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"Queering" Thai Masculinities and Sexualities in *Phi Mak Phra Khanong*

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Abstract

Phi Mak Phra Khanong (2013), directed by Banjong Pisunthanakun, is the highest-grossing film in the history of the Thai film industry. The narrative, based on the famous Thai legend of *Mae Nak*, is a haunting love tale of Mak and Nak set about 100 years ago in a village called Phra Khanong in Bangkok. Upon Mak having to go to war, his pregnant wife, Nak, dies during childbirth. Without knowledge of his wife's death, Mak returns to live with his ghost wife. An exorcist or, in some variations, a monk eventually shows up to banish her spirit from the living world.

This well-known legend has been told and retold across the full spectrum of cultural storytelling, including via television series, films, stage plays, comic books, animated cartoons and a 3D motion picture. What distinguishes the 2013 film version is that the narration, as usually focuses on Nak's point of view, is shifted to Mak's perspective. This realignment opens up opportunities to discuss and rethink hegemonic masculinities as arise in Thailand. The film also ignores the traditional ending of the tale, whereupon the living and the dead are definitively separated. In this version, Mak and Nak clearly question, challenge and resist the norms of sexuality and the power of religion. The film therefore "queers" the contemporary standards and politics of Thai sexuality. It also brings down the charisma of the so-called Thai Buddhist beliefs and practices, suggesting a revision of the essence of religious teachings in Thai society.

Keywords: Hegemonic masculinities, Thai sexualities and Buddhism

Phi Mak Phra Khanong: Introduction

Mae Nak Phra Khanong [Mother Nak from Phra Khanong], a well-known haunting love tale, has been told and retold from generation to generation in Thai society. It is believed to be based on a true story[1] that occurred during the reign of King Rama III. The tale narrates how a young man, Mak, goes off to war (or, in some variations, goes to serve in the army in Bangkok), leaving behind his pregnant wife, Nak. While Mak battles for his life, Nak and her baby die during in childbirth, yet the love between Mak and Nak is so strong that her spirit survives. When Mak returns home, and without knowing that his wife is dead, he begins to live with his ghost wife. Nak subsequently becomes aggressive, killing anyone who tries to tear them apart. Mak eventually discovers that he is living with a ghost and an exorcist shows up and rids the village of Nak's spirit by trapping it in a terracotta pot (or, in some variations, a monk traps her spirit with a spell over her own forehead bone and takes her spirit with him so that she can eventually undergo rebirth).

Nithi Eawsriwong (2012) asserts that the lovelorn tale most likely became well-known in Siam either in the late era of King Rama III or in the early period of King Rama V, pointing to a poem about the love story by Khru Jang [teacher Jang] as evidence of this.

Subsequently, the well-known legend has been told and retold across the full spectrum of cultural storytelling. According to McDaniel (2011: 1-2), the lovelorn ghost tale had its first public broadcast in 1928 over the Bangkok airwaves, with representations following via a novelette, a play/musical, a poem, an opera, a comic book, graphic novel, TV series, animation (for children) and a number of films.

In regards to cinematic representations, 22 films (with different characters and name changes) have been made over the last 50 years. The first extant film appearance is in the 1959 film, *Mae Nak Phra Khanong* [Mae Nak from Phra Khanong], being remade in 1970, 1973 and 1978 under the same name. Nak has also featured in the same plot but with different iterations, including in *Mae Nak Khuen Chip* [The Return of Mae Nak] (1960), *Winyan Mae Nak Khanorng* [Wild Spirit of Mae Nak] (1962), *Mae Nak Khanorng Rak* [Impetuous Love of Mae Nak] (1968), *Mae Nak Alawat* [Mae Nak Rampages] (1973), *Mae Nak Jer Phi Pop* [Mae Nak Meets an Ogress] (1992), *Sanya Jai Mae Nak Phra Khanong* [Commitment of Mae Nak Phra Khanong] (1992) and *Mae Nak Patha Pop Sam Tua* [Mae Nak VS. Three Ogresses] (2011). In some cinematic representations, the plot significantly diverges, for example whereupon Nak becomes an American in *The Pot* (1975) and visits Japan in *Mae Nak Buk Tokyo* [Mae Nak

Invades Tokyo] (1976). The short film *Mae Nak* (1998) focuses on Nak's perspective and narration of the story. In a modern adaptation, *Ghost of Mae nak* (2005), Nak haunts a young Bangkok couple who share the same name as her and her husband. The most famous version of Mae Nak is the 1999 film directed by Nonzee Nimibutr and written by Wisit Sasanathiang called *Nang Nak* [Mrs Nak] (Hunt, 2013). Throughout these films, Nak is characterised as a rampageous ghost who must be destroyed for the peace and safety of the community, a fact evidenced by the respective titles.

