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Reincarnating Mae Nak: The contemporary cinematic history of a Thai icon

ABSTRACT

Working from the premise that Nonzee Nimibutr's Nang Nak (1999) marked a major turning point in the discourse surrounding Thailand's well-known ghost Nak, this article offers a case study of more recent remakes of the narrative both as potentially revelatory of certain key meanings that now reside in the figure and as illustrative of a number of tendencies of the contemporary Thai film industry – indeed, offering a kind of longitudinal view of industrial shifts over the past fifteen years. Recent images of Nak have ranged from dangerous (and eroticized) to heroic, and the films themselves have run the gamut from low-budget exploitation, to animation, to a blockbuster comedy.

KEYWORDS

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INTRODUCTION

Thai cinema offers few figures as iconic as the ghostly Mae Nak, a young woman who has died in childbirth and returned from the grave (often with the deceased baby in tow) to be with her husband in numerous film productions over the course of decades.¹ The figure has gained currency in recent Thai cinema in particular owing to Nonzee Nimibutr's 1999 version of the tale under the title *Nang Nak*. *Nang Nak* not only achieved unprecedented success for a Thai film at home and abroad, it also helped spur a new rise in

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2010 International Seminar and Screening of Thai Cinema held at the Shanghai Theatre Academy,

China on 16–21 April 2010. That version subsequently appeared in the conference proceedings (Knee 2011), and then in Chinese translation (in Zhang and Raksarn 2011).

2. For a discussion of two early Mae Nak-themed films see Ng in this issue.

commercial feature film-making in Thailand, in particular in the horror genre (for which Thailand soon developed an international reputation) – and among these new Thai horrors was, not surprisingly, a number of additional versions of the Nak legend.

Working from the presupposition that *Nang Nak* marked a major turning point in the discourse surrounding the Nak figure, this article offers a case study of more recent remakes of the narrative both as potentially revelatory of certain key meanings that now reside in the figure and as illustrative of a number of tendencies of the contemporary Thai film industry – indeed, offering a kind of longitudinal view of industrial shifts over the past fifteen years. My approach somewhat concurs with the observations of a number of theorists who have suggested that remakes constitute an effort to ‘get it right’, to bring out the elements of real significance from an earlier iteration of a tale (Braudy 1998; Konigsberg 1998; McDougal 1998); but at the same time it recognizes that just what is ‘right’ is itself something that will be constantly in flux according to industrial and cultural contexts of production and reception, and that the discourse of Nak is a continuously shifting field through history. Indeed, the common impulse in remake studies to refer back to a single originating text as an ultimate reference point is particularly problematic in the case of Nak, given that there are many prior versions of the tale, in both film and other media (Sukawong and Suwannapak 2001: 52–55).² I want to stress, then, that I am using the terms ‘remake’ and ‘adaptation’ fairly loosely here, even though 1999’s *Nang Nak* is a key point of reference. Again, I am not interested in how ‘faithful’ recent texts are to any one original model, but rather wish to explore the dynamics of the flow of various discourses by way of these texts; and in this emphasis I take my cue from such recent theorizations as those of James Naremore (2000a) and Robert Stam (2000), who stress that the exploration of a ‘dialogics of adaptation’ is more germane than a search for any supposed point of origin.

A number of writers have already discussed both the importance of *Nang Nak* to the renaissance of Thailand’s film industry and its various thematic overtones (Fuhrmann 2009; Ingawanij 2007; Knee 2005; Panyasopon 2003; see also Wong 2000 for a background on the figure more broadly); therefore, I will just briefly touch on this background by way of an introduction to this analysis of subsequent adaptations. Nimibutr’s film significantly positioned itself to travel well on the international festival circuit by taking a different tack than earlier Thai horror films, which usually mixed horror with slapstick humour and paid little consideration to production values (as low-budget works aimed for local audiences). In contrast, Nimibutr chose to approach the tale ‘seriously’, as it were, doing away with the genre’s typical comicality, paying attention to technical finesse in production and putting the effort into researching historical detail (Davis 2003). While the film engages with the essential elements of the Nak discourse – retaining the basic details of the usual plotting and including the de rigueur scenes of Nak reaching with a long extending arm to retrieve a lime she has dropped through the floorboards of her house (the moment at which her husband Mak typically becomes aware of her ghostly identity), and of a shaman and/or Buddhist clergy carrying out rituals to rid the village of her violent and vengeful presence – certain new dramatic emphases also appear, with Nak now becoming perhaps a more sympathetic than horrifying character owing to the suffering she goes through for her love.

Yah Nark (2004)

If Nimibutr's version of Nak could be understood as heralding and setting the standard for a new level of sophistication and technical finesse in Thai film-making, a new attainment of world-class standards for a global film festival audience, the first remake to be discussed here, *Yah Nark* (Tunkamhang, 2004), could be said to represent the opposite end of the industrial and audience spectrums: the film is a direct-to-video feature made at a time of a rise in such productions (Chaiworaporn and Knee 2006: 67), shot in a low-budget 3D process, and aimed directly for a popular local audience. While *Nang Nak* includes both some brief scenes of gore and some discreet scenes of sexual intimacy, *Yah Nark* appears to play up both gore and sex (within the parameters permitted by the Thai film-making context) as a selling point. Where the former goes to pains to render details of historical setting and features carefully controlled acting performances, the latter is able to largely sidestep the need for historical settings (helpful when working on a limited budget) and features extremely exaggerated performance styles of a sort more familiar to viewers of Thai television shows.

Yah Nark, like *Ghost of Mae Nak* (Duffield, 2005) after it, manages to bring the Nak story into a contemporary setting not by having the tale of Nak and her lover occur at a later historical period, but by focusing instead on a different modern couple that in some way recalls the couple of Nak and Mak, and with whom the ghost of Nak (having presumably having already experienced the well-known 1860s narrative events) now interacts. The two main protagonists of *Yah Nark* are a couple, Nat and Mak, who are playing Nak and Mak in yet another film being made of the Nak legend. The episodic plot sets Nat up as an emotionally and mentally unstable woman who has been picked up from the streets and made the star of a new film of the Nak story by a lecherous producer who eventually follows through on his attraction to her by administering a drug so that he can rape her. Nat, for her part, is in love with her co-star, with whom she has a brief romantic relationship. When she learns that he is also seeing other people, however, an upset Nat prays at the real-world shrine to Nak, and before long those she feels have wronged her start to meet unpleasant deaths – perhaps owing to her being newly imbued with supernatural powers and/or possessed by the spirit of Nak, and in some cases perhaps owing to the direct intervention of Nak's ghost. In keeping with the narrative form of many Nak adaptations, the producer, the director, another crewmember and a rival in love all die from at least partially supernatural forces, and at the film's culmination, a crazed Nat, having been told by Mak that he wants to discontinue their relationship, lures him on to the film set where she manages to remove his heart so that she can verify its faithfulness to her.

