

The Glocalization Strategy of Contemporary Thai Cinema

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Abstract

Since the success of *Bad Genius* (2017, Nattawut Poonpiriya), the most recent international success story in Thai cinema, Thai content has proven itself as a subject of interest in the global market. Following its success, many Thai filmmakers attempted to follow this formula. They utilized local culture and beliefs in order to attract international audiences. Although this situation is not unique to Thai cinema, being observable elsewhere. This cinematic strategy is part of a wider response to the effects of globalism. It exemplifies what Roland Robertson (1995) says, explaining that the spheres of global and local are not opposites. Instead, the latter is 'essentially included within the global.' Particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic, with the subsequent intense transformation of the media industry, a rethinking of these binaries is increasingly useful for our understanding of the current situation. This paper takes a close look at this current trend, in how Thai filmmakers engages with globalization through the following films: *The Medium* (2021, Banjong Pisanthanakul), and *Hunger* (2023, Sitisiri Mongkolsiri). Both were created during the rise of streaming media, particularly Netflix, alongside the cooperation between national and transnational industries.

Keywords: Thai Cinema, Glocalization, Transnational Cinema

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Introduction

The year 2017 marked an important phase for the development of the Thai film industry. The year saw the release of *Bad Genius* (2017, Nattawut Poonpiriya), grossing over 30 million US dollars internationally, became the most successful film in Thai history. This film is atypical of the romance or horror fare foreign audiences usually associate with Thai cinema. Instead, it centers on a group of high school students who run a test-cheating scheme for financial gain. It is not a standard high school student film, but rather, a heist-style thriller outside the norms of Thai cinema. Moreover, Netflix was first introduced to Thai audiences in 2017. Both events changed the Thai film industry. While the former proved that Thai content could compete as a subject of interest for global consumers, the latter offered a chance for newcomers of Thai cinema to access an international market. Both events propelled a kind of film-making that uses the local contents of culture in order to attract global audiences. This paper takes a closer look at examples of this current trend through the following films: *The Medium* (2021, Banjong Pisanthanakul), and *Hunger* (2023, Sitisiri Mongkolsiri). These were created during the rise in popularity of streaming media, particularly Netflix, as well as the cooperation between national and transnational industries. While the first film was made from the cooperation between Korean and Thai filmmakers, the latter is a Netflix Original. I will argue that these films provide insight into the complex relationship between global and local forces, how their interaction materializes in Thai cinema.

I am aided by Roland Robertson (1995), positing that the spheres of global and local are not opposites. Instead, the latter is 'essentially included within the global' (Robertson, 1995, p. 35). According to Peter Beyer (2022), who studies the works of early scholars on globalization including J.P. Nettl, Roland Robertson, George Modelski, and Wilbert E. Moore, 'the international or global orientation did not supersede the national or local; rather the fundamental idea was that local or national societies were still primary but that they operated, and to a significant degree constituted themselves, in relation to one another in an international or global whole' (p. 3). Robertson (1995) introduces the term 'glocalization' as a much needed concept. The term globalization suggests that locality is overridden completely. At the same time, what is often neglected about the local is that, in varying degrees, it is constructed on a trans-local basis (1995, p.26). Although Robertson's 'glocalization' theory highlight how global corporations employs local marketing strategy, by respecting diversity and cultural differences, Dirlik (2018) notes that this may play into capital interest. He argues that 'to admit different cultures into the realm of capital, only to break them down and to remake them in accordance with the requirements of production and consumption' (p.93). Although the local is not purely a site for the manipulations of capitalist operations; there will always be something left out and unturned that complicates the task. Furthermore for Robertson (1995), 'glocalization' 'may have seriously underestimated the flow of ideas and practices from the so-called Third World to the seemingly dominant societies and regions in the world'(p.38-39). In a way, 'glocalization' can also be used by the local, a metonym for the so-called Third World here, as a strategy for accessing global markets (Robertson, 1995, p. 40). My argument is that the transnational film industry brings to the fore Robertson's idea of 'glocalization'. This is particularly relevant now with the technological transformation of media, as well as the industrial shift towards international collaboration. Through a closer look at the *The Medium* and *Hunger*, I will analyse them as sites where local and global are encountered, revealing the complexity of their relationship. In the following, I will trace the ways glocalization has impacted the film industry, becoming redefined post-pandemic, while lending context for the Thai film industry today.

