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Sociae Polites
EISSN 2620-4975
ISSN 1410-3745

RUPTURED LIFEWORLDS: INDUSTRIAL SETTLER COLONIALISM AND THE FORMOSA STEEL DISASTER IN COASTAL VIETNAM

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Abstract

The massive marine pollution caused by toxic waste from Formosa Ha Tinh Steel (FHS) in 2016 triggered one of the largest environmental protests in Vietnam's history. This study interprets the Formosa case not merely as an industrial failure, but as a form of industrial settler colonialism—a concept described by Kyle Whyte as a process that erases the social and ecological relationships of local communities with their living spaces. Using critical discourse analysis of media coverage and literature review, this research explores how the industrial project disrupted the lives of Vietnam's coastal communities. The findings reveal that the disaster not only destroyed marine ecosystems but also disrupted local identity, livelihoods, and cultural ties to the sea. In response, communities constructed a collective narrative that links environmental pollution to the struggle for environmental justice and popular sovereignty. This study highlights how colonial logics are not limited to former Western colonies, but also emerge in new forms through industrial expansion in Southeast Asia. Amid pressure from the state and corporations, coastal communities continue to show resilience by defending their right to a sustainable environment through media and public solidarity.

Keywords: settler colonialism, Formosa Ha Tinh Steel, Vietnam, environmental justice, coastal lifeworlds.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In 2008, Formosa Ha Tinh Steel (FHS), a subsidiary of the Taiwan-based Formosa Plastics Group (FPG), began expanding its investment in Vietnam by constructing a steel industrial complex and port facilities in the Vung Ang Economic Zone, located along the coastal area of Ha Tinh Province. The project was planned in two phases, with investment values of US$10 billion and US$27 billion, respectively (Kawabata 2016; Hoang 2024).It was positioned as part of Vietnam's national strategy to attract foreign direct investment (FDI), accelerate industrialization, and generate employment in the north-central coastal region. That same year, Ha Tinh's Vice Chairman, Võ Kim Cự, stated in Document 858 that FPG had expressed interest in investing in the Vung Ang Economic Zone. He welcomed the project, predicting it would generate billions of dollars in revenue for Ha Tinh and create approximately 35,000 jobs for local residents. In response, the Ha Tinh provincial government committed to issuing a 70-year investment license to FHS and allowed the company to lease 3,300 hectares of land for the

construction of its industrial facilities ((Ngo 2017). At the time, this was the largest FDI project in Vietnam. Both central and local governments hoped the project would drive economic growth in Ha Tinh, one of the country's poorest provinces, which contributed only 1.1% to the national GDP (Hoang 2024).

Steel production by Formosa Ha Tinh Steel (FHS) officially began in 2015 and was seen as a key milestone in Vietnam's coastal industrialization strategy. However, just one year after becoming operational, FHS was at the center of one of the most severe environmental disasters in modern Vietnamese history. Even before the disaster, FHS had already drawn controversy. In 2014, the company was found to have hired 3,000 Chinese workers without proper work permits, sparking criticism over weak foreign labor oversight. In 2015, a scaffolding collapse at the construction site due to safety negligence resulted in 16 fatalities. That same year, amid rising tensions in the South China Sea, FHS facilities were attacked by rioters who linked the project to China's economic and political interests, leading to four deaths (Ngo 2017).

The peak of the crisis occurred in April 2016, when more than 100 tons of dead fish were found along a 250-kilometer stretch of coastline from Ha Tinh to Thua Thien Hue. A government investigation concluded that the pollution was caused by the discharge of toxic waste—phenol, cyanide, and ferrous hydroxide—by Formosa Ha Tinh Steel (FHS)(Ngo 2017; Dung 2019; Fan, Chiu, and Mabon 2022). The disaster devastated marine life in four provinces and destroyed the livelihoods of around 200,000 people, primarily fishers and small coastal businesses. The incident revealed weak oversight of foreign investment and the limited role of public participation in environmental impact assessments. The Formosa case is now considered the most severe environmental disaster in modern Vietnamese history (Dung 2019). Beyond its ecological impact, FHS became a catalyst for widespread cross-sectoral protests, extending to the Vietnamese diaspora abroad (Bui 2020). These social movements reflect a significant shift in how environmental issues are understood, not merely as pollution, but as structural injustice and the erosion of community lifeworld.

The Formosa marine pollution case has received considerable scholarly attention. Several studies have examined the legal and policy challenges in managing the environmental impacts of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Vietnam (Dung 2019; Kawabata 2016), as well as the socio-economic consequences experienced by coastal communities(Ngo 2017; Ty et al. 2022). In addition, research on the Vietnamese diaspora has highlighted how transnational activism is organized across borders through solidarity networks, as explored in (Bui 2020). However, despite this growing body of research, few studies have examined the case through the lens of industrial settler colonialism—a framework that situates FHS within the broader project of global capitalism that seizes space, erases local ways of life, and restructures the ecological relations of communities.

