiences (which account for 90% of the film consumption market in both countries) and popular culture (which is not the target of the IAM), as part of a strategy to build soft power with regard to governing people. In a broader context, both Chinese and Vietnamese IAM have paid attention to Confucianism in contemporary spiritual life, but this “attention” is aimed to question, challenge, and reconstruct Confucianism, rather than mass-produce the same type of movies. For example, Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life* (2006) and Phan Dang Di’s *Bi, Don’t Be Afraid!* (2010), which are two typical films of two prominent directors of IAM in both countries, showed critical aspects of Confucian ethics in contemporary society, especially the breakdown of ceremonial practices and spiritual weakness with regard to social beliefs in the attachment between humanity and natural forces. Instead of seeing homogeneous and flawless “utopias”, we only see the heterogeneous and imperfect “dystopias”, a broken world, degraded environment and exhausted cities like Hanoi in *Bi, Don’t Be Afraid!* or Chongqing in *Still Life*.

It can be seen that the making of *picturesque* aesthetics in these commercial movies, the invention of a “safe”, “pure”, “permanent”, and “inviolable” reality co-ordinating with the discourses on “*tianren heyi*”, cosmic balance, and social order, play an important part in reproducing “the dominant corporate and commercial culture, excluding discourses and images that contest the established social system” (Durham and Kellner 2012, xii). Thus, there is no contradiction in the way the cultural industry in these two socialist countries manipulates the

masses through an implicit political discourse, which is based on Hollywood capitalism and a socialist orientation at the same time. This particular policy shows its effectiveness within the current popular culture of China and Vietnam, in particular through the commercial success of most such films as well as the positive responses of the governments to them.<sup>18</sup>

Does this specific form of co-production exist in Korea and Japan, which are two capitalist countries that have the same Confucian foundations as China and Vietnam? In Korea, all recent movies on the royal court have chosen the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910) as a shared historical memory between South and North Korea. They have not romanticized or deified the king-servant relationship, and most of them follow a modernist style in exploring the limits and contradictions in the personal inner lives of the characters, as seen in *Masquerade* (Choo 2012), *The Fatal Encounter* (Lee 2014), *The King and the Clown* (Lee 2015), *Rampant* (Kim 2018), etc. Meanwhile, Japan is a very specific East Asian case, since from the beginning of the twenty-first century up to now there has not been a film that directly mentions the “Emperor of Japan” (*Tennō*), or the issues of a power struggle in Tennō’s reign. *Genji Monogatari: Sennen no Nazo* (Yasuo 2011, adapted from Murasaki Shikibu’s classic literary work) is considered to be the only film set in “the Tennō’s reign”, but mainly focuses on the personal and emotional life of Prince Genji and not the political side of things. Other historical period films (*Jidaigeki*) often emphasize the figures of Japanese samurai and nobles as the central characters, especially in Akira Kurosawa’s most well-known movies. Both Korean and Japanese films often seek to express the indeterminacy and difficulty of court life through the look of realism, not through perfect, beautiful, and romantic frames which are the basis for Vietnamese and Chinese cinema on royalty.

### *Top-down Direction and Bottom-up Direction: Two Ways of Discourse on Power in Chinese and Vietnamese Films*

Despite sharing the ideas of utilitarianism, paradoxes, and ecological injustice hidden below Confucian moral discourse in both content and cinematic language,

18 Almost all of the above films have high box office returns compared to the regional (Chinese ones) and with domestic movies (Vietnamese ones), winning some state and international awards, such as *Hero* (177,394,432 USD; Best Cinematography, Best Art Direction in Hong Kong Film Awards 2002); *Red Cliff 1,2* (250,100,000 USD; Best Visual Effects in 3rd Asian Film Awards, Best Art Direction in 28th Hong Kong Film Awards); *Blood Letter* (740,000 USD; Jury Prize for Feature-length film in Hanoi International Film Festival 2012, Vietnam Film Festival Award for Best Feature Film 2013); *Tam Cam* (3,000,000 USD; 2017 Silver Kite Award for Feature Film), and so on.

the approaches of the Vietnamese and Chinese directors still have distinct differences.

In the Chinese films, the concept of “Heaven’s will” is often downward. The discourse direction of power comes from top to bottom, from higher to lower levels on the social ladder, and often from the view and the value of the Emperors (like Qin Wang in *Hero* or Han Wang and Liu Bei in *Red Cliff*). Chinese directors are interested in the expression of the Emperor’s virtue and legitimacy, which let “the bottom people” be totally persuaded by their power and legitimacy. For example, Qin Shihuang receives sympathy from the assassins in *Hero*; Liu Bei is initially misunderstood by his followers, but finally, his wisdom is confirmed in *Red Cliff*; Prince Wu in *The Banquet* even has to make a sacrifice for “big karma”, but also shows his integrity when he gets revenge for his father’s death. The good qualities of “subordinates” through the eyes and expectations of their “superiors” are faithfulness, respect for “Heaven’s mandate”, obedience to cosmological law, and a willingness to sacrifice one’s life for those moral beliefs. Also, in Chinese films the concept of “under Heaven” is respected and emphasized in imperial characters in order to justify their actions.

