

Reeling in the Clichés

Thailand through the Hollywood camera lens

By Matthew Hunt

“I spent the night with a gorgeous Thai girl who turned out to be a gorgeous Thai boy!” *Bridget Jones: The Edge Of Reason* (2004) features a trip to Bangkok, and, of course, it includes an encounter with a ladyboy. Whenever Hollywood comes to Thailand, the same themes are routinely recycled: the sex trade, drug trafficking, and the city’s notorious jail, the Bangkok Hilton.

Bridget Jones manages to combine them all in a single scene: while Bridget is imprisoned on a drugs charge, the female inmates tell her how they were forced into prostitution. Women are also imprisoned on drugs charges in the altogether darker *Brokedown Palace* (1999), a melodramatic issue-movie. The film criticizes the Thai legal system: the women are brutally treated and forced to sign untranslated confessions. For this reason, it was largely filmed outside Thailand.

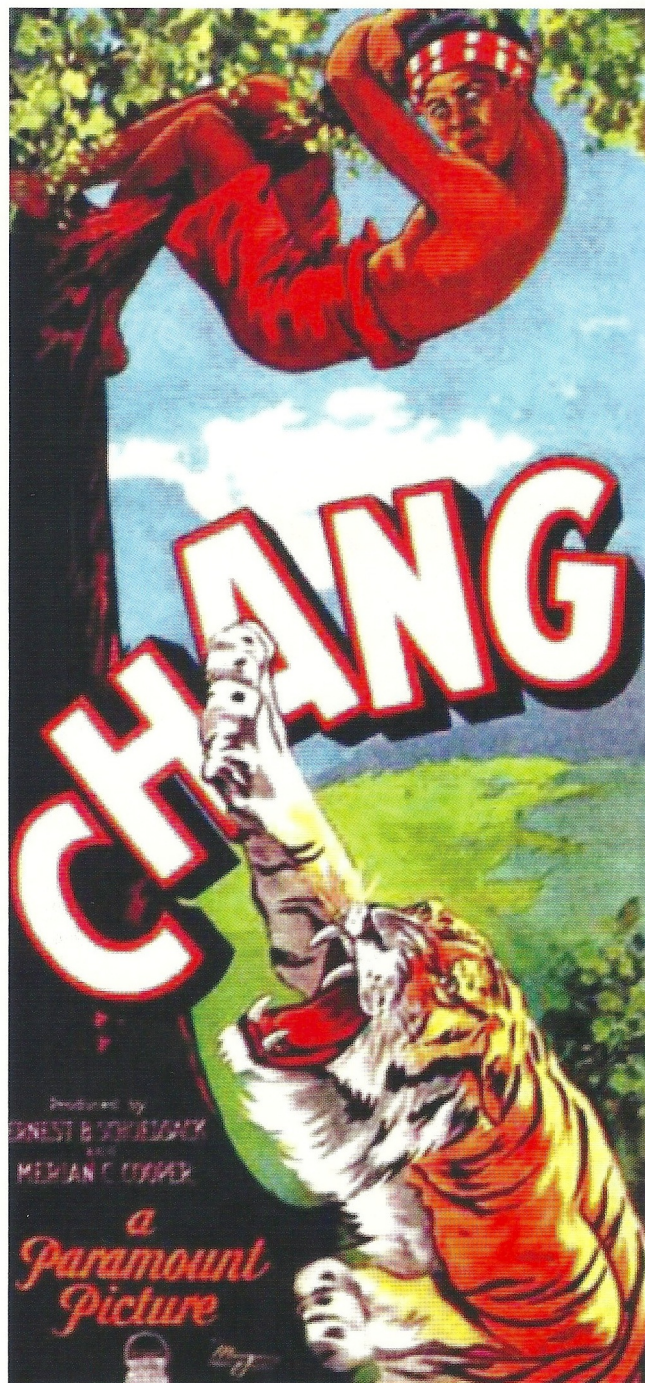
Even more sinister is the issue of Thai child prostitution, the subject of

the deeply disturbing Japanese drama *Children Of The Dark* (2008). The film was banned from the Bangkok International Film Festival, because the event was sponsored by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), and a film about pedophilia doesn’t exactly encourage tourism (at least, not the type of tourists that TAT intended). At a press conference, director Junji Sakamoto said: “This film is not about Thailand, it is about the problem [of child abuse]. This is a test case of how open Thailand is.”

The first Hollywood film set in Thailand was, surprisingly, made almost 90 years ago. *Miss Suwanna*

Of Siam, a US-Thai co-production, was filmed in the kingdom in 1923. The American director, Henry MacRae, received royal endorsement, as he wrote in 1924: “I felt that His Majesty, King Rama VI, would be interested in moving pictures, and after considerable maneuvering I finally secured an audience which resulted in securing... free use of the King’s 52 automobiles, His Majesty’s 600 race horses, the free use of the navy, the Royal Palaces, the railways, the rice mills, thousands of miles of rice fields, coconut groves, klongs and elephants.”

