

Rural Narratives and Media Convergence in Thai Cinema

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Abstract

The year 2023 marked a resurgence for Thai cinema, highlighted by the successes of *The Undertaker* and *Death Whisperer*, which brought rural narratives and socio-cultural themes to the forefront. Produced by Thibaan Studio, *The Undertaker* became Thailand's highest-grossing film of the year, while *Death Whisperer* engaged audiences with its haunting portrayal of family and community resilience in rural Thailand. Additionally, *The Murderer*, the first Northeastern dialect film to premiere on Netflix, demonstrates the global reach of localized storytelling. Together, these films signal a shift in Thai cinema, where authentic portrayals of rural life highlight issues such as cultural adaptation, economic hardship, and the negotiation between tradition and modernity. This analysis employs Henry Jenkins' concept of media convergence and John Urry's mobilities framework to examine how these films engage global audiences. Jenkins' notion of convergence highlights how platforms like Netflix connect local stories with international viewers, as demonstrated by *The Murderer*'s success. Urry's mobilities framework further illustrates the transformation of regional films into transnational cultural flows, emphasizing the balance between local specificity and global accessibility. By centering rural narratives, these films challenge urban-centric depictions in Thai cinema, promoting a richer representation of Thai culture that engages critically with social challenges and cultural identity in a globalized world.

Keywords: Thai Cinema, Rural Narratives, Media Convergence

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Introduction

In 2023, Thai cinema saw a resurgence, driven by the success of *The Undertaker* and *Death Whisperer*, which marked a shift towards rural narratives. *The Undertaker* became Thailand's highest-grossing film of the year, earning over 700 million baht. Meanwhile, *Death Whisperer*, a horror film rooted in rural Thai life, grossed over 500 million baht and was released on Netflix following its theatrical run. These films reflect a departure from the conventional focus on urban settings, offering a more nuanced exploration of rural identities and experiences. Extending this trend further, *The Murderer*, the first Northeastern dialect film to premiere on Netflix, brings localized stories to global audiences, leveraging digital platforms to share regional narratives beyond national borders. Collectively, these films represent a transformative moment in Thai cinema, highlighting the richness of rural stories and engaging with audiences both domestically and internationally.

This paper argues that the success of *The Undertaker*, *Death Whisperer*, and *The Murderer* signals a broader shift in Thai cinema, as these films foreground the diversity and complexity of rural life. Using Henry Jenkins' concept of media convergence and John Urry's mobilities framework, this analysis explores how rural narratives are both localized and globalized through modern media platforms. Jenkins' notion of convergence explains how platforms like Netflix facilitate the global dissemination of regional stories, as demonstrated by *The Murderer*'s international reach. Meanwhile, Urry's concept of mobilities illustrates how these films transcend cultural and geographical boundaries, transforming local stories into transnational cultural flows. This interaction between regional authenticity and global accessibility suggests a growing trend toward more inclusive and diverse representations, fostering a deeper appreciation of Thai cultural complexities on the global stage.

To contextualize this shift, it is crucial to examine the evolution of rural representation in Thai cinema. Over time, portrayals of rural Thailand have fluctuated between romanticized idealizations and critical reflections, shaped by the socio-political dynamics of various eras. Understanding this trajectory provides essential insight into the current resurgence of rural narratives and their implications for the future of Thai cinema. The following section traces this evolution, setting the stage for a more in-depth analysis of contemporary rural-themed films and their role in redefining Thai cinematic identity in an increasingly globalized media landscape.

Evolution of Rural Representation in Thai Cinema

The portrayal of rural life has significantly shaped the trajectory of Thai cinema, reflecting the nation's socio-political and cultural shifts. Early depictions often presented rural life as innocent and virtuous, positioned in contrast to the corruption associated with urban settings. This dichotomy is evident in early films such as *Going Ashtray* (1932), where the protagonist is led astray by urban temptations but ultimately returns to his rural roots. While the contrast between rural and urban life has persisted as a theme, its complexity has deepened across cinematic eras.