Even by the usual standards of Thai popular cinema for the domestic market, this film seems to have a fairly loosely structured narrative: it often provides scant detail for its various subplots, relatively vague thematic emphasis, and, most unusually, little sense of any character or characters singled out as key, positive protagonists with whom we are supposed to identify and be concerned about. Nat might be the most likely candidate for this as we spend most of our time with her and learn that as a child she suffered – and now still continues to suffer – from abusive parents. But we learn little else about her background. Her mental stability is questioned from the opening shot of the film (where she appears to talk to herself about how great an actress

she is), and, despite the fact that she is repeatedly victimized, she is also made out to be the main villain and main source of horror in the piece. There is therefore considerably less sympathy for her than for her counterpart in the 1999 film, though her positioning as largely horrific does have precedence in earlier (pre-1999) versions of the tale. But Mak himself also has little appeal as a protagonist: while he is not shown as being particularly cruel or spiteful towards Nat, little opportunity is taken to provide him with any character development in the film's short (70 minute) running time. We therefore do not know much about his personality or attitude save for the fact that he is somewhat of a 'ladies' man' with a desire to be free of his relationship with Nat. Nor, indeed, does the film have any character who emerges as a clear hero or protector, especially given that few are really aware of the dangerous presence of Nak's spirit working in collusion with Nat as the film has no equivalent to the shamans and monks of earlier versions.

Such narrative gaps, however, are not entirely surprising when one considers that the film is more concerned with other sets of industrial conventions than those of the theatrical Hollywood feature film – more specifically, those of the direct-to-video film and of the resurgent Thai horror genre. The particular imperatives of these forms are not classical plot construction, careful character development, and thematic consistency and complexity (although these can and do sometimes occur, especially in the horror film), but rather moments of sensational spectacle, generally of a lurid, salacious and/or horrific kind.

The logic of the construction of *Yah Nark*, then, is such that it seeks out the elements with the strongest exploitation potential in the Nak narrative. These it finds in part in the 1999 version, with its focus upon Nak seeking horrific revenge on those she feels has wronged or betrayed her. In her alignment with Nak, Nat seeks vengeance in a similar way, which the film makes sure to detail in a bloody fashion, as when a young man slips on a bar of soap and bleeds to death, or when the director is killed by a large shard of glass from an exploding microwave oven piercing his throat. *Yah Nark* also chooses to utilize the focus upon wifely possessiveness to develop themes involving sexual jealousy and intrigue. Thus, there are many sensationalistic scenes built around sexuality, as where Nat spies upon Mak having sex with a highly desirous partner, or kills a rival's lover as the rival waits impatiently for sex, or strokes a bound Mak's bare chest and abdomen lasciviously before cutting out his heart. *Yah Nark* therefore gains in sensationalism by bringing into its narrative elements that are somewhat alien to the Nak discourse but fully at home within the Thai (and indeed pan-Asian) horror film as it developed subsequent to the *Nimibutr* film. Thus, in this version of the tale, unlike the 1999 film but much like many subsequent Thai horror films, the main source of horror comes from an angry and powerful female spirit who seeks revenge for sexual abuse – in this case abuse both as a child (in rape by her stepfather) and as an adult (the aforementioned rape by the producer). The emphasis on highlighting sensationalistic set pieces (rather than focusing on developing an interconnected narrative causal chain) resonates in the film's very formal properties as well: many of the scenes are free-standing – not causally motivated by what comes directly before or after – and open with a fade in and close with a fade out. For about a third of the scenes, moreover, a '3D' logo comes up on-screen, a detail that both alerts the viewer to put on the supplied 3D glasses and simultaneously marks the scene out as visual spectacle.

On one level, perhaps what is most distinctive and instructive about this version of the Nak tale, and what most strongly differentiates it from the 1999

version, is its lack of a clear definition of what Nak as a figure actually stands for and, by implication, the corresponding Thai national values she represents. This is not to say that the film disregards the figure's association with a strong and faithful love of husband and child, but that the status or value of that devotion is significantly unclear due to its association with and articulation through the troubled figure of Nat. The film never makes particularly clear to what extent Nat is supported by (if indeed not possessed by) Nak in her claims and her actions, and in some scenes it is also not clear if what we are seeing is the (possibly possessed) body of Nat or the apparition of Nak's ghost. Indeed, in some of the scenes where Nat explicitly invokes the value of the faithful and strong love Nak represents in discussing her own relationship to the modern Mak, said values are made to seem completely out of place, both because, in her mental confusion, Nat does not realize such feelings for Mak are not mutual and because, in the contemporary Thai social context as the film represents it, such values of monogamy and fidelity are utterly outmoded, out of keeping with the actual sexual practices of her peers. Nat herself explicitly suggests a basic difference from Nak in her perspective on relationships in the climactic scene of Mak's murder: she repeatedly invokes the eternal nature of Nak's love but then critically questions 'why Nak did not take her husband [to death] with her the first time', as Nat now prepares to do.

Along with the articulation of the association between Nak and the notion of a woman's undying, faithful love, the film also plainly references the association between Nak and notions of dangerous female possessiveness or inappropriate attachment, especially in love. In the more traditional Nak narrative this takes the form of the wife's wanting to retain her worldly attachment to Mak, even after her death, thus transgressing Buddhist interdictions about such attachments. In *Yah Nark*, however, it takes the form of Nat's obliviousness to Mak's loss of interest in her and her insistence on keeping the relationship eternal even after he has asked to break it off. The strongest visual correlative of this attachment – the image of Nak's unnaturally extended arm reaching for a dropped lime – is logically retained in this version and even redoubled in a fashion that indicates self-consciousness about its thematic weight: the image is first shown in its classic form as Nat and Mak shoot the scene for the film-within-the-film, but it is significantly alluded to again later on, just prior to the scene of Mak's mutilation, as Nat's arm is seen ominously reaching for Mak's shoulder as he looks for her in the forest near the film set.

