

Rural - Urban Boundaries in Contemporary Vietnamese Cinema: A Look from Phan Dang Di's Films

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Abstract

In traditional Vietnamese movie (before 2000), rural and urban areas are often depicted by cinematic stereotypes as absolutely separated and differentiated territories. Also, people living in these two spaces are often represented by contrasted traits, for example, rural people are naïve, while urban people are sophisticated or sometimes, disrupted. But in contemporary Vietnamese cinema, rural and urban areas have been "de-territorialized". The distinctions between the two spaces have been blurred, especially in the films made by young directors. Vietnamese films which are made in recent years show clearly that the personality of people are not sharply characterized according to their origin, rural or urban area, but are often in a very complex state. Often the characters have a mixed personality of rural and urban type. This paper approaches Phan Dang Di's films as typical examples to present the ideas of rural – urban boundaries in urbanization process and the de-territorialization trend in contemporary Vietnamese movie.

Keyword: Vietnamese cinema, De-territorialization trend, Rural – urban boundaries, Phan Dang Di's films, Urbanization

Introduction

First and foremost, it is necessary to shed some light on the real conditions in which urbanization and rural-urban boundaries arise along with the development of Vietnamese society. In some aspect, this studies results from reality itself and from the question: Has an urban civilization or an urban society actually come into being in Vietnam?

The city represents civilization, therefore urban studies itself is the study of contemporary society and the interpretation of our ongoing existence. No individual or academic discipline is able to capture and decipher the entire field of urban studies, partly because new issues arise everyday as cities constantly change and so does our perception on them. In the 4th century BC, the Greek philosopher Aristotle began to perceive cities from demographic and societal perspectives, allowing him to forge the foundations of modern planning as a discipline. In *The Politics*, he illustrated a utopian community consisting of 5000 populations – which is “small enough so that a single citizen's voice could be heard by all the assembled fellow citizens.”¹ On the nature of urban areas, Patricia Clarke Annze and Robert M.Buckley said that: “Urbanization and growth go together: no country has ever reached middle-income status without a significant population shift into cities.” (Annze, 2009).

From a historical standpoint, in Vietnam, cities (thành thị) are perceived as “a mixed hub of political space, which is located within a stronghold (thành), and a market (thị), which lies next to and provides supplies for the former's population, and thus is always lively and full of residences. A city in Vietnam, as in other Eastern countries under feudalist dynasties, is first of all a combination of interdependent places and spaces that together make up the identity of thành-thị”.² Under this viewpoint, under the Ly-Tran dynasties, from around the 11th century to the 14th century, Thang Long imperial citadel bears clear features of a city.

Although the history of Vietnamese cities can be said to begin in the 11th century, Vietnam remains an agricultural country. The majority of its population was farmers residing at villages, which accounted for 90% of the total population until the August Revolution broke out. Cities are perceived as islands arising from an agricultural ocean. Even Thang Long-Hanoi, the largest city in the world, is not exempt from the penetration of rural elements into every aspect of its daily culture. Historically, the harmony between rural and urban areas is a significant characteristic of traditional Thang Long – Hanoi. In terms of land, according to cadastres, in two Hanoi's inner districts under the Nguyen dynasty (Tho Xuong and Vinh Thuan) there is still a large amount of agricultural wards and hamlets, where different kinds of cultivated lands (rice, mulberry, flower and vegetable fields), riparian alluvial grounds, over 4000 lakes, hills and graveyards can be found. Residential areas, apart from houses, include adjacent gardens and ponds. The sceneries around commercial towns bear even more

1 Cited in *The City Reader*. Edited by Richard LeGates and Frederic Stout. New York: Routledge, 2011, p.41

2 Philippe Papin, *Đô thị xưa và dấu vết trong đại*, <http://www.tamdaoconf.com/vi/2015/08/23/3774/>

agricultural features (mud cottages, ponds and gardens, hamlets, fields, bamboos, areca trees, etc). French author J. Boissière described Hang Theu street (now Hang Trong) at the end of the 19th century: “Near Hoan Kiem lake, there are gardens, areca trees and bamboos whose images are reflected on the water, making whoever near the lake feel lost in an agricultural setting, especially under the sunset...”³ In the 18th century, a Western missionary commented while visiting Thang Long: “not only is each village a commune but big cities are divided into wards, each of which is itself a commune”⁴. In daily life and also in social organization, a permanent economic linkage and relationship between urban and rural areas necessarily existed in Thang Long-Hanoi. In conclusion, despite its early introduction in the 11th century and its progression through the 19th century, when Western cultural traits rapidly spread across Vietnam, and even till now, the urbanization of Thang Long-Hanoi and of many other cities in Vietnam is not regular and radical.