What is unique about the ghost of Mae Nak (and perhaps one of the reasons as to why the tale has been so popular in Thai society) is that, as Nithi Eawsriwong (2012) notes, she is the first ghost in Thai history who is an individual. Nithi points to the fact that, before Mae Nak, Thai ghosts had no individuality and were regarded as animals (such as geckos or cockroaches). Mae Nak, in contrast, was constructed with a specific personality and possessing personal details. We know, for instance, that she is from the Phra Khanong district, dies during child delivery, has a husband named Mak and has the special and unique ability to expand her arm through gaps in the floorboard to pick up a lime (or, in some variations, a pestle) that has fallen onto the ground.

While multiple film versions have narrated the story of Nak and Mak, all conclude with Nak being separated from Mak due to the unnatural state of the living co-existing with the dead. The latest version of the tale, *Phi Mark Phra Khanong* (later short for *Phi Mak*), in contrast ignores, questions and challenges this normative ending. The film also shifts its narration, rejecting the usual focus on Nak's point of view and shifting it to Mak's point of view. This is apparent in the changing of the title from *Mae Nak Phra Khanong* to *Phi Mak Phra Khanong*.

Despite the controversial ending, particularly in it breaking both social and religious norms, the film has proved to be highly popular, becoming the highest-grossing film in the history of the Thai film industry. One reason for this might be that the film combines the two most popular genres in Thailand, horror and comedy.

John Storey (2009: 1-2) interprets one of Raymond Williams' three broad definitions of culture as "signifying practices", thus allowing us to speak of soap operas, pop music and comics as examples of culture. Williams (1983: 237) also suggests that, of the four current meanings of the term, "popular" can be understood as something that is "well-liked by many people" (qtd. in Storey 2009: 5). According to these definitions, both in terms of culture and

popularity, *Phi Mak* can be held as a fine example of "popular culture" in Thai society.

Due to *Phi Mak* being "well-liked" by many people in Thai society, this popular cultural text must reflect, if not shape, some approved "signifying practices", beliefs or structures in Thai society. In this paper, I seek to explore two significant and challenging reinterpretations of the film. The first pertains to how the film queers Thai hegemonic masculinities, consequently revealing significant shifts in Thai masculine values. The second reinterpretation explores how the film queers Thai sexualities, incorporating Thai Buddhist beliefs in the process.

I. *Phi Mak* Queering Thai Hegemonic Masculinities

When *Phi Mak* shifts its main focus from the female protagonist to the main male character, the break in the traditional narrative opens up a chance to further explore the representations of the male characters, particularly in how they project masculinities and masculine values within the film.

To identify how masculinities are portrayed in *Phi Mak*– particularly in light of there being numerous cinematic representations of the Mae Nak legend, yet only one that breaks the normative ending of the tale– I have selected two significant versions for exploration against which I shall compare *Phi Mak* in terms of the portrayals of maleness, masculinities and hegemonic masculinities. The first film version to be explored, *Mae Nak Phra Khanong*, is the first extant film made in 1959 by Precha Rungrueang. The second film to be explored, *Nang Nak*, was directed by Nonzee Nimibutr in 1999. The 1999 version was so popular among both Thai and worldwide audiences that it is considered to be one of the Thai films that created a phenomenon known as Thai New Cinema[2]. In exploring how the main male character, Mak, has been portrayed through these selected versions, it is clear that hegemonic masculinities play a significant role in reflecting how maleness, masculinities and masculine values have significantly shifted across time.

Gramsci saw hegemony as the "spontaneous consent" given by the great masses of a population to the general direction that is imposed on social life by the dominant group. This consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys for its position and function in the world of production (Gramsci, 1971: 12). Essential for the ruling class to establish and maintain its domination is its ability to impose and formulate ideology that defines morality– norms and values which can persuade

the greater part of the population or the subordinate groups to follow these ideologies. The ruling class may impose and articulate these "natural", "moral" and "normal" ideals through various kinds of social components (such as the media and other social institutions such as education and religion) (Donaldson, 1993: 643-7; cited in Pongpanit, 2011: 51-4).

A number of feminist thinkers and gender theorists– for instance Mike Donaldson (1993), Raewyn W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt (2005), Melissa J. Hodges and Michelle J. Budig (2010) and Steve Garlick (2010)– have employed the concept of hegemony and explained the existence of male dominance over women (or even over men themselves) as "hegemonic masculinity". Hegemonic masculinity is therefore a means of creating an ideological terrain, implementing in the process a reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge that men are supposed to aim for and women are supposed to follow (Pongpanit, 2011: 51-4).

Kittimahachalern (2010) and Narupon Duangwises (2013) discuss maleness in Thai society by charting its emergence since the reign of King Rama IV (1851–1868). In trying to *civilise* Siam to meet "Western standards", King Rama IV, alongside the ruling and elite classes, promoted the importance of women's rights. The King, for instance, sought to challenge the common belief that "*phuying pen kwai phuchai pen khon*" (women are buffaloes and men are humans).