During World War II, the portrayal of rural life became a part of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram's nationalist agenda. Films like *Ban Rai Na Rao* (1942) glorified rural agrarian life as integral to the nation's strength and identity. This romanticized vision of rural Thailand drew on the historical precedent set by King Ramkamhaeng's thirteenth-century stele, which described the land as fertile and abundant: "There is fish in the water and rice in

the fields" (Bowie, 1992, p. 797). This discourse linked rural prosperity to royal virtue, reinforcing the centrality of the countryside in national narratives of strength and unity (Bowie, 1992, p. 798). In this context, the promotion of rural life was both a celebration of tradition and a projection of Thailand's modernization, seen in the adoption of Western-style clothing in rural settings (Herrera, 2015, p. 36).

The post-war period was further complicated by the Cold War, where Thai military regimes, backed by the United States, used cinema to promote nationalist ideologies and government policies (Chaloemtiarana, 2007, p. 145). Thai films during this time were heavily influenced by the political climate. Many reflected anti-communist sentiments and promoted Thai values. For example, *Fai Yen* (1965), supported by the United States Information Service (USIS), portrayed the horrors of communism and offered a positive image of the anti-Communist Thai government during a time when communist influence was growing in Thailand, particularly in the rural areas of Northeastern Thailand where the film was set (Pirakjunyakul, 2017). The rural is portrayed as impoverished but on its way to a better life with the help of the government and royal patronage, combating the communist accusation that the rural had been neglected.

The post-war era also saw the rise of independent filmmaking, driven by the reduced cost of 16 mm equipment. This led to a diversification of perspectives in Thai cinema, with open-air screenings becoming popular in rural areas. Films like *Thai, the Gentleman Bandit* (1949) portrayed rural protagonists as noble yet wronged figures forced into criminality by external forces. These narratives echoed the frustrations of rural populations, who felt increasingly marginalized by modernization and widening social inequalities. The rural setting became a site of resistance and a reflection of the growing class divide, with the protagonist's fight for justice resonating with rural audiences who sought fairness in a rapidly changing society.

By the 1970s, political upheavals and student movements led to a more critical portrayal of rural life. As May Adadol Ingawanij (2006) observes, the left-wing nationalist discourse encouraged intellectual identification with rural life and celebrated folk and popular culture (p. 81). This perspective reflected a growing awareness of the social and economic challenges faced by rural communities, urging artists and filmmakers to depict these realities more honestly. This era gave rise to the "Art for Life" movement (*sinlapa pua chiwit*), which embraced social realism and was committed to representing the struggles of the masses (p. 83). Filmmakers of the Thai New Wave, such as Chatrichalerm Yukol, incorporated these ideals into films like *Karn* (1973), which portrayed the injustices faced by rural populations, including poverty, lack of education, and bureaucratic corruption. Similarly, *Plae Kao* (1977) by Cherd Songsri challenged romanticized portrayals of rural life by depicting the economic struggles of peasants and the growing disparity between rural and urban Thailand.

Filmmakers began addressing issues of poverty, migration, and the exploitation of rural communities by urban elites and corrupt political systems, while the rise of urbanization was often portrayed as a threat to traditional values and rural livelihoods. With many Northeasterners migrating to Bangkok for labor work, numerous films have been made particularly about the Northeastern part of Thailand (known as Isan) that make use of the local culture and Northeastern way of life. According to Somboon and Chummuangpak (2022, p. 192), there were three trends before 2007 in Northeastern films: Isan for life (realism), local musical films, and action films. The most notable one in the "Isan for life" category is *Luk Isan* (Vichit Kounavudhi, 1982), which uses the Northeastern dialect and adopts a realistic approach to the subject matter with no stars in the film. The film

emphasizes the struggle of the villagers and portrays the Northeastern villages as barren lands constantly in drought.

In the 21st century, filmmakers like Apichatpong Weerasethakul have revolutionized rural representation in Thai cinema, blending mysticism, memory, and the supernatural with depictions of rural existence. Films such as *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010) move beyond purely socio-economic narratives to explore the personal and spiritual dimensions of rural life. These films challenge earlier depictions of rural life as simple or backward, offering instead a space for narrative experimentation and ambiguity. Films like *Pai in Love* (2009) and *Chiang Khan Story* (2014) reflect a nostalgic longing for rural life, framing it as an authentic and peaceful contrast to the corrupt and hectic nature of urban existence. However, as Adadol critiques in her analysis of *Mon-Rak Transistor* (2001), this romanticization of rural life often fails to address the real struggles of rural populations facing modernity, capitalism, and globalization (p. 85).