In general, the Chinese films closely follow the dominant conception of Han Confucianism (especially of Dong Zhongshu), which is the “doctrine to the need for the Empire” (Yao and Yao 2000, 8). Through the main ideas of the “theological and metaphysical doctrine of interaction between Heaven and humans”, these movies tend to promote the ruling class and the idea that the Emperor is a superior being who carries the sacred mission of unifying the world and ruling the people (ibid.). Those films also focus on the Mandate of Heaven, duties of subordinates, stories of fidelity and infidelity, and the inviolably hierarchical order of society, as well as of the universe. The direction of building Confucian spirit in cinema as well as in other cultural industries in the new Chinese era is becoming one of the essential spearheads of political discourse, a way to expand international influence and strengthen the stability of the regime domestically (Tu 2000; Li and Witteborn 2012).

In contrast, the direction of the power discourse in the Vietnamese films on royalty is mostly upwards in terms of how the lower people express their observations and expectations to the Emperors. Most of the main characters in the narratives are “subordinates” under the dynasties: Nguyễn Vũ in *Blood Letter*, Tấm in *Tam Cam the Untold Story*, General Nguyễn Huệ in *Heroes of the Tay Son Dynasty*, and so on. These characters all bear unhappiness, pain, or other challenges that are sent by destiny. Thanks to their self-cultivation and education, they are able to surpass their suffering and receive signs from Heaven to liberate their lives:

“Heaven already has let you know, you have to find justice for your family”, “if the blood letter is true, it is Heaven’s ideal” (*Blood Letter*); “following Heaven’s will and the people’s aspiration”, “standing in front of Heaven and Earth” (*Heroes*); “obey Heaven’s order” (*Tam Cam*), etc. The majority of stories are directed to the process of self-cultivation to become a superior person (*junzi*) and a loyal servant. From the upward point of view, an ideal leader is one who combines good governance (*dezhi*) with the law (*fazhi*) to establish cosmological order. Of course, he or she must receive the mandate of Heaven (like the Empress Dowager in *Blood Letter*, King Le Hien Tong in *Heroes*, King and Crown Prince in *Tam Cam*). The common people seem ready to help and support the monarchs unconditionally, based on their mystical and boundless power of the universe.

The Vietnamese films primarily carry the original Vietnamized Confucian elements that combine indigenous beliefs, Taoism, and Buddhism. In explaining the uniqueness of Confucianism in today’s Vietnam, Nguyen Kim Son argues that

the revival of Confucianism in the 21st century is not the rebirth of the general Confucianism, but the rebirth of a Confucian division which is profoundly Vietnamized, the rebirth of Vietnamese Confucianism with all the advantages and drawbacks that it has ever shown. (Nguyễn 2003, 56)

Based on this, Nguyễn Kim Son makes an important observation: “The position of Confucianism and Confucius is also improving, but for the Vietnamese it is still a process to honour Vietnamese tradition, but not to honour Confucianism and Confucius, although those two are closely related”. (*ibid.*) The ultimate goal is to praise the “plentiful cultural tradition” and nationalism in which the Vietnamese nation always presents itself as a righteous subject, protecting itself from the invasion of foreign powers.

## Conclusion

In East Asian Confucian countries, the royal and imperial court is part of the regional co-cultural memory. As I pointed out above, in the first two decades of the twenty-first century the breakthrough blockbuster movie *Hero*, as well as the globalization of the entertainment and film industries, have helped historical period movies about royal court life to become very popular in East Asia and beyond.

In a series of films about royalty released from 2002 to the present, both Chinese and Vietnamese movies have many similarities in how they feature Confucian

ethics and cosmology in contemporary society, in contrast to Japan and South Korea, the two other East Asian countries that share these traditions. Moreover, although these Chinese and Vietnamese movies are focused on depicting the beauty and power of natural forces, and the metaphysical phenomena of the universe beyond humanity, the central discourse platform is not directed towards an ecological/environmental message. It is instead done through seemingly non-modern and eye-catching frames, which are, in fact, expressing a strict and fierce socio-political philosophy. Through the return to Confucian tradition which is deeply rooted in the consciousness of East Asians, and through one of the most beloved products of the cultural industries—cinema—the authorities in China and Vietnam have found a suitable way to approach and influence the mass audience, directing them to appropriate thoughts and actions to benefit the current institutions. Here, the boundaries between Confucian ethics (in constructing the model of an ideal governor as a representative for the collective, community and whole nation), socialist ideology (in putting the rights and powers of “collectives” and the “community” above those of individuals), and the capitalist spirit (in focusing on mass production to meet demands of popular culture and get the most profit) have become subtly and skilfully harmonized in the form of a commercial entertainment product. These three aspects seem to be far away from each other, but are more connected than ever with state management and orthodox thought, especially in today’s China and Vietnam, where the leaders are interested in the use of soft power in guiding the people to follow their socialist-oriented market economies.

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