

Haunted Thailand: The Village as a Location of Thai Horror

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In Thailand, the concept of the village has been used to imagine the Thai nation and perceive Thai identity. The discourse of the village has been romanticised based upon a socio-political impetus. This paper argues that the romanticised village discourse is repressive and reductive, in the sense that it creates expectations that might not fit with social reality; that the imagination of the peaceful village encourages forced homogeneity; and that the imagination of the pure rustic village bars the village from material progress. The paper contends that the discourse of the Thai village creates cultural anxiety that is well reflected in horror films, based on an analysis of *Ban phi pob [Village of the phi pob]* (Saiyong Srisawat, 1989) and *Phi hua khat [Headless Hero]* (Khomsan Triphong, 2002) as responses to the two intense movements of the romanticised village discourse.

Keywords: *village discourse, cultural anxiety, horror, abjection, Thailand*

Horror is a very popular genre of cultural products in Thailand, where audiences consume horror texts in the form of television dramas, novels, cheap comics, and films. In Thai cinema, horror films, along with action and comedy, are the most popular genres (Chaiworaporn, 2006). Horror films are also one of the best internationally known aspects of Thai popular culture. Increasingly, academics are studying horror texts by deploying anthropological and psychoanalytical methods (Ancuta & Ainslie, 2014). Many scholars propose that horror texts can be read as a reflection of society and not just as the products of pre-modern superstitious beliefs.¹ Peter Pels (2003) noted that magic is reinvented in modernity. Magic is the reinvention of modernity rather than something superseded by modernity. Human dealings with the occult are a global theme that is inherent in modern societies, not only in the “Third World.” Pattana Kitiarsa (2011), in the same manner as Pels but in the Thai context, proposed that magic and spirit cults have posed important questions pertinent to the modernization process. He stated that “ghosts and their ghostly presence are the products

of modern social marginalization, made in and through the modernization process” (p. 201). Hence, horror texts should be read to comprehend social meanings. He further stated that “the ghostly aspects of modern social life in Thailand are most vividly displayed and critically unveiled through horror films, perhaps the country’s most powerful popular-entertainment media” (p. 202).

This paper looks at two Thai horror films: *Ban phi pob* [*Village of the phi pob*](Srisawat, 1989) and *Phi hua khat* [*Headless Hero*] (Khomsan, 2002) as reflections of cultural anxiety in response to the two intense movements of the romanticised village discourse. In Thailand, the concept of the village has been used to imagine the Thai nation and to perceive Thai identity. The village has been romanticised as utopia, thus serving as the allegory of the Thai nation. Romanticisation has occurred in different epochs and with different political impetuses, creating reductive and repressive discourse on village. Significantly, however, the village, which is always portrayed romantically in official culture as a peaceful utopia, is simultaneously one of the most popular locations of Thai horror texts. I propose that the village discourse creates anxiety that is then reflected in horror texts by subverting the village from a utopia to a dystopia in which the peaceful and homogenous village is transformed into a haunted village.

This paper begins with discussion about the discourse of the Thai village to give contextual background. I argue that the popularity of the films *Ban phi pob* and *Phi hua khat* comes from their imposition of the romanticised village discourse which does not fit with social reality. The paper then closely analyses each film. This is followed by theoretical analysis of the two films using Julia Kristeva’s (1982) notion of abjection.

The Discourse of the Thai Village

The concept of village life has long played a crucial role in representing Thai identity. The Thai nation has been allegorically imagined using the illustration of the utopian village, which has been circulated in school textbooks, literature, films, and the mass media. Education has provided an important channel for disseminating this state-driven idea. This is well reflected in Thongchai Winichakul’s (2014) foreword in *Disturbing Conventions* (Harrison, 2014).

As schoolchildren, we were brought up to understand that as a largely rural society that changed little prior to the impact of Western influence, Thai society functioned rather as a large family or village. Members of this family typically

belonged to the same ethnic group, in effect constituting a reasonably homogenous society. (p.xiii)

Winichakul (2014) also proposed that Thai people were taught that Thai society was calm, peace-loving, harmonious, orderly, and hierarchical. People were taught to know their place. In Thai society, “conflict is considered an anomaly, an aberration and a problem with the potential to disrupt the well-being of the society” (Winichakul, 2014, p. xiii). As Philip Hirsch (2002) argued, “There is a popular sense that what is genuinely Thai (*thai thae thae*) emanates from rural life, and this means village life” (p. 262). It is difficult, therefore, to think about Thai identity without thinking about rural identity.