The representation of rural life in Thai cinema has evolved from idealized, nationalist depictions to more complex portrayals that reflect the country's socio-political and economic transformations. This evolution sets the stage for films like *The Undertaker*, *Death Whisperer*, and *The Murderer*, which highlight the cultural richness of rural communities while engaging with themes of tradition, modernity, and the supernatural.

Redefining Rural Narratives in *The Undertaker*, *Death Whisperer*, and *The Murderer*

This section focuses on *The Undertaker*, *Death Whisperer*, and *The Murderer*, which were released around the same time and exemplify the growing prominence of rural narratives in Thai cinema during the age of global platforms. The analysis of these films will cover their narrative, socio-cultural themes, and representation of rural life, while also exploring their success in domestic and international markets, particularly through media convergence in the next section.

The Undertaker

Produced by Thibaa Studio, this film is the sixth installment of the Thibaa series, which is known for its authentic portrayal of rural Isan culture and is made by Isan filmmakers. The momentum of the rise of the representation of the Northeastern has continued since the latter half of the 2000s, with 'Isan Fever,' a local trend of the Northeastern region permeating the rest of the country through music, television series, food culture, and film (Somboon & Chummuangpak, 2022). It is no longer content that circulates only among the Isan people. Many films since 2014 have been locally produced instead of funded by big studios from Bangkok. Isan is no longer a land of drought, as Pattana Kittiarsa (2014) suggests, but a strategically positioned center of development within the Mekong region (p. 32). This new Isan is not a poor immigrant who flocks to Bangkok for work but a proud Isan who represents their local culture (Kodtummee, 2020).

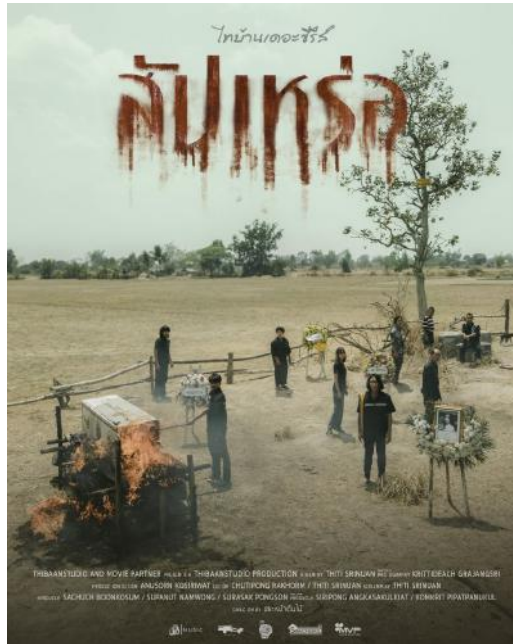


Figure 1: *The Undertaker* (Thiti Srinuan, 2023) Official Poster

Thibaaan: The Series is part of the continuation of this trend, building on the success of earlier films about Isan since *Yam Yasothorn* (Petchtai Wongkamlao, 2005), which was made by a big studio, to *Phubao Thai Ban Isan Indy* (2014), made on a very low budget by local filmmakers. The first *Thibaaan: The Series* was made in 2017. The film follows Ja Lod, a shy young man from rural Isan, who attempts to find love by courting 100 girls while working as a school janitor, alongside his friend Pong, an ambitious entrepreneur facing pressure to abandon his dreams and farm instead. The next four films of *Thibaaan: The Series* use the same characters and explore interconnected stories, referred to as the ‘universe of Thibaaan.’ The narrative in all six films similarly portrays the everyday lives of villagers, balancing humor, tradition, and modernity, while still centering around the ‘Home–Temple–School’ relationship—a key social structure that has held Thai community together since the past. *Thibaaan: The Series* has added a new element, technology, into this relationship (Srijinda, Wattansis, & Karupad, 2020, p. 75). These films have portrayed Isan culture as a hybrid culture where modernity has become part of their lives.

