Can life be this hard, and maturing into manhood this difficult? In this debut feature film by writer and director Nguyen-Vo Nghiem-Minh, everything is difficult, including the actual logistics and shooting of the film. Water is everywhere and fills the landscape. This is quite typical for Vietnam, where the name for country, nước, is also the name for water. This film’s location, the southernmost province of Ca Mau, is particularly severe; rarely visited by tourists, regular and debilitating flooding is a fact of life and death in this part of the country. It also remains a place of unscathed ethnic division, where resentment lingers between remnants of the ancient Khmer (Cambodian) culture and the Vietnamese (Kinh).

Our protagonist, Kim, looks back and tells his granddaughter and us how he became a man. Though the story is set in the wartime 1940s, the existence of the French colonials and Japanese imperialists is quite irrelevant to this rendition of Vietnamese peasant life, a life that presents few choices and is at the mercy of nature.

Vietnamese peasant farmers depend on their buffalos for plowing the paddy and as beasts of burden. In this cyclical season of the floods, the buffalos need grass to survive and need to be moved to higher grounds. This is brutal and dangerous work, made more dangerous and more brutal as the herders compete with rival herders for choice grassland. When they can afford it, rural families hire buffalo herders to drive their buffalo to fresh pastures. Kim’s family is too poor to hire the herders and his father too ill to travel, so Kim, at age 15, is charged with getting the family’s two buffalos to clear grass before they die.

So begins this desperate tale, told over two flooding seasons, of a young rural Vietnamese male’s coming of age while “on the road,” a story of male domains characterized by violence and rape. Winner of many film festival awards, this film is a dark tragedy buffeted only by fleeting moments of kindness. Only the most sentimental will believe that there is light and rescue at the end of this tunnel.

Buffalo Boy is filled with beautiful images. It is true that Vietnam is a place of glorious landscapes; however, the beauty conceals the ruthlessness of this watery terrain where, as the film’s narrator tells us in the very beginning, there is rot and decay. The Vietnamese continue to live with this duality—water is the sustainer for wet rice agriculture and the serene paddies, and floods provide new nutrients for the fields while threatening everything in their path. Pray to the Water God, indeed—for rain to come and to stop the rain! This cosmology of powerful gods and a powerful Nature is the backbone of a Vietnamese fatalism on the one hand, and a startling hopefulness for a better future on the other. It is luck and good fortune to which the rural Vietnamese aspire, especially in environments as unlucky as the one

depicted in the film. In Kim's world, survival of the family’s buffalos, and the subsistence of the family, would be signs of grace—real prosperity is certainly out of reach. We can expect little of these characters except endurance and forbearance.

The film is based on a series of short stories remembered by writer-director Nguyen-Vo, who was educated in France and the United States, from his childhood. There is certainly an ample share of the typical themes that often make up the Vietnamese genre—stark poverty and hardship, struggle and survival, tragedy, and the sometimes saving forces of family and community. But unlike many Vietnamese films there is no nostalgia here.

In this stark and wet world, women provide social integration through the binding embrace of family and community. Men hold dominance over their families as the putative breadwinners and spend most of their time in the company of other men. It is a complex masculine world of competition, hierarchy, drinking, and violence, but it is also one of friendship and camaraderie. There is tenderness between Kim and his father, between Kim and his friend Det, and between Kim and Det’s son, Thien, whom Kim adopts. The relationship between Kim and his father is one of filial piety and obedience, and also one of silences and secrets, which the son must discover on his own.

Kim’s father seems like a congenial old man, but he was once a buffalo herdsman and a rapist. In the season he spends herding buffalo, Kim repeats the sins of the father.

There is a nod to the taxing realities of French colonialism but these oppressions add little to the narratives they are just another cost and nuisance to living. That aspect has not changed in Vietnam, where petty corruptions are a daily occurrence.