The term “village” has several connotations. In the most basic sense, a village is comprised of clusters of households. In Thai polity, the village is the smallest state administrative unit, led by a local elected leader, the village headman. The village is the territorial unit by which the state demarcates governable spaces. The spatial demarcation may or may not conform to the indigenous space of local community. The village could also refer to a rural community composed of relationships and kinships. Despite this ambiguity, the village is always portrayed as the essential Thai community. Hirsch (2002) proposed a way of looking at the village as discourse, a definition that prevents limiting the term village because many criteria define it. Hence, there are difficulties in pinning down the definition of the village.

Even though the concept of the village carries many different meanings, the image of the village has been deployed to serve political ideologies; to accomplish this, the image needs to be romanticised to reduce its other meanings. The romanticisation helps create an image of the village that may or may not conform to reality. The romanticised image of the Thai village is to some extent imaginary for the purpose of generating certain sentiments and is intrinsically political.

The romanticisation of rural utopia can be traced to the discovery of the thirteenth-century stele of King Ramkamhaeng of Sukhothai. The rustic paradise described in the stele is conveyed through the well-known line: “There is fish in the water and rice in the fields” (Bowie, 1992, p. 797). This rustic paradise was governed by King Ramkamhaeng who was portrayed in the inscription as a distinguished, just, and caring king, which was the ideal image of a monarch. The link between rural abundance and the monarchy from the thirteenth-century stele was extensively used in the nineteenth century. This archetypical illustration served to legitimize the institution of absolute monarchy during the time it confronted both external challenges from European imperialism and internal challenges (Bowie, 1992). This

discourse emphasised “interdependent nexus linking royal virtue with agricultural economic prosperity” (Reynolds, as cited in Bowie, 1992, p. 798).

I propose that the romanticisation of the rural village that took place in the cultural realm in modern Siam has persisted but that the intense movements have come in waves. The first occurred from the 1960s to the 1970s, a period referred to by Benedict Anderson (1985) as “the American era” that extends from the rise of Sarit Thanarat’s dictatorship in 1958 until his death in 1963 and of his successors, Thanom Kittikhajorn and Praphat Jarusathian, from 1963-1973. The second wave took place during the 1990s, a period of economic boom that flourished up until the economic crisis of 1997.

The first wave happened after the Second World War. At the time, the US recruited Thailand as an ally and a base for the pursuit of the Cold War. Thailand had become a US client state under military rule. The military government espoused anti-communist sentiments to appeal for US patronage and financial and arms support. Responding to the term “development” as a key concept of the US global mission, the term *phattana* was coined in Thai to connote economic, education, and administrative development. The US helped to build a new bureaucratic infrastructure for promoting development (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2005, pp. 144-151).

Under the rubric of rural development, Thai villages were encouraged by state policy to be more standardised. The development plan encouraged villagers to settle in the same area for easy installation and provision of infrastructure facilities such as electricity, roads, and piped water. The Thai state also launched nationwide schemes that encouraged the standardisation of the village such as *Phaendin tham phaendin thong* (literally, Land of [Buddhist] Virtue, Land of Gold), fencing projects, and village competitions. *Phaendin tham phaendin thong* promoted the ideology of unity and Buddhism to enhance individual virtue. Fencing projects encouraged the villagers to create a neat, demarcated and well-ordered landscape around their properties. Village competitions were the disciplinary instruments that awarded villages that conformed to the state’s criteria (Hirsch, 2002). This state-led rural development imposed a standardised form on the village, giving the state better control over both villages and villagers. Hence, the discourse of the village facilitated the exercise of state power. Up until the 1980s, the discourse of the village was also used in both political and military schemes to minimise communism in the Thai countryside (Hirsch, 2002).

However, the development programme also had its dissidents. Development meant open access to Thailand by foreign capital, mainly American. Sarit’s regime facilitated capitalism by enforcing low wages and

smashing trade unions. Hence, the Thai economic boom was sustained for a decade, leading to the emergence of a real Thai middle class. The expansion of education, especially tertiary education, produced a new generation of well-educated people. Also with the help of the US, more young Thai students were able to go to America for advanced studies. These occurrences changed the intellectual climate among the urban youth who had adopted American-style social views and put them in more direct contact with the social problems of Thailand's rural areas. All this brought forth the movement of "well-educated, prosperous, urban youth going out to 'help the villagers' in a very American spirit of utilitarian idealism" (Anderson, 1985, p. 35).

Responding to this social context of the 1970s, there emerged a literary and artistic movement called *sinlapa pheua chiwit* [art for the people or art for life] that adopted social realist aesthetics and was committed to the political liberation of the masses and opposed to the US-backed military dictatorship (Ingawani, 2006). Hence, the movement was paradoxically the consequence of rapid social changes under the US-influenced development programme, while simultaneously it opposed the US-backed military regime and US influences. In this artistic movement, the rural was romanticised as pastoral rural. One of the characteristics of the works of this movement was that they drew a contrast between the rural and the urban. These works have the sentiments of anti-American nationalism, emphasising the affliction of modernisation and Western influences (Ingawani, 2006). This movement therefore had the effect of strengthening the myth of the Thai village as opposed to a Western definition of progress.

