

The Characteristics of Thai Movies and Factors Contributing to Becoming Widely Known in International Markets

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Abstract—Many Thai movies have been very popular domestically and internationally. Some movies were box office hits and receiving awards. However, there has not yet been research about how Thai movies can sell in international markets

The objectives of the research were 1) To analyze the characteristics of Thai movies that can sell to world audiences; 2) To investigate the factors making Thai movies into foreign markets. Thai film professionals were interviewed. Their ideas were analyzed to find out what factors contributing to Thai movies widely seen in worldwide markets. Nine foreign audiences were also interviewed to reveal what characteristics of Thai movies would be well accepted by the markets.

The results showed that major characteristics of Thai movies proving successful worldwide were cultural and exotic Thai movies, outstanding genres, well-known actors, music and songs. Factors contributing to global market were marketing, qualities of Thai movies, and financial support from the government.

Keywords—Characteristics, factors, international markets, Thai movies.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background and Objectives

DESPITE the beginning of film production in Thailand 85 years ago [1], the first period when Thai movies flourished was in 1947. Shortly after, Thai movie production declined. However, during 1987-1996 more genres of movies, such as horror, action and teen movies were produced. Since 1997 Thai movies have been successful both in box office and awards. Due to the competition of Thai film industry and the change of global orientation of the films produced, there are more new waves of film directors and film business management as well as advertisement to stimulate audiences. Historical films, comedies, and horrors films have increased in production; especially, there has been an increase in those that reflect the ideals of Thainess, which enables Thai audiences to appreciate nationalism [2].

Thai movies have been accepted internationally, such as *Tom Yam Kung* (The Protector), *Suriyothai* [2001], *Bang Rajan*[2000], *Nang Nak* (1999), *Iron Women* (2000), and *Bangkok Dangerous* (1999) [3]. In 2007, a gay film named “*Puen ku rak muang wa*” (Bangkok Love Story) was awarded the grand award across all categories in the 34th international Independent Film Festival in Belgium (in spite of being a

commercial film, it received the award in independent film festival)[4]. Recently, the wave of Thai films has spread over China as Mario Maorer was as popular as the movie he performed, “*Sing Lek Lek ti reak wa rak*,” (Teen Love Story) [5].

However, no other film companies in Thailand have taken seriously producing Thai commercial movies specifically for the international market. A director indicated that the movie business had its advantages; there was no research and no collecting data [6]. Thai movies are primarily for Thai audiences, and exporting films to the international markets is a by-product, or they are submitted for contests in international festivals. According to Film Industry Promotion Strategies by the Thai government (2012- 2016) (period 2), only Middle-Eastern countries are big markets. China, Japan and South Korea bought some Thai movies. Despite prominent and famous directors receiving awards, one particular problem is that Thai films lack stories and content that is consistent with international market interests [7]. Also there has been no research about the capacity of the Thai film industry in meeting international market needs. International audiences turn to various appealing films from many countries including Hollywood.

Therefore, through this research, the characteristics of Thai movies that may appeal more to international audience members, hence increasing their interest in seeing these films, were analyzed and factors that contribute to this appeal in Thai movies as a cultural industry in the world market were investigated.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the characteristics of Thai movies that can sell to international audiences.
2. To investigate the factors that contributes to Thai movies’ potential for entry into the international markets.

B. Research Method

In this research, Thai movies were discussed in the interviews with Thai producers, directors, marketing directors, and film critics, focusing on how Thai movies could sell in international markets. Professional key informants in the film area shared their knowledge on how to make Thai movies become more attractive internationally. Also, nine interviewees, representing male and female international audiences were interviewed. They were Chinese, Hong Kongian, Japanese, Philippines, American, Australian, Polish,

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and Irish. They often experienced viewing Thai movies in Thailand and in their countries.

The research method was based on documentary research of literature reviews and other previous research results which were referenced. The theories were used to frame the questions for in-depth interviews. The information and viewpoints gained from both key informants and viewers were analyzed to answer the objectives of the study.