For one thing, cities and countries are places, whereas urbanization is a process in which changes occur in spatial, demographic, economic and environmental terms, which generate urban living spaces from rural ones. Urbanization is inevitable in any country where the process of industrial and trade development is seen. It is a shift from dispersed agricultural activities to centralized industrial activities in a certain area. It is a complex socio-economic phenomenon, which happens across a huge area and lasts long enough to transform agricultural-rural societies where farmers live into urban-industrial spheres where urban dwellers live. Urbanization is also a process wherein the population converges in cities and the role of cities in social development generally surges⁵.

Urban society usually goes with the process of modernization, specialization and therefore with a radical transformation from agricultural modes of production to industrial and service modes of production (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2016). It began in the West and established there patterns that later spread to the world and to places where village customs, modes of production and business were replaced, and where life became industrialized and functioned in a scientific and regularized way with a synchronized management system manifested in urban planning, public traffic, daily life and employment and livelihood. For its part, Hanoi has until now – as remarked by historian/culturalist Tran Quoc Vuong – still a “big village” rather than a big city. Although Saigon bears more resemblances of a city thanks to a long time being manipulated by colonial regimes (French and American), in whose mother countries the concept of “modern city” originated. Similar to Hanoi after 1954, Saigon after 1975 became partly “villagized” in the same manner as the North due to historical conditions and its particularly old-fashioned urban management system, before quickly returning to its urban trajectory after the Renovation had been adopted. However, compared to other Asian cities that have completed their process of “urbanization” such as Taipei, Singapore, Hong Kong, Seoul, Tokyo, Hanoi is nevertheless a “village” as far as its outdated daily customs and habits are concerned (Vuong, 1981).

Not only a “young” type of art in the world, film is also a recreational industry that is more popular, up-to-date, commercialized and socialized than other types (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). “Since its introduction at the end of the 19th century, this type of art has become one of the most popular and influential media in the 20th century and beyond.” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2016). A product of modern society, film sharply reflects all the aspects of modern society, including the interaction and transition between “rural” and “urban” areas. It is in this setting that we choose film as an interdisciplinary and cultural object through which to study urbanization and the boundaries between urban-rural areas in contemporary Vietnam.

Among the series of images and symbols/topics that produce the greatest influence on the Vietnamese cultural and aesthetic dynamics and cinema in particular, “rural areas/countryside”- not “urban”, despite the long-term urban history - is an image which has a strong, persistent and lasting lifespan. Rural areas/countryside also becomes a grip, a root from which the discourses on “Vietnamese identity” in the movies spring. The wartime in Vietnam (1945-1975) and the next 10 years (1975-1985): Vietnamese cinema vividly reflects the national personality through the image of rural areas: *Chung một dòng sông* (*Together on the Same River*, 1959), *Con chim vành khuyên* (*Passerine bird*, 1962), *Đến hẹn lại lên* (*Back up an appointment*, 1974), *Cánh đồng hoang* (*The abandoned field: free fire zone*, 1978), *Mẹ vắng nhà* (*Mother Away*, 1979), *Bao giờ cho đến Tháng Mười* (*When the tenth month comes*, 1984)... In the Renovation area, since the introduction of the “open door policy” to the 2000s of the 21st century (1986-2000), rural areas are put in contrast with urban areas: *Thương nhớ đồng quê* (*Nostalgia for Countryland*, 1995), *Hoa của trời* (*Flowers of the sky*, 1995), *Những người thợ xẻ* (*The Sawyers*, 1998)... The Vietnamese origin and personality is perceived to originate from rural areas, where the Vietnamese find their ultimate safe haven and tranquility. Whereas cities are imagined as a place full of anxiety and nervousness: *Tướng về hưu* (*The Retired General*, 1988), *Vị đắng tình yêu* (*The bitter taste of love*, 1990), *Chuyện tình trong ngõ hẹp* (*Love story in narrow alley*, 1992), etc...