The second wave of the intense romanticisation of the village came in 1997, when Thailand was undergoing an economic crisis. After enjoying an economic boom for around two decades, Thailand encountered unresolved financial problems. The crisis reached its pinnacle in July 1997, when the baht was attacked by international speculators.² As a result, the baht was devalued to less than half its value against the dollar (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2009). Duncan McCargo (2001) proposed that two main strands of populist thinking emerged in Thailand as a response to the economic crisis. One was the resurgent nationalism that tried to blame the West and criticised globalisation and economic colonialism. Another was the discourse of localism that resulted from criticism of the Thai development path of capitalist industrialization, which accentuated the need to return to agrarian roots. As McCargo (2001) stated, "The power of these discourses lay in their syncretism, blending elements of standard official nationalism with an implicit, highly romanticised evocation of *khon Thai* (Thai people) as village-dwelling farmers, buffeted by the storms of global capitalism" (p. 99).

McCargo (2001) argued that the discourse of localism, with its rhetorical emphasis on village and community, was closely related to old-fashioned nationalism. Behind the nationalism lay a political impetus linked to the highly conservative Thai political reform in the 1990s that attempted to overhaul Thai political and social order by monitoring the abuses of power by politicians and urging political transparency (McCargo, 2001). In another sense, political reform also reflected the elite's attempts to organise elite governance and strengthen the elite's political status, which had been undermined by the prior democratic reform. McCargo (2001) further argued that the 1990s political reform movement was aimed at shoring up the long-term position of the throne. Kevin Hewison described the idea of localism as "traditional, conservative and nostalgic, emphasizing agriculture, criticizing industrialization and denouncing exploitation by outsiders" (McCargo, 2001, p. 99). Hewison's criticism of the localism discourse was that there was a contradiction between the top-down inspiration and its claims to represent grassroots villagers: "(T)he localism discourse has come to include all elements of the national trilogy of 'Nation, Religion, and Monarchy'" (Falkus & Hewison as cited in McCargo, 2001, p. 105).

Hence, localism discourse is, to some extent, a new form of nationalism that emerged during the insecurity that followed the economic crash. Also, blaming the West and glorifying localism was to some extent an attempt to deflect responsibility and substitute the sentiment of disappointment that emerged from economic failure. In this context, village life has been imagined as that of the pure, peaceful, utopian rural community in opposition to the contaminated, hectic capitalism of urban life. The notion of the Thai village is not only one of the romanticised imagination of searching for an allegedly authentic Thai identity, but also one of ideological and political discourse beneath the political power struggles.

Rural village life has been romanticised by Thais—especially by the urban middle class who were most affected by the economic crisis—as the roots of authentic Thai culture. Although it celebrates rural purity and simplicity, this romanticisation is repressive because it confines the rural from the notion of progress. Mills (2012) stated:

Yet even celebratory images tend to legitimize the exclusion of rural residents from the social prestige and material benefits of contemporary arenas of "development" (*karn phattana*) and "progress" (*khwam chareon*) by linking villagers' simplified ways and limited aspirations of imagined past. (p. 89)

The discourse of the village has been politically deployed by many factions and driven by different sentiments in different epochs. It has been romanticised as a peaceful rural utopia to imagine Thai society and the essence of Thai culture. However, the romanticisation has reduced the complexity of the concept of the village and is repressive in several key ways.

In Thai cinema, there were also two waves of films that responded to these two movements of romanticisation. In the late 1970s, Cherd Songsri, a Western-trained director who is best known for making period films, made his masterwork, *Plae kao* [*The Scar*] (1978). *Plae kao* tells a tragic love story of two peasants in rural Thailand. The film reflects the harmony of village life and the importance of rural tradition (Harrison, 2005). The film was a huge box-office success, so Cherd replicated its pattern by subsequently making tragic love stories in historical and rural settings. Cherd's *Plae kao* was screened at the 25th London Film Festival in 1981. In marketing *Plae kao*, Cherd created a slogan, "We will promote THAI to the world," with a vision of marketing Thai cinema on the international market. Cherd's oeuvre attempts to project Thainess and Thai values to international audiences. Cherd's slogan reflects the Thai belief that Thainess emanates from the rural tradition. For the post-1997 wave, there emerged the so-called "New Thai cinema."³ Films in this wave, with the backdrop of economic crisis, often display the unsullied cultural practice and spiritual purity of rural communities in contrast with the immorality of the city. They often have nostalgic themes of yearning for the Thai rural past (Harrison, 2005).