II. DEFINITION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A. Elements of the Movie

The elements of the movie are used as framework in asking both key informants and audiences about the positive qualities of Thai films, thus meeting the objectives of the study. They are

1. Plot, script or content, and theme, (in this context might include culture as well)
2. Directors and actors are those who work in artistic areas.
3. Cinematography elements are those of angles, lighting and techniques of the film, such as editing techniques.
4. Music and soundtrack. This includes songs and any tune that enhances a film's appreciation [8].

B. The Concept of Production, Distribution and Exhibition

This includes the process by which films are produced, distributed, classified, promoted and marketed to audiences. The production elements deal with finance, preproduction, production, and postproduction. Most commercial films require investors from famous studios or private investment companies, the government, self-financing wealthy individuals, foreign sales and so on. However, the script, the producer, the director, the stars or any combination of these elements may appeal to audiences [9].

According to the authors [10], the job of the producer is to secure finance for the film and then to supervise its expenditure and develop a film from conception to exhibition. The exhibition outside the country possibly invites those producers abroad interested in international movies. Marketing (advertising, publicity and promotion working with other companies) is the key term and its strategies are used to promote and sell movies. Marketing does not only maximize box-office revenue but also reach the largest audiences possible. This idea includes multinational corporations with global networks [11]. These elements will be used in my research to ask the producers, the directors, the distributors how Thai movie can sell in the global market.

C. Film as Commercial Products

Movies are considered to be valuable commodities as Hollywood maintains its fame of movies as commercial products. Hollywood takes advantage of new opportunities in offering new technology [12]. People around the world can watch Thai movies in DVD at the same time, but only some Thai movies have no subtitles. Bandit Thongdee, a Thai professional director producer of Baa-Ram-Ewe Company (a

sub-company of Sahamongkol Film International) mentioned that if other countries bought Thai movies from his company, they had to sign contract in case they wished to sell as DVD [13]. This meant movies were cultural and commercial products in whatever forms they were placed in the market.

III. RESULTS

The analysis depended on the information gaining from in-depth interviews of those with professional Thai movie careers and the international audiences who watched Thai movie as well as the support from documents the researcher reviewed.

A. To Analyze the Characteristics of Thai Movies that can Sell to International Audiences

The characteristics of Thai movie that appealed to international audiences were as follows:

1. Movies with Thai culture and exotic things

These kind of movies would become popular among international audiences as Bandit Thongdee [14], 12 years as producer and director Prawit Tang-agorn [15], a movie critic with 25 years experience both stated that Thainess, Thai culture, and exotic things in the eyes of the world were exciting and became things they rarely saw, such as Thai traditional and modern ways of life, Thai Buddhism beliefs about karma and a female ghost returning to live with her human husband in the 1999 film *Nang Nak*, or Thai martial arts as Tony Jaa starring in *Ong-bak* (2003). One Australian male expressed that culture as Thai rural area and hill tribes could be sold to audience that have never seen it. A female Polish reported that she appreciated the cultural context of the movies she watched, but she was afraid the Thai context was mostly lost on people who had not been exposed to Thai culture and had only seen it through the prism of American movies. It took her quite a while to be able to appreciate it and she couldn't say she could completely understand it yet.



Fig. 1 Movies with Thai culture

2. Five outstanding genres of movies

Both film professionals and interviewees stated that five Thai film genres were attractive in international markets. Ghost stories and action movies are now in the forefront. First, Thai ghost films differ from those of the West. As in *Nang Nak* (1999), *the Shutter* (2004), *I Miss You* (2012), humans hurt ghosts first and then they return to revenge humans. In case of American ghost films as *the Exocist* (1973), when a girl is possessed by a mysterious entity, her mother asks two

priests to save her daughter. Or in *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2012), the president of the United States discovers vampires' planning to take over the United States. The president considers his duty to eliminate them [16]. According to Pantham Thongsang [17], a director producer for GMM Grammy Public Company Limited (GMM), the largest media conglomerate entertainment company in Thailand, ghost or horror movies were easy to understand and universal. Ghosts made many people scared, but they wanted to see exciting scenes. As in *Shutter* (2004), a female ghost returned for justice when she was not supposed to die from her boyfriend's carelessness. Nevertheless, a female Polish viewer mentioned that Thai horror genre differed quite a lot from what would be considered "horror" in most Western countries. She remembered watching *Buppah Rahtee* (2003) during a horror film festival in London and she remembered the entire audience getting utterly confused with the story. We did not know whether the film was supposed to be serious or funny.