3 Jean Boissière. *L'Indochine avec les Français*, Paris, Michaud, 1913., p.232

4 Paul Bourde. *De Paris au Tonkin*, Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1885, p.128

5 Dinh Quang. *The urbanization process in the world and in our country today*. Hanoi: Culture and Information, 2005, p.17

At the beginning of the 21st century, the image of rural areas/countryside is no longer perceived as a place associated with the so-called “Vietnamese personality”: *Chơi voi* (*Adrift*, 2009), *Bi, đừng sợ!* (*Bi, don't be afraid!*, 2011), *Đập cánh giữa không trung* (*Flapping in the middle of nowhere*, 2014), *Big father, small father and other stories* (*Big father, small father and other stories*, 2015), *Căn phòng của mẹ* (*Homostratus*, 2013)... In these movies, what is reflected is the portrait of a nation in the process of finding its personality and transgressing the boundaries between rural and urban areas. There, globality and locality intermingles: the presence of “normal foreigners”, increasing evidence of the deep influence of Western foreign cultures, the youngsters who struggle to find themselves, all of which do not belong to any fixed space – time coordination... Familiar discourses on Vietnamese identifiable traits such as water rice, rural areas, green fields, femininity... are resituated in a discursive situation. Each movie attempts to provide a different representation, interpretation, perspective or answer – through their account of the rural spaces – thus presenting each particular and unconventional perspective of the independent directors on the issue of “national personality”.

Within the scope of a paper, we want to primarily focus on the works of Phan Dang Di to illustrate his profound interest in the image of urban areas in the transitional and integrating era of Vietnam, his unified perspective on the rural/urban boundaries and its suggestive yet practical treatment of realistic materials. Apart from *Khi tôi 20* (*When I am 20*, 2008), *Bi, đừng sợ!* (*Bi, don't be afraid!*, 2011), *Cha và con và...* (*Big father, small father and other stories*, 2015) written and directed by Phan Dang Di himself, we delve into *Chơi voi* (*Adrift*, 2009) written by Phan Dang Di – and discovers the image of cities deeply embedded in the movies of Phan Dang Di.

The spatial boundaries: From boundaries to non-boundaries

The original movies made by Phan Dang Di usually take a big city as their target of scrutiny: for *Bi, don't be afraid!*, *When I am 20* – it is Hanoi (the 2000s, and a glimpse of Hai Phong); for *Big father, small father and other stories* – it is Saigon (the 90s as Vietnam had commenced its Renovation and Integration.).

If the contexts of Phan Dang Di's movies are dissected, three spatial groups can be seen:

First of all are urban spaces, with bars, disco clubs, railways, bridges, hotels-hostels-boarding houses, ancient French mansions/old houses, train stations, hospitals, etc. In general, the urban architecture and arrangement is messed up, disorganized and even repulsive and the size and volume of buildings and apartments is disproportionate: desolate moldy old residences stand next to majestic bright constructions; slumdogs lie on the fringe of flashy and dazzling cities; crowded and hectic beer halls under the bridge stand side by side with sumptuous and lavish restaurants. In *Bi, don't be afraid!*, the character Quang frequently stands aloof next to an old grey door of an apartment, zooming out to the entire city; similarly in *Big father, small father and other stories*, Van and Vu meet each other and share their love next to the window of an old residence; the prostitute in *When I am 20* also works in an old apartment. Factories, which constitute an important indicator of urbanization and modernization, in Di's movies are depicted as primitive, manual and cluttered places (the water ice factory in *Bi, don't be afraid!*, and the nut and bolt factory in *Big father, small father and other stories*, etc.). Trains running across cities, which is familiar in the context of cities, are perceived by the characters (Quang – *Bi, don't be afraid!*, the prostitute – *When I am 20*) with unfamiliarity as if they were exotic and foreign to them. In Di's movies, crowded and busy urban sceneries are hardly seen, and in the same degree advertising panels appear only scarcely. The ordinary beer halls normally presented in these movies, the incoherent local dialect of the female barber, and wandering and petty individuals living in the dwells along Sai Gon River – all illustrate such areas torn between traditional countryside and modern city.