Significantly, at around the same period of these two movements of romanticisation, there emerged horror films that were unexpectedly popular, especially in rural markets. These two films were surprisingly successful, considering that they were the very first films of the newly established film companies and were made with comparatively low budgets. Both films use the Thai village as the location of the stories, but the villages are haunted by ghosts and, in contrast with the official utopian village discourse, are subverted to dystopia. In this paper, I read these two films as the reflection of the anxieties caused by the two intense movements of the romanticised village discourse. These two films are *Ban phi pob* [*Village of the phi pob*] and *Phi hua khat* [*Headless Hero*].

Contextualizing *Ban Phi pob* and *Phi hua khat*

Ban phi pob (literally, "village of the *phi pob*"; *ban* is the abbreviation of *muban*, which means village) is one of the most popular Thai horror film series, with 13 episodes to date.⁴ The first episode of the series, directed by Saiyon Srisawat, was made in 1989 and was very successful. The latest one

was released in 2011. The first episode of *Ban phi pob* was a grade B film, produced by a small company named Group Four Production. It was made with a budget as low as 400,000 baht and was shot in only seven days. The film gained unexpected success in rural markets, especially in north and north-eastern regions (Bioscope, 2008).

Released in 2002, *Phi hua khat* [*Headless Hero*] was directed by Khomson Triphong.⁵ The film was a big success, identifying itself with the rural film market and rural audiences. It earned around 73 million baht and was the highest-grossing film of 2002, which makes it number 48 among Thailand's highest-grossing films of all time (Entertain Weekly, 2013). The film was produced by a rural-based film distribution company named Phranakorn Film. It is regarded as lowbrow and was deliberately targeted toward the rural market. The film was the pioneer of the trend of many comedians starring in one film and the trend of comedy-horror that would continue for several years.

Although *Phi hua khat* was released during the rise of new Thai cinema, it is totally excluded from the wave because of its nature, which is contrary to new Thai cinema's characteristics of realistic or stylistic production and urban-middle class orientation, made by educated stylistic directors with a background in TV commercials (Chaiworaporn, 2006; Harrison, 2005)

Ban phi pob was made in the 1980s, a period that still felt the legacy of rural development policy. Also, the village discourse was deployed by the state to contain communism in Thai rural areas up until the 1980s. *Phi hua khat* was made in 2002, after the height of localism sentiments, which came in the aftermath of the 1997 economic crisis. Localism romanticised the village as the source of indigenous Thainess and local wisdom and presented it as an alternative to Thailand's failure in the neo-liberal arena. In both films, a village is the main location of the story. The village is haunted by ghosts and is subverted to dystopia.

Both films also belong to the genre of comedy-horror that could be seen as "lowbrow." Lowbrow Thai films often revolve around four generic genres—comedy, horror, drama, and action—to prevent them from becoming box office flops (Chaiworaporn, 2006). Despite lowbrow films' popularity in the rural market, they have been demeaned as "low-grade cultural product" by "educated, urban audiences in Thai society" (Chaiworaporn, 2006, n.p.). They are appreciated only by "rural, low-class audiences" because they often have "(b)ad plots, nonsensical scripts, exaggerated performance and poor production" (n.p.). They have always been overlooked as cliché mass cultural products that are produced only to make a profit. However, their popularity and the large number of films produced are significant and are a crucial part of Thai cinematic culture. These films have their own idiosyncratic

aesthetics and style that might be seen by urban and educated people as outdated and unrealistic compared to Western films, or films from the new Thai cinema wave. However, lowbrow aesthetics stem from the root of Thai folk culture.

Ban phi pob

In this paper, I analyse the first episode of the *Ban phi pob* series. The film depicts a village where people are disturbed by *phi pob*, a spirit that has an appetite for human viscera and live animals. Grandma Thongkham, who appears to other villagers as a sick old lady, is suspected by the villagers to be a *phi pob*. She is looked after by Plubplueng, a beautiful young woman. When a group of volunteer doctors from Bangkok gets lost in the jungle and accidentally comes to the village, one of the young doctors, Nares, develops a crush on Plubplueng. Nares dismisses the gossip about Plubplueng and Grandma Thongkham, saying that the old woman has a disease and he will take her to the hospital in the town.

Villagers bring a shaman to exorcise the *phi pob* from Grandma Thongkham, but she turns out to actually be a *phi pob*, and the shaman is killed. Grandma Thongkham rampages and chases other villagers because she is very hungry for human entrails, and they plot to kill her. Another shaman, from the north, comes to the village. He explains that the *phi pob* was originally a mountain spirit who accompanied a woman named Ueangkham who committed adultery with a man from Bangkok. When Ueangkham was reincarnated as Plubplueng, the *phi pob* accompanied her and possessed Grandma Thongkham. Thus, to help Plubplueng, Grandma Thongkham transmits the *phi pob* to the village headman's daughter through saliva, but dies after the transmission because the *phi pob* has already eaten up her entrails. In the end, Plubplueng marries Nares and moves to Bangkok, while the village headman's daughter becomes the next *phi pob* and continues to haunt the village.