Glocalization & Cinema

Throughout the history of cinema, Hollywood has dominated the world in terms of numbers and revenue. It has successfully made national cinema a global phenomenon. While it has become a dominant mode of filmmaking, it has been criticized for its ethnocentrism. The racial other, including but not limited to African, Asian, and Latin American others, are often portrayed as savage, violence, and primitive. There has been many attempts by other countries, according to Bala A. Musa (2022), ‘to seize their own national narratives, as well as their desire to reap economic benefits from developing their film industries and also emancipate themselves from cultural and media imperialism’ (p. 278). This, in turn, has led towards a glocalization of culture and communication. The Post-Second World War period has led to many developments in national cinema or so-called New Wave cinema across the globe, from Europe to Latin America and Africa. This emergence was closely linked to the proliferation of film festivals in European countries. Film festivals, as suggested by SooJeong Ahn (2012), aligned itself with regenerative projects focusing on the national levels in many European countries in Post-Second World War (p.8). The notion of national cinema in film festivals persists today despite the influx of transnational finance and technological and the global circulation of media (Ahn, 2012, p.8).

Film festivals continue to promote categories such as World Cinema, Cinema from the South, Asian Cinema, African Cinema, among many others that specify location. The growing number of film festivals around the world has helped to fit filmmakers into this mold. While these films need to stand on their own artistic merits, it is equally important that they are rooted in their cultural identity. According to Bill Nichols (1994):

Films from nations not previously regarded as prominent film-producing countries receive praise for their ability to transcend local issues and provincial tastes while simultaneously providing a window onto a different culture. We are invited to receive such films as evidence of artistic maturity – the work of directors ready to take their place within an international fraternity of *auteur* – and of a distinctive national culture – work that remains distinct from Hollywood-based norms both in style and theme. (p. 16)

The interplay between the local and the global is thereby at the heart of national cinema since the very beginning. Being part of global film culture allows the promotion of such films through the international stage of film festivals. As Kim Soyoun (1998) suggests ‘the international-scale film festivals in particular thrive on the manifold manifestations of the global and the local and the national and the local’ (p. 176). Filmmakers around the world have targeted the film festival circuit and strategically follow its trends. By diverting from the norm of Hollywood in both style and content, in emphasizing its own cultural identity, each filmmaker attempts to find his or her *auteur* signature.

Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, Thai cinema has caught the attention of international film festivals through the films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul and other so-called Thai New Wave directors, including Pen-ake Rattanaruang, Wisit Sassanathieng. Thai filmmakers have found an alternative route beyond the big studios that dominated the Thai film industry at the time. Since then, many filmmakers have gone independent through the film festival path. This means independence in mode of production, via film festival’s funding schemes and co-production, as well as exhibition and distribution. The awareness of cultural identity in line with international tastes, as set by film festival programmers, has been ingrained among

younger generation of filmmakers. However, as in many countries, the success of Thai filmmakers in international film festivals may not directly correlate with the development of national filmmaking. The complex relationship between national cinema and film festival needs to be further unraveled.

In the past five years, the film industry has undergone major changes particularly on the technological front, evidenced by the number of various platforms that have entered the Thai market. The Covid-19 pandemic also played a transformative role. Both have accelerated the popularity of online film viewing in Thailand, with a number of Thai films originating in platforms such as Netflix. Film co-production across borders have also gained momentum in Southeast Asia. Previously, the European film fund often required European partnership, but they have allowed an open option for non-European partnership. Additionally, Korea-Southeast Asia Co-Productions have been on the rise since the late 2010s. Due to the saturated state of their own markets, many major film companies sought alternative channels for growth and market expansion (Seonghoon, 2017). Their strategies can be thought as attempts at 'localization' as Yoon In-ho, head of CJ Entertainment's public relation team realized. He notes that 'Hollywood movies are universal, but in contrast, Korean movies face culture and language barriers' (Seonghoon, 2017). This has resulted in film companies launching remakes of *Miss Granny* across China, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia since 2015.—In recent years, the ample opportunities for collaboration has produced a new breed of Thai films made with different partners for international audiences. The following section will explore how the local is presented to the world using examples of Thai cinema.