Second are rural places: rivers, canals, fields, village gates, graveyards, banyan trees, wood stoves, etc. The image of South Vietnamese rural areas/farmers in Phan Dang Di's movies is not as clear-cut and vivid as in traditional accounts. For example, the large river flowing into the ocean in *Big father, small father and other stories* and the adjacent communities, who fish for livelihood and live with natural canals, are different from how they are supposed to be in traditional Northern traditional rural areas, with their edges sometimes blurred. Even the fields, village gates and graveyards in *Bi, don't be afraid!* are only glimpsed at instead of meticulously depicted.

6 Phan Dang Di (born 1976) is one of the most famous independent directors of Vietnamese cinema and possesses unique and emotional film thinking. His two first short movies – *Sen* (2005) and *When I am 20* (2006), were picked as candidates for many prestigious awards in such film festivals as Clermont Ferrand and Venice. In 2009, his screenplay for the movie *Chơi voi* directed by Bui Thac Chuyen also received high recognition and appreciation from professional movie critics. With *Bi, don't be afraid!* (2011), he became one of the few successful Vietnamese directors in the international stage. The film received 2 prestigious awards at Cannes film festival and Best First Feature and Best Cinematography at the Stockholm International Film Festival (Sweden) and many others. In January 2015, *Big father, small father and other stories* became the first Vietnamese movie listed among the 19 official competition entries by the organizer of Berlin International film festival (Germany).

Third are the suburban, outer or adjacent and neighboring areas: the series of barren boarding houses along Sai Gon River, floodplains-canebrakes, meadows, sandbanks, the dykes near Red River, the Long Bien bridge leading to suburban Hanoi, the cluster of natural resorts, etc. As far as the number of scenes is concerned, scenes in which the characters are set in these spaces account for a relatively high proportion: they reside in these adjacent areas more than next to streets or in other urban areas. These spaces act as buffer zones that connect two trajectories of the characters: Mr Sau travels from the countryside to city, Vu and Thang returns to their country to live and work after having inhabited and studied in cities. Both cities and rural area are looked at and observed from these spaces. For example, Mr Sau fetches jack-fruit and glutinous rice cakes from Tien Giang to his children in the city; and Van follows Thang to visit Vu at his boarding house. Both Mr. Sau and Van show off similar actions as soon as they enter the house: they unconsciously look up to the ceiling, on which there is a small hole through which Vu can look down. Therefore, rural and urban atmospheres are synchronized and combined in the living spaces of these peri-urban residents. In *Bi, don't be afraid!*, Bi's pastime is wandering through dense meadows and canebrakes near the Red River and seeking for small secrets, which are both frightening and extremely fascinating – together with the rural kids. In these films, the urban-rural boundaries are removed, or at least “blurred” and harmonized as the characters move into “buffer” or peri-urban zones.

As mentioned above, in the collision of these spaces and the transgression of boundaries, an incomplete and undone process of urbanization reveals itself. Things are arranged in a disorganized fashion, and everything is jumbled, mixed up, inadequately planned, tangled up and untidy. To represent these radically contradictory spaces in his movies, Phan Dang Di often utilizes extremist angles: overly wide or narrow, and brightness and harmonious light are often followed by darkness and extremely contrasted light, making it difficult for the audience to distinguish between rural and urban components according to their standardized size and volume. For example, “rural areas” are at times noisy and have their dark sides - in *Big father, small father and other stories và*; and cities are not infrequently endless, silent and chillingly borderless – in *Bi, don't be afraid!*.

However, the boundaries between these spaces are often unclear, as the former rural-urban distinctions gradually transform into adjacent and peripheral spaces and even into non-spaces. As geographical borders are eliminated – these spaces even overlap and intermingle with one another and infiltrate the daily, existential life of its inhabitants, become a kind of “nowhere land”, which is floating, mysterious, indistinct, indefinable or indescribable, such as the infinite meadows in *Bi, don't be afraid!* or strangely silent mangroves in *Big father, small father and other stories* or the cosmic beaches in *Adrift*, etc.

The cultural and social boundaries – urbanization or the enlargement of rural areas?