In *The Undertaker*, the film focuses on Jerd, a 25-year-old law graduate who is forced to help his sick father as an undertaker despite his fear of ghosts, and Xiang, who, heartbroken by the loss of his ex-girlfriend Baikhao, seeks to reunite with her in the afterlife through spiritual practices. Through the undertaker, whose role in the community is both practical and spiritual, his duties include overseeing funerals and helping families navigate the process of mourning, reflecting the central role that death rituals play in rural Thai communities. The film’s portrayal of these rituals is deeply rooted in local customs, offering a rich, ethnographic depiction of life in rural Thailand, particularly reflecting Isan beliefs surround death.

Despite socio-economic pressures of capitalism and globalization, the people still maintain their strong beliefs, reflecting resilience in the face of change. Chutikamoltham (2015) argues that rural horror films often portray rural villages as spaces where unresolved social tensions manifest through supernatural phenomena, reinforcing a dystopian view of the countryside as a place trapped by its past. *The Undertaker*, however, reinterprets these elements, using supernatural aspects not as symbols of stagnation, but as catalysts for the village’s negotiation

between past and present. For example, the ghost of Baikao represents the weight of the past, yet rather than haunting the present, it provides Xiang with a way to reconcile his grief and move forward, illustrating how rural communities adapt tradition to navigate change.

Thibaaan: The Series, initially popularized among Northeastern audiences, exceeded expectations and expanded its reach into urban centers like Bangkok. Building on this established fan base, *The Undertaker* successfully resonated across diverse audiences, drawing urban and even international viewers. Its exploration of universal themes, such as death and the afterlife, allowed the film to transcend regional boundaries, showcasing the global appeal of local narratives and highlighting rural Thai culture on a broader stage.

Death Whisperer



Figure 2: *Death Whisperer* (Taweewat Wantha, 2023)

Death Whisperer is a horror film adapted from the novel *Thiyod... Whispers of Madness* by Kritanont (Kittisak Kittiviryanon), which recounts a chilling tale based on true events experienced by the author's family. Set in 1972, the film follows the mysterious deaths of young girls in a remote village in Kanchanaburi, as the protagonist Yak and his family grapple with the eerie presence and supernatural occurrences linked to the haunting sound of "Thiyod" that terrorizes the community, ultimately forcing them to confront the malevolent forces threatening their lives.

Death Whisperer can be analyzed through the lens of how rural horror films use supernatural elements to confront deeper cultural anxieties related to tradition, memory, and unresolved histories within rural communities. As Chutikamoltham (2015) suggests, rural horror films like *Ban Phi Pob* (Srisawat, 1989) and *Phi Hua Khat* (Khomsan, 2002) utilize supernatural narratives to subvert the romanticized image of the village, transforming it into a space of hidden fears and suppressed anxieties. Similarly, *Death Whisperer* employs the eerie sound of "Thiyod" and the mysterious deaths in a remote village as metaphors for the haunting presence of the past and the unresolved traumas that continue to affect rural communities.

By setting the story in the 1970s, a period marked by social and political turmoil in Thailand, the film situates its horror within a specific historical context, reflecting how rural spaces are often burdened with the collective memory of suffering and loss. Thus, *Death Whisperer* extends the thematic concerns of earlier rural horror films by using the supernatural not only to terrify but also to reflect on the complex, often painful realities that shape rural life, be it unresolved historical traumas and social issues that rural communities in Thailand have

faced, such as poverty, social inequality, loss of traditional ways of life, and the lingering effects of political turmoil. What sets *Death Whisperer* apart from other Thai horror films is the way the family actively fights back against the haunting sound and the spirits that possess one of their members. Instead of relying on religious authorities, the family takes matters into their own hands, actively confronting the supernatural forces threatening their village. This approach transforms them from passive victims into agents of their own destiny, marking a departure from traditional portrayals of rural helplessness. The village in *Death Whisperer* supplants from a peripheral setting into a critical space where the past and present clash, highlighting the struggle and complexities of rural identity and experience in contemporary Thailand.