Men of Siam at that time were, as a result, forced to perform the above hegemonic masculinity by being faithful to their life partner and to value monogamous life. The behaviours and values of a "gentleman" therefore began to frame codes of conduct for men – for instance, a gentleman had to be well mannered, respect women, have social etiquette and be responsive to their duties (Kittimahachalern, 2010; cited in Pongpanit, 2011: 51-4).

Scalena (2009: 10), in his thesis *State Masculinities in Siam*, 1910-1925, also studied maleness in Thai society. His analysis reveals that shifting conceptions of gender roles during the reign of King Rama VI were intimately linked to the King's efforts to overcome problems caused by the new bureaucracy. Masculine values were therefore encouraged in an emphasis of unity, militarism and loyalty to the dynastic state (Pongpanit, 2011: 51-4).

Chusak Pattarakulvanit (2002) has also discussed the notion of "gentleman" or "*suphap-burut*" in Thai society through a group of Thai writers, chiefly those organised by Kulap Saipradit in 1929 who called themselves "*Khana suphap-burut*" (The Gentlemen).

Kulap Saipradit described suphap-burut as follows:

> ถ้าจะว่า 'สุภาพบุรุษ' มีรูปร่างหน้าตาใกล้เข้าไปกับ 'ผู้ดี' ดูจะไม่ค่อยมีข้อคัดค้าน แต่จะต้องให้เป็น 'ผู้ดี' ซึ่งคนสมัยนี้เข้าใจกัน ถ้าเป็น 'ผู้ดีเดินตรอก' อย่างสมัย 10 ปีก่อนลงไป สุภาพบุรุษของเราก็คงไม่มีโอกาสใกล้เข้าไปได้อีกตามเคย...หัวใจของ 'ความเป็นสุภาพบุรุษ' อยู่ที่การเสียสละ เพราะการเสียสละเป็นบ่อเกิดของคุณความดีร้อยแปดอย่าง... ผู้ใดเกิดมาเป็นสุภาพบุรุษ ผู้นั้นเกิดมาสำหรับคนอื่น (quoted in Chusak Pattarakulvanit (ibid.:79)
>
> [trans.] If one says '*suphap-burut*', it looks like a 'gentlemen/elite', I don't think I have a problem with that. But 'gentlemen' has to be a term used and understood by people in the present time. If it only meant 'elites' 10 years ago, our *suphap-burut* do not have any chance of getting any closer to that meaning...the heart of 'being a gentleman' is to sacrifice since it is the origin of many other good deeds...people born as gentleman are born for others.

Chusak believes that Kulap named his group of freelance writers *Khana suphap-burut* because he wanted to rebel against the rigid social class structure of the Thai society elites of the time, subsequently seeking to re-establish the term *suphap-burut* according to the bourgeoisie's perspective that people should be valued for their ability not their origin (Pattarakulvanit, 2002: 79). As a result, while altering the rigid social structure, the re-establishment of the notion of *suphap-burut* also sent out codes of hegemonic masculinity or, in other words, denoted how a *suphap-burut* should behave in Thai society (Pongpanit, 2011: 51-4).

The above analyses evidence shifts that reflect the fluidity of masculinities in society, a concept which does not seem to be fixed across different periods of time or social movements.

When looking at the main male character, Mak, in the first extant version in 1959, the masculine figure was without doubt characterised as a gentleman. When Nak is alive, Mak is highly protective of her, seen for example when she is being harassed by other men. Concurrently, Mak is also shown to be both responsible and loyal to his country. When the state needs him to serve in the army, despite him possessing concerns as to his pregnant wife, he nonetheless leaves Nak, explaining to her that it is his responsibility to serve the country ("*มันเป็นหน้าที่ของพี่ ที่ต้องรับใช้ชาติ*").

Further, he is shown to value monogamy. When serving as a soldier, his commander's daughter falls in love with him, not only offering her love but also a high rank

in the army. In rejecting this love and informing her explicitly that he already has a wife who is expecting his child, his dedication to monogamy is brought to the fore.

Upon Mak discovering that his wife is a ghost, while he is compassionate he nonetheless conforms to social and religious norms. The film presents the ghost of Nak begging for her husband's sympathy, asking him to live with her and their child. Mak almost relents when seeing his wife in misery, however with the help of his male friends he comes to the conclusion that it would be unnatural for them to be together. He therefore sacrifices his love by letting an exorcist get rid of Nak's spirit for the peace and safety of the people in his village.

The final moments between Mak and Nak evidences and intensifies Mak's gentleman characteristics.