Furthermore, environmental justice scholarship has primarily developed within democratic contexts, where public participation and civil liberties are relatively protected. In contrast, authoritarian settings—where much of today's global infrastructure and capitalist expansion takes place—remain empirically underexplored (Fan, Chiu, and Mabon 2022). In repressive political systems such

as Vietnam, citizens face structural barriers in voicing claims of environmental injustice, both legally and politically.

This article addresses that gap by offering a new reading of the Formosa case as a manifestation of industrial settler colonialism, and examines how claims to environmental justice are articulated from below by citizens through banners, cultural symbols, and social media—as forms of political expression within a constrained authoritarian space. In doing so, this study not only expands the geographic and political scope of environmental justice research, but also deepens our understanding of how ecological resistance takes shape under political repression in Southeast Asia.

1.2. Research Question

How does the Formosa Ha Tinh Steel (FHS) project reflect practices of settler colonialism through the erasure of ecological and social relations of Vietnam's coastal communities, and how have Vietnamese communities responded to it?

1.3. Purpose and Objective

This article aims to interpret the FHS case as a manifestation of industrial settler colonialism, highlighting how the project erodes the lifeworlds of Vietnam's coastal communities through the expansion of physical territorial control, the severing of ties with traditional ways of life, and the reconfiguration of human-environment relations. Drawing on Kyle Whyte's framework, the study also explores how communities construct narratives of resistance through media, protest symbols, and digital solidarity as forms of political articulation under a repressive regime.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Settler Colonialism

In this study, the concept of settler colonialism as developed by Kyle Powys Whyte is used to understand forms of ecological domination manifested through industrial projects in areas inhabited by local communities in Vietnam. Whyte explains that settler colonialism is a form of institutional arrangement that sustains a system of oppression (Whyte 2016). To understand this system, it is crucial to view settler societies as groups that relocate and attempt to establish a new homeland on territories already inhabited by others. This occupation is not merely physical, but also involves the construction of comprehensive social and ecological structures.

Settlers embed their own systems of values, economy, politics, and culture into the living spaces of the communities they occupy. In the process, local knowledge, ecological practices, and spiritual relationships with nature are often ignored or erased. To justify colonization, settlers construct moralizing narratives such as "for the sake of progress," while concealing the violence and militarism that accompany it. This process unfolds through deforestation, industrialization, militarization, privatization, the erasure of indigenous land rights, and natural resource extraction (Arooba, Bokhari, and Dogar 2021).

In ecological terms, settler colonialism operates by dismantling the socio-ecological relations of Indigenous or local communities and replacing them with new structures that sustain the survival of external actors such as corporations or the state. Industrial projects like Formosa Ha Tinh Steel in Vietnam can be read as a form of ecological settler colonialism, as they impose new regimes over the sea and coastal areas that once held ecological, social, and spiritual value for local communities. In this context, marine pollution not only triggers an environmental crisis but also signifies the erasure of established lifeways and the entrenchment of capitalist production logics as the dominant system.

Whyte emphasizes that settler colonialism is structural and ongoing—it does not end with the initial occupation but continues through the reproduction of social and ecological institutions that systematically displace local communities from their own lifeworlds. This approach enables a deeper analysis of environmental domination, not merely as physical degradation, but as a form of conquest over meaning and existence.

2.2. Collective Continuance

This study also employs Whyte's concept of collective continuance to analyze how the ecological impacts of colonial practices affect a community's collective resilience in the face of change. Collective continuance refers to a community's capacity to sustain and adapt its ways of life—including cultural values, economic activities, and relationships with nature—amid environmental and social pressures (Whyte 2016). When a community's ecological relations are disrupted by external forces such as industrial projects, it loses its ability to adapt and sustain itself as a cohesive social entity.

Such colonial processes also give rise to forms of resistance. In the Formosa case, Vietnam's coastal communities did not remain passive. They responded through social protests, the mobilization of environmental justice narratives, and efforts to build solidarity across communities and sectors. These responses can be seen as strategies to preserve collective continuance, as well as expressions of resistance against settler colonialism embedded in development and industrial policies.

By utilizing the frameworks of settler colonialism and collective continuance, this study seeks to explain how the Formosa industrial project operates as a form of ecological colonialism that threatens the sustainability of local communities, and how those communities develop social, political, and ecological responses to defend their lifeworlds.

3. Research Method

3.1. Type of Research

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore how the Formosa Ha Tinh Steel (FHS) disaster represents industrial settler colonialism, and how Vietnamese civil society constructs resistance narratives in response.