The Murderer

Following *The Undertaker's* exploration of rural resilience and *Death Whisperer's* focus on rural trauma, *The Murderer* brings a fresh perspective, using dark humor to critique the cultural tensions and identity struggles in rural Isan. As the first Isan dialect film produced in collaboration with Netflix and Transformation Films, *The Murderer*, directed by Wisit Sasanatieng, centers on Nawath (played by Petchtai Wongkamlao, a renowned comedian in Thailand), a seasoned investigator tasked with solving a mass murder in a remote Isan village. The primary suspect is Earl, a foreign son-in-law, as all evidence seemingly points to him. The film blends suspense with dark humor, exploring Earl's efforts to prove his innocence amid the deep-seated prejudices of the villagers. Earl's modest IT job and his non-traditional relationship with his wife, whom he met as a coworker rather than through the more typical circumstances often associated with 'farang,' distinguish him from the stereotypical image of a wealthy foreigner. This divergence from the expected stereotype intensifies the tension between him and the locals, complicating his place within the community and heightening suspicions against him.

Petchtai's comedic background adds a layer of nuance to Nawath's character. His comedic timing allows the film to subvert typical crime dramas, mixing humor with social critique, making it more than just a mystery or satire. Petchtai's performance highlights how rural spaces, often marginalized in Thai cinema, become vibrant sites for negotiating cultural tension. His portrayal of Nawath underscores the complexities of navigating local expectations in the face of outside influences, transforming the investigator's role from a mere figure of authority into one who mirrors the villagers' underlying anxieties. This duality—balancing humor with the weight of deeper issues—mirrors the absurdity and complexity of cultural encounters within the film.



Figure 3: *The Murderer* (Wisit Sasanatieng, 2023)

In *The Murderer*, Wisit Sasanatieng's use of color echoes the stylized artificiality Stephen Teo (2017) identifies in his previous work, *Tears of the Black Tiger*. Like in *Tears of the Black Tiger*, Sasanatieng employs exaggerated, vibrant colors that break away from traditional Thai naturalism, creating a heightened, almost surreal aesthetic that underscores the film's thematic contrasts between modernity and tradition. This approach visually reinforces the absurdity of cultural tensions within the rural Isan village, amplifying the clash between local norms and global influences. The artificial hues not only add a comic-book feel but also transform the village setting into an active site of cultural negotiation, where the exaggerated colors underscore the distortions and biases each character brings to their interactions. This stylization positions *The Murderer* within a unique narrative space that challenges and reinterprets conventional rural depictions.

Ultimately, *The Murderer* reframes rural spaces as active participants in shaping modern Thai identity. The film critiques the cultural collisions that occur as rural and global worlds meet, exposing the contradictions and negotiations inherent in this process. By blending dark comedy with sharp social commentary, *The Murderer* invites audiences to reconsider the role of rural Isan, not only within the Thai nation but also within a globalized cultural framework. The village, with its complex social fabric, embodies the tension between maintaining local identity and adapting to global influences, positioning rural spaces as critical players in Thailand's evolving cultural landscape.

Rural Narratives, Media Convergence, and Global Mobilities: The Case of *The Undertaker*, *Death Whisperer*, and *The Murderer*

Using Henry Jenkins' concept of media convergence and John Urry's mobilities framework, this section explores how rural local narratives are integrated into the global cinematic landscape, offering a more nuanced perspective on cultural identity and the shifting dynamics between the local and the global. This analysis is structured into three thematic areas:

Expanding Global Reach Through Digital Platforms

The success of these films is not solely a result of their engaging narratives but also stems from the strategic use of digital platforms like Netflix, which have expanded the reach of Thai cinema to international audiences. *The Murderer*'s availability as a Netflix Original demonstrates the platform's role in curating and promoting culturally specific content to a

global audience. Netflix, using extensive data and user ratings, identifies a growing interest in non-Western narratives. This allows films like *The Murderer* to reach a broader audience, aligning with Jenkins' (2006) concept of convergence culture, where media flows across platforms, engaging diverse viewers through algorithm-driven recommendations.