In the film, the utopian Thai village turns into a dystopian village, haunted by a *phi pob*. According to local myth (which differs somewhat



Figure 1. *Ban phi pob* Video CD cover.

Retrieved from: <http://i.ytimg.com/vi/-PxKR-ZiEoNQ/hqdefault.jpg>

from the *phi pob* in the film), a *phi pob* emerges when a person improperly performs *saiyasat* [black magic] and is turned into a *phi pob*'s originating host. A *phi pob* would possess someone whom the originating host hates and make the possessed host sick. In the end, a *phi pob* would eat up the possessed host's internal organs, and the host would die. The originating host of the *phi pob* acts abnormally and does not look anyone in the eye. If other villagers know that the originating host is a *phi pob*, the latter is expelled from the village, along with his or her entire family, because the villagers fear that the *phi pob* will possess someone else (Rajadhon, 1972; Plainoy, 2009). The village would then organise a ritual, inviting monks to chant in the middle of the village for three or seven days. During this ritual, outsiders are prohibited from entering the village.⁶

From the perspective of Western psychology, a *phi pob* is a culture-bound syndrome. One can be accused of being a *phi pob* if one shows aberrant or deviant behaviour (Simons & Hughes, 1993), thus refusing to conform to the homogenous village. Hence, a *phi pob* is a community-related ghost.

I propose that the idea of the *phi pob* can be read as the anxiety over the discourse of the homogeneous village. Reading it within the context of the American era of the 1970s to the 1980s, the *phi pob* as the aberration can also be read as symptoms of anxiety over the changes in the discourse of the village. The concept of the village had been largely transformed in this era due to rural development programmes that changed it from a loosely settled indigenous village with easy access to the fields into the standardized, closely settled village that enabled the state to provide infrastructure facilities. The new pattern of settlement helped the state centralise its control over the people (Hirsch, 2002). Bringing together people in a closely knit community and increasing the state's control brought about the aberration. Aberration is a concept that is relative; it cannot occur when there is only one person and tends to more likely to happen when many people are living together. Aberration is the by-product of homogeneity. The village discourse of the development programmes was characterised by the attempt to create homogeneity through new patterns of settlement, standardization, and centralisation. Hence, aberration can be said to be the result of the emerging bureaucratic Thai village that was encouraged by the rural development programme. In this case, the *phi pob*, which is the metaphor of aberration, can be identified as the anxiety created by the shift of the concept of the village into its repressive nature.

Furthermore, the concept of homogeneity allows the use of force against aberration. In the film, the villagers try to get rid of Grandma Thongkham, and in reality, anyone accused of being a *phi pob* would be expelled. The villagers in *Baanphi pob* exercise self-surveillance. They always keep an eye

on Grandma Thongkham, accused of being *phi pob*, and Pubplueng, her companion, plotting to get rid of them out of fear that the people in the village would be harmed.

Also, the village discourse in this era changed the functions of local leadership. The village headman used to perform a synaptic role in 1960s. However, in the development era, the village headman had become more important and acted as “mouth, eyes, and ears of the state in the village” (Hirsch, 2002, p. 267). This was due to the increased role of the state in administrative and political processes at the local level, as is well reflected in the role of the village headman in *Ban phi pob*. He and his company survey Grandma Thongkham and Pubplueng. In one scene, after learning of a death caused by a *phi pob*, the village headman visits Grandma Thongkham’s house with a gun, insisting on seeing the old woman even though Pubplueng objects that Grandma is sick. The village headman still goes on to investigate what Grandma Thongkham did earlier that night. In the film, the village headman is in charge of maintaining the village’s peace and order. It is also interesting that in the end, the *phi pob* is transmitted to the village headman’s daughter. This can be read as resentment towards the local authority.

The group of volunteer doctors from Bangkok coming to treat the villagers can be read as the new generation of people emerging as the result of US-supported education expansion. They are well-educated and willing to help villagers with utilitarian idealism. However, in this film, what they find is not the idealistic rural village, but a village haunted by a *phi pob* and with a vigilant and wary atmosphere.

In *Ban phi pob*, the village is portrayed as a dystopia. The utopian village is subverted into a haunted village where villagers have to run away from a preying ghost. In the end, the *phi pob* is not even eliminated—it is just transmitted to another person, thus creating a persistent aberration that continues to haunt the village.

