

Naming Places, Narrating Selves: A Study of Locative Thai Film Titles and the Meaning of Spatial Identity in Contemporary Thai Films

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Abstract

Spaces or places used for film titling may be a goal of travel for travelers who seek a new experience. In a Thai film called *Tha Rae: The Exorcist* (Wantha, 2025), Tha Rae refers to a village in Sakon Nakhon Province. This place is well-known as the largest community of Christians in the northeastern part of Thailand, which connects to the story in the film that presents the dimensions of beliefs and culture. This study mainly focuses on spaces in Thai films. Therefore, only Thai films by Thai film creators were selected, with the names of places or spaces in both Thai and English titles. Eight Thai films were selected for analysis, namely *Tha Rae: The Exorcist* (Wantha, 2025), *Halabala* (Thairaat, 2025), *Bangkok Dark Tales* (Onpapliw et al., 2019), *Siam Square* (Khumwan, 2017), *Sam Chuk* (Chaisati et al., 2009), *Laddaland* (Sakdaphisit, 2011), *Love of Siam* (Sakveerakul, 2007), and *OK Baytong* (Nimibutr, 2003). The objectives are to analyze their titles, stories, and the meaning of spatial identity presented through these films. The theory “The Production of Space” by Henri Lefebvre (1991) was used for explanation. This research explores how spaces signify symbolic meanings in contemporary Thai films. The study reveals that names and stories of locative Thai films bring new perspectives to recognize spaces in social, historical, and cultural dimensions. It is regarded as the construction of meanings and spatial identity in terms of reproduction and the creation of new meanings. Storytelling through films with locative stories can create an attractive experience in the perception of spaces, and can lead to some changes in the society.

Keywords: Thai films, Thai films title, production of space

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Introduction

The process of setting in the world of films is related to designing places, space, time, and the experiences of the characters. The key role of these designed factors is to guide the direction of a film and to create its symbolic meaning. A place and a space are two of the required components in the story. The place provides a meaning to the story. Thus, using the name of a place or space as the film title can draw attraction to a film and the primary perception framework for the audience, because they first recognize the film by its title before watching it in a cinema (Jongthakul, 2018). For this reason, the film title is significant and can bring an impression, motivation, or memory, and possibly affects its future income generation (Phaetkhacha, 2014).

Using the name of a place or a space for a film title may imply that the filmmaker intends to make the audience perceive the significance of that specific place or space, and thus it is chosen as the title of the film. Each space contains its own story, history or background, and meaning, with a variety of different perceived aspects. The research of Bernstein (2007) on *New York Placenames in Film Titles* describes that the name of a place in a film title has the role of creating a perceptual map in the audience's mind. The name acts as a milestone to define the meaning and mental image of the space at the social level. Thus, a film title with the word "New York" may signify modernity, independence, freedom, and urbanization, which reflects the identity of a space based on social imagination while possibly also simultaneously implying loneliness and the rush of life in a big city.

It can be noticed that names of the major cities and capitals of several countries or the names of countries around the world are frequently used as film titles, e.g., *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942), *Tokyo Story* (Ozu, 1953), *New York, New York* (Scorsese, 1977), *Good Morning Vietnam* (Levinson, 1987), *Hotel Rwanda* (George, 2004), *Midnight in Paris* (Allen, 2011), and *Manchester by the Sea* (Lonergan, 2016). This phenomenon reflects that city and country names act as a spatial symbol connected to identities, memories, and cultural meanings based on social imagination. Using their names as film titles enhances the attraction to the stories, and it is done to emphasize the same meaning or to set a new meaning of the target place through an attractive story, possibly resulting in a trend of travelling to this place.

For the film *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942), the name of a city in Morocco, the story is about a middle-aged man who meets his ex-lover and her husband by chance during World War II. He wants to go to the USA. Thus, Casablanca in this context involves the war, escape, and the transitions of life. Likewise, the story of *Good Morning Vietnam* (Levinson, 1987) narrates Vietnam during the Vietnam War through the eyes of American soldiers. The scenes reveal the stressful war, parallel to a love story between an American soldier and a Vietnamese girl.