Mak: นากจ๋า อโหสิให้พี่ด้วยที่พี่หลอกลวงเจ้า [ด้วยการหลอกให้นากเข้ามาใกล้และคล้องสายสิญจน์ให้ตัวนาก เพื่อสะกดวิญญาณนาก] เพื่อให้ดวงวิญญาณของเจ้าได้ไปผุดไปเกิดสักทีหนึ่ง นากอยู่กับพี่ไม่ได้หรอก เราไม่ใช่คนเหมื่อนกัน เอาไว้ชาติหน้าเราไว้พบกัน ใหม่อีกเถอะ

My dearest Nak, please forgive me for deceiving you [by luring Nak to get close to him and trap her with a sacred rope]. I did it so that your spirit will be able to be reborn. You can't be with me anymore. You are not human like me anymore. I hope we meet again in our next lives.

Nak: โถพี่มาก คนเรานี่ช่างประหลาดนัก ยามเมื่อมีชีวิตอยู่ก็รักใคร่กันดี แต่พอกลายเป็นผีก็มีแต่ความเกลียด ความกลัว ไม่เวทนาปราณีกันสะบ้างเลย ทั้งๆ ที่เป็นเมียที่ก็ยังทำร้ายได้

Oh my dearest Mak, people are so queer. When I was alive, you loved me so much. When I became a ghost, you only hate and are afraid of me. You have no more compassion towards me. I'm your wife and you still hurt me.

In the above dialogue, Mak's "gentlemen" values are highlighted by being respectful and loyal to his dead wife as well as sacrificing his happiness to the others. It, nonetheless, clearly contrasts how the female character is portrayed as emotional, illogical and seductive which puts her into a lower status of the gender hierarchy.

As with Mak in the 1959 version, Mak in the 1999 version is also masculine, protective and compassionate. When an exorcist tries to destroy his wife's body, although Mak is afraid of the ghost of his wife, he runs out of the temple– the place where he can be safe – to save (and even hug) his wife's rotten body. Mak extends his faithfulness to his wife beyond his present life, asserting that they must become husband and wife again in their next lives.

From the representations of Mak in the two versions detailed above, it is clear that aspects of the hegemonic masculinities imposed in Siam/Thai society since the reign of King Rama IV resonate strongly. In both versions, Mak firmly represent the notions of "gentlemen" in his adherence to the hegemonic masculinities of Siam/Thai society by being respectful and loyal to his wife, sacrificing his happiness to the others and loyal to his country.

In the last film version of the legend, and in the strong contrast to the two "gentlemen" versions of Mak in the earlier iterations discussed above, whilst Mak still firmly conforms to and supports the notion and practice of monogamy, Mak (or to be precise, Mark[3]) is characterised as weak, childish, cowardly, emotional, irresponsible, powerless and irreligious. In Mak's very first scene, he cries out as if he was badly injured in the war. However, it is subsequently revealed that he has merely twisted his ankle. Mak also confesses to Nak that he is a bad soldier because, when at war, all he thought of was his wife. Here, it is clear that he is represented as not caring about his nation. Mak is also shown to not adhere closely to Buddhism. After discovering that his wife is a ghost, he throws away his amulet so that he can be with his ghost wife and baby, indicating that he chooses his ghost wife over the representative of state religion. Mak in this version thus becomes more individual and less conforms to the previous hegemonic masculinities constructed and resonated in Thai society.

According to the analysis of the character Mak in these three versions, it highlights significant changes in terms of male representation, male values and hegemonic masculinities in Thai cinematic narratives, this further evidencing the ability of hegemonic masculinities to be fluid in Thai society.

Referring back to the notion of popular culture, since the film was so well-received in Thai society, *Phi Mak* perhaps suggests changing and acceptable values of gentleman that do not need to conform to previous or fixed hegemonic masculinities in the society. The latest film may, as a result, reflect among contemporary Thai audiences a satisfaction being derived from observing the male character's emotional fulfilment/liberation rather than his conforming to social and religious confinements. Indeed, this could also be argued to reflect the desire of the audience to follow suit.

II. *Phi Mark* "Queering" Sexualities and Thai Buddhism

Although *Phi Mak* firmly conforms to and supports one of the notions and practices of Thai hegemonic masculinities which is monogamy, it nonetheless "queers" some heteronormative sexualities. Dean (2003: 238) refers to the term "heteronormativity" as "all those ways in which the world makes sense from a heterosexual point of view. It assumes that a complementary relation between the sexes is both a natural arrangement (the way things are) and a cultural ideal (the way things should be)".

The 2013 version of Mak "queers" some of the natural arrangements and religious ideals. Instead of having an exorcist or a monk get rid of the ghost wife, Mak decides to remain with her.

