



The Preponderance of Indigenous Experience Or the Naivety of Modern Man over the “Trap of Nature”?:

Juxtaposing Nature in *The Story of Pao* (Ngô Quang Hải)
and *Into the Wild* (Sean Penn)



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[*Abstract*]

Derived from the juxtapositional model of Comparative Literature, this article analyzes two movies, *The Story of Pao* (Chuyện của Pao, directed by Ngô Quang Hải) and *Into the Wild* (directed by Sean Penn), using eco-criticism and focusing on two specific aspects: looking for the relationship between “culture” and “nature” and questioning the ideology that puts people at the center of the natural world. Specifically, the article points out similar tones in discovering and praising the beauty of nature, and at the same time, focuses on explaining the “disagreement” and “harmony” in behaviors of different communities towards Mother Nature in these two films. Finally, *The Story of Pao* and *Into the Wild* are both read as discourses that participate in the repositioning of human beings in the natural world. The purpose of juxtaposition, therefore, is to seek a new existential dimension for the works, providing an opportunity to uncover and reveal hidden layers of meaning of each text.

Keywords: ecocriticism, nature, civilization, wilderness, decontextualization

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I . Introduction

Why not compare? This question, taken from the title of Susan Stanford Friedman's article, becomes the inspiration for this study. Is it impossible to put two unfamiliar and incompatible works side by side in an attempt to find a common ground between them? In practice, this approach is prone to skepticism from traditional comparative thinking, but from the juxtapositional model of Comparative Literature that has been developed in the West in the early twenty-first century, placing unfamiliar works side by side gives an opportunity to reveal hidden meanings, and to a certain extent, even creates more new meanings.

In juxtaposing two movies, *The Story of Pao* (2006) directed by Ngô Quang Hải (1967-) and *Into the Wild* (2007) directed by Sean Penn (1960-), and discovering filmic conversations in terms of ecological issues, the article emphasizes the relationship between "culture" and "nature," and then calls into question the anthropocentrism which dominates Western thought since ancient times. This article focuses on comparing two aspects, namely, the aesthetic viewpoint and the behaviors of different communities towards the natural world in the two above-mentioned films, once again re-examining the dialectical relationship between nature and man. In fact, there is no connection between these two works, whether overtly or implicitly in terms of space, time, or plot. *The Story of Pao* narrates the story of a young girl growing up in the mountain of Northeast Vietnam in the 2000s, while *Into the Wild* talks about a young American in the 1990s. But when removed from traditional contexts of geography, history, and culture, and placed in a new contexts that promise collisions, interactions, and sometimes even oppositions, familiar readings and interpretations may more or less not work well. *The Story of Pao* is not only a growing-up journey of a Hmong girl but also one of the models for a lifestyle that is in harmony with the nature of an ethnic minority in a developing country. *Into the Wild*, on the contrary, is a typical story of modern, urbanized man in a highly-developed country, who wants to escape the artificial and boring reality by committing himself to the wild. This comparative method allows us to make a

“decentralization,” that is, translating texts from one context to another without being limited by the ties of geographical and historical conditions. Hence, the work from the lesser-known Vietnamese Cinema is placed next to a well-known Japanese film, without the baggage of “mismatching.” This article, therefore, proposes a new research approach for Vietnamese cinema in light of openness, interculturality, and decontextualization.

Juxtaposing and viewing the films from an ecocritical perspective, the article draws particular attention to the cultural and ideological sources of ecological risks. Wang Nuo (王諾), who considers this the pivot of ecocriticism, asserts that the field studies the relationship between literature and nature on the basis of ecologism, especially ecological holism; it elucidates cultural and ideological sources of ecological risks, and at the same time drawing attention to ecological aesthetics and other artistic manifestations of the ecology (王諾 2010: 69). Thus, through literary criticism, ecocriticism discovers “the profound genesis of ecological risks hidden in cultural modalities” and on that basis, aims at adjusting outlooks on the relationship between man and nature, and establishing ways of living that uphold ecology (Đỗ Văn Hiếu 2016: 78). Ecocriticism, accordingly, overtakes the limits of aesthetic criticism when reconsidering how models of social development and human communities have influenced the relationship between man and nature, thus requiring literary criticism to be more associated with studying the nature of culture and society and ethnic cultural psychology. This perspective is used to “reread” *The Story of Pao* and *Into the Wild*.