As far as the cultural traits and daily habits practiced by the urban dwellers in Phan Dang Di's movies are concerned, the aforementioned deficient urbanization shows itself even more vividly. It is reflected in a “village culture” and in every daily meal, every routine and the treatment of daily issues by the characters.⁷

Among daily routines, the family dinner held together by the urban characters clearly stands out as a residual cultural practice typical of rural areas. The families in *Bi, don't be afraid!* and *Big father, small father and other stories* are still three-generation families – which are traditional, and whose mentality requires the presence of all family members to begin their meal. The dishes made by the wet nurse (crab soup, floating sticky rice ball and dumpling, boiled chicken, etc) in *Bi* or the betel nut mortar of Hoa's grandmother in *When I am 20* all bear clear rural marks. The scenes wherein Duyen uses lemonade to wash Cam's hair, Cam wraps herself in a blanket to make herself sweat and cure her cold, Cam's decrepit mother diligently weaves her wedding dress hoping for her wedding day to come... (*Adrift*); the scenes in which the characters party, joyfully exchange wishes on the wedding day, participate in the funeral, or even meet each other without any reason (*Bi, don't be afraid!*, *Big father, small father and other stories*) – all reflect different traditional and genuinely rural customs frequently practiced by Vietnamese.

A particular feature that stands out as a rural custom in urban areas is the treatment of diseased family members in *Bi, don't be afraid!*. In this movie, the director fully sketches out the portrait of a conventional family right in Hanoi, which tries to maintain every traditional custom and retain the time-honored mentality and rituals during a funeral. After her father in law dies, the broom “decorates” his body and puts socks and gloves on him. The funeral lasts for quite a while and has all its rituals retained; the son and his wife strictly follow the dress code by wearing elongated funeral attires. On the first death anniversary (after a year), relatives and family members get

⁷ For many centuries, “village” has been the basic unit of commuting in Vietnamese rural areas and a crucial part of the Vietnamese monarchical states. The traditional village in medieval and early modern periods is a community made up by people of the same bloodline and livelihood that reside in a certain area. Traditional Vietnamese village cultures are best represented by North Vietnamese village culture. Vietnamese Northern villages have long been a place where Vietnamese live, work, engage in production and organize all kinds of cultural and spiritual customs; and are at the same time where neighboring and lineal relations are fixed. The colorful cultural characteristics of villages are combined in *village customs*, patterned in *village conventions*, and manifested in different ways in *village festivals*. All combine to create village identities, among which *village coexistence* and *autonomy* are the most representative.

together in a warm dinner to talk and reminisce about the moments at the funeral. In a spiritual sense, Bi's family members' burning incense before their ancestors' altar, or the broom and her nephew's visiting her father-in-law's grave as soon as the first death anniversary finishes, are all familiar "practices" in Vietnamese traditional culture.

The daily routines of the urban families in Phan Dang Di's movies are still disposed towards patriarchal and lineal characteristics typical of Vietnamese families – which are deeply influenced by Confucius values. In fact, Confucianism is a philosophy that “sees the world through familial relations, sees life and social-administrative relations through the lens of an extended patriarchal familial model” (Vuong, 1999)⁸. Ideas on familial hierarchy and lineage and the position of the eldest son are still embedded in the minds of Phan Dang Di's characters even in the period of urbanization: Bi's grandfather, despite having gone off for years, is patiently waited for by his wife and other family members, still desiring to serve and provide for him; during family meals – the family members sit according to their assigned position; after Bi's family comes back from his grandfather's funeral, the wet nurse tells his father to stay home to “pay homage” to the deceased grandfather, because “you are the eldest son, who is irreplaceable” (*Bi, don't be afraid!*); Vu's father does his best to find him a good lady so they can “carry on the lineage” (*Big father, small father and other stories*); Hai's mother always treats her eldest son decently as if he were a “small king” although Hai has created his own family (*Adrift*), etc.