The prominent type of Thai action movies were those showing exciting Thai boxing. Thai films did not use martial arts like Kung Fu as in Hong Kong or as in the American Film, *James Bond* which aimed to chase the antagonists. Thai Films designed the fighting scene as beautiful and exciting. It was a kind of Thai boxing mixed with acrobatic moves and combat, which related to real life and human action. *Ong-bak* (2003) is nonstop action and the fights were choreographed by Panna Rittikai. *Ong-Bak* or *Muay Thai Warrior* [18] was released in North America in 387 theatres. In its opening weekend, it grossed US\$1,334,869 (\$3,449 per screen), on its way to a US total of \$4,563,167. According to Bandit Thongdee, the film released in many countries such as Australia, Germany, France, United Kingdom, The United States, Italy, Japan, Hong Kong, Mexico, Singapore, and India. A male Australian pointed out that ghosts, violence and sex were attractive if there were English subtitles as these made the movies less complicated. A male Japanese asserted that Thai action movies were easy to understand and most Japanese know Muay Thai while a male American favored Thai actions with kickboxing. Muay Thai was embraced enthusiastically by practitioners. It was a kind of sport and self-defense. *Ong-Bak* inspired me to practice Thai boxing. Yongyuth Thongkongtoon [19], a film director and producer of GMM Thai Hub CO., Ltd., (GTH) stated that what he dealt with European markets, Italy, Spain, and England liked some Thai horrors and action movies if the stories were narrated simply and universally; that is, international audiences could understand the content. What was outstanding in that movie that would make audience demanding?



Fig. 2 *Ong-Bak*, an action outstanding Thai film in 2003

As the viewpoints of international audiences, another two genres that become appealing to them is a romantic story and a historical movie. One male Chinese student stated that he loved Thai love stories. It was different from his country. He had seen those movies in Beijing. They were *Fan Chan* (2003), *Love of Siam* (2007) and *First Love* (2010). Thai romantic movies were popular in his country. Especially in *Love of Siam* (2007), the characters were inspiring. In the story, the characters never gave up because they had dreams. In this gay romantic movie two young boys discovered unexpected feelings for each other. This gay teen love story became a critical success because it was a new content of Thai society and no other producer had yet made this kind of gay boy teen film and because it was not about sex. Everyone could see the film because it talked about family. According to a male Chinese, the movie received a warm welcome in China. The romantic comedy, *Love of Siam*, dominated Thailand's 2007 film awards season, winning the Best Picture category of all major events [20]. Another example of romantic comedy was that *Bangkok traffic love story* (2009). One female Filipino mentioned that romantic comedy was appealing to her. She was very particular about the characters because they were the main factor to her in what made a movie interesting or not. So, she watched Ken Teeradej [a Thai famous actor] and his performance in *Bangkok Traffic Love story*. A female Japanese expressed that it was a kind of new narration of love story that happened in the new setting as in a sky train in Bangkok. Love was magnificent and the conversations between the lovers were interesting. Sometimes, they agreed to each other and quarrelled next. She loved the actors. They were a good match.

However, a male Irish viewer and a female Hong Kong viewer considered Thai historical movies such as *Suriyothai* (2001) as appealing to them because they could gain historical perspective and Thai culture. Location, Thai culture and architecture were interesting and often beautiful. An Irish said that he was able to appreciate the hardship and adversity that many Thais had faced and overcome over the past ages. While a Hong Kong viewer stated that the cultures and the beauty of the ancient costumes were magnificent.

Thai art films were always well-recognized in international audiences and in film festivals. Prawit Tang-agsorn and Pantham Thongsang noted that Thai art films were well-liked by participants in international festivals. The story-telling by directors emphasizing on their authorial expressiveness was unique, new, strange as it departed from old traditions. Niche market audiences enjoyed escapism and tried to look for art in many aspects such as camera angles, acting, beauty, new presentations, and creativity. Next, audiences would wait and

follow new art films of those Thai famous directors continually. Examples of internationally well-received Thai art films were *Uncle Boonmee who can Recall his Past lives* (winner of the prestigious 2010 Cannes Film Festival Palme d'Or prize), *Tropical Malady* (2004), (winning a jury prize at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival) and *Syndromes and a Century* (2006) [21].