One of the most striking elements of this particular enactment of the classic arm extension scene is the level of restraint with which it is executed, given the film's lack of subtlety on other matters: the scene is here carried out with no prosthetics, no special effects save for the 3D cinematography. The effect is rather achieved solely with suggestive camera angles and editing, and is followed by an unsettled reaction from Mak just before the director calls to 'cut'. The fact that the film achieves the effect in this understated and naturalistic way allows it to continue its characteristic blurring of the natural and supernatural alluded to earlier and suggests that such blurring may indeed be part of a self-conscious strategy of obfuscation. We are again forced to wonder: was Mak's look of disturbance part of his acting (as the fictive Mak) or his actual response to what he saw. Was the woman extending her arm the actress Nat, the 'real' ghost of Nak, that ghost as portrayed in the film-within-the-film, or some amalgam of the three? Were we being shown the pro-filmic event (having been unexpectedly taken over by the supernatural) or its filmic product (intentionally representing the supernatural)?



Figure 1: *The Grand Guignol* finale to *Yah Nark*: Are we seeing Nat or Nak?

3. See Fuhrmann (2009) for an in-depth analysis on the problematics of female sexual desire especially with respect to the 1999 version.

But while clearly articulating nationally inflected values about female devotion and fidelity (and about the need to give up worldly desires) is not the key focus of *Yah Nark*, a theme that it does share with the 1999 narrative, one taken up even more strongly in subsequent Thai horror, is that of the fear regarding female agency and, in particular, female sexual desire.³ The 1999 incarnation of Nak, as well as the earlier ones, posed a clear affront to largely patriarchal arbiters of power in her refusal to adhere to Buddhist precepts, to give up attachments, and to respect the division between the world of the living and the dead, and resolution of the narrative requires her to accede to this order by relinquishing her grasp upon her husband. *Yah Nark* amplifies and highlights what is plainly a fear of female sexual desire within the Nak scenario, not only through images of strong female sexual volition that punctuate the film (such as those mentioned above), but particularly in its climactic scene so evocative of the female rape of a man, where the bound Mak is lasciviously stroked before being forcibly penetrated (with a knife) with the express purpose of cementing him into a family unit (Figure 1).

This emphasis upon the most lurid valences of the Nak discourse is not entirely surprising, given the film's mode of production and generic framework: these are precisely the elements that can provide the most sensationalistic scenes, as the form calls for, while also overlapping with themes of female abuse and subsequent ghostly revenge prevalent in much contemporaneous Asian horror. The corresponding de-emphasis of themes of Thai moral values and national identity, on the other hand, would appear to support May Ingawanij's observations about how such themes in the 1999 version are a direct function of that work's positioning as a 'heritage film', one that self-consciously produces images of Thainess for a global audience (2007). With the shift to a primarily local direct-to-video audience, that particular ideological impetus attenuates.

But what is also lost in *Yah Nark*, and arguably renders it a politically regressive text, is any clear perspective on the issues of modern sexual mores and Thai female identity to which it alludes. Nat's perspective on monogamy and fidelity is made to appear laughably (and then dangerously) archaic and out of touch, and yet the film does not in any way clearly position the modern-day sexual promiscuity of her peers as a more humane and reasonable alternative. Nor, though, does it clearly criticize such sexual promiscuity as hurtful or amoral. Also troubling is that the film initially hints it is Nat's own history of abuse that leads her to want to adhere to relatively conservative sexual values, but then goes on to position her as a mentally unstable and violent oppressor of the object of her own desires, thus effectively blurring any strains of patriarchal critique.

Ghost of Mae Nak

The second adaptation of Nak to be discussed here, *Ghost of Mae Nak*, can only be loosely described as a Thai film, despite its designation as such on both the Tartan Asian Extreme DVD cover and the Internet Movie Database website. The film makes use of a well-known Thai plot premise and was filmed in Thailand, and in the Thai language, with Thai stars and a largely Thai crew, and was even partially funded from Thai sources. Crucially, however, the film's writer and director was British, and other key creative personnel were westerners as well; therefore, despite the film's appearances, it becomes highly problematic to characterize it as simply a Thai film. And yet, while the complication of the film's national identity is particularly extreme in this case (a 'Thai' film with a non-Thai writer/director), the film nevertheless can be taken as pointing to significant broader trends in the globalization of the Thai film industry at its particular moment of production. The film evidences, first of all, the growing visibility of Thai film culture in a global arena (in that its western makers were both aware of its Thai horror premise and rightly convinced of the economic viability of an internationally distributed, western-directed take on this premise) and, second, the development of a local Thai film-making industry geared to provide production services for film-makers from other countries (a service industry that the Thai government had been making some effort to promote).⁴

Again, as noted earlier, this updating of the Nak narrative involves a modern-day couple with parallels to Nak and Mak, with whom Nak becomes involved. The script's explanation of the reasons for this involvement is ultimately quite convoluted and confused; indeed, if *Yah Nark* could be faulted for a paucity of narrative information, *Ghost of Mae Nak* suffers equally (if not more) from a surplus, with its relatively inexperienced scriptwriter/director including all manner of subplots and utterly improbable coincidences and twists (which are then expanded still further in the repeated use of the tired horror film convention of horrific plot developments that are ultimately nothing but a protagonist's dream). In this film, the protagonists, who happen to be named Nak and Mak, initially come to the attention of the spirit of Mae Nak in their youth when they play at a playground that happens to have been built over her burial ground. The spirit takes a particular interest in the pair, it seems, because she feels moved by their love and finds it similar to that which she had for her own Mak. Years later, when they buy an old house on the eve of their wedding, it turns out to be the house Mae Nak had lived in, and the antique brooch Mak buys as a wedding present for his bride turns out to

4. An overview of the substantial production service industry, along with statistics for the growing number of foreign productions in Thailand from the time of *Ghost of Mae Nak* onwards, can be found at the website for the government-run Thailand Film Office.