In terms of ecological aesthetics, *The Story of Pao* and *Into the Wild* both suggest a path where one can find signs of a world that is both poetic and wild, and where people are allowed to express in an intense and undisguised way a yearning that is both ancient and contemporary, i.e. *the desire for nature*. The two clearly represent the mindset of attachment, even voluntary dependence on nature, for the survival of an ethnic minority who lives in a dangerous and remote mountainous area in Vietnam; a typical example of a struggle to break free from bondage to the material world and the breakthrough effort to find the truth of life in the natural world for

those who belong to the civilized world. They seem to be quite distinct in terms of thinking between the East and the West, between civilization and primitiveness, between developing and developed, between mountainous and urban areas, but in reality, when placed side by side, they reflect similarities and differences of human behaviors towards nature. These similarities and differences will be clarified through the following two points.

II . The Aesthetic Potential of Nature and the Invitation to Travel

Eco-critics have advocated taking ecology as the center and seen it as an anchor for eco-critical endeavors. This tendency sees nature as an entity; "[N]ature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironized as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect" (Barry 2009: 243). The fact that literary and cinematic works depict or discover the beauty of nature is also one of the recognitions for the aforementioned trend. From the perspective of the juxtapositional model, the films *Into the Wild* and *The Story of Pao*, of course, show two completely separate pictures of nature, corresponding to the geographical features of the two regions. Nature, in the meaning of the wild, untouched landscape and natural sources, even though belonging to different cultures, places, and times, has similarities in its natural beauty, making viewers soar in a sense of freedom, comfort, and peace. It urges people, at least once, to dare to give up familiar limitations of modern life and to enjoy the pleasures of the primitive life. This "random contiguity," promises to create an intertextual and intercultural network that is a trend of today's society.

A coincidence, of course, is absolutely not a reason for me to make a comparison, i.e. these two films are both adapted from literary works and tell true stories.

The film *The Story of Pao* (Ngô Quang Hải) is based on the literary work *The Lip Lute Behind the Stone Fence* by Nguyễn Bích Thúy. It narrates the journey of Pao, a young Hmong girl, to find her mother. Pao lives with her father, a younger brother, and her

father's eldest wife (often called old mother or mother Kía). Since the person who gave birth to her, the mother Sim (father's second wife), could not stand cohabitation, poverty, and an awkward life, she left Pao and her sisters to the first wife to nurture them. After decades of enduring a loveless marriage and desperation to have a child, Mother Kía chose to commit suicide. Many other events followed, Pao set out to find her mother Sim to bring some comfort to her father in his last days. The journey to find her mother gradually uncovers secrets of love and human relationships, and presents the material and spiritual-cultural life of the Hmong in Hà Giang, Vietnam.

Meanwhile, *Into the Wild* is a 2007 American film, adapted from the hit book of the same title by Jon Krakauer. It is about the true adventure of the 23-year-old Christopher McCandless. McCandless just graduated from college with honors. Coming from a well-to-do family, as well as being smart and talented, Chris faces a promising future. But he is fed up with his materialistic life, as well as life with the hypocrisy of society.

Aside from being haunted by his parents' quarrels during his childhood days, Chris also discovers that his father abandoned his first family. After a graduation party, Chris decides to erase all traces of himself, and changes his name to Alexander Supertramp—“Alex Superwanderer.” He starts his journey to Alaska. In a deserted patch of forest in the Stampede Trail, Chris sees a bus converted as a shelter for reindeer hunters. This bus immediately becomes Chris's home, and begins a life hunting wild animals for food. After four months, he is pressed to leave the place but melted ice causes the river to rise; he could not cross the river. Without medicine and assistance, Chris suffers from tree root poisoning and dies, severely malnourished at 30 kg. His body is found two weeks later.

Both films, made in the style of a travelogue, focus on the central character's displacement, both in time and in space. In this style, characters start the journey when they are pulled from their familiar and peaceful living environment. The challenges that come gradually reveal their disposition and motivation in the face of events that transform them. Pao in *The Story of Pao* makes a

journey to find her mother, which is, in fact, the journey to find an intimate connection that she lost during her childhood. In contrast, Chris in *Into the Wild* cuts off all ties with family and social institutions, leaving him alone to step into the wild following the call of the ideal life that he believes in.

Into the Wild and *The Story of Pao* feature quests for truth, that in effect also presents a sense of nature. Following Pao and Chris' footsteps are natural scenes associated with the characteristics of two geographical regions. For instance, *The Story of Pao* offers a wild but charming natural surroundings of Northeast Vietnam, overwhelming and delicate. Somehow, it is also the nature that subconsciously creates human character.