3.2. Data Collection

Primary data consists of 113 protest banners purposively collected from four countries—Vietnam, Taiwan, the United States, and Germany. The banners were gathered through systematic tracking of online communication channels, including social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, online forums, blogs, and digital news comment sections, which served as key arenas for the circulation of protest symbols and messages during the movement.

To enhance contextual understanding and ensure depth in the analysis, the banner data was supplemented by secondary sources, including books, academic journal articles, and NGO reports that document the environmental disaster, civil resistance, and the broader political-ecological context of the Formosa case. The banners were selected based on their relevance to the movement's discourse, and their engagement with political, ecological, cultural, and transnational resistance themes.

3.3. Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, thematic content analysis was applied to identify key patterns and categories within the texts and visuals of the banners, including representations of the sea as a living space, critiques of corporate and state actors, and demands for environmental justice. Second, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was employed to reveal the underlying power relations embedded in these protest texts and to assess how the banners both reflect and challenge the political-economic dominance that underpins the FHS project. CDA treats discourse not merely as a linguistic expression but as a form of social practice, shaped by and shaping political, economic, and cultural contexts (Masitoh 2020).

To ensure data validity, source triangulation was conducted by comparing banner content with relevant news reports and documents from civil society organizations. In addition, interpretive validity was enhanced through peer review, involving eight academics and three environmental practitioners with expertise in discourse analysis, colonialism, and ecological justice.

4. Research Results and Discussion

4.1. Industrial Settler Colonialism

For centuries, the central coast of Vietnam has served as a living space where humans and nature coexist in mutually sustaining relationships. The sea has not merely been a source of food, but also a spiritual, cultural, and social space that binds communities through tradition, local knowledge, and natural cycles. However, this landscape began to shift with the arrival of large-scale industrial projects promising development.

The Formosa Ha Tinh Steel (FHS) project reflects the logic of industrial settler colonialism, which not only seizes physical space but also displaces long-established local lifeways. In this context, colonialism does not manifest through the direct migration of foreign populations, but rather through the expansion of transnational corporations—backed by the state—that transform coastal landscapes into closed and tightly controlled industrial zones. This process

unfolds through three interrelated mechanisms: the occupation of physical space, the disarticulation of local ways of life, and the redefinition of human–environment relationships.

First, the presence of FHS has been a key driver in the occupation of physical space along Vietnam's central coast. Through large-scale industrial development, FHS has consolidated coastal areas that were once fishing community lifeworlds, ecological heritage sites, and collectively maintained social spaces. This transformation took place through the systematic conversion of land and sea into extractive-oriented industrial zones. The Vung Ang Economic Zone, where FHS operates, not only severed community access to the sea as a source of livelihood and cultural identity, but also reorganized spatial arrangements by displacing local residents from their homes. As one resident lamented, the government was not only demolishing homes for the project's second phase but also offering compensation far too low to afford rebuilding elsewhere. A school that once served as a hub for local children was demolished, and the government forced students to attend a school 20 miles away, while forbidding them from enrolling in a nearby alternative. This forced relocation imposed psychological stress and intentional discomfort, effectively pressuring residents to leave "voluntarily."

Such strategies reveal that spatial domination is not only achieved through physical and administrative means, but also through the manipulation of daily life and social pressures that undermine the sustainability of local communities (Fan, Chiu, and Mabon 2022).

Second, alongside the occupation of physical space, FHS has also contributed to the disarticulation of local lifeways that have long formed the foundation of coastal community life. Local wisdom—deeply tied to natural rhythms, seasonal cycles, and collective living practices—is gradually being replaced by the logic of labor flexibility and industrial productivity. Fishers who no longer have access to the sea are forced into unstable wage labor systems that are misaligned with the values of solidarity and communal life they once upheld. The impact is not limited to job loss, but extends to the loss of lifeworlds—the structures of meaning, identity, and social sustainability embedded in everyday life.

Coastal communities that have long relied on fishing and tourism now face severe socio-economic pressures, including identity crises and cultural disorientation (Hoang 2024). A similar condition has been documented among Anishinaabe communities, where settler colonialism dismantled Indigenous life systems through deforestation, privatization, and resource extraction—only to replace them with settler-imposed structures that disregard local values (Arooba, Bokhari, and Dogar 2021).

Tensions escalated when Formosa's official spokesperson, Chu Xuơn Phơm, stated in an interview with VTC14 that *"sometimes, you [the Vietnamese people] have to choose between fish and shrimp or a modern steel factory"*. This public statement, urging citizens to "choose" between a steel plant and shrimp farming, further revealed the underlying pattern of domination (Ngo 2017; Fan, Chiu, and Mabon 2022). The remark not only reflected corporate arrogance but

also represented an attempt to redefine the meaning of life and economic value for local communities through a reductive and demeaning binary framework.