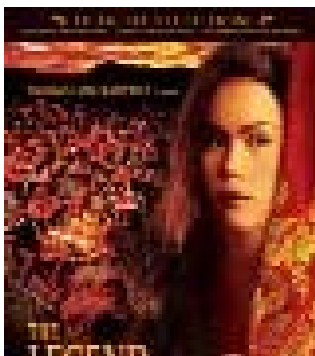


Fig. 3 Love of Siam (2007), Bangkok Traffic Love Story(2009), and Suriyothai (2001)

3. Well-known actors

Famous actors as Tony Jaa starring in *Ong-Bak* could attract international audiences as he appeared in his action films. His martial arts were inspired by Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li at temple fairs in his hometown, Surin [22]. However, Bandit Thongdee, Prawit Tang-agorn, Yongyuth Thongkongtoon and Panthan Thongsang described that no other Thai famous actor was in the US film except him. Tony Jaa performed in US *Mission Hunter 2* and *Mortal Kombat*

Annihilation (1996). If Tony continued his performance Like Jackie Chan and Jet Li, he could become a renowned actor in Hollywood.



Fig. 4 Tony Jaa, a leading actor in *Ong-Bak* (2003)

From key informants' viewpoints, Thai directors would not become famous in the eyes of the audience but would be known in film festivals such as in Cannes, France. International audiences remembered the movie and the outstanding star instead. Stars or actors in some countries as England, Korea, Hong Kong, and Hollywood could be sold with the movies but not really in Thai movies.

Nevertheless, Pantham Thongsang revealed that only Thai famous art film directors such as Apichartpong Weerasethakul and Eakchai Uekrongtham whose movie, *Beautiful Boxer* (2003) was awarded Best Feature Film from Toronto International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, Best Film from Milan International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, and Outstanding Film from GLADD Media Awards [23]. Both directors were recognized because the audiences of art films, especially in many film festivals would follow the artistic and aesthetic styles of their direction.

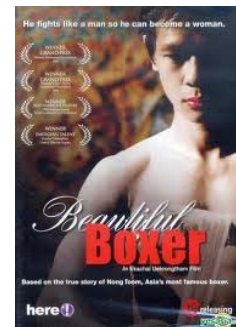


Fig. 5 Asanee Suwan, a professional boxer as Nong Thoom in *Beautiful Boxer* (2003)

4. Music and song

All Key informants agreed that Thai music and songs showed Thai tunes and audiences might recollect them if they watched Thai movies. Music and songs were not as significant as Thai stories. It was the way to promote movies, not the selling points. If people knew the music, it might be known unintentionally. Yongyuth Thongkongtoon stated that song and music would be used for public relations of the movie. However, a female Hong Kong viewer revealed that the songs in *Suriyothai* were fit since the songs made her think she was

the warrior with brevity. All four characteristics above could make Thai movies appealing to universal.

B. To investigate the factors that contributes to Thai movies' potential for entry into the international markets.

The factors that contributed to Thai movies' potential for entry into the international markets were as follows.

1. Marketing

According to Yongyuth Thongkongtoon and Pantham Thongsang, marketing played the significant role. The first way was participating in film festivals, such as Busan international Film Festival, Okinawa International Movie Festival, and the Toronto International Film Festival. The festivals served like a free market where movies were shown. International film makers came and selected the kinds of movies they were interested in buying. Ghosts, horrors, and action movies were popular in Asian countries such as Korea, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. Probably, they were the favorite genres for them. However, in Cannes and Berlin Film Festivals, Europeans like various genres and all brands of outstanding content that they had never viewed.

Second, film distributors, or individual companies, or the owners of the movies contact Thai film companies by themselves. They bought both commercial movies and art movies. A distributor might contact Thai movie companies directly or through theatrical exhibitors and other sub-distributors. In this case, they bought both famous Thai movies and art films.

Third, international movie companies heard from a Thai movie Fan club in their countries or from social networks, such as the case of Indonesia, the companies contacted the producer especially for a horror movie like *Laddaland* (2011) directed and co-written by Sophon Sakdaphisit. Yongyuth Thongkongtoon remarked that this film was favorite probably because the story talked about middle class people and family's responsibility.