The establishing shot in *The Story of Pao* shows towering mountains mixed with clouds. This scene more or less predicts the visual structure of the entire film. Nature is always present in every situation and narrative of the characters. The most commonly used scenes are of mountains and clouds, both majestic and mysterious, both inviting and challenging. The camera has maximized the immensity of the mountains, or the full vitality of the green forests stretching along the roadside, following each step of the main character from Đồng Văn (Hà Giang) to Sa Pa (Lào Cai) to Mộc Châu (Sơn La). The frames are bright and wide, helping the viewer to capture the breathtaking beauty, which is typical of the mountainous landscape in the North of Vietnam. Sometimes, the scene shows clouds afloat, and at times with bright yellow canola flowers, white mountain ebony, or green cornfields, creating a real visual impression for the film. Cinematographer Cordelia Beresford tends to put nature at the center, with the camera angle usually placed behind the character, giving the impression that the foreground, nature, is bold. The Đồng Văn Stone Plateau in the film *The Story of Pao* is beautiful, splendid, intimate, simple, poetic and melancholic, all in all romantic and miserable. In a beautiful extreme long shot, people are small but not covered by nature, and existing amidst nature innocently and strongly. The original living space in *The Story of Pao* might be an interesting suggestion for contemporary living in Vietnam—a lifestyle that is open, in harmony with nature, which reflects architectural tastes of urban housing in

recent years. It is also an architectural style that strongly expresses the desire of modern urban dwellers.

The main theme in *The Story of Pao* seems unrelated to ecology but focuses on the fate of man and love. But on the background, viewers can in turn find the connection between nature and people. At the same time, from the perspective of human ecology, the film shows bold topography, regions, and other natural factors, such as climate, which create the identity of the Hmong ethnic group. They are as strong as stone, but also soft as flowers, and innocent as grass.

Into the Wild features nature in North America. As soon as released, Sean Penn's movie immediately created a strong aftershock, especially for young people who love to explore and adventure. The film has a tragic ending but from beginning to end, not tinged with sadness at all. Simply, each scene in Chris's journey is a beautiful picture of that deep, mysterious ancient forest in the Pacific Northwest. There are treacherous canyons and vast deserts farther south. There is the golden wheat field in the northern prairies in the scene where Chris drives a harvester—a place he appears to be fond of. It may have felt heaven for Chris to run around with wild horses. There is the majesty of the raging waves in a river that Chris crosses with powerful paddle movements. There is a smooth beach where Chris finds his own footprints in the early morning. There is a forest of thorn leaves covered with white snow or precarious cliff and so on. The gorgeous beauty of the North American landscape in the west of Mississippi is shown in a sheer extreme long shot. The beautiful angles and country music of Eddie Vedder have succeeded in attracting audiences to fully focus on the screen and touch their feelings. In *Into the Wild*, scenes of urban life are few and mostly blurred, or are done with quick, rushed, and sometimes soundless shots. In contrast, natural scenes are shot slowly, like a beautiful flashback that the filmmaker did not want to skip too quickly. This method creates asymmetry, where nature is presented with a dominant, open, spacious advantage, in contrast to urban life where people are always stuck in a closed, crowded space (car, house, motel, restaurant, schoolyard).

Geography makes a difference in the natural landscapes of *Into the Wild* and *The Story of Pao*. It is worth mentioning here is that the aesthetic potential of nature, as discovered by the filmmakers' artistic sense and the characters' passionate eyes, becomes an endless source of inspiration. Both *Into the Wild* and *The Story of Pao* are like an invitation to travel for those who love freedom and adventures. Chris chooses to return to nature, accepting that he would also be like an animal or a tree, vulnerable and could die of hunger and lack of water. He immerses himself in the simple beauty of nature. Taking the pseudonym Alexander Supertramp, and rejecting material needs and human attachments, he identifies himself as an "aesthetic traveler" (Ebert 2007). For him, the meaning of life is new experiences. This meaning is highlighted in Sean Penn's movie.

The film is divided into several chapters, each chapter a journey, at times of difficulty, of hardship, of sadness and isolation, of joy in harmony with nature, of happiness with kind friends. The old, experienced middle-aged people Chris meets on the trip had different fates, cultural backgrounds, and life experiences, but they were completely convinced by Chris's plan to conquer cold, dangerous Alaska, and wished him well.

Alaska is probably the most mentioned keyword in the movie *Into the Wild*. As Chris's destination, it also becomes a measure of his courage, a symbol of the desire to commit and face challenges. Alaska with its unspoiled beauty becomes the setting for many other Hollywood movies: *Never Cry Wolf* (1983) by Carroll Ballard, *The Edge* (1997) by Lee Tamahori, and *The Grey* (2011) by Joe Carnahan.