Trần Văn Lĩnh, an executive at Thuận Phước Seafood Corporation, described the statement as "highly irresponsible and foolish […]. I cannot accept the logic that producing one must come at the expense of the other. That's an answer from the late 19th or early 20th century when industrial countries colonized their colonies" (Ngo 2017).

Thus, FHS is not merely building a steel factory and occupying land—it is profoundly unsettling the social fabric of coastal communities. It marginalizes ways of life rooted in ecological sustainability and social solidarity, while seeking to replace them with an industrial logic that disregards the affective and cultural dimensions of people's living spaces.

Third, the project also redefines the relationship between humans and the environment. The sea—once regarded as *commons*, a shared living space collectively maintained and spiritually respected—was reconstructed as an object of exploitation and a channel for industrial waste. Ecological relations that were once reciprocal, culturally embedded, and regenerative have been replaced by exploitative and purely functional dynamics.

This shift reached a critical point on April 6, 2016, when a mass fish death occurred in the waters of Vung Ang. The pollution spread over 200 kilometers, crippling fisheries, causing food poisoning, damaging marine ecosystems, and killing a diver investigating the incident (Nguyen and Datzberger 2018). Within a month, the disaster had affected four central coastal provinces of Vietnam—Ha Tinh, Quang Binh, Quang Tri, and Thua Thien Hue—with approximately 140 tons of dead fish washing ashore. Additionally, nearly 50% of coral reefs along this coastline were reported to have suffered serious damage.

During the construction and early operational phases of the plant, Formosa committed 53 violations related to facility design, operations, and infrastructure. As a result, large quantities of industrial waste—including toxic chemicals and heavy metals—were improperly discharged into the sea. This release of toxic waste triggered one of the most severe marine pollution events in Vietnam's history, not only decimating marine life but also disrupting the long-term ecological balance (Hoang 2024). This incident reflects more than a technical failure—it illustrates how the industrial development paradigm promoted by FHS disregards ecological dimensions and treats the sea as a dumping ground rather than a living space. In Kyle Whyte's framework, this process represents a disruption of collective continuance—the destruction of a community's ability to sustain its social structures, cultural values, and ecological relationships. In this context, the social fabric, cultural meanings, and ecological relations that support community life are eroded by a colonial-industrial system driven by spatial accumulation and state power. Thus, Formosa is not merely an industrial project—it is a symbol of modern colonialism that silences lifeways that do not conform to the logic of capital.

4.2. Banners and Ecological Resistance

Within Vietnam's highly centralized political landscape that suppresses freedom of expression, the 2016 Formosa Movement unexpectedly opened up strong avenues for articulation through the widespread circulation of visual protest symbols across various regions. The protests that unfolded in multiple countries demonstrated the transnational dimension of this movement, reflecting cross-border solidarity and the capacity of the Vietnamese diaspora and global civil society networks to mobilize environmental issues as matters of public concern.

A total of 113 protest banners were identified across four main countries: Vietnam (48 banners), Taiwan (39), the United States (22), and Germany (4). These banners served as visual markers of diverse discourses of resistance, ranging from condemnation of the Formosa corporation, criticism of the Vietnamese government, to calls for ecological justice and the rights of coastal communities.

In terms of language, multilingual expression functioned as a key strategy for reaching both local and international audiences. In Vietnam, most banners were written in Vietnamese (35) and English (13). In Taiwan, messages were conveyed in Vietnamese (16), Mandarin Chinese (14), English (7), and bilingual Vietnamese–English (2). In the United States, the banners used English (13), Vietnamese (7), and 2 in mixed languages, demonstrating how diaspora communities helped bridge discourse with the American public. In Germany, the four banners were evenly split between Vietnamese and English, reflecting the global orientation of the messages voiced.

From the total 113 banners analyzed, their messages were classified into seven main thematic categories: *(1) Against Formosa, (2) I Choose Fish, (3) Claim Transparency, (4) Criticize the Vietnam Government, (5) People's Sufferings, (6) Environmental Justice, and (7) Claim Suing and Compensation.*

However, many banners conveyed more than one type of message, such as simultaneously criticizing Formosa and expressing disappointment with the Vietnamese government. As a result, the total number of messages recorded reached 119, even though the physical number of banners remained 113. This indicates that each banner functioned not merely as a visual symbol but as a complex medium for articulating multiple layers of political, ecological, and cultural discourse.