The international availability of these films challenges Western-dominated narratives and brings visibility to non-Western stories. *The Undertaker*, *Death Whisperer*, and *The Murderer* bring local narratives to global audiences, encouraging engagement with themes and practices unfamiliar to Western viewers. This fosters a more inclusive global cultural discourse, allowing diverse voices and regional identities to thrive. However, this global reception raises questions about cultural authenticity. As Urry (2007) argues, the movement of cultural products across borders involves recontextualization. While these films remain culturally rooted, their global distribution introduces them to new interpretive frameworks, which can create tension between preserving cultural specificity and making the content accessible to a broader audience. For instance, several death-related rituals in *The Undertaker*—specific to Isan culture and Buddhism—may not fully resonate with Western audiences whose beliefs about death and the afterlife differ, illustrating the challenge of balancing local authenticity with global accessibility.

Additionally, these films benefit from the increasing global interest in non-Western narratives and the expansion of streaming platforms into new markets. Netflix's strategy of producing and distributing local content globally introduces Thai cinema to new audiences while encouraging filmmakers to think beyond their local markets without sacrificing cultural identity. This form of media convergence allows films like *The Murderer* to transcend regional boundaries and contribute to a global dialogue on cultural identity, modernity, and tradition. Digital platforms bridge the gap between local storytelling and global audiences, enhancing the visibility of Thai cultural narratives on the world stage.

Thematic Universality and Cultural Specificity

One of the key strengths of these films lies in their ability to blend universal themes with culturally specific narratives. *The Undertaker* explores the universal experience of dealing with death and loss, set against the backdrop of a rural Thai community. The film's emphasis on the rituals surrounding death and the role of the undertaker in the community provides an intimate glimpse into how rural Thai society deals with mortality. This theme resonates globally, as death is a universal experience, yet the film's portrayal of death rituals is deeply rooted in Isan cultural traditions, showcasing the specificity of beliefs about spirits, the afterlife, and the importance of rituals in rural Thai society. For example, the ritual of "cutting the ghost cord" (*tat sai naen*) breaks the ties between the deceased and the living to prevent the spirit from lingering or taking another family member with them into the afterlife. Such rituals not only highlight the communal response to death but also emphasize the spiritual responsibility the living have to ensure the peaceful transition of the dead. These practices, while specific to Isan culture, contrast with the individualistic and often more secular approaches to death seen in Western cinema, where rituals may focus more on grief management or emotional catharsis rather than on the metaphysical continuation of relationships between the living and the dead. By portraying these complex, culturally rich death rituals, *The Undertaker* offers a distinctive take on the universal experience of death, grounding it in a communal, spiritually nuanced framework that enriches the film's global resonance, while simultaneously preserving its cultural specificity.

Similarly, *Death Whisperer* uses supernatural horror to explore the lingering presence of historical trauma within a rural community. While this theme of confronting the past may resonate with global audiences familiar with similar narratives, the film remains firmly rooted in the socio-political history of Thailand, where the past is seen as an active force shaping the present. This localized context prevents the film from being merely a universal metaphor, instead grounding it in the specific historical and cultural struggles faced by rural Thai communities. *The Murderer*, on the other hand, the theme of the outsider struggling to fit in, while universal, is enriched by the film's specific cultural context, highlighting the unique challenges faced by those who exist on the margins of Thai society. Consequently, this blending of the local and the global allows these films to resonate with diverse audiences, demonstrating the potential of Thai cinema to contribute to global cultural dialogues.

Reimagining Rural Spaces & Negotiating Identity in a Converged World

The depiction of rural Thailand in these films reimagines the traditional portrayal of rural spaces, challenging simplistic binaries of rural-urban, tradition-modernity, and local-global. John Urry's (2007) concept of "mobilities" emphasizes that places are continually reshaped by the flows of people, ideas, and cultural practices, and these films show rural Thailand as actively engaging with modernity and global forces rather than remaining isolated or stagnant. Through migration, global media, and tourism, rural communities are influenced by shifting realities, positioning rural Thailand as a participant in global currents rather than a place left behind.