Chris's journey in *Into the Wild* is also reminiscent of Jean-Marc Vallee in the film *Wild* (2014), based on the memoir *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (2012) by Cheryl Strayed. After going through years of disorientation due to the death of a loved one and a painful divorce, Cheryl Strayed (Reese Witherspoon) is determined to pack her backpack and set out to conquer the famous Pacific Crest Road. *Wild* captures powerfully the fears and joys of a young woman moving forward, in the face of all difficulties in a deeply emotional journey that ultimately heals her

wounds. Although the inspiration for the trip is not as compelling as *Into the Wild* and *The Story of Pao*, *Wild* was still able to make people fall in love with nature, in its splendor and harshness. Meanwhile, the house Pao lives in, which we will analyze later in the article, more or less represents the dream of a structure in harmony with nature. Lũng Cắm Cultural Village, Đòng Văn Stone Plateau-Hà Giang, the main setting of *The Story of Pao*, became a tourist destination after the film was released.

As a psychological drama, nature in *The Story of Pao* is perceived to embody emotions, as it is always in harmony with man. Everything exudes rhythm, freshness, and femininity. On the other hand, *Into the Wild's* documentary style imbues nature with masculinity and strength with its dominant use of cold colors. Despite the differences in cinematic perspective, *Into the Wild* and *The Story of Pao*, set side by side, can be both be read as consensual discourses that espouse ecology-centered sensibility, with special attention to the hidden beauty of the natural world.

III. Juxtaposing Two Models of Behavior towards Nature

The relationship of "culture" and "nature" requires an unlocking of terms. The term "nature," says John S. Habgood (2002), has multiple and overlapping meanings. In this paper, "nature" is understood according to its Latin etymology "natura," which means "things that belong to the universe" and differ from the man-made world (Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt 2018). "Culture," according to UNESCO, is "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, that encompasses, not only art and literature, but lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs" (UNESCO 2001). In this definition, "beliefs" and "values" are hard to be evaluated directly, yet can be assessed through related habits and acts. However, it should be remembered that nature is basically fluid, and some of its factors are determined by humans. This reality leads to the fact that nature and culture "do not simply oppose each other, but also intermingle with one another" (Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt 2018). The relationship between man

and nature has become increasingly complex in the modern era when in underdeveloped areas, “nature” is swallowed up by “culture” as a result of environmental destruction. This is the primary concern of ecocriticism.

Up to now, the debate about the relationship between people/culture and the environment/nature or either human-centered view or nonhuman-centered views (Kopnina et al. 2018: 110) has not ceased. The two most common opposing arguments are: man is born to master and possess nature as Descartes put it, or only “crazy” people “bring machines to declare war on nature” as Erasme puts it (Vernier 2002). Accordingly, the relationship between man and nature is established by a dualistic worldview: human/subject-nature/object. This view was later questioned by Western anthropologists who argued for a different perspective when scholars studied non-Western cultures, particularly hunter-gatherer communities living in Asia, Africa, or even in both Latin America and North America (Phan Thị Hoàn 2019: 25). In the case of *Into the Wild* and *The Story of Pao*, the critique towards the dualistic worldview, i.e. human/subject-nature/object, becomes clear and drastic when two cultures, East-West, or two states of living, civilized-wild, are put side by side. This “juxtaposition” stems from a reconsideration of influences that models of social development and ways of living have on the relationship between humans and nature. The two models of behavior towards nature, as seen in the protagonists Pao and Chris, are equivalent to the differences between Eastern and Western cultures. The East is characterized by stability, while the West is more associated with mobility, “the former is more natural, the latter is more artificial” (李1949: 37-38). The West values logic, hence being more likely to underestimate the significance of the environment, while the East assumes that life is always changing, transforming from one state to another, thus appreciating the relationship between an object and the overall surrounding environment (Nisbett 2003). Undoubtedly, it is not the matter of criticizing or choosing between the two models yet elucidating them from the perspective of cultural identity of each community.

In *The Story of Pao*, we see the compatibility of the Hmong

minority community with nature in the highlands, where it is lush and poetic. The desire for discovering, conquering, and mastering nature is more or less revealed in those who belong to the modern world of *Into the Wild*; although it is more or less “covered” by the so-called desire to live in harmony with nature. The title *Into the Wild* partly shows that people are looking for a way to return to the wild rather than live in nature.