In terms of arts, deeply inscribed in the urban way of life are the songs, melodies and other “art performances” associated with the Northern and Southern rural areas: *Trống cơm* (*Tambourine*) – a Northern folksong (*Bi, don't be afraid!*); *Chàng đi săn* (*Hunter*) – a Khmer folksong; *Nỗi buồn hoa phượng* (*The sadness of flamboyants*) – a pre-war track played in both rural and urban areas; the kids that sell lottery tickets and perform such performances as fire breathing and snake-swallowing at pubs, etc. (*Big father, small father and other stories*). A characteristic of Phan Dang Di's movies is that his characters' jobs and professions are more or less artistically-inclined, but nevertheless resemble *folklore theatrical and art performances* rather than the professional and luxurious shows typical of urbanity.

Beside all of the above features, the presence of “foreign” cultural elements contributes to certain incongruity and vagueness that blurs the rural-urban boundaries. For example, the foreigners in these movies always turn upon such spaces that are beyond the urban-rural binary as natural resorts and deserted beaches. Upon entering these places, they recreate various tools according to their favorite size and ideas (such as the enormous mud bath barrel in *Big father, small father and other stories*, the isolated parachuting scene in *Bi, don't be afraid!*, etc.) to such an extent that these cultural tools cannot be categorized as either rural or urban.

The making of personality and gender – beyond every territorial boundary

According to a standpoint that almost became a stereotype in Vietnamese movies in the past, the concepts of “rural” and “urban” areas often referred to distinctly separated spaces and territories and were closely related to the making of human's personality: rural and urban areas are associated with a pure personality and a broken personality, respectively. Accordingly, individuals that keep residing in rural areas maintain their pure personality as good-natured, innocent, honest and nice personalities; whereas those who migrate to cities from rural areas, or the urban dwellers themselves, are often regarded as “foreign, displaced” individuals, who have lost their direction in life or fell into even worse trajectories (*Thời xa vắng/ A Time Far Past, The Retired General, Nostalgia for Countryland*, etc.). Giang Minh Sai in *A Time Far Past*, after having come to Hanoi and married Chau – a beautiful yet egoistic and calculating female “burgher” – becomes a coward and feeble man, who has abandoned his personality and sincerity typical of a soldier whose background was from the countryside. Thuy – Thuan's urban daughter-in-law in *The Retired General* – also presents her selfishness, shamelessness and apathy in her lifestyle and attitude towards others. Meanwhile, the rural characters are often depicted as simple, honest and kind individuals that represent the “pure” and general Vietnamese personality. In *A Time Far Past*, Sai's first lover (Hương) maintains her warmth and femininity despite having been through countless ups and downs and changes; Mr Co and lady Lai – honest peasants who migrate to the city to serve as houseworkers in Thuan's family as seen in *The Retired General* – are actually Thuan's closest and most loving friends rather than his cold-blooded children, etc.

As for contemporary Vietnamese cinema – especially for young directors such as Phan Dang Di, these boundaries are “de-territorialized”, leading to the “de-identification” of these characters based on these spatial underpinnings. Through his movies, Phan Dang Di deterritorializes both urban and rural areas, blurring the

⁸ According to the interpretations of Tran Ngoc Vuong, in Confucius societies, “the citizens live according to lineal relationships, and lineage – made of up blood relationships – plays an enormous role, thus the emperor – king has to be irreplaceable and is the most ethical and eldest member of a distinct lineage”. See: Tran Ngoc Vuong. *About individual human beings in ancient literature of Vietnam*. Hanoi: VNU Press, 1999, p. 53-70.

boundaries and distinctions between these two spatial categories. This leads to de-identification, meaning that rural and urban areas no longer contain fixed identities as construed by former viewpoints.

In *Big father, small father and other stories*, the main characters reside mostly in “peri-urban” spaces and receive little impact from both rural and urban areas. But more importantly, in the noisy, boisterous yet instinctual and innocent world of these “young boys”, their personality is not clearly defined and is almost “in the making” – therefore it is difficult to define whether they are influenced by either environment where they had lived (their original rural places or urban places where they struggle for livelihood).

