

Film adaptation of Kim Thúy's *Ru* paints portrait of a welcoming Quebec

*With so much debate recently about immigration to Quebec, it's worth noting the warmth with which a Vietnamese family is greeted in *Ru*.*

Brendan Kelly • Montreal Gazette

Published Nov 27, 2023



Kim Thúy was certain Chloé Djangji (right, with Long Pham) was the perfect choice for the young protagonist in the film adaptation of her novel *Ru*. Photo courtesy of Immina Films

Kim Thúy has been touring the province with the film *Ru*, adapted from her award-winning novel of the same name, and the always-ebullient Thúy said she's been positively loving the experience.

Ru opened in cinemas across Quebec on Friday. Thúy has been on the road trip with director Charles-Olivier Michaud, lead actress Chloé Djandji, and producers André Dupuy and Marie-Alexandra Forget.

“It’s like a party,” Thúy said. “We’re on the same bus, spending 18 hours a day together. So it’s like summer camp. It’s great because I didn’t have the opportunity to live the experience of summer camps. I arrived here too late and we were too poor at that point. I was 10 and, of course, I could’ve gone to summer camp, but it was beyond our reach (financially). I had always dreamed of summer camps because of the movies. You see all these movies about summer camps. So I’m living it now at 55.”

Thúy arrived in Quebec at the age of 10 in 1979, her family part of the more than one million “boat people” who fled Vietnam after the fall of Saigon in 1975. They first arrived in a refugee camp in Malaysia and finally touched down in Granby. After a year there, they moved to Montreal.

Ru, the novel and film, is inspired by Thúy’s life story. It flashes back and forth between scenes of the family’s chaotic last days in Vietnam, the horrifying trip by boat out of Vietnam and their early days in snowy Quebec.

Since it was published in its original French version in 2009, it had often been said *Ru* was a novel that could not be made into a film because it’s such a non-linear narrative and everything is recounted through the eyes of a quiet 10-year-old girl, Tinh, clearly the alter ego of Thúy. But Michaud has done a stellar job, telling the story with evocative images and sparse dialogue. The screenplay was penned by veteran screenwriter Jacques Davidts, with much input from Michaud.



Author Kim Thúy at home in Longueuil in 2021. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

Djandji, who plays Tinh, was born in Vietnam to a Quebec father and Vietnamese mother, and she immigrated here three years ago. The actress, who is now 13, is spellbinding as Tinh, communicating so much just with her gaze.

“I fell in love with her at Second No. 10 when I saw the audition,” Thúy said. “She was just cleaning an imaginary carrot and she said one small sentence to the dad, maybe four or five words. And her Vietnamese was so cute, so perfect. Just the way she moved, her non-verbal was so loud. I could hear her hesitation and her fear. She had all these questions that she couldn’t ask her dad. And all that in 10 seconds. I knew it was her. I watched that audition probably 100 times. I called Charles-Olivier right away and I said, ‘You’ve got it. Don’t look for anyone else.’”

The cast also includes Patrice Robitaille, Karine Vanasse, Chantal Thuy and Jean Bui.

Michaud said what attracted him to the novel was its poetry.

“Ru is an anthropological novel and it’s also a photo book without photos,” Michaud said. “It’s a portrait of the world around Kim Thúy. People said it was a book that couldn’t be adapted into a film, but it’s funny because it’s really a novel of images, of textures, of smells. Of beauty and horror at the same time. I read Ru in 2009. It was before the buzz. It was before it sold all kinds of copies. I bought it at the Salon du livre. Her language is so precise and it’s not a story that’s told through dialogue.”

With so much debate recently about immigration to Quebec, it's hard not to notice one of the overriding themes of *Ru* is the incredible warmth of the reception this Vietnamese family receives upon their arrival here.

"I wanted the film to be a love letter to Quebec," said Michaud, whose previous films include *Snow* and *Ashes*, and *Exile*.

RELATED STORIES



Joy – and cafés – are the heart of author Kim Thúy's Montreal

Thúy recalled how when she first arrived, people would keep bringing them to the Granby Zoo and “by the end of the summer, the animals recognized us.”

That was just one of so many acts of kindness she experienced.

“One lady invited us to her house and it was a mobile home,” Thúy said. “She was poor, but she invited us in. She found a job for my father, to work at a school, helping the concierge. Everybody helped, not just those who had the means. Even those who had very little. People went out of their way to help us. I’m telling you this and I get goosebumps. I get so emotional. There was no cafeteria at our elementary school and so many people wanted to have us over for lunch. We never got to eat at home!”