The Recent Cases of Glocalization in Thai Film Industry

It is now commonplace for filmmakers around the world to work together, crossing borders, to produce films. This is demonstrated by Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Memoria* (2021), made in Columbia, and *The Medium* (2021), being a cooperation between Thai and Korean filmmakers. The latter was produced and written by Na Hong-Jin, a respected and successful Korean filmmaker, and directed by Banjong Pisanthanakun, whose film *Pee Mak* (2014) grossed the highest for national films in Thai history. *The Medium* (2021) is about a shaman's spiritual inheritance in Northeastern Thailand. The film centers, in mockumentary style, on what the diegetic camera sees as the film crew follows the shaman, Nim. Inheriting the spirit of Ba Yen, the shaman seeks to transfer this entity onto her niece Mink, while watching over her transformation. However, something entirely different possesses Mink, something evil that will destroy everything around her.

This film was highly anticipated, being a collaboration between two film directors who made their names through horror films. The film is also co-invested by GDH and Showbox, whose previous investment included *The Host* (Bong Joon Ho, 2006.). It started with Hong-Jin's original story about a shaman's inheritance in Korea; he later asked Pisanthanakun to direct and place into a Thai context. Hong-Jin's intention was to make a film for international audiences that cannot be neatly categorized as either Thai or Korean. For him, Thai horror films have the potential to reach the top of world cinema. In an interview, Hong Jin said 'Thai horror films are much more daring, primitive and tremendously exotic to me. Korean horror films – we have our own style but it seems similar to the Hollywood style and I wanted to differentiate from that' (Noh, 2021). Initially, Hong Jin started the project with Korean's version of shamanism but he found it too similar to his previous film, *The Wailing* (2016), that also focused on shamanistic belief. He instead wanted to locate it in more exotic locations like Thailand or Indonesia. He then asked Pisanthanakun to localize the story and

contextualize it within Thai culture. For Pisanthanakun, Thai horror genre has been on par with horror films from Japan and Korea, particularly with his first film *Shutter* (2004). He believes these three countries have given birth to what he terms ‘vengeful crawling lady in white’, a trope catching international attention, including Hollywood with its numerous adaptations (Supateerawanitt, 2021). Pisanthanakun has definite experience using local cultural beliefs about the spiritual world in order to attract international audiences.



Figure 1: *The Medium* (Banjong Pisanthanakun, 2021) Official Poster

The collaboration between these two filmmakers, demonstrated by how the script was co-created by Hong-Jin, Banjong Pisanthanakun and Chantavit Dhanasevi, long time Pisanthanakun’s collaborator, the element of shamanism has been made trans- local through the resonances and differences of both cultures. The film creates a new aesthetics combining local beliefs of animism, the natural immanence of spirits in humans, trees, or animals, with some of Korean’s original shamanistic ideas that global audiences could understand. This belief is distinctively different from western ideas about the supernatural. Furthermore, this use of animism is similar to Weerasethakul’s use in *Tropical Malady* (2004). It is this exotic belief that attracts international audiences in both films. Both feature transformation, one more animalist as suggested by the Thai version of the title *Sat Pralaat* meaning strange beast, while the other focuses on the devil. Many scholars, including Chelsea Birks and May Adadol Ingawanich, draw on regional historic context. Birks (2021) suggests that ‘the opposition between matriarchal-syncretic animism and patriarchal- monological Buddhism’ provides the appropriate framework in reading Weerasethakul’s film (p. 60). Weerasethakul’s work is similar to *The Medium* in its Northeastern Thai setting as well as sharing belief systems. Both films suggest that the space between animal and human, spirit world and real world, are ambiguous and permeable. This differs from western notions of the spiritual world contained by discrete boundaries. With the spirits and animals in *The Medium* holding grudges against the human world, all hell can truly break loose.

The Medium employs the conventions of internationally recognized horror sub-genres of the zombie film, as well as possession movies like *The exorcist* (1973). The zombie genre is popular not only in the West but also in Asian countries as of recently. This is found in many recent films and series from Korea and Japan, including *Zombiverse* (series, 2023), *Zom 100: Bucket List of the Dead* (2023), *Alive* (2020). *The Medium* may specify locality while also translating very well across culture; Mink’s possession and horrifying transformation resonates with demonic possession beliefs in the West. In terms of style, the film’s similarity to *Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Paranormal Activity* (2007), using documentary style

footage and closed-circuit images, would be familiar for global audiences. Its mockumentary style, which the *Blair Witch Project* (1999) made famous, heightens the potential horror of the *The Medium* lending to its popularity among mainstream viewers. Filming *The Medium* this way was Hong-jin's first idea when he presented it to Pisanthanakun.