One of the two main characters – Vu – is a complex and multi-dimensional character, who has special interactions with his environment and living conditions. Vu is a young photography student in the 1990s, where Vietnamese society witnesses all-round changes in economic, political and social aspects (which are reminded by several details: the old currency, fixed phone booths, the vasectomies encouraged by the government or motorbike stunt shows, etc.). Right at the beginning, Vu’s father’s visit to his son by boat in which he carries the jackfruit from his hometown garden, a series of sticky rice cakes and a camera worth two tons of rice reveals that Vu was born in a wet countryside and into a Southern rural family. Nevertheless, Vu is figured by the director as an urban “intellectual” boy, who is white, gentle, smiley, naïve and pure. Despite having been in different settings, from hectic and anxious urban environments to silent and boundless rural spaces, Vu keeps his personality unchanged. In chaotic urban atmospheres, Vu is an observer (primarily a photographer) rather than a participant, as if nothing could change him: the dance hall filled with drugs and violence where Thang works as a bartender, the arduous sweatshop where Cuong works, the disordered pub where Tung and Mai earn their living as streetsingers, etc. In his poor wet countryside: having lived and studied in the city for quite a while, Vu still engages in chasing games with the rural boys, plays with forest spiders like a kid, and refuses his father’s request to marry Huong only to “stabilize his lineage”. If Cuong takes a vasectomy and earns money as a broker to buy a mobile phone that may help him “court” a girlfriend, Vu takes it at the end of the movie to show his resolute departure from his gender – in a proactive and chilly way. Finally, by which spatial environment is Vu’s personality regulated and shaped: The darkroom, the dance hall, the hospital, the swamp, the river, or the forest? The answer is Vu is not entirely trapped in any of these spaces – as Thang, Cuong, Tung are “imprisoned” by the city or Vu’s father and older sisters are “shaped” by the countryside. Vu’s personality therefore possesses a kind of “zen” quality: despite having passed his puberty and engaged in different lifestyles, Vu retains his childlike, candid and emotional worldview. This personality itself contributes to changing the viewpoints associated with “spatialized” and “territorialized” identities characteristic of Vietnamese movies that deal with urban-rural areas.

In *Bi, don’t be afraid!*, the entire complex world of adults is seen through Bi’s innocent eyes – a pure, immature, spontaneous and unbiased pair of eyes. Bi wanders aimlessly from place to place: from narrow passages in the ancient house and the ice water factory to crowded and busy streets, to corn fields and sandbanks along the Red River, even to village graveyards in suburban areas. Bi is able to talk and make friends with the rugged “workers” at the ice factory, shares secrets with his cold grandfather, who has returned after years abroad (and who is fearful to his family), willingly plays with the rural kids spattered with mud, sleeps with “Ms Thuy” at night yet comes back to his parents whenever he sleep-talks, and he loves to walk to the graveyard with his mom and naturally talk with grasshoppers and locusts. Bi throws an apple into the ice pack at the factory, puts a maple leaf into the ice tray of his family’s fridge, secretly nurtures a tiny watermelon until the day it fully grows up, and plucks a small flower in the dense meadow. Bi’s world holds numerous secrets and beautiful memories, and thus is outside any territorial or spatial boundary. His perspective penetrates every margin between things: urban or rural, natural or humanistic, adult or childish, rich or poor.

Also in *Bi, don’t be afraid!*, the “progressive development” of a human life starts to reveal itself through the four male characters – rather than four complete lives: first is an innocent, pure, joyful and carefree boyhood (Bi), followed by a prideful, romantic yet short adolescent (the student), followed by adulthood, which is associated with relentless responsibilities and being lost in complicated relationships and the vain pursuit of happiness (Bi’s father); and at the last station, as the man has been through all his life events and fully grasped its essence, he remains silent and ready to welcome his death (Bi’s grandfather). This hidden narrative progress makes it difficult for us to define which space among the aforementioned spaces influenced and shaped one of these lives (urban, rural areas or suburban, market areas, etc.).

In addition, in Di’s movies, the issues of sexuality and sexual orientation as seen through the characters constitute a “problematic” discourse that penetrates all living spaces: whether the characters originate or reside in rural or urban areas, their sexual/erotic urges and desires are intense and strong. In *Big father, small father and other stories*, the homosexual attraction between Vu and Thang begins in the city – where they share the same residence, but starts to intensify more vigorously and “frantically” on the river flowing near Vu’s hometown, and becomes even more passionate and rigorous after they come back to the city. Huong is an orphan that spends her whole life in the countryside, but unlike other traditional stereotypes of rural girls that are bashful, timid and

closed, she shows no reluctance in showing off her desire and longing for happiness and finding her Self. Deeply buried in the urban women in *Bi, don't be afraid!* (Bi's mother and aunt) and *Adrift* (Cam, Duyen and Vy) is a passionate and burning desire for romantic and sexual experiences, which are unfortunately repressed, hidden and ignored – not unlike the rural women in *Nostalgia for Countryland* (Dang Nhat Minh), *Bến không chồng* (Luu Trong Ninh), *Khách ở quê ra* (*Visitors from the countryside*, Duc Hoan)...