Midnight in Paris (Allen, 2011) depicts a young male novelist who loves Paris. He turns back the time to Paris in the old days. The film presents the beauty of Paris, the capital of France, with its charms and fullness of love as well as romance. A large audience became obsessed with the story of this film.

Apart from large cities, the names of small towns or small communities are also used as film titles. *Notting Hill* (Michell, 1999), for example, is a romantic film about a Hollywood female superstar falling in love with an ordinary man who owns a bookstore in Notting Hill, a well-known and fascinating place located in West London, England. Houses here are painted in pastel colors, a unique charm of Victorian architecture. There is Portobello Road Market selling

vintage objects and crafts, along with cafes. Notting Hill is actually reputable worldwide; however, when this film was released, the place became even more well recognized.

Paprach and Hashim (2022) conducted the study on *Destination Space in Film: Viewer Perspectives on Film Destination Contributions to Promoting Thai Tourism*. They found that there are eight spatial patterns presented in Thai films, i.e., exotic world, idyllic space, nostalgic space, modern space, spiritual space, martial art space, the features, and the meanings of space in a film. These are all the key components that set the emotional and conceptual meanings. Their roles are to set the perception of the place and to potentially promote tourism through spatial imagination.

Thus, the objective of this study was to examine how using names of places or spaces as film titles is significant and how it can reflect and define the meaning of space in the context of films. Three key issues were analyzed, i.e., 1) the patterns and practices of using names of places or a space as titles of Thai films; 2) the presentation of space and its meaning in Thai films; and 3) the setting of spatial identities through stories, characters, and social as well as cultural contexts in films.

Research Question

How can using the names of places or a space as a film title reflect and define the meaning of space in the context of a film?

Objectives

1. To analyze the patterns and practices of using names of places or a space as titles of Thai films.
2. To analyze the presentation of space and its meaning in Thai films.
3. To analyse the setting of spatial identities through stories, characters, and social as well as cultural contexts in Thai films.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of *The Production of Space* by Henri Lefebvre was used as the conceptual framework in this study. This concept describes space in a perspective that is broader than physical space. Nevertheless, space remains a social setting. The description is divided into three dimensions as follows (Lefebvre, 1991).

Spatial Practice or Perceived Space

This refers to space for living, space that exists in reality, and space that has boundaries and can be touched. It is concrete, can be physically used, and can be perceived through the five senses. In filmmaking, spatial practice is required as the places of stories, e.g., houses, markets, grocery stores, schools, hospitals, etc. They must be spaces for living, movement, and interactions among the characters, making space a necessary component for story development.

Representations of Space or Conceived Space

This refers to the conceptual setting of space, meaningfully designed with planning by architects or space design experts. Features and utilization are also determined, with space

control authority. It can be referred to as ideological space with fixed use, rules and regulations, and symbols. It is conceptual and provides the meaning of the setting toward space. In reference to films, space is more than merely the backgrounds or scenes; it is the outcome of the conceptual construction through production design, picture arrangement (*mise-en-scène*), and the setting of places and time. These play important roles in the implication and systematic connection to the points of stories.

Representational Spaces or Lived Space

This refers to the activity and experience of space of involved persons. Symbols are used, with conveyed meanings cultivated by their societies and cultures, that are convey the meanings of this type of space, which may be adjusted for its definitions, depending on experiences. Thus, it is the combination between physical and conceptual spaces. In films, this type of space usually appears through characters' experiences and audience perception. Space narrates the stories of life filled with emotional meanings, symbols, and imagination, e.g., space of memories, love, fears, or loss. It strengthens interpretation and space-related identities.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research study using textual analysis of eight Thai films by Thai directors and Thai filmmaking teams. The subject films were obtained by purposive sampling, of which titles must be associated with names of places or a space in Thailand and must be in Thai and in English. *The Production of Space* by Henri Lefebvre (1991) was used for analysis to describe presentation and spatial identity setting in films. The films in this study included *Tha Rae: The Exorcist* (Wantha, 2025), *Halabala* (Thairaat, 2025), *Bangkok Dark Tales* (Onpapiw et al., 2019) *Siam Square* (Khumwan, 2017), *Sam Chuk* (Chaisati et al., 2009), *Laddaland* (Sakdaphisit, 2011), *Love of Siam* (Sakveerakul, 2007), and *OK Baytong* (Nimibutr, 2003).