Some of my Vietnamese student friends say that they do not like this morbid tale, that it is boring and does not express Vietnamese reality.
They argue that it is a southern story without the southern soul, and that the dialogues are influenced by the West and are not native to southern Vietnamese life. While, for my Hanoi students, Cà Mau is very far away and the lives of their poorest farmers quite remote, these representations speak to the conditions of life in the 1940s and may have applicability today. The film’s depiction of a darker side to Vietnamese masculinity with its violence and misogyny remains a reality in Vietnam. The film’s images of the floods, the stark minimalism of the houses, the tempered dress, and of course, the centrality of the buffalo are all quite powerful representations of a Vietnamese way of life still found in the countryside.

This is not an appropriate film for young children, because of the violent and sexual subject matter (though little is explicitly shown on screen). High school and college students will find it a fascinating story of an adolescent coming of age with its masculine rituals and displays. They will also find this watery landscape foreign and foreboding and get a fictionalized glimpse into the life of desperately poor Vietnamese peasant farmers then, and even now.

Although this film would not be useful for a history lesson, it does provide some timeless images of daily life, human character, and adversity. Useful discussions for Western audiences might be the complex relationships between fathers and sons, men and women, men’s relationships to other men, respect for elders and ancestors, and human choices in the face of desperate hardship.

Jack D. Harris is professor of Sociology at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York. His research areas include Vietnam social organization and Vietnamese masculinity. He has been the recipient of an Academic Exchange Grant, Center for Educational Exchange with Vietnam, American Council of Learned Societies, and ASIANetwork (2006), and a Vietnam Research Grant from the ASIANetwork Freeman Foundation Student Faculty Fellows Program (2003).

Buffalo Boy is available on DVD and VHS from First Run/Icarus Films. Price is $248 for purchase and $125 for rental.

Additional Resources
A discussion guide for Buffalo Boy, developed by The Global Film Initiative, is available on the DVD and also at www.fritt.com/guide/buf.pdf. In addition to discussion questions on film aesthetics and narrative themes, the guide includes background information on the film, the writer/director, and Vietnam, as well as a glossary.

Kokoyakyu
continued from page 2

high school sport, although the film lends too much credence to the dubious Japanese view that such qualities are unique.

In using the film with students, it would be more useful to probe the claims of the coaches, players, and supporters. For instance, it is true that there is a very high ratio of practice to games in Japanese school baseball, which goes back to the very beginning of the sport. In this, it is less like baseball in the United States and more like high school football, whose players can work year-round through spring training, pre-season and season in order to play 10 or 12 games. To talk about “American game, Japanese discipline” requires a willful suspension of disbelief about our own youth sports.

And lest we are tempted to accept the spiritual nostrums of the two coaches at face value, we should recall that the two other big stories of Japanese baseball this spring were scandals involving covert payments to players and illegal subsidies. In fact, any observer of Japanese baseball knows there to be longstanding practices, periodically exposed but never eradicated, not unlike the underside of the NCAA, Little League baseball, and popular school sports everywhere.

What the Chiben player Maeda notes in a moment of candor would surprise no fan of school sports anywhere:

“It’s hard to do both academics and baseball. I don’t do a lot of studying; it’s mostly all baseball for me. I know I should, but I can’t keep up. It’s like the baseball club gets special treatment. We have our own classes and stuff. We have it a lot easier. We get basic questions on the test.”

Of course high-minded character-building goes hand-in-hand with low-down tawdry dealings. Since the beginnings of school sports in the mid-nineteenth century on the playing fields of English elite schools, the pursuit of an amateur ethic and the prestige of success have mingled uneasily. Japanese high school baseball, shown here with perhaps a rosier-tinted lens than necessary, expresses these universal tensions in colorful spectacle, all-out effort, school spirit, and national passion.

William W. Kelly is professor of Anthropology and Sumitomo Professor of Japanese Studies in the Department of Anthropology at Yale University. He has been a student of and editor with Sugimoto Arata. This Sporting Life: Sports and Body Culture in Modern Japan (2007).

Kokoyakyu: High School Baseball is available on DVD from Customfix. Purchase price is $29.95.

Suggested Reading


Suggested Viewing

Additional Resources