The Story of Pao is also reminiscent of Farley Mowat’s *People of the Deer* (1952), which presents the author’s research on the life of the aboriginal people Ihalmiut in Keewatin (Canada) before the impact of the market economy. The intrusion of signs of the civilized world has threatened the survival of the reindeer, a source of life and existence for the tribe. This kind of ecological rupture compels intervention from ecocritics. In contrast, *The Story of Pao* shows nature dominating local culture, while conversely, the indigenous culture of the Hmong regulating behavior amidst nature.

Comparatively, *The Story of Pao* is about life that is primitive, where people live fully with nature, and where they do not need to make a choice, because they were born and raised in the natural environment. They commune with nature instinctively and rather innocently. Meanwhile, *Into the Wild* reflects a tendency to choose, albeit quite extremely, an approach that is to search for the natural world to escape the real world. Does nature in *Into the Wild* become teleological considering Chris’s dreamlike escape brimming with mental recollections of relationships that are intense but are actually empty? Is it a passionate adventure to explore an unmaterialistic life? Or is it a beautiful, fruitful journey that is also too costly for finding answers about the essence of life? Chris’s trip may find itself answering these three questions. There is naiveté, but also reason, strength and weakness, isolation and social cohesion, and there is achievement, but at the cost of one’s life.

3.1. *Into the Wild* and a Sore Misunderstanding of Nature

From the very beginning, Chris appears as a typical example of the spirit of fierce resistance against civilized society. He comes from a wealthy family, his father is a genius, and his mother is

a resourceful and astute person. He also graduated from Emory University with a formidable academic record and even secured a place in at the Harvard University Law School. However, Chris sets everything aside to embark on a difficult path. His first, low-level resistance is his refusal to buy a new car; instead, he keeps an old Datsun. The level of protest gradually increases, when Chris decides without hesitation to destroy all his his pieces of identification, donate his savings of more than \$ 24,000 to charity “for those who need it” (Penn 2007), and even burn his remaining cash. He leaves his car in a faraway place and hitchhikes to start his adventure. He also goes alone into the deep Alaska forest without a hunting license. The climax of his rejection of civilized society comes when he passionately tells Ron Franz, “Mr. Franz, I think that “career” is just an invention of the 20th century and I don’t want it” (Penn 2007). Perhaps it may not be easy to understand Chris’s boredom. But Chris himself, an excellent and sensitive young man, must have soon realized that the world does not offer the things he really needs. Money, fame, or a new car does not matter when the world is a stage where everyone, including his parents, plays a role. In a meeting with the hippie couple Jan and Rambey along the journey, Chris bitterly but wittily describes his parents as “living fake somewhere” (Penn 2007). Haunted by a human world that is unreal and cumbersome, Chris finds his ideal while fondly reading books about wildlife. He believes in nature because nature tells no lies. After completing his education, Chris decides to go back to the wild. He considers it a revival because it helps him free from what he addresses as “boring history, oppression, rituals and obligations, an absolute freedom and that road always goes to the West” (Penn 2007). In the wild, he enjoys “majestic mountains, snowy rivers, hunting, just wildness, in wilderness” escaping from “this sick society” (Penn 2007). This shows that Chris is certainly not the only individual of his generation who has intensely explored the dark side of modern society and Chris’ journey may be followed by someone else.

Clearly, Chris always puts himself in self-examination, criticism, inference, and fierce struggle between opposing categories:

civilization-wildness, real-unreal, freedom-bondage. Chris’s story easily reminds of the American writer, poet, philosopher, naturalist, and historian Henri David Thoreau who wrote *Walden*. In 1845, with only an ax, Thoreau went alone to the mountain beside Walden Lagoon near the town of Concord, Massachusetts, and lived there for two years, growing beans, potatoes, corn, radishes. Thoreau’s simple and poetic lifestyle and ideas have had a great influence on American society. The young Chris himself seems to be a “fan” of this idea. Thoreau’s guiding principle became Chris’s life motto: “Above all of love, money, fame, justice, just give me the truth” (Penn 2007). Chris’s face always sparkles with the joy of someone who dares to go against the sun, dares to break through the dream of prosperity and fame that many people covet, to venture into the wild and pure nature with a philosophy of minimalist living. Let us not forget that ecocriticism, even now in America, continues to take on a literary task posed by three important American authors in the nineteenth century. As a transcendental writer, Thoreau was among those who belong to the first who achieved a “cultural independence” from European models. *Walden* is considered foundational in “ecocentred” writing (Barry 2015: 241). Thus, undoubtedly, Chris’s inclination for the wild is a vibrant contemporary embodiment of Thoreau’s idea as seen through the shots of “praising nature, (the) meaning of the life and wildness of America” (Barry 2015: 240).