5. A qualification that could be made here is that the preoccupation with retrieving the forehead bone does have *some* thematic continuity with earlier versions inasmuch as the object could be said to represent not only Nak's property, but also her physicality and female sexuality, that which authorities have seen fit to contain (Fuhrmann 2009: 234–236); such overtones, however, are not emphasized in *Ghost*.

be none other than the bone fragment that had been taken from Mae Nak's forehead after the high priest had put her to rest. Mae Nak begins haunting the couple and also appearing before some of those with whom they have dealings. Mak is then injured when hit by the van of some criminals who have robbed from their house, and he goes into a coma apparently in part because of the influence of Mae Nak. With the help of a medium, the modern-day Nak determines that her ghostly namesake wants to have her forehead bone returned to her skeleton, and she therefore eventually contrives to retrieve the skeleton and place the bone in the hole in its forehead, after which Mak emerges from his coma.

In *Ghost* just as in *Yah Nark*, Mae Nak's most immediate (and explicitly articulated) thematic association is with strong and enduring love, the film opening with the modern Nak's grandmother telling the audience (in a line that recalls the opening voice-over narration of Nimibutr's *Nang Nak*) that 'The legend of Mae Nak is a tale of true love that Thai people have been telling for generations', and going on to indicate that her ghost will return one day 'to find the true love that she once had'. Even in these opening lines, then, there is already the sense not only of loving devotion but also of a tenaciousness that can extend even past death. The negative and dangerous overtone to this sense of tenaciousness is made clear later on when the grandmother tells the story of Mae Nak to her modern-day namesake, who (most improbably) is unfamiliar with it. The grandmother's story is accompanied by a flashback that very much recalls the period look of Nimibutr's film (and aligns with the events as narrated therein) and therefore naturally could be understood as a form of allusion to it for the Thai audience familiar with the local blockbuster. The grandmother's brief account of the history puts particular emphasis on Mae Nak's visiting violent vengeance upon the villagers who were trying to prevent her posthumous relationship with Mak. When the present-day Nak asks why she needed to act in this way, the grandmother explains, 'She wanted to keep the true love she had. Her love for Mak was so overwhelming it became an obsession, turning to anger and revenge'.

But while the grandmother puts particular emphasis on the danger and obsessiveness of Mae Nak's love, it is not entirely clear how and why these themes are related to the present-day narrative. The importance she places upon love is used to explain why the modern-day Nak and Mak attract the original Nak's interest, but it is not at all clear if we are supposed to think that she is jealous of that love or possessive of the modern Mak (though one sequence that turns out to have been a dream does suggest this and she also appears to put the modern Mak's life in danger at times). Rather, Mae Nak's primary interest turns out to be getting back that forehead bone – an interest alien to previous versions of the Nak narrative (and not strongly related to their themes), but much in keeping with many ghost narratives of the West and Asia alike: the motif of the deceased returning to complete unfinished business – to retrieve something lost or reveal and redress a perceived wrong or have a body properly laid to rest – has long been a stock in trade of such narratives, recent well-known examples including *The Sixth Sense* (Shyamalan, 1999) and *Gothika* (Kassovitz, 2003) from the United States, *Ringu/Ring* (Nakata, 1998) and *Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara/Dark Water* (Nakata, 2002) from Japan.⁵

This convergence with international horror film tendencies is not surprising, given that the film was made by a western writer-director with an international audience in mind – and indeed it is only one of several ways that



Figure 2: Nak figured as monstrous in *Ghost of Mae Nak*.

Ghost of Mae Nak works to align the Nak discourse with international (and in particular Hollywood) horror conventions. Perhaps most notably, the film is now built around elaborate, gory set pieces, featuring the deaths of various people caused by the ghost of Mae Nak, in a structure reminiscent of the preordained deaths of a wide range of characters in the then-recent Hollywood films *Final Destination* (Wong, 2000) and *Final Destination 2* (Ellis, 2003). Mae Nak herself is turned into more of a creature of horror than an ambiguous (and sometimes pitiful) ghost: in the vast majority of scenes, she no longer seems to have the power of speech, but rather snarls animalistically instead, the snarling accompanied by a CGI-produced distortion of her features (Figure 2).

Again, the effort to internationalize elements of the Nak narrative is hardly unusual – indeed, even Nimibutr’s 1999 version was, in a different way, concerned with rendering the Nak discourse for a certain global audience. But this particular version appears to run into some problems with formal cohesion owing to its grafting of one set of textual conventions onto a framework that is organized very differently. One result of this is the blurring of the cultural meanings behind Mae Nak. As suggested above, there is a lack of a clear set of associations for the figure: the film’s exposition tells us to associate her with faithful and lasting love, but the narrative focus eventually has more to do with a personal concern over the completeness of her body after death. Such a concern seems to run counter to the cosmology of the film’s putatively Buddhist framework: the attachment to the body even after death is entirely anathema to Thai Buddhism’s understanding of the body as one of the earthly things that ought to be entirely given up in death. One might counter that one of Mae Nak’s key characteristics in earlier versions of the tale is a willingness to go against Buddhist teachings about worldly attachments (among other things) in the name of love, but *Ghost of Mae Nak* makes no

clear reference to such Buddhist teachings as a means of indicating that this is an intended focus, nor again does it suggest any connection between the constancy of her love and her drive to reunify the parts of her corpse. Such confusions, the result of an only partially successful transnational transformation, arguably yield a muting of the local meanings that the figure of Mae Nak has as a Thai national icon.

Nak (2008)

If *Yah Nark* references and embodies the persistence of a low-budget B-film mode of production in Thailand, and *Ghost of Mae Nak* proves symptomatic of an industry beginning to work with economic interpenetration and global cultural flows, the animated film *Nak* (Ratanachoksirikul, 2008) could be said to represent the local industry's further developed efforts to actively tap into a changing global market. Aside from working to adapt a popular local storyline that has proven itself to be globally viable, *Nak* positions itself to take advantage of the momentum created through the international success of another animated Thai film, *Khan Kluay* (Kemgumnird, 2006). That film generated extremely high revenues at home, and though it did not perhaps achieve the level of international success its studio had hoped, it nevertheless did achieve a mainstream US DVD release in a version dubbed by top US actors (under the title *The Blue Elephant*) and also a Hindi-dubbed Indian theatrical release (under the title *Jumbo*). *Nak*, made on a much more modest budget, did not achieve that level of success, but nevertheless did reach international audiences through screenings at a number of domestic festivals aimed for international audiences and distributors and top international festivals such as Seattle and Rotterdam.