In Thai society, as with the rest of the world I believe, the living having a relationship with the dead as husband and wife doesn't appear to be a natural arrangement. Indeed, there are a number of literary works that have repeated this belief in Thailand. For instance, in a Dharma novel called *สัตว์โลกย่อมเป็นไปตามกรรม* (1994) (*Sat-lok yom pen pai tam kam*/ World creatures are designated by their karma) by Sudtassa Onkom, upon a gay disciple asking if a male ghost residing at the temple is handsome (suggesting that if so, he would flirt with him in an effort to become boyfriends), the abbot warns him that:

> "...เอ็งอย่าได้มาคิดลามกจกเปรตในกุฏิของข้า ที่ข้าให้เอ็งมาอยู่ที่นี่ก็เพื่อให้มาทำความดีนะ...มันวิปริตผิดเพศไง แล้วก็ยังผิดภพภูมิด้วย อีกประการหนึ่งเขาก็มีคู่รักแล้ว"
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> Don't have dirty thoughts in my place. I let you stay here to accumulate good deeds... What you have in mind is sexually queer and it's wrong because you and him are not in the same world of existence. More importantly, he already has a lover.

This Dharma novel clearly asserts that it is wrong for the living to be with the dead and, furthermore, it is even queerer for a gay man who wants to be with a male ghost.

In a 2006 Thai horror film directed by Wisit Sasanatieng, *The Unseeable* (*เป็นชู้กับผี*/ *Pen Chu Kap Phi*/having an affair with a ghost), the boundary between the living and the dead is intentionally played with, especially in regards to the dead not knowing that they are deceased (as seen in some Western films such as *The Sixth Sense* (1999, dir. M. Night Shyamalan) and *The Others* (2001, dir. Alejandro Amenábar)). In *The Unseeable,* after killing her husband, the living wife somehow traps her husband's spirit so that he can be with her. Every night, the ghost husband appears in their bedroom and consummates their life

together. The film therefore makes it possible for the living and the dead to be together sexually, despite the sexual relations being set with dark tones, negative light and neuroses.

In *I-Khun Phi* (2004) (*ไอ้คุณผี*/Mister Ghost), a novel by Kanok-rekha, a girl attempts to help a ghost who has been mistakenly murdered get back to his body. In doing this, they fall in love but cannot do anything about it because they are not of the same "world". Nonetheless, by the denouement, the ghost is able to return to his twin's body and thus become human again. This thereby normalises their love and allows them to be happy together.

From the above literary examples, it is clear that the theme of the living and the dead being together or falling in love is a recurrent motif in Thai society. While some texts say it is possible for the living to be with the dead sexually, even if this must be portrayed through dark tones, others say it is impossible. What those examples have in common nonetheless is reference to Buddhism. It is therefore worthwhile taking a look at what Buddhism really says about this particular matter.

Firstly, whether it is possible for the living to have a sexual relationship with the dead (or, in other words, non-human beings) is addressed in the Vinaya. Here, it is noted that monks are forbidden to perform sexual intercourse, whether orally, vaginally or anally, with female human beings, female non-human beings[4], female animals, hermaphrodite[5] human beings, hermaphrodite non-human beings, hermaphrodite animals, homosexual[6] human beings, homosexual non-human beings, homosexual animals, male human beings, male non-human beings or male animals. Monks who are not mindful and have sexual intercourse with any of the above will be required to leave the monkhood (*Tripitaka*, No. 1, Vinaya, Vol. 1. Maha vipank).

It is clear, at least from the Buddhist text, that it is therefore possible for human beings to perform sexual acts with those who are not human. With the *Vinaya* separating human beings, non-human beings and animals from each other, non-human beings are therefore stated as being distinct from human beings and animals. In regards to these separate forms of existence, the Buddha categorised four kinds of birth or modes of generation (*Tripitaka*, No. 11, Sutantaka, Vol. 3. Thikhanigaya Patikawak);

1. *Chalaphucha*– the viviparous; womb-born creatures (i.e., human beings, cows, dogs and cats).

2. *Anthacha*– the oviparous; egg-born creatures (i.e., birds, ducks and chickens).

3. *Sangsetthacha*– Putrescence-born creatures; moisture-born creatures.

4. *Oppatika*– spontaneously born creatures such as angels or apparitions.

As the first three categories cover only human beings and animals, non-human beings thus seem to fall into the fourth category, *Oppatika*, as includes apparitions or ghosts.

Whilst it is evident that human beings may have sexual intercourse with apparitions, what remains problematic is whether the living and the dead can have a relationship as a couple. In terms of being a life partnership, the Buddha explained four types of living together as husband and wife (Tripitaka, No. 21, Sutantaka, Vol.13. Aungkuttra-nigaya Chatuk-kanibat);

1. Male ghost and female ghost. These are people who, in this world, don't keep the 5 percepts.

2. Male ghost and female angel. Here, the male doesn't keep the 5 precepts but the female does.

3. Male angel and female ghost. Here, the male keeps the 5 precepts but the female does not.

4. Male angel and female angel. Here, both keep the 5 precepts.

My interpretation of this categorisation is that the Buddha used these non-human beings as metaphors to teach couple life, noting that when one has a partner who behaves badly, it is already like you are living with a hungry ghost. In contrast, if both partners behave well, then the couple life is already like those of the angels in heaven. What is significant here is that the Buddha did not mix and match these subjects outside the forth category of birth, *Oppatika*, instead only identifying matches between ghosts and angels, figures who belong in the same category. This could be one of the reasons as to why Thai Buddhists come to the conclusion and share a belief that human and non-human beings or beings from different kinds of birth or modes of generation should not be united. Accordingly, it remains unclear and ambiguous as to what Buddhism actually says about human and non-human beings being together, primarily since there are no direct writings on this particular issue in the Pali canon. It is interesting that despite the lack of evidence from the script, the belief has become acceptable and pervasive in Thai media and society.