Key Findings

According to the results of all eight analyzed Thai films, three key issues were found, i.e., 1) the patterns and practices of using names of places or a space as titles of Thai films; 2) the presentation of space and its meaning in Thai films; and 3) the setting of spatial identities through stories, characters, and social as well as cultural contexts in films.

Forms and Practices of Using Names of Places or a Space as Titles of Thai Films

For the study on the patterns of place naming found in film titles, they can be divided into city names, area names, district or community names, village or community names, and nature-based names (Srisophon, 2023). It refers to spatial practice or perceived space available in reality. As for the use of names of places or spaces in all eight films, there is one name of a large and major city, two names of areas within large cities, two district names, two village names, and one nature-based name.

City Name

Bangkok Dark Tales (Onpapiw et al., 2019) uses the name of Thailand's capital. It is the name of the major city that is used to convey the meaning of the story. As the film title, it also acts as a spatial symbol with specific meaning. For example, Bangkok signifies a large city, the

center of the country, prosperity, and modernity while also signifying social problems that need to be solved for better development.

Area Names

Siam Square (Khumwan, 2017) and *Love of Siam* (Sakveerakul, 2007) use the name “Siam” in the film titles. Siam Square is one of the top economic areas in Bangkok. In the past, the location of Siam Square was a residential area with vegetable plots, under Chulalongkorn University. During urban expansion later on at the time of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, it was developed further as a shopping mall area. Subsequently, it grew more popular among teenagers until it finally became a landmark of Bangkok (Panchai, 2025).

District or Community Names

Sam Chuk (Chaisati et al., 2009) and *OK Baytong* (Nimibutr, 2003) are the names of two districts in Thailand with Sam Chuk being the name of a district located in Suphan Buri Province, not far from Bangkok. People there live a simple life. The district is outstanding for its trade economy and exchange of goods. There is Sam Chuk Old Market, a 100-year market, one of the remarkable places in Thai history (Sam Chuk District Public Health Office, 2022).

Similarly, Betong District, or the former name in Malay “Yarom,” means a “needle.” Later, the name was changed to Betong, which originated from the local rough giant bamboo. Like its name, it is large and originated from the Malay name of “Buluh Betong.” In the district, this species of bamboo is available in a large quantity. Betong is the southernmost district of Thailand in Yala, renowned as “a city in the mist, with the prettiest flowers” (Faculty of Management Science, Yala Rajabhat University, 2020).

Village or Community Name

In the film *Laddaland* (Sakdaphisit, 2011), the name is that of a housing estate in Chiang Mai. According to the background, once it was also a famous tourist attraction. Mrs. Ladda was the owner. The village was beautiful until someone died here. After that, there was a legend of a ghost, a mystery, and a supernatural story. As a consequence, villagers gradually moved out until this place became completely deserted (Sanook, 2011).

Regarding the film *Tha Rae: The Exorcist* (Wantha, 2025), the name is that of the oldest and largest Roman Catholic community in Thailand, located in Mueang Sakon Nakhon District, Sakon Nakhon. It has a very long history of over 130 years. The word “Tha Rae” is based on its primary physical feature, i.e., laterite soil called “Hae stone” (minerals). Thus, this word has been used as the village or community name “Tha Hae,” which was later changed to “Tha Rae” up until the present (Thaethiangtham, 2025).