The animated film *Nak* makes its ghostly title character palatable for its intended school-age audiences, and simultaneously recuperates Nak as a kind of national emblem, by having her (as well as other traditional Thai ghosts) still alive in a present-day Thai village, not visiting horror upon Thai citizens but rather watching over them as guardian spirits. Trouble comes to the countryside, however, when city ghosts kidnap a boy from Nak's village in order to help perform a ceremony to enable them to take over the human world. Feeling an obligation to aid the child, Nak rallies the country ghosts together to visit the city (clearly Bangkok), where they confront the city ghosts at their high-rise headquarters. A battle ensues, and Nak's son (who had been taken from her as a baby and subsequently worked in cahoots with the city ghosts) ultimately sacrifices himself for the sake of humankind (as well as his fellow country ghosts). With the city ghosts back in their place, the village's peaceful life can resume.

The relatively spare contours of its plot and its juvenile audience address notwithstanding, *Nak* does allude to quite a few substantive issues in contemporary Thailand for more sophisticated viewers as well. Indeed, the plot motif of countryside innocents in peril in the fearsome city often appears within Thai cinema and, as might be expected, is thematically quite loaded within the culture. *Nak* therefore does not need to go too far out of its way to suggest a subtext about the threat to traditional Thai values (embodied by the happy village existence and familial bonds of the soon-to-be kidnapped boy and his sister at the film's opening) posed by the forces of urbanization (embodied by the villainous urban ghosts). Throughout the film, urban existence is characterized by a lack of community and familial bonds, evident in the image of



Figure 3: *The city under siege in Nak.*

the main railway terminal (Hualomphong) as full of rushing urban ghosts of various sorts who pay little heed to one another – a depiction in sharp contrast to the film’s opening images of village denizens at play under the watchful eyes of friendly spirits. This (urban) lack of care for fellow beings, humans and ghosts, is also evident in comments about the city ghosts’ transgressions of the lines between human and spirit worlds and urban and country worlds: while once the two realms were in a happy, peaceful symbiosis because each knew its place and the spirit world kept itself invisible, now trouble has begun to erupt because the city ghosts are bold enough to allow themselves to be seen and even to stray into the countryside to kidnap the boy they think holds the key to their taking over the human world (Figure 3).

The urban realm as represented in *Nak* is also negatively associated with commercialism, as the small-scale vendors of the village (a grandmother selling grilled meatballs to fair-goers) are replaced by global branding and omnipresent advertising (including for several real-world companies) for, among others, fast food, touristic and telecommunications products. The simple village amusements of the country fair are now replaced by shopping malls and a raucous ghost disco party, the old-fashioned outdoor movie screening (a community viewing activity, with live local voice-dubbers, and a screen adorned with Thai flags) now replaced by omnipresent video screens. The city is also negatively associated with globalization in part by way of its saturation with commerce and mass media: many of the brands shown (such as Kentucky Fried Chicken) are foreign in origin and the city ghosts have a number of recognizably foreign spirits among their number, spirits who themselves come from (i.e., have been able to make their way into Thailand by way of) the mass media. The boy is initially kidnapped by a ghost that clearly references Sadako from the Japanese film *Ring*, whom we see on the outdoor movie screen first emerging from an old CRT television within the

6. The detail is also arguably an intertextual displacement of a narrative element from the larger Nak discourse – that of Mak called away from his family by war.

film-within-the-film, and then emerging from the movie screen to terrorize the village. Subsequently, the rural ghosts encounter a boy ghost similar to the ghost from *Ju-on* (Shimizu, 2002) hiding in a closet in a Japanese-style room in the city ghosts' Bangkok headquarters.

Lastly, the city ghosts are also negatively associated with militarism on several levels, with its trappings, its regimentation and its violence. Most of the ghosts are in para-military outfits of one kind or another and move in regimented formations. The threat of militarism to traditional village life is suggested not only in that the city ghosts are the antagonists, but in the detail (only briefly evident from a wall photo) that the human siblings' father was once in the military and is now gone from them (one would presume killed in the line of duty).⁶

Within this framework, then, the character of Nak is instrumental in the defeat of the city ghosts and thus is automatically positioned as a defender of the traditional Thai values that are being lost with the urbanization, globalization and commercialization of the nation (concepts that are often intertwined in popular Thai discourse). Indeed, she ultimately achieves her victory over the city ghosts (after initially fighting them off with her long arms) precisely by preaching such Thai values: Nak explains to her son that, as spirits with no real body, it is their obligation to fight to try to save the living humans, and her son accepts this and then sacrifices his life to defeat those ghosts who would upset the proper order of things. Significantly, the boy is ready to accept her claims in large measure because he has just learnt that she is his mother, and therefore fighting for Thai tradition here becomes simultaneously a gesture of reconnecting with his (past rural Thai) origins, of coming to terms with who he really is. Also in this way, the film's national values become linked with those of familial love and, in particular, motherly love. It is the loving bond between Nak and her son that enables her to convince him to sacrifice himself, and that same motherly love clearly has parallels in the relationship shown (in opening and closing sequences) between the small-town siblings and their mother.

The notion of Nak as mother is certainly not alien to the Nak discourse: an iconic image of her is, after all, that of her holding her ghost baby (and the 'Mae' in 'Mae Nak' is a designation of her as a mother). But in this particular version of the Nak tale, the discourse about the tenaciousness of her love is shifted so that the lasting love is no longer a wifely and somewhat sexualized love but rather a purely motherly one. Indeed, Nak's outstretched arms, one of the key visual motifs of her tenaciousness, are now employed not in cooking for her husband (in a film in which husbands and fathers are largely absent) but in fending off threats to children under her care. This shift in Nak's love and tenacity from being somewhat selfish and personal (Nak's romantic desire for her husband) to more selfless in nature (Nak's instinct of motherly protection over her own child and others') is fully in keeping with the film's positioning her more as an explicit symbol of Thai social values, a move that requires the effacement of the difficult, oppositional and eroticized dimensions of the Nak image. Significantly, however, this erotic repressed makes its textual return in the visual design of Nak's appearance here which, considering her role as a mother figure in a children's entertainment, is incongruously sexualized, as she is endowed with a cartoonishly slender and muscularly toned physique (shown off in the bare midriff of her period costume), as well as a disproportionately large and gravity-defying bosom.