Phi Mak, on the contrary, intentionally plays with and questions the human-ghost relationship/categorisation/identification. Instead of labelling Mae Nak as a ghost like the previous versions, the film initially leaves it unclear as to whether Mak and another character are ghosts. While, at the end of the film, it is revealed that it is still Mae Nak who is a ghost,

the narrative nonetheless questions and challenges the practices of identification in Thai society. To read how the film plays with the practices of labelling, Queer theory becomes useful and applicable in exploring this issue.

Queer theory analyses how heteronormativity structures the meaningfulness of society, thereby identifying how it enforcing a hierarchy between those who are normal and those who are deviant or queer (Dean, 2003: 238). Queer is therefore anti-identitarian and is defined relationally rather than substantively. With its anti-identitarianism, Queer theory gives rise to both the promise and the risk that queerness offers progressive politics– the promise that encourages us to think and act beyond the confines of identity (including group identity) and the risk that in doing so we might overlook or lose the specificities of race, gender, class, sexuality and ethnicity. In other words, Queer Theory is a discourse that explores the space between those promises and risks (Dean, 2003: 240-241).

In *Phi Mak*, whenever the process of labelling or identification happens, it creates a hierarchy, separation, isolation and violation. When Nak is identified as a ghost, a monk throws holy water at her to scare her away (see Picture One). When Mak is mistakenly believed to be a ghost, his friend also throws holy rice at him to make him go away (see Picture Two). This is similar to A, a friend of Mak, who is pushed into a river from a boat whereupon his friends start to believe that he is a ghost (see Picture Three).

Picture One: The ghost of Nak, hurt by a monk throwing holy water at her.
Source: *Phi Mak Phra Khanong* film

Picture Two: Mak, mistakenly believed to be a ghost, has holy rice thrown at him by his friends to make him go away.
Source: *Phi Mak Phra Khanong* film

Picture Three: A, a friend of Mak, is pushed into the river from the boat upon his friends thinking that he is a ghost.
Source: *Phi Mak Phra Khanong* film

Nonetheless, the film shows that once Mak and Nak, as well as his four friends, can go beyond the confinements of identification and labelling, their minds are able to open up, they are able to truly communicate and they can reasonably find practical solutions that work best for their unique and current situation. The very last moments between Nak and Mak illustrates the film's thesis:

มาก: ที่นากบอกว่านากหลอกพี่ นากไม่ได้หลอกอะไรพี่เลยนะ ถึงพี่จะเป็นคนโง่ พี่ก็ไม่ได้โง่ขนาดไม่รู้ว่าเมียตัวเองตายไปแล้วหรอกนะ... ถึงชาวบ้านจะรังเกียจไม่มีใครคบ... แต่พี่ก็ยังอยากอยู่กับนากนะ

Mak: You didn't lie to me. I am not so stupid that I didn't know my wife is dead. Even though the villagers won't talk to me anymore, I still want to be with you.

นาก: ขอบใจนะพี่ แต่มันเป็นไปไม่ได้หรอก

Nak: Thank you love, but it is impossible.

มาก: ทำไมอะ เราก็แค่ทำเป็นเหมือนไม่มีอะไรเกิดขึ้น ที่ผ่านมาเราก็อยู่ด้วยกันได้ไม่ใช่เหรอนาก

Mak: Why? Let's just pretend nothing has happened. Before I knew [that you were a ghost], we were together and there was no problem.

นาก: แต่เขาตายไปแล้วนะ คนกับผีอยู่ด้วยกันไม่ได้หรอก มันผิดธรรมชาติ

Nak: But I'm dead. Humans and ghosts can't be together. It's unnatural.

มาก: ถ้างั้นความรักก็คงเป็นเรื่องผิดธรรมชาติ ตอนสงคราม พี่ควรจะตายไปแล้ว ไม่มีใครคิดว่า พี่จะรอด แต่พี่ก็ยังกลับมาหานาก ขนาดนากได้ตายไปแล้ว ทำไมนากยังกลับมาหาพี่ละ... ผิดด้วยเหรอนากที่เรารักกันขนาดเนี้ย

Mak: If that's so, love must be an unnatural thing. When I was at war, I should have been dead. No one thought I could make it, but I survived and came back to see you. What about you? You're dead. How come you came back to see me?... Is it so wrong that we love each other this much?