Phi hua khat

Phi hua khat tells the story of a village man named Diao who is searching for his father’s old friend, *Ajarn* (master) Koi, now a shaman in another village. Diao wants to live with *Ajarn* Koi to grant his father’s dying wish. In the village where Koi lives, Diao contests the power of the gang of *Kamnan* (the head of a group of villages) Khem, a local authority, and Hia Yong, a local Chinese businessman who owns the rice mill. He also comes into conflict with their sons, who are *Chao pho* (roughly translated as “godfather”) of the village. The gang persecutes the villagers, and they own most of the local businesses, both legal and illegal.



Figure 2. *Phi hua khat* Video CD cover.

One night, the gang of Suea Mhen bandits, who are involved with *Kamnan*, loots the temple and cuts the head off a Buddha image. Diao fights those bandits and retrieves the Buddha head. As Diao is returning the head to the temple, he is decapitated by Mart, a boxer who is the son of *Kamnan*. Diao comes back as a vengeful headless ghost determined to eliminate the gang.

I argue that the character Diao represents the village outsider who encounters the corrupted, dystopian village. The village is oppressed by the local

authority, *Kamnan* Khem, the local capitalist, Hia Yong, and their gang of *Chao pho*. This is demonstrated in a scene showing Mart and Phong, the sons of *Kamnan* and Hia Yong, as unscrupulous moneylenders, violently demanding that villagers pay off their debts at unfair interest rates. They beat up people who do not have enough money. They also own and operate illegal businesses such as gambling houses, boxing houses, and opium dens.

Phongpaichit and Phiriyaransan (1996) defined the term *Chao pho* as “influential businessmen who may accumulate wealth by legal or illegal means, but who are rich enough and possess sufficient *itthiphon* [influence] that they may sometimes flaunt the law, or protect others from it” (p. 61). The term suggests a tendency to act above the law. They always have good relationships with people who have power, such as bureaucrats, policemen, and military figures. Moreover, they sometimes hold positions of authority in local administrations (Phongpaichit & Phiriyaransan, 1996).

Chao pho have played roles in local and national politics. Their local influence grew rapidly from the 1960s onwards, and from the mid-1970s, they became more influential in the national arena. Their increasing power was an offshoot of the extreme centralisation of the Thai state and the rapid growth of provincial wealth that resulted from the development strategy of General Sarit’s government in the late 1950s. Because power was concentrated in Bangkok, the provinces were loosely controlled by a skeleton administration. When money began to be made, it allowed the “new men” to make fortunes through criminal activities and illicit methods

(Phongpaichit & Phiriyaransan, 1996). *Kamnan* Khem and Hia Yong are a reflection of the corrupt system in provincial Thailand, which contrasts sharply with the romanticised rural utopia in the village discourse that is imagined as the essence of Thai identity.

In the same way, the villagers are not good citizens. They illegally gamble. They fight each other. The village is not peaceful but is full of factions. The representation of villagers in the film totally differs from the docile and innocent villagers imagined by urban people. Unlike the discourse of the village in post-1997 localism, which viewed the village as pastoral and self-sufficient, the village in the film is governed by capitalism associated with corrupt local authority, as represented by *Kamnan* and Hia Yong. Their network influences the locality. They own both legal and illegal businesses. They collaborate with bandits to loot the village's temple. They use their power to gain benefit. They are presented in the film as the main villains. The ghost of Diao can be read as the symbolic representation of the people who want to resist local power. He uses the rice sickle as his weapon and travels around on his ghost buffalo, which is the general representation of a common farmer. Diao is the allegory of people who are persecuted and who come back to take revenge and get rid of injustice. Diao stands for the anxiety of the common people against oppression.

The village in *Headless Hero* is corrupted from the beginning by capitalism and by local authorities. It becomes haunted later by the ghost of Diao. In the end, the village is restored by Diao's ghost when he rids the village of the corrupted gang, after which he disappears. It is interesting that it is a ghost who restores order in the village, not any religious authority. There even are two scenes in which monks get scared by the ghost of Diao and they run away from him.

I argue that the village in the film disregards both the state's authority, in the case of *Kamnan*, and religious authority, in the case of monks. None of the problems can be managed by authority from the centre. However, the disorder is resolved by a dead grass-roots heroic figure.

The representation of the village in *Phi hua khat* makes a good contrast with the ending of Pen-ek's Ratanaruang's *Sixty-nine* (1999), a crime film depicting the story of a secretary who gets laid off from the company due to the 1997 economic crisis, who by chance becomes involved with a mafia gang. Bangkok is depicted as capitalistic, hectic, and full of dishonest people. At the end, the main protagonist leaves corrupted Bangkok for her rural hometown. The ending scene visualises the tranquil road to the rural area with beautiful scenery of green mountains. This suggests the purity of the rural, unpolluted by capitalism. However, the village in *Phi hua khat* is as corrupted as Bangkok, with mafia gangs, capitalism and

immorality committing Buddhist vices such as stealing, gambling, and fighting. The Buddha head can be read as the symbol of Buddhist morality that is destroyed by the mafia gang. Diao as the heroic figure tries to restore morality by fighting them and symbolically returning the Buddha head to the temple. Hence, *Phi hua khat*, to some extent, negates the imagination of the spiritual purity of the rural.