Although I have discussed these three cinematic renditions of Nak in chronological order, I have not intended to posit a strict historical progression or teleology in the development of the Nak discourse. And while I have shown how different films have foregrounded or developed different dimensions of the Nak discourse (e.g., Nak as a sexual danger, as a violent woman, as a tenacious lover, as a mother), these different dimensions exist simultaneously within the discourse, and there are myriad possible reasons (some biographical and idiosyncratic, others broader and more historical and cultural) why any given text might end up emphasizing one in favour of another. That said, however, one *can* observe certain possible correspondences here between the trends evidenced in these texts and history more broadly. One kind of history I have already discussed in this regard is industrial history: these films, we have seen, can be understood as showing evidence of various trends and pressures within the Thai film industry at the time(s) of their making. However, these texts can also be understood as bearing a relation to Thai history more broadly, and this relationship is particularly germane, I would suggest, for *Nak*.

On a most literal level, and in spite of its animated and exaggerated framework, *Nak* makes many direct references within its diegesis to the historical era of its production, showing us many actual and specific elements of the corporate and pop culture realms of its time (e.g., KFC, True mobile phone services, the 'Japanese wave' in horror). At the same time, however, we can consider the particular historical resonance of the themes it chooses to highlight. Images of chaos and violence in the streets of Bangkok, its people in peril, are plainly resonant with the unrest the capital has experienced several times in its modern history, including the years immediately preceding the release of *Nak*. While some of this chaos is, in the film, linked to foreign elements, it is primarily shown as originating locally, with one particular non-dominant population – the city ghosts – that wants to step outside its traditional position in society and control the country. They are ultimately thwarted primarily as the outcome of Nak's preaching of the importance of ghosts (as those without real bodies) being willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the lives of humans and the good of Thai society as a whole. The film ends with the different elements of the nation being willing to co-exist peacefully because the non-dominant group (the ghosts, the invisible, the bodiless) is willing to support the dominant mortals and to remain separate from them, not interfering in their lives. The framework may seem innocuous enough when taken at face value, as being about ghosts cooperating with living beings. But if one makes the logical step of reading the film as also being, on an allegorical level, about the interaction of different groups of flesh-and-blood beings, its message seems to take on a more conservative cast: Nak and the film suggest that the minority group must sacrifice itself for and give way to the dominant group in order to ensure harmony and the peace of the nation. In a period in contemporary Thai history when there are growing divisions among different groups of Thais – for example, on the basis of issues of politics or class or religion – the resonances of such a message appear fairly strong and immediate.⁷

7. To extend the allegory further, it is also highly suggestive that the disempowered group in this scenario is designated as a *bodiless* group – beings who could be read as standing in for the flesh-and-blood individuals in Thailand who have in various ways lost control over their bodies, including those whose bodies have been trafficked and exploited.

FAMILY RESEMBLANCES AND NEW DIMENSIONS

Indeed, one could hypothesize that these same contemporary conditions – in which there is a crisis in patriarchal control, in the ability of any one established male order to forge a consensus – are precisely what makes a healing

mother figure who preaches traditional Thai values of consideration and harmony so potentially attractive to local audiences. Interesting, in this regard, is that a further film appearing not long before *Nak*, which, while it does not explicitly identify itself as version of the Mae Nak story, nevertheless shows strong influence of it, presents a very similar central character. *Ghost Mother* (Siriphunvaraporn, 2007), with the Thai title *Pii Liang Luk Khon* (literally 'ghost that raises children'), makes intertextual reference to earlier versions of the Nak tale through, among other things, publicity images featuring a ghostly woman with a babe in arms in a forest (images reminiscent of many Mae Nak images, including those in publicity for both the 1958 and 1999 versions, but which do not appear in the movie *Ghost Mother*) and the choice to cast a star (Patcharapa Chaichua) who had previously appeared in a television adaptation of Nak. The film revolves around a woman who, even after her murder at the hands of a drug gang, continues to fulfil what she sees as her duty to look after her orphaned nieces and nephew, keeping her death a secret as long as possible and also contributing to the deaths of the gang members, who continue to threaten the family. As in *Nak*, there is the fairly clear suggestion that the ghost's fulfilment of these maternal duties renders her a figure who stands for Thai national values and works to protect the nation, a notion that perhaps becomes clearest in a scene where those under her care attend a Mother's Day ceremony at their school: we hear the teachers at this state institution speak of the importance of mothers in the children's lives and see how the ghost's nieces and nephew are upset by her inability to attend this particular function as their surrogate mother (because, unbeknownst to them, she is dead). Concordantly, the ghost also implicitly defends the nation in attacking a gang that is shown corrupting and exploiting youth through drug dealing, pimping and the production of pornography featuring young leads. Quite interestingly, while in most earlier versions of Mae Nak the male protagonist ends up seeking the assistance of a shaman or Buddhist clergyman to constrain Nak from violence and ultimately allow her to move on to her future life, the Buddhist monk in this particular version tells the protagonist that he should aid (rather than constrain) the ghost in doing what she is doing, as it is clear she (like her animated counterpart a year later) is on the side of what is morally right.