นาก: ตัวเองไม่กลัวเขาหรอ

Mak: You're not afraid of me?

มาก: "เค้ากลัวผีจะตายตัวเองก็รู้ เค้ากลัวไม่ได้อยู่กับตัวเองมากกว่า"

Mak: You know I am scared of ghosts, but I am more scared to live my life without you.

Here, not only do Nak and Mak ignore a number of social and religious norms by granting themselves a happy ending, Mak goes even further by being wise towards his present situation. Mak makes a good use of his wife being a ghost, for example in asking Nak to fix the ceiling of the village temple (as humans cannot reach that height but Nak can walk on

the ceiling). Mak also builds a small business opening a ghost house, using Nak's ability as a ghost to make the attraction look real and convincing. With the twist ending deviating from the traditional and normative tale as can be seen in the 1959 and 1999 versions, the film suggests a revision to Buddhism in Thailand.

In the 1959 version, the film projects a strong evidence of Buddhism such as temples and monks and its relationship to the main characters through some public Buddhist events and traditions presenting that they are Buddhists. Yet, the appearance of the exorcist and Mak's belief in helping his wife's spirit to have a rebirth by trapping her in the exorcist's pot indicate well that Thai Buddhism has been amalgamated with Animism (and Hinduism).

As the exorcist can be seen as a part of the animist belief, it is normal that his method to solve the problem with Nak's spirit is different from that of the Buddhist monk in the 1999 version. What seems to be problematic though is when Mak mixes the Animist practice and Buddhist notion together. While it is the case that Buddhism believes in rebirth, it also emphasises on the contemplation on loving kindness (*metta*) to others. When Mak believes that in order to help his wife's spirit to have a rebirth she must be trapped in a pot and put in a miserable and painful situation, this does not thus reflect a peaceful and harmless solution. The tragic and miserable ending in the 1959 version rather reveals the misunderstanding and lack of complete understanding on the relevant religions, particularly Buddhism.

In contrast, the 1999 version uses a highly respected and well-known monk, believed to Somdet Toh[7] to bring back the natural order and peace by the power of his loving kindness and wisdom (panya). The monk approaches to Nak's spirit in a charismatic, calm and kind manner. He kindly invites her to have a conversation and manages to calm her down by making her eventually understand and accept her tragic fate. The scene, however, was shot in silent so the audience cannot hear the content of the conversation that solves all the problems. The monk character also looks like the real Somdet Toh making the scenes more convening.

Since loving kindness is placed to be the first of the four sublime states or *Brahma-vihara* believed to be great removers of tension, peace-makers in social conflict, and healers of wounds suffered in the struggle of existence (Thera, 1994) and one of the most attractive features in Buddhism, closely related to its psychological orientation, is its emphasis on self-reliance, the practice stressing on human effort, or one's capacity to liberate oneself

from suffering (Bodhi, 2006), the monk in the 1999 version seems to be portrayed closely to the right Buddhist practices that brings a peaceful and harmless result.

Interestingly, the monk in the 2013 version is however portrayed as helpless and even ridiculous (the monk character is played by a well-known Thai comedian, Yorng Lukyee). The monk in the 2013 version uses violence and needs to rely solely on some fetishes such as holy rice, holy water and holy thread to get rid of Nak's spirit. When all of his fetish objects are accidentally destroyed, the monk therefore becomes utterly useless. He even abandons Mak and his friends to face the problems by themselves.

As mentioned above, since self-reliance is a quintessential part in the Buddhist practice, that's why the portrayal of having the senior monk to solve all the problems in the 1999 version is still problematic. The resolving conversation– restricted between the monk and the spirit and silent to the film audience– limits the application of Buddhist teaching merely to the monk and, at the same time, deprives the rest of the characters as well as the film audience of the beneficial and essential teaching that can relieve suffering. When the monk is portrayed as highly charismatic with absolute power, the Buddhist practices in the film are therefore located in a highly sacred place where only a holy monk can attain. When the monk in the 2013 version becomes useless, this offers the lay characters for the first time to use their wisdom and solve the sufferings by themselves.

Not only does *Phi Mak* replace the charismatic monk in the 1999 version with the useless and ridiculous monk, the film also presents some problematic scenes that appear to be potentially disrespectful for Buddhist audiences. Nonetheless, no strong criticism was received from either Thai Buddhist audiences or the Thai board of censorship– for instance, in relation to a scene in which a monk is pushed and falls down at Nak's feet (see Picture Four) or a scene in which a Buddha statue is on fire (see Picture Five).