For example, by setting the story in a rural Isan village and using the local dialect, *The Murderer* subverts Western stereotypes of rural Asia as static or undeveloped. Rather than portraying a remote, unchanging backdrop, the film presents a dynamic space where local culture actively interacts with global forces, exemplified by Earl, a British man, and another Isan son-in-law, Charlie, an American who fits more closely with the stereotype of a foreigner—meeting his wife at a bar and working hard to provide for her family, trying to navigate the intricacies of village life. These characters symbolize the complex relationships between locals and outsiders. This portrayal challenges Western assumptions about rural Asia, showing that the community is not isolated but globally aware and culturally distinct. The villagers, as one comments, see such foreigners as people “looking for someone to care for them in old age, to clean up after them,” highlighting a well-understood dynamic within the community. By portraying locals who both recognize and navigate these relationships, the film complicates the Western notion of rural spaces as merely exotic, presenting rural Isan as an active participant in global cultural exchanges rather than a passive backdrop. The film further explores the negotiation of cultural identity within a globalized media landscape.

In *Death Whisperer*, Yak's resistance to supernatural threats goes beyond a mere struggle for survival, symbolizing a rural family's defiance amidst the turbulence of 1970s Thailand. This was a period marked by violent political unrest, such as the October 14, 1973, student uprising, which reflected widespread dissatisfaction with a centralized government often perceived as neglectful of rural communities. Rural populations found themselves largely unprotected and accused of being leftist sympathizers, forcing them to rely on self-sustained resources and traditions for survival. Yak's struggle represents this resilience, embodying rural communities' broader resistance to external political and ideological pressures encroaching upon their ways of life. According to Sattayanurak, the "community culture" model, which has shaped Thai intellectual and political perceptions of rural areas, often romanticizes rural life while overlooking actual conflicts and material needs (2010). Yak's

defiance thus resonates with modern challenges facing rural spaces as they negotiate identity and self-determination within a converging world, underscoring the timeless struggle to balance tradition and autonomy with external influences.

These films position rural spaces as dynamic areas where tradition and modernity intersect, revealing evolving identity landscapes in contemporary Thailand. Urry's mobility framework complicates our understanding of rural identity by showing how these spaces act as conduits for diverse and intersecting flows of people, culture, and economic forces (Urry, 2007). Unlike static portrayals, this perspective suggests that rural identities are constructed not solely through internal cultural practices or external global influences but through the interdependent mobility of ideas, values, and lifestyles. These flows create a layered identity that rural residents must navigate, often embracing modernity as a tool to reinforce traditional values, thereby creating hybrid identities that appear contradictory but are rooted in resilience and adaptability. In rural Thailand, where global influences are mediated through both localized practices and transnational relationships—such as migration networks and digital communication channels—identity formation becomes a multidirectional process. The portrayal of rural spaces as simultaneously rooted and globally engaged thus emphasizes a rural agency that actively shapes modern Thai identity through strategic adaptations, illustrating the complexities of belonging within a globalized yet place-bound framework.

Conclusion

This study highlights a transformative shift in Thai cinema, where films like *The Undertaker*, *Death Whisperer*, and *The Murderer* foreground rural narratives, challenging the dominance of urban-centric stories in Thai media. These films employ authentic portrayals of rural life, using local dialects, cultural practices, and socio-historical contexts to bring nuanced rural perspectives to both Thai and global audiences. The analysis, drawing on Henry Jenkins' media convergence and John Urry's mobilities framework, reveals how platforms like Netflix facilitate the international dissemination of these narratives, enabling them to resonate across cultural boundaries. This convergence of local storytelling and global distribution reflects a growing capacity for Thai cinema to engage in international cultural discourse, elevating previously marginalized perspectives.

The findings suggest that rural Thai films can serve as powerful tools for exploring and preserving cultural identity amidst globalization. By navigating themes such as resilience, adaptation, and tradition within a modernizing world, these films encourage viewers to reconsider the complexities of rural life beyond idealized or stereotypical portrayals. However, the study also acknowledges limitations: the global reach achieved through platforms like Netflix often necessitates adjustments to enhance accessibility for international audiences, which may risk diluting culturally specific elements.

Looking forward, the evolving role of rural narratives in Thai cinema suggests a promising future for diverse representations in global media. As Thai filmmakers continue to leverage digital platforms and transnational distribution, further research could explore how audiences interpret these culturally specific films, examining the balance between preserving cultural authenticity and adapting for broader viewership. This trajectory signals an expanding space for Thai cinema within the global media landscape, contributing to a more inclusive and dynamic cultural exchange.

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