A number of additional unacknowledged adaptations of the tale also began to make their appearance in 2011, all of them direct-to-video releases exhibiting the same potentials of the narrative for erotic exploitation pointed to earlier in *Yah Nark*. Some of these only lightly reference the earlier narratives through titles (such as *Mia Pii/Wife Ghost* [Suwanna, 2011] or *Mai Sao Pii Hian/Ghost Widow* [Suwanna, 2011]) and through imagery on media packaging and/or film scenes featuring ghostly young women in period clothing in forest settings or love-making between living men and ghost women. *Ghost Widow* is one of the few that actually shares some substantive plot elements with the Nak blueprint; there the ghostly love interest has met her demise not in childbirth, but because of a murder at the hands of the associates of another woman who is jealous over the male protagonist's amorous attentions. As in a number of acknowledged versions of the Nak story, the love-making continues after the woman's transition to being a ghost (not yet known to the protagonist). Likewise, as in other versions, the protagonist, a shaman and various members of the community must tearfully plead with the ghost to give up her earthly desires and let the living be at peace, despite the fact that she has been wronged. This emphasizing of the other-worldly erotic dimension of Nak (or a Nak-like figure) is concretely linked to contemporary industrial history in

that these films were made to take advantage of a shift in censorship regulations at this particular juncture. A new Thai film law passed in 2008 included allowances for a rating system which would permit formerly censored imagery (such as erotic imagery) to now be screened or distributed, assuming it was with the proper age rating. This system was put into effect later in 2009, and direct-to-video (and some theatrical) productions were quick to take advantage of this, including erotic content with eighteen and older or twenty and older ratings.⁸

The same regulatory context is also significant to our understanding of the next theatrical iteration of Nak. *Mae Nak 3D* (Noirod, 2012) contains the same related impulse to figure Nak as an erotic object as much as if not more than a horrific ghost or a devoted wife or mother. Being a more mainstream release and aiming for a much wider audience than the direct-to-video titles, *Mae Nak 3D* does not have the extensive simulated soft-core sex and nudity of the former; rather, the eroticization of Nak arises through a brief (though significant) sex scene including two fleeting bare-breasted shots, a narrative variation on the Nak story that emphasizes (as in *Yah Nark*) sexual jealousy, and the casting of an actress whose star image in Thailand was already one very much associated with eroticism and in particular bodily voluptuousness (Bongkot Kongmalai). Hand in hand with the 'gimmick' of the eroticized Nak is that of the 3D format (plainly privileged in the title) and (unlike the use of ersatz 3D in *Yah Nark*) the film takes repeated advantage of the opportunity to have Nak's extending arms flying towards the camera in 3D (albeit with technology that was clearly giving the film-makers some difficulty). While upping their game here, in terms of a movement to greater permissiveness in some kinds of content and a movement towards a newly (and globally) popular mode of film technology, the film-makers also quite logically made plans for immediate distribution in international markets right on the heels of the domestic release (the film opened in Singapore, for example, directly after opening in Bangkok). This too exemplifies contemporary trends in the Thai industry in early 2012: at that moment, owing to a string of regional successes over the past few years in horror, romantic comedy and action genres, Thai films were starting to get regularly picked up for regional theatrical and DVD release (which was not yet the case only a few years ago), and *Mae Nak 3D* was crafted to take advantage of this newly internationalized context. In this case, however, the downside of this emphasis on exploitable package over content is a narrative with less logical coherence (and, for our purposes here, less thematic consistency) than any of the others discussed in this article, which led to audience dissatisfaction and only minor box office success.

Pee Mak (2013)

Perhaps even more significant about *Mae Nak 3D* than its transitional status in terms of institutional conditions of representation, cinematic technology and international exploitation strategy is a distinctive change in narrational tone compared to the other recent versions of Nak – a change that, despite the film's internationalization, paradoxically marks a return to older modes of Thai horror film-making. What is distinct is the film's consistent willingness to jarringly shift from maudlin melodrama to grotesque horror to high-speed slapstick, which reveals the film's lineage not so much in 1999's *Nang Nak* as in earlier versions of the tale, where such shifts were more the norm.⁹ In this, *Mae Nak 3D* significantly prefigures what was to become not only the most

8. For discussion of the new law, see Ingawanij (2008).

9. See Ainslie 2011 for a description of this earlier (and more comic) mode of production, along with an argument for the persistence of this mode throughout the period of 'New Thai Cinema'.

successful Nak film of all time, but the most successful Thai film of all time: *Pee Mak Phrakamong/Pee Mak* (Pisanthanakun, 2013).

Pee Mak, a higher-budgeted film from a major Thai studio, follows a formula not of the horror film but of the contemporary rising (and overlapping) popular Thai genres of romantic and/or teen comedy, in many cases featuring an ensemble cast and multiple key characters (and sometimes multiple romantic couples rather than a single one). Examples of such ensemble comedies in the period directly before the release of *Pee Mak* include *Puan Mai Kao/August Friends* (Wachirathammaporn, 2011), *Rad Jad Nak/Love, Not Yet* (Chaichayanon, 2011), *Love Summer* (Makmeongpad, 2011), *Small Ru Gu Naew* (Arnon, 2011) and *SuckSeed: Huay Khan Thep* (Boonprakod, 2011). In the instance of *Pee Mak*, the ‘gang’ comprises Mak and his various buddies. Rather than Mak being a solitary traveller, the men go off to battle together and then return home together. The whole group therefore meets the awaiting Nak together, and only subsequently do they individually start to apprehend that she might not be among the living.

In relation to the proximity to ensemble romantic comedy already mentioned, there is a high proportion of scenes emphasizing verbal or slapstick gags, as well as scenes highlighting romance, while very few scenes emphasize outright horror (fearful events, violence or gore) – and even the deaths at first attributed to Nak (and which she is responsible for in the earlier versions) turn out to have had nothing to do with her. Although there is one scene of a confrontation with Nak at a *wat* (temple), a scene in which a monk chants and uses magic string and holy water to protect the young men, there is in fact almost none of the tension between Nak and Buddhist authority that exists in other versions – and the resolution of the scene is, rather, just between Nak and the buddies, after the monk has already fled. And a sense of comic self-consciousness is evident not only through the gleeful use of anachronistic references throughout, but also through some direct allusions to Nimibutr’s version of the tale – as when some of the friends complain about Nak and Mak calling each other’s similar sounding names too often (as viewers noted in the 1999 film), or in a high-angle shot at the *wat* when water drips down on the chanting friends – a shot that revealed Nak hanging from the *wat*’s ceiling in the earlier film, but reveals an actual leak in the roof in this film (Figure 4).



Figure 4: The Nak tale as ensemble comedy in *Pee Mak*.

But perhaps the biggest distinctions in this version of the film are, first, a much heavier emphasis on the figure of Mak than that of Nak (as reflected in the title), a Mak moreover who is much less macho, being the first to cry when he rejoins Nak and showing abject fear at the mention of ghosts; second, the revelation at the film's close that Mak had figured out relatively early on that Nak was a ghost, but did not let on (in spite of his accustomed fear) owing to his love for her (and thus reinforcing the distinct themes of romance rather than horror); and, third, in keeping with the romantic themes, a conclusion that does not require the containment of Nak by getting her to agree to relinquish her desire for Mak and allow her spirit to rest, but rather one in which the couple choose to remain happily together.