Chris’s awareness of the natural world grows with each step of the journey. At first, nature seems to be an idealized world, a place for humans to conquer and to heal the soul. This idea is, to some extent, comparable to Wang Nuo (王諾)’s notions his essay 生態批評的美學原則 (Aesthetic Principles of Ecocriticism), where he analyzes works by 19th century writers Percy Bysshe Shelley, Jane Austen, Ralph Waldo Emerson. For Wang, these authors indulged in nature, paying attention to nature’s beauty but more importantly, blissfully appreciating the reciprocal relationship between nature and man’s inner mind, and how it can be a way to achieve spiritual release. Their lack of confidants and isolation drive them to return to nature to look

for empathy, and even passion. This is against the ecological aesthetics of engagement, which emphasizes that to be in harmony with nature, man must forget himself and become one with nature; only then they can he discover its true beauty (王 2010: 22).

The young Chris, greatly interested in books about nature, finds himself desolate in such a noisy and gaudy life, acknowledging that everything he has been through is pointless. Nature thus becomes “the reciprocal natural object,” from which Chris attempts to prove who and what he needs. Hence, it should be examined whether his use of nature as a resistance against civilization is also a manifestation of human-centered consciousness.

There comes a moment which can be described as aggressive, where the weak in nature is conquered with a gun; or as foolish, because of the urges of human instinct like hunger. Chris shoots down a wild deer, then struggles to preserve it; he eventually agonizes in killing a living creature. This sequence of actions in the scene is full of metaphors. Chris’s moment of awakening to his relationship with nature, far removed from the desire to oppress and dominate is also a premonition of the instability of the relationship between nature and culture. While Chris died with a satisfied smile, having dwelt in a place he longed for, his tragedy is a clearly a correctable one. He has misjudged nature. His readings from books are clearly not enough to orient him about nature. He may have been seen holding books by Lev Tolstoi or by Jack London, or often quotes Thoreau from memory but these pages only describe nature that is too beautiful and ideal. In reality, it is harsh and uncertain. This is once reiterated London in the short story *To Build a Fire*, which exemplifies the naturalist movement’s tendency of depicting the conflict between man and nature. A story of two versions (1902 and 1908), it tells the story of an unknown young man who ventures into the deep woods of the Yukon territory. Underestimating the harsh natural conditions and ignoring warnings about the dangers of crossing the forest alone in extreme cold, he ends up freezing to death alone. Strangely, this

story applies to Chris. Has Chris read this story, clearly a cautionary tale? Towards the end, Chris must have realized the need to understand nature.

Chris's overconfidence imbues in him a false safety in nature; save for a few books, he does not bring anything for self-defense, or at the very least pieces of medicine or a compass. When he is poisoned, he fails to read the instructions in his plant manual he brought. The following words are enlarged on screen: *edible, inedible, starving, dying*. They reflect the dual nature of the natural world. As he faces death, Chris painfully admits being "trapped in the wild." Defeated, he embodied human limitations and inability to grasp essence of nature. The abandoned bus in the middle of the snowy white forest where Chris dies appears to allude to the disparity in the relationship between civilization and wilderness. Chris is completely at a disadvantage as compared to natives like Pao in *The Story of Pao*.

3.2. *The Story of Pao* as an Exemplar of Eastern Ecological Thought

Pao is born and raised in the mountains of Northeast Vietnam—her adaptability to her surroundings cannot be disputed. Her first journey was still towards other mountains; even the markets or small towns she visited were that of other ethnic minorities. *The Story of Pao* expresses the nostalgia for a peaceful and harmonious living space, where man and nature have a magical connection, completely corresponding to the spirit of ecological aesthetics towards a harmony between humans and the natural world (曾繁仁 2010). In contrast to Chris in *Into the Wild*, Pao, her family, and the rest of her ethnic group get along with nature based on local knowledge and experiences. As examined below, the world of the Hmong in *The Story of Pao* shows a life in harmony with nature.

3.2.1. *Interdependence and Harmony between the Natural World and Man*

Hmongs have always lived in the hinterlands, amidst forests and high mountains (Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến 2014; Bùi Đình 1950). This determines their attitude towards the natural world (Cư Hòa Văn et

al. 1994: 7-8). In the film, Hmong life and spirituality require harmony with the natural environment in the Đồng Văn Stone Plateau, Hà Giang. This harmony may be observed in the Hmong housing, livelihood and cuisine.