Apart from the fact that the village in *Phi hua khat* is not a peaceful utopian village, the villagers are not an ideal populace, either. Many are crippled. To some extent, the crippled people are used to create comic jokes, but their omnipresence is significant. We can see villagers with crippled legs, cock eyes, stuttering, and dwarfism. It is a village of sickness, indicating the dysfunction of the village and its populace. Unlike the bourgeois aesthetics of the new Thai cinema that is the forerunner of the localism discourse, *Phi hua khat* deploys lowbrow aesthetics to entertain its audience. Many jokes in *Phi hua khat* are also about bodily excrements and private parts. The abject elements have been used to generate the audience's pleasure both sexually and horrifyingly, using images such as the close-up of the breast of the female corpse and the corpse of Diao walking around carrying his own head. The film employs lowbrow aesthetics, which are far from the clean and crisp bourgeois taste.

Although the village in the film is subverted to a dystopian one, there is also a scene romanticising the village as a rustic paradise with beautiful scenery as exemplified by a romantic scene between Diao and Tubtim, the female protagonist. The scene shows how the couple dates by strolling near the waterfall and riding on a water buffalo in the evergreen rice fields. The romanticisation is done excessively in the old fashioned way. However, the scene makes a good contrast with the village in other scenes.

Theorizing *Ban Phi pob* and *Phi hua khat*

In this paper, I draw upon Julia Kristeva's (1982) notion of abjection to look at both films. Abjection is the term Kristeva used to define that which disturbs the entrenched order or stable position. The abject is something that "disturbs identity, system, order...does not respect borders, positions, rules" (p. 4). The abject is something in between and is constructed at the border. In psychoanalysis, the abject is the key factor in formation of the "I" as it creates the conceptual boundary of the clean and proper space. Transgressing the boundary would be loathsome. Therefore, the abject is disturbing and horrific because it threatens to collapse order by threatening the collapse of meaning and challenging the border of selfhood. Kristeva used the example of bodily wastes as the abject. These wastes used to be part of the body, but when they pass out of the body, they become filthy. The

corpse is the ultimate abject as the I is transgressed and expelled. Katherine Goodnow (2010) proposed that horror resides in the abject because it threatens the boundaries that regulate the social order.

I propose to read *phi pob* and *phi hua khat* as the abject. *Phi pob* and *phi hua khat* are constructed at the border. Barbara Creed (1993) proposed that the monstrous in the horror film is constructed at the border and that crossing the border is abject. Although the border varies from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains “to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability” (p. 11). Conforming to this notion, *phi pob* is produced at the border between human and inhuman. In the daytime, *phi pob* is Grandma Thongkam, an ordinary old lady, while in the night time, *phi pob* becomes cannibalistic monster that eat humans’ livers. *Phi hua khat* is also constructed at the border between the dead and the living. *Phi hua khat* is the appearance of the living corpse walking around the village, taking revenge. In the village level, both *phi pob* and *phi hua khat* disturb the order of the imposed village discourse. The rampages of *phi pob* and *phi hua khat* destabilise the idealised village community that is based on the imaginary Thai village in the state’s ideology. *Phi pob* and *Phi hua khat* subvert the representation of a peaceful village into a chaotic dystopia where people have to run away from these spirits.

Furthermore, both films contain considerable “images of pollution,” which are abject (Goodnow, 2010). These images allow the audience to encounter the abject visually. In *Ban phi pob*, there is a scene of *phi pob* scooping out bloody entrails from the shaman’s body. In the climactic scene, Grandma Thongkam’s body suddenly decays into a corpse and then a skeleton as soon as the *phi pob* leaves her body. As in *phi hua khat*, the figure of *phi hua khat* is horrifying because it is the image of a living, decapitated corpse. In the beginning scene, the film shows an image of rotten corpses rising from the graveyard. Also, jokes about bodily waste such as excrement play a role in entertaining the audience.

In Kristeva’s view, abjection in literature helps the author and reader work through afflictions and conflicts so they are not doomed to act them out (McAfee, 2004). I propose that this notion holds true in the case of abjection in these two films. The abject in these films reflects and releases the anxiety towards the imposition of the village discourse, which does not fit social reality. This was manifested in the big success of these two films, especially in the rural market, where the imposition of the village discourse was more intense. Hence, these two films, as well as horror cinema elsewhere, can be read as “cultural attempts to bind those wounds in the interests of dominant ideologies of identity” (Blake, 2008, p. 2). They bridge the gap between the

imposed village discourse and social reality while also functioning as the space in which cultural anxiety can be let out.