Table 1. An Overview of the Main Discourses of the 2016 Formosa Movement in Vietnam

Countries		Vietnam	Taiwan	USA	Germany
Number of Banners		48 banners	39 banners	22 banners	4 banners
Languages of Banners		35 Vietnamese 13 English	16 Vietnamese 7 English 14 Chinese 2 Mixed (Vietnamese & English)	7 Vietnamese 13 English 2 Mixed (Vietnamese & English)	2 Vietnamese 2 English
Banner Messages	Against Formosa	17	11	13	3
	I Choose Fish	1	2	1	0

	Claim Transparency	1	4	0	0
	Criticize the Vietnam Government	13	3	8	2
	People's Sufferings,	4	6	0	0
	Environmental Justice	10	7	4	0
	Claim Suing and Compensation	5	4	0	0
	Subtotal Banner Messages	**51**	**37**	**26**	**5**
Total Banner messages		**119**			

Source: Compiled from Various Sources by Authors

These findings show that the Formosa Movement not only fostered national ecological solidarity but also developed a transnational discourse of resistance, expressed through diverse visual, linguistic, and spatial strategies. The choice of language, protest locations, and message content underscores that this environmental disaster was not perceived merely as a local crisis, but as a symbol of the global failure of environmental governance—worthy of being challenged at multiple levels.

The message group "Against Formosa" emerged as the most dominant theme, with a total of 44 banners appearing across all regional contexts. This slogan reflects public outrage against Formosa as the principal actor behind a major ecological disaster that killed one diver, caused serious health issues for 15 others, and led to the death of more than 100 tons of wild fish and 170 tons of farmed fish and shellfish along 250 kilometers of Vietnam's central coastline. The damages destroyed the livelihoods of approximately 263,000 coastal residents, including 100,000 fishers, crippled the tourism sector, and devastated marine ecosystems such as coral reefs and water quality.

Through the lens of Kyle Whyte's theory, Formosa's actions can be understood as a manifestation of industrial settler colonialism—where modern development projects not only seize physical space but also displace local lifeworlds rooted in reciprocal relationships with the environment. In this context, marine pollution is not seen merely as an ecological incident, but as a form of structural violence systematically threatening the collective survival of coastal communities.

This discourse is powerfully reflected in the slogans displayed across protest banners. The messages frame Formosa's actions as an ecological crime of existential magnitude, even characterizing it as a form of genocide against coastal life. Examples of such visual messages include:

- *FORMOSA hủy diệt môi trường là tội ác (Formosa destroying Vietnam's ocean is genocide)*
- *Formosa, stop poisoning the Sea*

- *Formosa đầu độc nhân dân Việt Nam (Formosa is poisoning Vietnam citizen)*
- ***魚要乾淨海水，*** *台塑說清楚 !!! (Fish need clean water, Formosa, say clearly!!!)*
- ***無良台塑污染海洋 -*** *Infamous Formosa Polluted Ocean*

Through these messages, the public expressed that marine pollution is not merely an environmental issue, but a form of modern colonization over their living space.

The message group "I Choose Fish" emerged in a more specific context—as a direct response to a controversial statement by a Formosa representative, who claimed that people must choose between a healthy sea or a modern steel factory. This remark sparked national outrage and inspired slogans such as:

- *Tôi chọn tôm cá, không chọn gang thép (I choose fish, not choose steels)*
- *Tôi cần biển, cần tôm, cần cá, không cần sắt thép (Formosa – The process of killing Vietnamese citizens)*
- *Tôi chọn cá và môi trường (I choose fish and the environment)*
- *Tôi là người Việt Nam Tôi chọn cá - Formosa Get out of Vietnam (I am Vietnamese, I choose Fish, Formosa Get out of Vietnam)*

The statement reflects a colonial logic of forced trade-off, where ecological and cultural survival are seen as obstacles to industrialization and thus must be sacrificed. The message "I Choose Fish" subverts this logic by affirming that communities have the right to define their own collective continuance without being subjected to the false choices imposed by corporate-driven development.

Meanwhile, the message groups "Claim Transparency" and "Criticize the Vietnam Government" highlight the close relationship between the corporation and the state. The Vietnamese government, seen as slow and opaque in responding to the disaster, became a primary target of public criticism. Banners such as:

- *Cá cần nước sạch, dân cần minh bạch (Fish need clean water, citizens need transparency)*
- Công khai thông tin giám sát môi trường (*Release the environmental monitoring information)*
- 越南公開環境監測數據 – *(Vietnam, release the environmental monitoring information)*

This reflects what is known as recurring colonial structures, where the modern state plays a dual role—as both a facilitator of industrial investment and a denier of ecological crises. Instead of protecting its communities, the state becomes part of the machinery of contemporary colonialism that dismantles the collective life infrastructure of local populations.