From a perspective of intertextuality: Comparisons with other Asian films of the same theme. The case of Apichatpong's films

Hanoi and Saigon in Phan Dang Di's movies easily remind us of Taipei and other Taiwanese cities in the 80s of the 20th century as featured in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's movies, wherein the process of industrialization and urbanization is undone and the interactions and hybridities between urban and rural characteristics linger in the habits and lifestyles of urban inhabitants. (For example, his *A time to love, a time to die* or *Three Times* were illustrative of the extremely fast development of Taiwan as it entered the first stage of urbanization). Meanwhile, as for Hanoi at the beginning of the 21st century or Saigon in the 1990s as portrayed in Phan Dang Di's movies, this process is still in a "transitional", intermediary or beginning period and is far from complete. His movies portray the urban loneliness present in Tsai Ming-liang's movies in the early 1990s for example, which specifically designates the status of Taipei at that moment as a "metropolitan" (*What time is it there?*, *I don't want to sleep alone*, *The Hole*...). With the introduction of Asian "metropolitans", such topics as *the making of cities, urban life, urban alienation, urban loneliness, urban nostalgia, and urban love stories*, etc. became the favorites of Tsai Ming-liang, Lou Ye, Jia Zhangke, Kore Eda, Fruit Chen and Wong Kar-wai, etc. For these directors, the city is conceived as an important object and even a character in their movies, in which the relationship between human and city and urban dwellers themselves are dissected at different levels and through different aspects.

The disinterest in urban area as an image/theme is a distinction of a Thai director that won the Palme d'Or - Apichatpong Weerasethakul – compared to other renowned Asian film directors. The materials used by his movies contain a cross-temporal/non-temporal character although most of their settings and stories can be inferred from contemporary life in Thailand. Apichatpong's movies regard the city not as an important factor in their narrative and do not talk about urban citizens. In *Tropical Malady*, in which the city is featured the most, the city is briefly portrayed through the eyes of a casual bystander (observer) rather than an urban citizen. Another variant of "the city" in *Syndromes and A Century* is a fictional city in the future, which is not a real city in the present. Apichatpong departs from the "urban" streamline pursued by contemporary Asian movies, probably because the most important thing his movies are interested in is the journey to find a human's "core" or "essence". Such a journey demands the characters to turn back to their most primitive and instinctual state and ways of life, a primordial status where human lives within nature and next to nature, which is far different from the artificial ways of life among which "urban" lifestyle is a typical one.

Compared to the case of Apichatpong, Phan Dang Di's movies share many similarities and parallels: for example, their movies all feature wandering characters that, whenever facing challenges, choose to evade them and return to nature – as "rogues of the forest". Nature serves as a hideout and safe haven for anyone in spite of its insidiousness and roughness. However, in Phan Dang Di's movies, his characters' lives often fluctuate between two environments: "the artificial coexistent life" and "the primitive natural environment". For this reason, the issues of deterritorialization and de-identification in Di's movies also constitute a prominent and problematic topic faced by the audience. His movies illustrate the Vietnamese urban life in the context of incomplete urbanization and residual "village" customs that still influence the lifestyle, thinking and daily routines of the characters. Behind these movies is a dynamic and complex reality of Vietnamese contemporary society in its development.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that Phan Dang Di's movies illustrate life of people in Vietnam in the context of incomplete urbanization where "village customs" still influence the lifestyle, thinking and daily routines of urban people. In his films, rural-urban boundaries are blurred or eliminated. The spatial, cultural and personal boundaries do not show only rural or urban features, but often express the mixture of both.

His movies reflect the dynamic and complex reality of Vietnamese contemporary society in its period of urbanization and globalization.

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