Bandit Thongdee noticed that Sahamongkol International Film would observe what country liked culture and action. In Thailand, action films might not gross high income but the company would focus on European and American markets. So far, many countries had still liked action, horror, romance, and art movies from the Thai market. However, if Thai movies presented deep Thai cultures, the movies could not be accepted due to the difficulty of the story.

2. Remaining qualities of the movies

Yongyuth Thongkongtoon stated that Thai producers need to keep their standard of making movies. In this sense, he considered that the content of the movie must be universal and kept in mind that Thai movie positioning should be contemporary for international audiences. Producers had to make the story clear and made the film elaborate. A ghost story needed to make audiences afraid of the darkness and shocking sounds, for example. Different types of Thai ghosts such as spirits of the banana trees or Takien (the haunted trees) might be too difficult for international viewers. He believed that "Thai ghosts need to be narrated simply as we see ghost

movies, and we are terrified by the invisible." One female Polish viewer commented that "Thai comedies can be particularly hard to sell to foreign audiences because much of the humor is language-related and because they utilize a number of devices, such as cartoonish sound effects which are particularly alienating to non-Thai viewers." In this sense, some Thai comedies lacked the universal language and might not be based on the quality of world comedies. Nevertheless, Prawit Tang-agsorn, a profession film critic confirmed that the quality of a Thai movie was what the producer wanted to convey his or her intention through significant story, not considering too much on box office; otherwise, the film would lose the values of its own identity. Film makers should find new ways and quality was possible. The idea was close to Pantham Thongsang's opinion in that at present Thai movies lacked new possible genres such as dramas and adventures.

3. Financial support from Thai Government

Pantham Thongsang disclosed that only two countries supported by government and movie funding in Asia were South Korea and Malaysia. Korean film makers developed films for the competition with foreign films. Korean government got involved with film industry, and this resulted in Korean films' expanding further into international market. According to Milim Kim, the policies to support film industry by Korean government went back to 1970s. Funds profiting from foreign film import were used to support domestic films through the Korean Motion Picture Promotion Corporation [24]. Although Thai government planned some strategies for Thailand as the Asian Hub of movie and digital content, those plans never came true. As governments changed, plans changed as well. This conformed with Ruksan's research (1999) [25], which pointed that budget for film making was not sufficient and producers lacked cooperation from the government. Thai government did not help with marketing abroad and there were no government agencies in other countries to help support Thai films. Pantham Thongsang considered that Thai producers could not risk investing a large amount of money for making a movie. There were a lot of skillful Thai film makers but they chose to produce low-cost movies which would guarantee high box offices such as comedies, horrors, and romantics. This signified Thailand now lacked various genres such as dramas, suspense movies, children movies, animations, political movies and so on.

IV. DISCUSSION

In this research, it is found that most foreign audiences loved to see Thai action movies, especially male viewers who viewed violence more than women while most women enjoyed romantic contents. Although there was one female audience cited that the song of the battle scenes made her identify with the hero and challenged fighting with the bad characters in the movie. On the other hand, a romance movie was not necessary for only women since love was the big issue of humans. This might probably be the case of general audiences of the world.

For factors leading Thai movies to more possible world market, marketing played a significant role as it enabled viewers to learn more about Thai movies. Qualities of the

films must be universal. Support from Thai government was necessary since one quality movie required budget. Otherwise, mobilization of Thai films would be slow and could be behind other nations.

V.CONCLUSION

The research aimed at examining the characteristics of Thai movies and factors contributing to Thai movies to becoming widely known in International markets. The research is just a beginning of a focus on the Thai film industry which also finds ways to promote its products outside the country. This invites other Thai movie researchers to look far in the future for how Thai films will continue to be known, especially in different ways besides Thai boxing, and ghost stories. There are countless Thai cultures to be observed and various genres of movies to be challenged. Thai producers need to carry on their intention in making Thai movies as they wish no matter how difficult it is to obtain a sufficient budget. Thai filmmakers should examine how other countries gather budgets and movie funding and bring into use. Thai Researchers should go to international markets and film festivals to find out more regarding the potential of Thai films in a wider market.

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