Nature-Based Name

The film *Halabala* (Thairaat, 2025) was titled after the name of a wildlife sanctuary and the most well-known tropical rainforest in the southern part of Thailand, covering the areas of Narathiwat and Yala Provinces. Halabala is renowned as the most mysterious forest with very impressive natural beauty (Srisuk, 2003).

According to the findings, it can be noted that using the names of places or a space as film titles must be based on their attractive backgrounds or history and highlights, e.g., a large city with unique ways of life and people, a legend or story, and the beliefs related to that certain place or space.

Presenting Space and Its Meaning in Thai Films

When examining film contents, it was found that they mainly focus on narrating space as representations of space or conceived space and representational spaces or lived space. Their setting is related to space or places as the key components of the stories.

The films using the names of places in this group that are classified as horror and drama, totally five films, include *Bangkok Dark Tales* (Onpapliw et al., 2019), *Siam Square* (Khumwan, 2017), *Laddaland* (Sakdaphisit, 2011), *Tha Rae: The Exorcist* (Wantha, 2025), and *Halabala* (Thairaat, 2025). This reflects that space is used as an essential mechanism for emotions, meanings, and intensive experiences. The other three are dramas, i.e., *Sam Chuk* (Chaisati et al., 2009), *Love of Siam* (Sakveerakul, 2007), and *OK Baytong* (Nimibutr, 2003). Each presents a social problem that brings about review and questioning that eventually extend to awareness and possibly to solutions.

Bangkok Dark Tales: Struggling Life in Bangkok

Capitals or major cities are often used as film titles. Thailand's capital is Bangkok. *Bangkok Dark Tales* (Onpapliw et al., 2019) is a horror story, narrating ghost stories and mysterious tales in the large city (Urban Horror) under the Thai title "Bangkok...Sayong" which are the stories of three types of people in Bangkok, i.e., an office girl under work pressure, a female student from another province coming to rent a house in Bangkok who undergoes a mystery, and a cinema with a terrifying story.

This film presents the dark side of Bangkok. The area is used as setting the meanings of life in complex dimensions, e.g., struggling middle class to survive, the dream of someone from another province to search for urban opportunities, and fragile, complex social relationships.

Siam Square: Being Siam Teenagers Is Painful

Space is closely related to people and social groups, particularly urban areas that reflect ways of life and experiences. *Siam Square* (Khumwan, 2017) is a horror movie narrating the story of teenagers in Siam Square who see a female high school ghost at an extra tuition course held from the evening to the nighttime.

Siam Square is a space for teenagers, the middle class, and educational competitions. It is the center of tuition academies and self-development activities. At the same time, it is also a recreation space to escape from stress because there are a large number of shops, restaurants, and relaxing activities.

The film mainly presents night space, turning the image of this lively space into the silence, mystery, and loneliness connected to the experiences of teenagers with their attachment to Siam Square.

Love of Siam: Teenage Relationships and Forbidden Feelings

Siam Square also communicates love and relationships. *Love of Siam* (Sakveerakul, 2007) is a teenage drama about love and relationships in family and teenage love. Mew and Tong, the two young boys who used to be close friends during their childhood, meet again at Siam Square. Their reunion makes them discover a new relationship greater than friendship. But Tong's parents had to deal with the disappearance of his sister, and thus they are stuck in sorrow. The mother does not accept the relationship between Mew and Tong because she expects him to grow up like an ordinary teenager, to have his own family and children, and to live his life as per social expectations.

Siam Square signifies a free space for teenagers without control by adults. They can express themselves freely, e.g., playing music, having friends, and showing the feeling of love to the same sex with any fears of parents' eyes.

Laddaland: Dreams and a Broken Family of Urban Life

Urban expansion and the dream of a better life, e.g., having a house and a car, and sending children to a quality school, is a great reflection of the middle class in urban society. *Laddaland* (Sakdaphisit, 2011), for example, presents the story of a family moving from Bangkok to settle down in Chiang Mai. "Laddaland" is the name of a housing estate, representing a dreamy space for a better and more secure life.