This critique of the state is strongly reflected in the "Criticize the Vietnam Government" message group, which highlights the state's failure to manage foreign investment and prevent ecological disasters such as the FHS case. Several

slogans express public anger toward a government perceived to be more aligned with foreign corporations than with its own people, including:

- *Đừng vì Formosa mà phản bội nhân dân" (Don't betray citizens because of Formosa)*
- *Vì tương lai dân tộc, đề nghị chính quyền đóng cửa Formosa" (Because of the future of the nation, request the government close the Formosa plant*
- *Chọn nhân dân hay chọn Formosa (Choose citizens or Formosa)*

Some banners in the U.S. and Germany expressed even harsher criticism, portraying the Vietnamese government as complicit in environmental devastation—or even branding it a national betrayer—with messages such as:

- *Why kill citizens to serve Formosa?*
- *Tàn phá môi trường theo mô hình phát triển Trung Cộng là tự sát (Destroying the environment like China's communist government's development model is suicide.*
- *Vietnamese Govt + Formosa (Partners in Pollution)*
- *Đảng cộng sản Việt Nam + KCN Formosa = tội đồ dân tộc*
- *Bán nước (Sell the country)*

In addition, there were also banners condemning the repressive actions of state authorities in response to public protests, such as:

- *Phản đối công an Lộc Hà nổ súng, đàn áp dân (Protest the Loc Ha district's police opened fire to suppress citizens)*

Through those discourses, the protest movement not only identified Formosa as the polluter, but also revealed the state's complicity—through its policies, repression, and negligence—in perpetuating ecological colonialism in the modern era.

The "People's Sufferings" message group highlights the emotional and existential toll of the disaster. Banners such as:

- *Cá chết, người chết vì bị đầu độc (Fish died, people died by poisoning)*
- *Cá chết, dân sống với ai? (Fish died, who do we live with?)*
- *Cá chết, Người Chết, Chúng tôi vẫn đang chịu đau khổ - Fish Died, People Died, We Are Still Suffering*
- *# Đã mất cá sống (# Lose Living Fish)*

These messages represent a form of narrative repair—a communal effort to publicly articulate their ecological trauma. In Whyte's view, such suffering should not be seen as an individual incident, but rather as a collective rupture that disrupts the continuity of social, economic, and ecological relationships across generations.

The "Environmental Justice" group brings the issue of ecological justice into a broader realm of moral politics. Messages such as:

- *Justice 4 Fish*
- 拯救海洋拯救人類拯救下一代 - *(Save the ocean, save mankind save our next generation)*

- *Toàn dân Việt Nam cứu biển* (*All of Vietnam citizens save the sea)*
- Save the Fish

These messages represent demands for ecological restoration and recognition of the community's ecological values that have long been ignored. They show that people are not only seeking to repair environmental damage but also demanding acknowledgment of their right to continue a sustainable way of life.

In 2017, one year after the disaster, a new group of messages emerged under the theme "Claim Suing and Compensation," which highlighted the legal dimensions and the material responsibilities of the parties involved. Banners in this category emphasized the people's right to sue and receive compensation for the damages they suffered, such as:

- *Truy tố Formosa và những người liên đới trách nhiệm (Persecute Formosa and those having joint responsibility)*
- *Yêu cầu chính phủ Việt Nam khởi tố Formosa - Claim suing and compensation*
- 越南人民跨海訴訟 *(Vietnamese people's cross-sea lawsuit)*
- 我要賠償我要魚 *(I want compensation, I want fish)*

The above messages illustrate a transformation of the movement—from a moral expression to a legal campaign. However, within Whyte's framework, these demands are not merely about financial restitution, but also part of a broader struggle to restore the integrity of a community fractured by industrial colonialism. Even when the state began labeling the movement as *phản động* ("reactionary")—a term that essentially refers to political activities opposing the Vietnamese government—symbolic resistance emerged in the form of meaning reversal. One banner, for instance, read:

> 'Bức hại, bịt miệng nhân dân là phản động - Persecuting and gagging are reactionary'

Here, the term *phản động* is no longer directed at the people, but turned toward the state itself—highlighting that it is the state's repression that is truly subversive to the values of justice and humanity. This narrative demonstrates that the people's struggle occurs not only at legal and ecological levels but also within the contested terrain of meaning and language.

Finally, the presence of banners in three languages—Vietnamese, Mandarin, and English—as well as the emergence of cross-border solidarity, shows that this movement is both transnational and intercommunal. Diaspora communities in Taiwan, the United States, and Germany are not merely distant supporters, but active producers of discourse that expand the struggle for environmental justice into the global realm. Thus, the entire discourse embodied in the banners of the 2016 Formosa Movement should not be viewed as mere expressions of spontaneous anger, but as a complex form of political-ecological articulation—one that resists industrial settler colonialism and reaffirms the community's right to collective continuance.

This movement illustrates that, in conditions of political repression and ecological threat, symbols of resistance can forge new spaces for ecological sovereignty, transnational solidarity, and the restoration of community narratives long erased by the forces of the state and the market.