Whereas the King envisioned Miss Suwanna as an opportunity

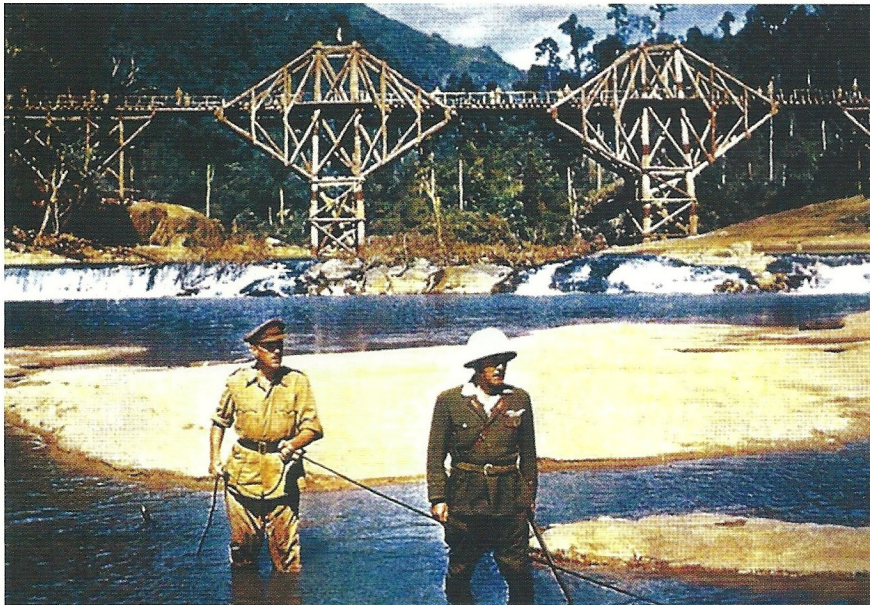




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01 Poster of *Chang*

Photo : [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chang_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chang_(film))

02 *Miss Suwanna of Siam*

Photo : http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miss_Suwanna_of_Siam
File:Misssuwannaofsiam.jpg

03 Poster of *Children of the Dark*

04 Scene from *The Bridge on the River Kwai*

to showcase Thailand's modern infrastructure, instead it set an unfortunate precedent. It included a scene showing a prisoner's execution, the first of many films highlighting the country's tough penal system. Like so many silent productions, *Miss Suwanna* is now a lost film, as is *The White Rose* (1928), made in Thailand by MacRae's assistant. All that remains are the publicity materials at the Thai Film Archive in Salaya, Nakhon Pathom.

One silent American movie filmed in Thailand has fortunately survived. *Chang: A Drama Of The Wilderness* (1927) is a fascinating documentary portrait of an Isan farmer, Kru. The credits emphasize the exotic nature of the sub-

ject, boasting that the film starred "Natives of the Wild... in the Jungles of Northern Siam". A combination of primitive ethnography and exploitation, its sensationalist finale shows a herd of elephants destroying Kru's village.

Chang closely follows the model set by the first feature-length documentary, *Nanook Of The North*, made in the Arctic just a few years earlier: a profile of a single native man and his family, with many sequences staged for the camera. *Chang* was screened in Thailand in 2009, with a score performed by a live orchestra, as part of the Bangkok Bananas arts festival. If *Chang* whetted your appetite for savage animals, see the low-budget horror film *Croc*

(2007), which features a man-eating crocodile at a Thai crocodile farm!

The most famous film set in Thailand has to be the World War II classic *The Bridge On The River Kwai* (1957). This epic film is a largely fictionalized account of British prisoners of war held at a Japanese prison camp in Thailand. The men are forced to construct a bridge, along a stretch of the infamous 'death railway,' to facilitate the Japanese invasion of Burma. The bridge still exists, near Kanchanaburi, and is now a major tourist attraction.

Thailand's other famous movie location, Koh Tapu, an island near Phuket, is now commonly known



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- 05 Scene from *American Gangster*
- 06 Scene from *The Hangover 2*
- 07 Poster of *Duel-of-fists*



07

as “James Bond island,” as it features in *The Man With The Golden Gun* (1974). Koh Phi Phi, also near Phuket, is now famous as the location of *The Beach* (2000), a film that presented two sides of the kingdom: the paradise of the Andaman coastline, and the nightmare of the narcotics trade. The film-makers were accused of damaging the landscape and ecology of the area, and conservationists staged a demonstration at the film’s Bangkok premiere. Also, several Thai politicians called for it to be banned, as its depiction of the drugs trade allegedly damaged the country’s reputation.

The most controversial films about Thailand are the various versions of *Anna & The King Of Siam*: the original film (1946), the Hollywood musical *The King & I* (1956), the drama *Anna & The King* (1999), and the animated musical *The King & I* (also 1999). The historical story of Anna Leonowens, who taught the wives and children of King Mongkut, became more fictionalized with each adaptation. The successful 1956 version, and the modern 1999 remake, both remain banned in Thailand, as they

show Anna challenging the King’s support of slavery and his numerous consorts.

Thailand is most popular as a location for action movies. In *The Big Boss* (1971), one of Bruce Lee’s first films, Lee’s character exposes a Thai drug-smuggling operation. Another martial-arts film made in the same year, *Duel of Fists*, concerns a man from Hong Kong who tracks down a muay Thai boxer in Bangkok. The film acts as a travelogue, as the man explores the sights of Bangkok, including landmarks such as the Grand Palace. He arrives during Songkran, a rare cinematic appearance for Thailand’s singular festival.

Organized crime in Thailand is a common theme in American action films, including another muay Thai movie, *Kickboxer* (1989), which was filmed in Bangkok and Ayut-

thaya. *Belly Of The Beast* (2003), *American Gangster* (2007), and the American remake of the excellent *Bangkok Dangerous* (2008) all deal with gangsters in Bangkok.

A bow and arrow feature among the deadly weapons that Sylvester Stallone uses when, in *Rambo* 2008, he singlehandedly disposes of Burmese army units who have captured Christian-Aid workers. Some of the scenes were filmed on the River Ping in Chiang Mai—a company offers boat trips on the river to a movie location that in reality is a herb garden.

And finally, what about *The Hangover II* (2011), the most recent movie set in Bangkok? Well, in its most famous scene (also, the only scene that’s even slightly amusing), a man discovers that he slept with... yes, you guessed it, another ladyboy. **E**

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