As a result, *The Medium* did quite well in both the Korea and Thailand box office during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was the 6th highest grossing Korean film of 2021. It also received 'Best of Bucheon' award at 25th Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival (BIFAN) in South Korea, that focused on horror, thriller, mystery and fantasy. The film was distributed by French distributor, The Jokers Films, which also released Korean films *Parasite* (Bong Joon Ho, 2019) and *The Handmaiden* (Park Chan-wook, 2016). It was also chosen as original feature for the streaming platform Shudder in the US. This has proven that stories about shamanistic practice in rural Thailand can cross borders. In a way, the success story of *The Medium* is reflected by the character of Shaman Santi, who has been asked to exorcise the dark force from Mink. The viewer sees Santi not only as a revered shaman, through the extravagant ceremonies of different faiths, but also as a representative of mercantile interests. In his opening scene, Nim asks him why he is still involved with these clowns, referring to him putting on an exotic ceremony. He replies that he has to make a living. What he says could suggest that the world today makes faith and capitalism inseparable, no longer diametrically opposed. We can see the process of glocalization attempting to reduce local cultures into exotic merchandise, whether that be in a free market or in this case a global platform.

Hunger is an original Netflix production, meaning that it was commissioned, produced and distributed by Netflix. Although what this means in terms of Netflix original or 'original film' is quite misleading. 'Original film' not only encompasses films commissioned or co-produced by Netflix but also includes those that are exclusively distributed by Netflix. *Hunger* has been distributed in over 190 countries. It is about a young talented cook, Aoy, who wants to advance her social status by training under the ruthless chef, Chef Paul. The leading cast features well-known actress Chutimon Chuengcharoensukying, who made her name in *Bad Genius*. It also stars Nopachai Chaiyanam, a veteran actor who appeared in two of Pen-Ake Rattanaerung films, *Nymph* and *Headshot*, previously shown in the international film festival circuit. *Hunger*, at the time of its release, was at number one for new releases.



Figure 2: *Hunger* (Sitisiri Mongkolsiri, 2023)

Netflix has particularly grown in popularity during the pandemic as viewers sought to find home comfort during the 2020 lockdown. In 2021, Netflix had 200 million subscribers, 36

million signing up in 2020 (Morrison, 2023, p. 84). Netflix have used original content to attract global audiences across the globe. They began releasing their own productions in 2015, increasing since then in both quantity and quality. Evidence of the latter is seen in films such as *Okja* (2017), *Roma* (2018) and *The Irishman* (2019), garnering praise in international film festivals and even receiving Oscar nominations. These original films have become integrated into world film culture rooted in various countries across the globe. In 2016, at International Consumer Electronics Show, CEO of Netflix Reed Hasting says that:

We are shooting a sports comedy in Mexico, a crime drama in Italy, a dystopian film about bioengineering in Korea. The possibilities of building connections between cultures and people are endless and important, that's why we're here to talk this morning. We're gonna talk about how the Internet is changing television and how we're at the start of a global revolution.

According to Colin Jon Mark (2021), his speech 'showcases the emergence of Netflix's discourse of "glocalization": producing local, non-English content to distribute globally and instantaneously' (p. 83). This means that, as Mareike Jenner (2018) argues, Netflix was keen to commission content that suited the popular tastes of a growing international audience (p. 139). In 2020, 60 % of Netflix's media content were made in languages other than English. These productions were successful beyond their original countries of origin. This has proven that localized content can appeal to global audiences. However, localized productions never operate as standalone operations. They are supervised and coordinated for achieving global efficiency. Netflix's transnational strategy combines localized adaptation and global standardization (Evens and Donders, 2018, p. 113).

In 2021, Netflix appointed Yongyoot Thongkongtoon, veteran filmmaker from GDH studios, as Director of Content for Thailand. They also appointed Lee Chatametikool, well-known editor and independent filmmaker, as Director of Post-production for Southeast Asia and Taiwan in 2022. The merge between mainstream film industry and independent sector into one conglomerate company has suggestively closed the gap between mainstream and independent film audiences, while focusing on international audiences. *Hunger* was made with global viewers in mind. It is not surprising that one of the film's originators is Soros Sukhum. Being well-known among international film festivals, many of his produced films have been shown in festivals for the last twenty years. He knows what kinds of films attract international audiences. Another important figure is Kongdej Jaturanrasamee, who was credited as writer and producer of the film. He is a long-time collaborator of Soros Sukhum and his films also screened at various film festivals. Both Sukhum and Jaturanrasamee understand how glocalization works, seen in both their filmograp *Tang Wong* (2013), *Snap* (2015), and *Where We Belong* (2019), all having successful runs in the international film festival circuit.