4.3. Cultural Symbolism and Political Critique

Beyond ecological articulation, many messages within the 2016 Formosa Movement banners carried culturally specific expressions and political idioms unique to Vietnam. Phrases such as *"tống cổ"* and *"cút"*, meaning "expel" and "get out," were used in slogans like *"Đưa Formosa ra tòa, tống cổ ra khỏi Việt Nam"* ("Sue Formosa, expel them from Vietnam") and *"Formosa, Cút khỏi Việt Nam"* ("Formosa, get out of Vietnam"). Everyday language was thus transformed into a vehicle of collective protest, heavily laden with nationalism and rejection of foreign industrial actors perceived to be polluting the homeland.

Beyond this forceful rhetoric, some banners also invoked emotionally resonant and culturally embedded phrases. For instance, *"Đảng ơi thương dân"* ("The Party, have affection for the people") used the vocative particle *"ơi"*, a tender, emotionally evocative term in Vietnamese that signals intimacy and deep appeal. By employing this expression, the protesters were not only critiquing the Party but also pleading for empathy from the Communist leadership toward citizens suffering from the disaster.

Another example is the banner *"Tôi yêu dân tộc, yêu tổ quốc. Formosa, hãy trả lại bình yên cho dân tộc tôi"* ("I love my people, I love my homeland. Formosa, give peace back to my nation"), where the word *"tổ quốc"*—a sacred term referring to one's homeland—was invoked to frame environmental protection as an act of patriotic devotion. The use of such culturally charged vocabulary helped galvanize public sentiment and frame the movement as a defense of national integrity.

Interestingly, several banners also employed metaphors drawn from state propaganda, which were then inverted to criticize the government itself. The phrase *"Dân là cá, Đảng là nước"* ("The people are fish, the Party is water"), originally a slogan promoting the harmonious symbiosis between the state and the people, was subverted in the banner *"Cá chết vì nước độc gây ra"* ("Fish die because of toxic water"). In this reversal, the water—symbolizing the state—becomes a source of death rather than sustenance, underscoring a deep betrayal of the social contract.

At the international level, particularly among the Vietnamese diaspora in Taiwan and the United States, protest banners carried politically sensitive phrases laden with historical significance. Many banners prominently featured reactionary terminology such as "Viet Cong" and the acronym "CSVN" (*Cộng Sản Việt Nam*, or Communist Party of Vietnam), both of which have evolved into symbols of authoritarianism and foreign collusion in the eyes of critical diaspora communities. Slogans like *"Không đồng lõa với Việt Cộng"* ("Do not collude with the Viet Cong") reflect deep disillusionment with the Vietnamese government, which protesters accused of shielding Formosa's environmental crimes. The term "Viet Cong," once a designation for communist revolutionaries, is here repurposed as a

metaphor for a corrupt and detached authoritarian regime. These expressions indicate how environmental protests have come to embody broader political discontent.

Mandarin-language banners, such as:

- 魚起企業 - 社會 責任拒 - 當越共幫兇 – *Poisonous Catch/Social Responsibilities Refusal /Accomplice with the Viet Cong*
- 魚起企業 - 社會責任拒 - 當越共幫兇 – *(Poisonous Catch)*

demonstrate how environmental activism is intertwined with political resistance. Everyday language and politicized idioms within the diaspora became tools to accuse the state of negligence—or even complicity—in environmental destruction, while simultaneously framing the movement as a form of nationalism and protection of the people from industrial and authoritarian threats. A banner like: *Walk for Victims of the Formosa Disaster & the Vietnamese Brutal Communist Regime* encapsulates this dual message, demanding ecological justice while also implicitly calling for regime change. Protesters in the diaspora explicitly described the Vietnamese government as "brutal," tying ecological injustice to broader histories of state violence and repression.

These messages reveal that transnational solidarity was not only rooted in environmental concern but also in the collective memory of political exile post-1975. The lingering trauma of forced displacement, authoritarian rule, and unaddressed historical wounds shaped the tone and intensity of these protests, positioning the Formosa disaster as both an environmental and political crisis.

Anti-China sentiment also emerged as a powerful driver behind the wave of protests against Formosa Ha Tinh Steel (FHS). Although FHS is legally a Taiwanese corporation, many Vietnamese citizens associated it with mainland China—a perception intensified by the escalating territorial disputes between Vietnam and China in the South China Sea. In this context, FHS was perceived not merely as a foreign investor but as a symbol of Chinese economic penetration and a deepening dependence on foreign powers (Altman-Lupu and Swanton 2024). Protest banners such as:

- *Formosa out of Vietnam, China stops the invasion of Vietnam; Democracy & Human Rights for VN*
- *No Formosa, No China*
- *Tàn phá môi trường theo mô hình phát triển Trung Cộng là tự sát* (Destroying the environment following China's communist development model is suicide)

clearly demonstrate how the ecological disaster was framed not only as an environmental or corporate failure, but also as a national security threat and a form of symbolic occupation.

