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ภาพยนตร์ไทย 3 มิติ เรื่องแรก

ดีแทค

ภาพยนตร์อนิเมชั่นเหนือจินตนาการ
โดย บอย โกสิยพงษ์

นาค
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พี่สาว
แห่งคลอง
พระโขนง

3 เมษายนนี้

สัมผัสโลกเหนือจินตนาการ



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The Haunted Screen

by Matthew Hunt

Only a few weeks after its premiere, Pee Mak Phra Kanong is now Thailand's biggest-ever box-office hit. The film, directed by Banjong Pisanthanakun, took over 100 million baht on its opening weekend, setting a new Thai record. Its box-office total has now exceeded 500 million baht, meaning that Pee Mak, an updated version of the Mae Nak folk legend, has overtaken Suriyothai, the previous record-holder.

Suriyothai was a state-sponsored epic, the most lavish production in the history of Thai cinema, and buying a ticket for it was seen as a patriotic duty. If nothing more, viewers were presumably curious to see what their taxes had been spent on. It was previously considered unassailable, and it held its pole position for more than a decade.

Pee Mak's unofficial takings could be as high as a billion baht, as the 500 million figure includes only the grosses from Bangkok and the central provinces. By a significant margin, it's the most popular movie in Thai cinema history, a position it achieved more swiftly than anyone could have imagined, especially considering that it's only the latest in a long line of previous Mae Nak movies.

The story of Mae Nak has been filmed almost twenty times before, and has been adapted into musicals, an opera, and numerous television dramas. Mae Nak, Thailand's most famous ghost, is an icon of folklore and popular culture.

The legend of Mae Nak is a simple story of young love, with a twist. Mak leaves his pregnant wife, Nak, to fight in a war. When he returns, Nak and their new baby are waiting for him, though the local villagers try to warn him that Nak is not what she seems. Eventually, Mak discovers Nak's corpse buried near their house, and, when he sees her stretch her arm down to the ground, he realises that she is a ghost. Nak insists that her love for her husband means that she cannot rest in peace without him, though a Buddhist monk finally exorcises her spirit.

Pee Mak Phra Kanong expands the original story to include four of Mak's friends who return with him from the war. In this new version of the legend, it is his fellow soldiers, rather than Mak himself, who discover Nak's secret. There are also some comic anachronisms, to bring the story up to date for contemporary audiences. Mak, for instance, declares that his nickname should be Westernised and pronounced "Mark".

The story has undergone a genre conversion: Pee Mak Phra Kanong is more of a comedy than a horror movie. Nak doesn't kill anyone this time, and Mak's mates (played by the quartet of stars from the comic-relief segment of 4Bia, also directed by Banjong) provide some broad humour. There are even jokes at the expense of its acclaimed antecedent, Nang Nak, when the simplistic dialogue "Nak!... Mak!..." is criticised as repetitive. (The constant screaming in the final half hour of Pee Mak Phra Kanong is even more repetitious, though.)

Nang Nak, a blockbuster released in 1999, is the most famous Mae Nak film. Directed by Nonzee Nimibutr and written by Wisit Sasanatieng, it was one of the key films in the Thai 'new wave' movement of the 1990s. (Wisit later directed the period suspense film The Unseeable, a traditional ghost story complete with creaking doors and billowing curtains. The Unseeable's ghost, whose presence is felt throughout her house, is similar to Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca. The film's twist ending is revealed by its Thai title, Ben Chu Kap Pee, which translates as "An affair with a ghost".)

Nang Nak emphasised the love between Nak and Mak, and in several scenes they cry out to each other across the canal near their home. The atmospheric period setting is evocative and impressive, and the final confrontation between Nak and a monk is quite gruesome and intense. Nang Nak's success, and that of similar films from Japan (The Ring) and South Korea (Whispering Corridors), led to a wave of Asian ghost films throughout the last decade. Ghost movies have been big business in Thailand ever since, though none has yet managed to equal Nang Nak's critical success.

Mae Nak originally appeared in a handful of Thai silent films, though they are now sadly lost. Her first extant film appearance is in Mae Nak Phra Kanong from 1959. The legend was retold in 1970, 1973, and 1978, in films of the same name. Nak also featured in Mae Nak Khuen Chip (1960), Winyan Rak Mae Nak Phra Kanong (1962), Mae Nak Khanong Rak (1968), Mae Nak Alawat (1973), Mae Nak Cheu Phi Pop (1992), Sannya Chai Mae Nak Phra Kanong (1992), and Mae Nak Patha Pop Sam Tua (2011).

In variations on the story, Nak became an American in The Pot (1975) and she visited Japan in Mae Nak Buk Tokiao (1976). The short film Mae Nak (1998) tells the story from Nak's perspective. In a modern adaptation, Ghost Of Mae Nak (2005), she haunts a young Bangkok couple who are also called Mak and Nak. There is also an animated version for children, Nak (2008), in which Nak and an assortment of other Thai ghosts come to modern-day Bangkok to rescue a young boy from malevolent spirits.

The 3D horror film Mae Nak (2012) embellishes the tale to include a woman jealous of Nak's love for Mak. She hires a witch-doctor to remove the unborn baby from Nak's corpse, cut off one of its fingers, and cook it on a barbecue! Nak turns from a beautiful ghost into a rotting corpse while Mak is kissing her, like the ghost in the bathroom from The Shining.

Mae Nak's influence on modern culture extends beyond the movies: In 2009, her story was dramatised in three Bangkok theatrical productions: Mae Nak Phra Kanong: The Musical (at Ratchadalai Theatre), Mae Nak: The Musical (at M Theatre), and Mae Nak: The Museum (at Makhampon Studio). The opera Mae Nak premiered in Bangkok in 2003 and transferred to London in 2011. At the other end of the cultural spectrum, Mae Nak has been recycled in numerous 'lakorn' (soap opera) series on Thai television, most recently in 2000.

Thailand still has a deeply superstitious culture, and many Thais fear the vengeful ghost of Mae Nak. The country boasts an impressive collection of spirits, including the cannibalistic pee pob (as featured in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's most recent film, Mekong Hotel) and krasue, a disembodied head with internal organs dangling from its neck. Thai spirits were celebrated in an exhibition at the Thailand Creative & Design Centre in Bangkok, titled Spirits: Creativities From Beyond (2010).

Whether the mythical Nak ghost was inspired by a real person is unknown, though there are unverified claims that a woman called Nak from Phra Kanong did indeed die in childbirth during the nineteenth century. There is now a shrine to Mae Nak at Wat Mahabut in Bangkok, decorated with portraits of her. Intriguingly, a television at the temple is permanently switched on, to entertain and appease Nak's spirit! **E**

THE HAUNTED SCREEN

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