For Hmongs, a house does not just shelter one from the elements but bears the very imprint of ethnic culture. It is a space where Hmong work takes place—winemaking, sewing, embroidery, and animal husbandry. A self-sufficient economy may be found under one roof. Pao’s house is a traditional *Trình tường*,¹ made of materials taken directly from nature. Stones abound and are used to fortify pillars and fences. Structurally, Pao’s house clearly reflects Hmong psychology. The house is overlooking an open space, providing a vast perspective; behind the house are mountains and hills, a backrest for the structure; at the heart of it is an often well-lit large courtyard where one can conveniently dwell; the front garden is usually teeming with vegetables. The household’s reliance on nature makes the house “a unit of ecological balance” (Đoàn Trúc Quỳnh 2013: 161) between man and nature. Even the beauty of Pao’s campus is mostly seen from the inside to the outside; through the main gate or window, viewers immediately apprehend nature everywhere, creating a completely open living space. It is a classic structure with bold colors, in total contrast to the concrete, suffocating jungle of modern Vietnamese cities.

Living in the mountains and moving frequently, Hmongs have learned to be self-sufficient and highly dependent on nature. Like Hmong generations before them, Pao’s family lives in close contact with the forest which provide them food sources (Nguyễn Thi Quế Loan 2015: 43). They cultivate the highlands, collect wild vegetables, and graze goats. Even after their biological mother left, Pao and her siblings “drank goat’s milk during the daytime, chewed on their old mother’s breast at night” (Ngô Quang Hải 2006). Men worked away from home to earn while women bartered domestic animals and vegetables.

The distance and the ruggedness of the terrain also determine

¹ *Trình tường*: a house is built on a flat land, with roof made of straw, and walls made entirely of thick rammed earth without any columns or piles as pillars.

the mode of transport and communication to the outside world. Hmongs choose to attend fairs to interact with other ethnic groups. In *The Story of Pao*, the protagonist went to markets thrice, to barter, and even to date. Markets are considered spaces for opening and firming up relationships, as well as bridging forbidden ones (meeting an old lover, for instance). The fair helps Hmongs to overcome being geographically obstructed (Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến 2014: 223-224). Thus, in the face of harsh living conditions, Hmongs have harbored a harmonious culture, taking nature as master, flexibly improvising with difficulties brought by it. Moreover, they use resources available in nature. *The Story of Pao* joyfully sings of a romance with mountains, forests, trees, and animals, hardly affected by modern economy.

Cuisine also reflects the material realities of the ethnic group. What they eat, how they prepare it, and where they source it, show how they easily adapt to nature. This shows that indeed, “each culture is, basically, the corollary of how its community survive and adapt to the surrounding nature” (Nguyễn Từ Chi 2003: 563). In *The Story of Pao*, the Hmong of Northeast Vietnam live in a almost rocky terrain, and thus are forced to cultivate on steep lands. Maize plays a prominent part in agricultural life, a source of food and raw material for local specialties like corn cakes and wines. This is shown in the film. Maize abounds in Pao’s space, its produce representing a melding of human relations. As it is used by, say women who usually prepare cornbread for the men who are away, it ensures the carrying out of social functions that is derived from a productive interaction between nature and culture.

For Jules Pretty and Sarah Pilgrim (2008), every ethnic groups life ways, house, and cuisine, or indigenous knowledge manifest the relationship between “nature” and “culture.” Indigenous knowledge provides cultural insights into the natural environment, the state of existing species, and ecological interactions. These establish ways of reasonably using natural resources and hence allows human to live sustainably within environmental limits. *The Story of Pao* demonstrates how Hmongs are able to an appropriate system of indigenous knowledge to ensure a balanced and harmonios life with nature.

3.2.2. *The Interplay between Nature and Hmong Identity*

In *The Story of Pao*, nature is seen as having a deep impression upon the worldview of Hmongs. They often use nature as a means for comparison. Pao's father states that his tree "is wilting." Mother Kía character considers there are essential interconnections between human and the stream water: "when it rains, the stream water is muddy, but it can't stay muddy forever, people are also the same" (Ngô Quang Hải 2006). Pao particularly emphasizes the importance of stone as the sign of human fate: "Whether you live for 20 years, 30 years, or stay until you die, you are just a stone as the foot of the pillar" (Ngô Quang Hải 2006).