Within the framework of industrial settler colonialism, the environmental damage caused by FHS was interpreted as part of a broader colonial process, not only extracting natural resources but also erasing the longstanding ecological and cultural relationships between local communities and their environments. Thus, resistance to FHS was not merely about demanding environmental justice, but

also an assertion of sovereignty and a rejection of foreign domination over Vietnamese land, identity, and autonomy.

Applying Kyle Whyte's framework, these symbolic messages represent a community's effort to uphold *collective continuance*, not only through the protection of marine ecosystems but also by restoring cultural metaphors, language, and identity disrupted by industrial colonialism. Banners functioned as symbolic spaces for preserving collective memory, voicing ecological trauma, and advancing demands that simultaneously address environmental, cultural, and ideological concerns.

In this way, the symbolic representations within the 2016 Formosa Movement reveal that the fight for environmental justice in Vietnam cannot be separated from its broader cultural and political context. The movement reflects the multilayered resistance of communities confronting contemporary forms of colonialism, where ecological degradation is entangled with national sovereignty, cultural survival, and political autonomy.

4.4. The Formosa Environmental Movement as a Political Threat

From the perspective of the Vietnamese government, the 2016 Formosa Environmental Movement was not merely an expression of ecological grievance, but rather constituted a national security crisis (Ortmann 2023). The state responded with a series of repressive measures aimed at preserving political stability under the single-party system. These included digital communication surveillance, crowd control, and criminal-political investigations—all intended to suppress a protest movement that had gained momentum both nationally and transnationally.

One notable repressive tactic was the framing of collective actions—particularly protests in coastal provinces such as Ha Tinh and Nghe An, as well as in major urban centers like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City—as violations of social order. Police adopted a zero-tolerance approach to demonstrations, often employing paramilitary forces, which, although distinct from the regular police, operate under state control. These forces executed systematic and professional tactics, including crowd dispersal, blocking access to protest sites, surveillance, and multi-layered security operations (Ngo 2017). For an authoritarian regime like Vietnam's, spontaneous public gatherings—even if peaceful—pose a perceived threat to the state's image of stability in the eyes of international observers and foreign investors. As such, even non-violent demonstrations are securitized and treated as risks to national security.

Moreover, the religious dimension of the movement was also problematized. A significant number of those affected by the disaster were Catholic, and some churches transformed Sunday rituals into peaceful protests, including substituting traditional hymns with anti-government songs. The state interpreted these actions as *inappropriate religious activities*, accusing them of disrupting *spiritual order* and deviating from the framework of *religious security*. Government narratives further accused church leaders of politicizing the faithful and inciting disobedience against state authority (Nguyen and Datzberger 2018),

revealing how religious spaces are tightly regulated within the ideological confines of the state.

Thus, an environmental movement that began as a response to an ecological disaster gradually transformed into a site of political articulation, prompting repressive state control. From Kyle Whyte's perspective, the state's response illustrates how industrial settler colonialism not only displaces communities from their ecological spaces, but also suppresses collective forms of resistance aimed at sustaining collective continuance. Public spaces, religion, and digital media are tightly monitored to prevent them from becoming platforms for alternative narratives of justice and ecological sovereignty. This underscores the deep tension between ecological security and state security within authoritarian contexts.

5. Conclusion

The Formosa Ha Tinh Steel (FHS) project exemplifies the logic of *settler colonialism* by systematically erasing the ecological and social relations of Vietnam's coastal communities. The sea—once a source of livelihood, cultural identity, and spiritual meaning—has been transformed into a toxic industrial space that no longer sustains life. This practice not only triggered ecological degradation, but also severed social networks and cultural legacies, reflecting a form of *lifeworld erasure* characteristic of industrial settler colonialism. Through Kyle Whyte's framework, the project's impacts—from ecological destruction to cultural disarticulation—can be understood as part of a colonial logic that treats coastal territories as legitimate spaces for domination, management, and exploitation for the sake of industrial capital accumulation.

In response, Vietnamese communities—both domestic and in the diaspora—have articulated their resistance through powerful symbolism, particularly in the form of protest banners. Inside the country, these expressions employed culturally resonant phrases rich in rhetorical meaning; abroad, protest narratives evolved into sharper political critiques, often viewed as subversive by the state. These banners reflect not only the transformation of environmental demands into political expressions, but also function as a medium of collective articulation, merging cultural identity, ecological justice, and critiques of both the state and corporate power. Thus, the Formosa case reveals that the Vietnamese people's struggle is not merely about environmental restoration, but also about defending *collective continuance* amid the pressures of industrial settler colonialism and authoritarian state repression.

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