In an interview with the director of *Hunger*, Sitisiri Mongkolsiri, he says he wanted to focus on food in his film because Thailand is known for its cuisine. He said 'when I look at the street, you see people cooking and eating all the time, and this goes on around the clock' (Doton, 2023). It is what most foreigners associate Thailand with. The film is unsurprisingly praised for its stunning visuals, particular with its food scenes. Food has become a feast for the eyes in par with the high value production guaranteed by the Netflix standard. Mongkolsiri chooses to portray both street food as represented by Aoy, taking over her father to cook the family's own Thai stir-fried noodle, *Pad Si-ew*, and fine dining as represented by Chef Paul in comparison. For Mongkolsiri, this comparison portrays Thailand because 'In

one place you might have something very luxurious and a street next to it, you'll see poverty. They're just mixed together in the same area' (Doton, 2023). Although the film might attract global viewers with food, particularly Thai food, its real message is about the universal subject of class division. It is an expectation that international audiences might be expected from when they watch Thai films, a kind of Third World issue they are familiar with. This is a concept originated by Western thought but clearly demonstrated by other world regions, as capitalism universally creates inequality that amplify class divisions. Films like *Parasite* have done the impossible in making a foreign film win the Oscar in 2020, while highlighting a bleak vision of capitalism where rich and poor are worlds apart. Issues of class still strike a chord among oversea viewers as inequality occurs not only in Third World counties, but are deeply rooted in every rich nation of the world. Mongkolsiri believes that this makes his film relatable for different audiences, saying that 'we live in an age of capitalism, even if you don't understand the language, I think everyone can relate to the movie' (Koh, 2023).

In the film, food has become a vehicle for addressing social inequality. Chef Paul, the main protagonist, cooks only for the rich and powerful. They are represented by a retired and powerful General; a group of young 'new money'; and a privileged businessman all trying to get closer to the epicenter of power. The differences between the two worlds can also be explicitly seen through food. While Chef Paul's food is elaborately displayed, at times raw and bloody, Aoy's street food is simple. Not only does the film address social inequality, it also addresses how patriarchy dominates every sector of society, treating women as subordinates. The film threads the universal themes of Third world society as typically expected.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to demonstrate how glocalization has impacted the Thai film industry and how it has reframed the way local filmmakers engage with global markets. I contextualize this in a time of increasing cooperation and coordination between national and transnational in the past few years.—Through the films *The Medium* (2021) and *Hunger* (2023), I attempt to reveal the complexities of global-local relationships in the process of filmmaking. For Robertson, combining global-local refers to the fact that globalization often involves 'the adaptation of panlocal developments to local circumstances' (Roudometof and Dessi, 2022, p. 6). With big corporations, in this case Showbox and Netflix, glocalization has become a business strategy for expanding their territories and audiences.

The growth of international mega-companies like Korea's Showbox or global media platforms like Netflix, Amazon, or Disney have forced them to become localized. This is in order to compete for fresh and exotic local content to present to the global market. Contrasting with Robertson's glocalization, George Ritzer has coined a new term 'grobalization' to describe this. Ritzer (2007) focuses on the 'imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, organizations, and the like and their desire, indeed need, to impose themselves in various geographic areas' (p. 15). Ritzer sees 'grobalization' as 'a way of conceptualizing the tendency toward homogenization within the process of globalization, with glocalization representing instead the trend towards heterogenization and hybridity' (Roudometof and Dessi, 2022, p. 7). These two contradictory trends, grobalization and glocalization, are both present in both films. While on one hand, cross cooperation works towards rating and profitability, the local sphere hopes to put forward unique cultural identity while sustaining domestic industry. Although much of what is local may curtail or tailor to

the global. Both films may be different from their local industry in content or visual styles, they nonetheless stay within their superficial exoticism.

The future is uncertain on further collaborations of global-local. With Ritzer's negative view of capitalism, globalization will inevitably move towards glocalization. Diversity and difference will be left behind, being represented as an exotic Other, or at its best incorporated by the global. Eventually, it will be transposed into the glocal. As Victor Roudometof and Ugo Dessi (2022) suggest, 'the spread of globalization means that the local disappears; all that is left is the global and that, of course, is insufficient for challenging capitalism' (p. 7). It remains to be seen whether the real-life ending will be as predictable as the ending of these films.

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