Conclusion

The concept of the village has played a crucial role in imagining the Thai nation and Thai identity. However, the discourse of the village is political and has been deployed to serve a socio-political ideology through a romanticising process. Romanticisation of the village discourse is repressive because it creates an idea of homogeneity that makes people submissive and prevents any aberration. The idea of the pastoral village also bars rural people from material progress because it expects them to be excluded from development and capitalism.

Baan Phi pob and *Phi hua khat* portray the village as dystopian, contradicting the romanticisation of the prevailing village discourse of their time. Both films were significantly successful, especially in the rural market. The villages in both *Baan phi pob* and *Phi hua khat* are dystopian places where people have to run away from ghosts. The ghosts in both films can be read as symbolic representations of otherness vis-à-vis the village community, thus accentuating the anxiety over the concept of the homogenous village. Both films negate the imagination of romanticised village discourse, which sees the village as an ideal, unsullied place. The two films similarly offer deviant, contesting representations of the village that differs from the official discourse, even though they depict different stories and different kinds of ghosts.

I argue that both films can be read as critiques of the repressive romanticised village discourse, which has created cultural anxiety, as the films highlight the cultural gap between discourse and social reality. The anxiety is reflected in cultural texts, especially horror texts, which are particularly fertile spaces for reflecting social anxiety. Hence, the animistic and ghostly elements in horror films should not be taken as pre-modern supernatural beliefs, but should be read closely as a reflection of modern repression. Furthermore, these two films can also be read as criticisms of and resistance to the state's attempt to alter the village life to match the state-driven village discourse, which does not conform to the social reality.

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Notes

- 1 Anthropological works have shown that ghostly presence and tales in modern society reflect social issues. In one case, Mary Beth Mills (1995) examines the “widow ghosts” phenomenon in Isan (north-eastern Thailand) during the 1990s, wherein young male Thai workers in Singapore were believed to have died in their sleep as a result of “sudden unexpected death syndrome” (*lai tai*) caused by malevolent widow ghosts. Mills (cited in Johnson, 2013, p. 314) argues that this phenomenon reflects the loss of sexual control over women caused by the migration of men for working purposes. Hence, the fears of modern ghosts are a criticism of modernity (Mills, 1995).
- 2 In May 1997, foreign speculators attacked the baht by massively selling it for US dollars in the spot market to force the baht’s devaluation. Foreign speculators believed that the baht was vulnerable and did not justify its exchange rate due to poor economic fundamentals. The Thai central bank spent billions of dollars to defend the baht according to Thailand’s fixed exchange-rate policy. It was revealed that Bank of Thailand had used the massive amount of Thailand’s foreign reserves and had more than 23 billion US dollars committed to forward contracts. Finally, on July 2, the Finance Minister announced to float the baht (Lauridsen, 1998, pp. 1581-1582; “Thailand: The crisis starts”, 1997).
- 3 New Thai cinema emerged in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis, after the decline of the Thai film industry in the early 1990s. The wave started when three TV advertisement directors coincidentally entered the film industry by making their first feature films. These three directors are Pen-Ek Ratanaruang (*Fun Bar Karaoke*, 1997), Nonzee Nimitbutr (*Dang Bailey and the Young Gangsters*, 1997) and Hong Kong-born Oxide Pang (*Who Is Running?*, 1997). The themes and styles of the films in the wave varied from commercially-oriented to experimental films (Chaiworaporn, 2006). Harrison

(2005, p.322) described their notably common stylistic features as “succinct storytelling, fast-paced editing and the panache to conjure up a captivating visual appeal...”

- 4 Some sources state that 14 episodes of the films have been made, but filmmakers actually skipped the 12th episode. The unit 12 or a dozen in Thai is called “*lo*,” which can mean something of low quality, and was thus deemed inauspicious.
- 5 *Phi hua khat* is a remake of the film of the same name made in 1980. The first version was made by a company called Srisayam Production. The film is believed to be extinct because the negative has been lost. The main storyline of the man who is decapitated and comes back from the dead to take revenge is similar, but other details have been changed
- 6 If one’s health deteriorates and it is presumed that he or she is possessed by a *phi pob*, a shaman must exorcise the *phi pob* by using a magical stick to whip the body of the possessed. The *phi pob* would respond to the whip by crying out in a voice that is different from the patient’s voice, finally saying the name of its owner or the one who is actually a *phi pob*. Interestingly, Anuman Rajadhon (1972, p. 340) pointed out that a *phi pob* cannot do any harm to people with high social status or people in the city, because its power would be weakened. This suggests the relationship between the *phi pob* and social hierarchy and modernity.

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