Picture Four: A monk, pushed down at Nak's feet.
Source: *Phi Mak Phra Khanong* film

Picture Five: A Buddha statue on fire.
Source: *Phi Mak Phra Khanong* film

It is the case that the non-problematic reception of these scenes may present and suggest the faith crisis in Thai Buddhism. On the other hand, *Phi Mak* literally brings Buddhism to the ground to be questioned, thus invoking a reconsideration of the core teachings. For instance, as one of the core teachings of the Buddha is to generate loving kindness and self-reliance, portraying a monk trying to hurt a ghost by using fetish objects does not therefore seem to fit the notion of Buddhist behaviours. Furthermore, while it is true that Buddha statues are representative of the Lord Buddha, if people, especially monks, do not try to understand or practice what the Buddha really taught, the Buddha statue may fail to represent or signify anything except being something that is combustible.

Not only does *Phi Mak* play with and blur the boundaries and identifications of humans and ghosts, it also touches upon the practices of handling facts in Thai society. In the previous film versions of this tale, Nak is positioned as a dangerous murderer who needs to be destroyed. In those versions, it is explicit that Nak commits murder whereas, in the 2013 version, it is intentionally unclear as to whether Nak has committed murder. When Nak is blamed for the death of an old woman in the village, she rejects this accusation, justifying to herself that the old woman drowned because she was drunk.

Accordingly, the film generates two sets of fact; the fact created and believed by the villagers that Nak killed the old woman and the fact presented by Nak who insists that she hadn't kill anyone. This conflict is presented in the film as the incident happened in the past and it is impossible to trace the truth due to the lack of evidence or proof. The film provides a chance to read this alongside the current political situations in Thailand, a scenario where there are also two sets of facts and two groups of believers who, no matter what, choose to take one side.

One might say that it is cliché of *Phi Mak* to uses love to overcome this conflict of opinion. Nonetheless, *Phi Mak* uses this discourse to cope with the arisen problems through open and honest communication. Mak decides to ignore the passive/ambiguous social and religious norms he encounters, dismissing some facts in light of the fact that no one can find the truth. Mak's actions seem to be more Buddhist than the presence of the monk or the Buddha statue. Since absolute wisdom is the ultimate goal of a Buddhist, Mak is the only character, among the two groups of believers in the film, who tries to solve his problems and conflicts with wisdom.

Concluding *Phi Mak*

With its challenging, daring, yet sweet new narration and ending of the lovelorn tale that Thai people know by heart, *Phi Mak* offers us a chance to rethink Thai masculinities, sexualities and Buddhism in a different light.

With the film's focal shift towards the male character, Mak is able to fully express himself and represent a new kind of masculinity that does not need to be constructed from hegemonic masculinities. Instead, his identify is derived from a great love and his desire for and satisfaction from achieving emotional fulfilment rather than from glorifying or conforming to social and religious norms and confinements.

Upon *Phi Mak* deciding to live happily with his ghost wife, the film also "queers" Thai sexualities. Here, there is also an invocation to the audience to rethink about and analyse Thai religious situations. In terms of Buddhism, the essence of the religion is taken literally to the ground, consequently questioning and reconsidering the core of the Buddha's teachings.

The film also reflects how Thai society handles facts, projecting that when two sets of fact are in conflict, attempts to prove whose facts are correct might not be beneficial as people may have already predetermined which side they want to take. *Phi Mak* solves conflicts in a Buddhist way by ignoring the past, dismissing passive/ambiguous social and religious constitutions and figuring out how to make the best of the present moment with wisdom. While some scenes in the film may appear to be disrespectful to Buddhism, *Phi Mak* actually instigates awareness as to the purification of the core essences of Buddhism in Thai society.

Notes

[1] Kor. Sor. Ror. Kulap wrote in his column in a newspaper called *Siam Praphet* (March, 1899) that truth lay behind the legend of the ghost of Nak, noting that; it occured in the reign of King Rama III, Nak was a daughter of a sheriff named Khun Sri in the Phra Khanong district, she was Chum's wife but later died during childbirth, she had more than one child and that the ghost of Nak was actually her other children who pretended to be the ghost because they did not want their father to have another wife (cited in Siriphot Loamanachalern, 2013).

[2] New Thai Cinema was a trend of Thai films that began in the 1970s when TV commercial directors– particularly Pen-Ek Ratanaruang, Nonzee Nimibutr and Oxide Pang– turned to film production and boosted both national and international awareness and appreciation of Thai cinema (Anchalee Chaiworaporn, 2006).

[3] In the film, Mak explains to his friends that his name is actually Mark and that he was named by his American father who had returned to the US with a group of missionaries.

[4] The Pali term is *อมนุษย์/a-manut*.

[5] The Pali term is *อุภโตพยัญชนก/Upato-phayan-chanok*.

[6] The Pali term is *บัณเฑาะก์/Ban-doe*.

[7] Somdet Toh (or his formal title, Somdet Budhacariya (To Brahmaransi) was one of the most famous and widely loved monks in Nineteenth Century Thailand. He was a skilled meditator who was closely associated with the royal family (see Thanissaro Bhikkhu's the *Legends of Somdet Toh* (2006).

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