This film was inspired by a tale about Laddaland Village, presented through a family with a father, a mother, a daughter, and a son. The father is a family leader with his dedication to work who builds economic security and social status. He buys their first house with convenience and full facilities.

However, stress, disagreements, and fragile family relationships are hidden under the perfect house. They see the ghost and bizarre situations in the village, which worsens their relationships and brings about holding on to the house, an external object, leading to the tragic ending of the father. This reflects that love and understanding among family members are of greater value than a beautiful house.

Sam Chuk: Giving a Chance and Listening to Teenage Problems

A local way of life and an image of a simple life in a rural society are presented through *Sam Chuk* (Chaisati et al., 2009). Sam Chuk is the name of a district in Suphan Buri and a drama narrating drug abuse, parallel to relationships and rural life. The story was inspired by real situations at Samchukratanapokaram School. Seven students undergo family problems and are addicted to drugs. Under this tension, a teacher protects and help the students (Guitarsolo, 2023).

Thus, Sam Chuk signifies the power of people who are ready to solve problems. The sympathetic teacher and school and the community give a chance for the teenagers to change themselves. Particularly, the teacher's efforts to help the students allow them to be able to finally return to the right path.

OK Betong: Amid Conflicts, People Still Try to Go On

Betong is the southernmost area of Thailand, adjoining Malaysia. Most of the people living here are Muslim. However, *OK Baytong* (Nimibutr, 2003) narrates the story of a Buddhist monk who must disrobe and live a secular life in order to take care of a niece because his sister unexpectedly dies from an explosion in Betong. Subsequently, he must learn how to live his secular life and start a new life as an ordinary man, e.g., using a mobile phone and riding a bicycle because he has been a monk since childhood.

Meanwhile, he must deal with loss and uncertainty in the southern border province in which conflicts among the groups of people with different ideologies still remain. Violence from attacks or explosions may occur at any time. According to the film's setting, Betong is still a livable and splendid city, signifying a simple way of life and several pleasant places in Betong where the combination of Buddhism and Islam that can live together. Like the name of the film, *OK Baytong* (Nimibutr, 2003), people there still try to live on.

Tha Rae: The Exorcist: Diverse Beliefs and the Fight Against Human Fears

Creating a strong community requires having a spiritual anchor. Tha Rae is the largest Christian community in Thailand, located in Sakon Nakhon. The film *Tha Rae: The Exorcist* (Wantha, 2025) takes the audience back to the world of history, beliefs, and rituals. The story begins when someone is possessed by a ghost. Shamans are invited to expel the ghost, i.e., a traditional shaman called "Moh Yao" and a Christian priest as Tha Rae is an area with various beliefs. The film presents the human effort to fight against the ghost or demon. With a strong mind, faith, and consciousness, humans will survive from ghosts or demons. Humans must fight against fears coming from outside related to supernatural entities and also the intrinsic fears of the characters for the sake of living peacefully.

Halabala: The Greatness of Nature

Halabala is a lush tropical rainforest in Thailand, located in Narathiwat and Yala. It is prominent in its biodiversity and mysterious nature. *Halabala* (Thairaat, 2025) presents the story of a police officer chasing after an offender who escapes into the forest of Halabala. The film reveals the images of the extraordinary, overgrown, dense and mysterious forest that indicates the greatness of nature.

The main character is a policeman or a government officer who is representative of humans with an attempt to use his authority and reason for controlling the area. Unfortunately, he must face his own limitations in the middle of uncontrollable nature. Thus, the forest was set as a challenging area against human capabilities and mental strength, along with his fragility when confronting nature.

Setting Spatial Identities Through Stories, Characters, and Social as Well as Cultural Contexts in Films

The space of films is set with attractive identities through stories, characters, and social as well as cultural contexts. The stories determine the frame of spatial meanings, while the characters represent local inhabitants, and the social contexts determine the cultural value and meaning of space.