For Hmongs, the stone is an eternal presence and may also be associated with the spiritual world. Hmongs accept and adapt to the harshness of rocks. These constitute their distinctive identity. Rocks also characterize Hmong values—intelligence, agility, courage, honesty, grit, and free. They are passionate about personal freedom. Choosing to live in isolation in the mountains is also a way for them to achieve freedom. This thirst for freedom convincingly explains the life choices of the characters of the film. The old mother, after many years of patiently working as a "stone as the foot of the pillars" (Ngô Quang Hải 2006), drops everything, and even fakes her suicide in order to flee to a new land with a new partner. Pao, at first uneasy hearing the sound of Chử's lip lute behind the stone fence, dares to "cross the fence" and dates the boy at the year-end market. Love remains the strongest ethnic value among the Hmongs, aside from the desire for freedom and self-control (Nguyễn Mạnh Tiến 2014: 210). Previous ethnographic studies show that Hmongs are liberal and open-minded idea of love, even allowing sexual intercourse before marriage. In the film, this is dramatized in the instances of two couples: the old mother Kía-Chử's father; and Chử-Pao. Though generations apart, their love basks in free will, reminiscent of the ways of Hmongs. Director Ngô Quang Hải paints the freedom in Pao and Chử's love through wide, bright, romantic frames, associated with the melodious sound of the lip lute and lush shots of nature and the highland market. Both characters are portrayed as both shy but brave. Again and again, fate and individuality intertwine with the natural world.

The Story of Pao is perhaps an implicit but powerful counterargument against a human-centered view. Here, man is in harmony with nature, as Zeng Fanren (曾繁仁) puts it that: “The symbiotic relationship between human and nature is the only plausible path.” (曾繁仁 2010: 466). Such cases have led to the emergence of “‘ecological humanism’ and ‘ecological totalism’ from the ecological theory that is better suited with the law of social development and later considered as the theoretical foundations of modern ecological aesthetics” (曾繁仁 2010: 466). The symbiosis between man and nature can be viewed as an ideal way of life which has been depicted in modern ecological movies, like *Little Forest* by Jun’ichi Mori and *Wood Job* by Shinobu Yaguchi. It is fully compatible with the stance of eco-criticism: declaring war on the “center,” and focusing on the harmony between man and nature. Therefore, this film more or less participates in strongly promoting the movement to protect nature in Vietnam.

The characters in *The Story of Pao* rarely interpret the natural world, but all the scenes and the stories take place amidst nature. Nature plays such a large part in the life of Hmongs life that it does not need to be discoursed. In contrast, *Into the Wild* permeates with quotes, dialogues, and narratives about nature, sometimes too passionate, veiling at some point the dangerous, dark side of nature. The “spiritual revolution” of the journey back to the wild is overemphasized that the “natural trap” is blurs. The violence of nature, which Chris did not care about from the beginning to the end of the journey, itself taught him a final lesson: Happiness only exists when shared. His story is not just one of courage, but also of foolishness, while expressing a dialectic relationship between society and nature, and contemplating about materialism in modern times.

IV. Conclusion

Interpreting *The Story of Pao* on its own only gives yields a love story imbued with the humanity of a people living in the high mountains of Vietnam. On its own, *Into the Wild* offers a painful journey of a young American. Read together, the films break

boundaries and reveal aesthetic similarities about the natural world. They even show the cultural characteristics of human communities as they behave in the presence of nature. *The Story of Pao* is like a dream, a slow-moving recollection of the ideal Eastern life as lived by an ethnic—a life in harmony with nature. *Into the Wild* re-explores the dialectical relationship between man and nature. Is Christopher McCandless ultimately an avant-garde hero or a dreamy idealist, a rebellious 1990s Thoreau, or another other lost son of America, a reckless, prideful, and pitiful victim struggling with the precarious balance between man and nature? Could modern man live in the wild and completely reject the material world? Has man appreciated the essence of nature or remained ambivalent about it?

The Story of Pao and *Into the Wild* allow us to imagine the changing position of man in the presence of nature. In the beginning, man is but a speck in the grandeur of nature (in the case of *The Story of Pao*, man relies on nature). Gradually, humans have learned to cope with the forces of nature, even conquering and transforming it. When they have achieved a high point of evolution, they immediately feel the loss of balance, and yearned to reintegrate into the unfamiliar primitive life (as in *Into the Wild*). The comparative reading of these two films enabled us to uncover diverse and dynamic interpretations. Decontextualized, *The Story of Pao* and *Into the Wild* serve as powerful statements about ecocriticism.

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