This closing gesture, of course, contravenes a key prohibition articulated across all the Nak films: that the living cannot mix with the dead. It therefore points towards a major thematic undercurrent in the film, one that could perhaps be best summed up in the term 'hybridity'. This has resonance in the generic hybridity described above, in the ongoing melding of time periods through anachronistic jokes and references, and in the designation of the Mak character as being of mixed race (my real name is 'Mark', he points out in an American accent, explaining that his father was a US missionary) and the casting of *luk khrueng* (Eurasian) actors to play Mak and Nak (Mario Maurer and Davika Hoorne, respectively). The film goes to (comic) pains, moreover, to show in concrete terms how such a coupling might be realized, how a hybridized existence can be effected: in the closing credit sequence, for example, we see Nak working with the (living) Buddhist community by helping out the monk she had formerly terrorized to patch the ceiling of the *wat*, and we see the mixed couple and their friends making a good living by running the horror house at the local fair – a big success owing to the uncommonly realistic special effects supplied by Nak. More canny and telling, however, is a final vignette in which villagers (in classical monster-hating horror mode) are seen rallying against the human/ghost coupling, holding up anti-ghost posters and shouting about how 'We can't allow this kind of unnatural thing in our village'. Nak scares them away with her long arms in comic fashion – but in a context of strife-torn, factionalized Thailand, the parallel with contemporary protests (and polarized inter-group relations) is hard to overlook.

On a number of levels, then, this Nak adaption (like the others discussed here) is clearly informed by its particular contexts of production. The film's willingness to mix generic modes (in the style of an earlier era of Thai film-making) arguably bespeaks a growing confidence in Thai film's ability to find audiences globally on its own terms, following the industry's recent successes with its home-grown action and romantic comedy as well as horror genres. The film's unprecedented monetary returns resulted in a number of productions following its model – in particular in taking a less 'serious' and reverent approach – and the film thus at least partially displaces the 1999 version as the key reference point in the contemporary cinematic Nak discourse. Within the same year, there were a number of very low-budget direct-to-video Nak-themed comedies (which practical space limitations preclude from discussing in any detail here), often featuring locally popular stage and television comedians, such as *Pee Mard Prakanong* (Chanachai, 2013; with advertising art directly quoting that of *Pee Mak*) and *Koo Gay Prakanong/Pra-ka-nong Couple* (Chernyim, 2013; a queer-themed parody that combines two oft-remade Thai narratives: those of Nak and of *Sunset at Chao Phraya*).

10. One could also extend this comparative reading of adaptations to include not only shifts in historical context but shifts in national context: Cambodia was simultaneously making its own Nak-inflected films, with their own locally germane emphases. For example, *Neang Neath* (Heng, 2004) was largely a straightforward remake of the 1999 *Nang Nak*, but without the Thai film's emphasis on the Buddhist clerical hierarchy and with the husband's absence arising, quite interestingly, not out of being called away to battle, but out of being attacked by local bandits. The same production company followed this up with a somewhat similar narrative in *The Witch Kantong Khiev* (Heng, 2006), where there is again the ghost of a wife who has died in childbirth, but now integrated with more locally specific Cambodian themes and imagery. And Nak's iconic extending arms have found their way into the narratives and publicity materials of still other Cambodian horror productions.

One further theatrical release example, equally under the sway of current genre trends, is *Mathayom Pak Ma Tha Mae Nak/Make Me Shudder 2: Shudder Me Mae Nak* (Arnon, 2014). The second film in a *Make Me Shudder* franchise, this film (like the first in the series) is built on a horror-meets-ensemble-comedy framework dealing with a group of high school pals who run into trouble interacting with ghosts. In the particular case of this film, however, the ghost is that of Nak, whose shrine they have prayed before in order to achieve academic success, only to find themselves face to face with her. As in *Pee Mak*, there is a mix of generic elements (most centrally comedy and horror) and also a mix of time periods, a play on anachronism – here in that modern day characters from the modern day franchise seem to have stumbled into a period ghost narrative (though just how this could be is not really made clear), and the dialogue even in the period sequences repeatedly makes clear allusion to present-day frames of reference (including passing quips on the very current political unrest in the country). For the most part, aside from the mixing of a group of modern day protagonists into the old Nak narrative, there is relatively little variation or novelty in this version of the tale (much of it playing surprisingly straight); however, as a requisite shift, to mark this text as offering a variation on the theme, there is the surprise twist of a revelation near the film's close that not only Nak but also Mak himself is already a ghost (a twist of the kind found in quite a few contemporary Asian horror films, following on in turn from the monumentally successful Hollywood supernatural drama *The Sixth Sense*); therefore once this is made clear to him, the two lovers can be reunited.

CONCLUSION

This article has not attempted to argue for a single 'correct' reading of what the figure of Mae Nak stands for in contemporary Thai film. It has aimed, rather, to provide the start of a mapping of a dynamic field of interrelated, socially relevant meanings within the broader Nak discourse as it has progressed through recent cinematic renderings.¹⁰ Different significations within the Nak discourse may be more or less dominant within any given iteration – but the particular form or emphasis of a given film has correspondence to both the state of the contemporary Thai film industry and developments within Thai national history more broadly. In the period following Nimibutr's 1999 *Nang Nak*, discourses of particular importance have included, at the negative end of the spectrum, Mae Nak understood as representative of unregulated and hence potentially dangerous female passion (as, e.g., in *Yah Nark* and *Ghost of Mae Nak*), while at the other end of the spectrum, understood as representative of faithful motherly guardianship (as in *Nak* and, arguably, *Ghost Mother*). The diminution of most horrifying or dangerous or erotic overtones of the figure in the family-friendly *Nak*, while reversed in some of the more lurid films in the years immediately following, nevertheless paved the way for the still more accessible version of the character in *Pee Mak*, a film that, in a new departure, encourages an open embrace of the (ghostly) other. Part of what is so fascinating about the figure of Nak is how these varied characteristics can reside at one and the same time within her, and allow her to continue to have a tenacious grasp on the imaginations of contemporary Thai audiences.

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