Spatial Identities of Societies in Large Cities

According to the analysis of *Bangkok Dark Tales* (Onpapliw et al., 2019), the film presents the identity of Bangkok, in which people have to struggle for survival. The characters are working people who undergo social problems. Also, the identity of *Siam Square* (Khumwan, 2017) is a space for teenagers. The teenage characters encounter mysteries and the pressures of life. *Love of Siam* (Sakveerakul, 2007) depicts Siam Square with a narration of teenage identity. The characters are searching for themselves and learning about love and relationships. *Laddaland* (Sakdaphisit, 2011) presents a spatial identity about the middle class in a major city as well. The main character must fight against economic and social conditions for a better life.

It can be noted that all four of these films present a spatial identity setting in the societies of large cities, involving various groups of people, i.e., working people, students, teenagers, and families. These settings reflect the complex urban life in the economic, social, and human relationship dimensions. Spatial identities in the societies of large cities can be compared to a modern space which was established through economic and social systems and people's experiences.

Spatial Identities of Social Problems

Sam Chuk (Chaisati et al., 2009) and *OK Baytong* (Nimibutr, 2003) narrate situations of social problems, i.e., drug problems in Suphan Buri and insurgencies in Yala, a southern border province of Thailand. The problems in Yala are mainly about ideologies, beliefs, and involvement with complex history. Both films refer to a spatial identity setting which reflects social problems, cultural complexity, and relationships among local inhabitants. The characters are ordinary people, e.g., students, a teacher, a monk, and a struggling girl. Nonetheless, both films still reveal the ways of life and the beauty of people in small towns connected to nostalgic space. This is because, despite problems and conflicts, memories and hopes still remain.

Spatial Identities of Beliefs and Religions

Beliefs and religions are the key components in the way of life in Tha Rae community. They act as the center to determine the values, meanings, and ways of life there. *Tha Rae: The Exorcist* (Wantha, 2025) presents the issues concerned with religions and beliefs through a story related to exorcism, reflecting the roles of religions as a crucial mechanism to describe and to deal with supernatural entities. Thus, the space in this context is set through beliefs and rituals and can be compared to spiritual space. It is required in order to shape the community's self and to define the social and cultural meanings of space.

Spatial Identities of the Natural Area

Humans are part of the natural world and must therefore respect nature. *Halabala* (Thairaat, 2025) presents the greatness of the natural forest, where humans may be ordinary people who cannot defeat nature. Thus, this film was set within a natural and majestic space, reflecting the power-based relationships between humans and nature. It also points out the limitations of humans with regard to the need to dominate nature. Thus, in this film, Halabala is introduced as an exotic world full of mysteries and unfamiliarity for humans.

Conclusion

Setting space or worlds in films is significant in terms of defining meanings, imagination, and experiences in perceived space. Setting space is connected to existing meanings while also negotiating or defining new meanings with regard to space.

Despite the dark aspects of space depicted in several of the films examined in this study, i.e., social problems, conflicts, or obstacles, these films also show the dimensions of beauty, values, and attractiveness of space so as to open a new perspective for audiences. This might convince them to learn, to explore, and to understand the history, culture, and the local context of a certain area more than usual. Thus, films play an important role in setting the meanings and identity of space in social, cultural, and imaginary dimensions.

One of the key strengths of this study is that it approaches film titles not simply as names, but as cultural and symbolic spaces that shape audience perception. This research also highlights how Thai films construct spatial identities through stories, characters, emotions, and social contexts, showing that space in cinema is far more than a background setting.

By applying Henri Lefebvre's (1991) concept of *The Production of Space*, the study connects film studies with cultural and spatial studies, offering a deeper understanding of how films produce meanings, memories, and social imagination about places in Thailand.

This study is unique in its focus on Thai spaces and local identities and explores themes of urban life, youth culture, religion, border conflicts and nature. Taken together, these elements suggest the complexities of contemporary Thai society as cinematically represented. But still there are many uncharted spaces.

To conclude, this research reveals the importance and uniquely Thai representations of space in the cinema. These films tell stories that culturally imbue places and spaces and inspire audiences to become more interested in their locations, histories and social contexts through storytelling.

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