



Hybrid heroes: Cultural hybridization in Thai action adventure films from 1997 to 2010



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ABSTRACT

This paper studied cultural hybridization as reflected in hero characters from 30 Thai action adventure films produced and released during 1997–2010. It was hypothesized that the characterization of the heroes in the action adventure films in question had been influenced by features of heroes in foreign films. Such features had been mixed with Thai values and local beliefs so as to create Thai hybrid hero characters. These hybrid characters demonstrated the distinctiveness and dynamics of Thai action adventure films. It was found that cultural hybridization is presented through the Thai hero characters' images, gender identity, and roles leading to the emergence of three important types of Thai hybrid hero: 1) local Thai cowboy heroes, 2) Thai martial arts heroes, and 3) Thai necromancer superheroes. These heroes are clear evidence of an adaptation and cultural hybridization between international films' hero characters and certain elements in Thai society being legends, local beliefs, and the values of masculinity. Moreover, these hybrid heroes reflect the flow of globalization into Thai society and the process of localization to creatively respond to the flux in global culture.

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Introduction

Action adventure films are categorized as one of the main genres in the global film industry (Lichtenfeld, 2004, p. 1). Kerddee (2000, pp. 17–81) reported that the prototypes of this genre were films produced in the United States during the 1920s such as *The Mark of Zorro* in 1920, *The Three Musketeers* in 1921, and *The Thief of Bagdad* in 1924. These film plots are about swordsman heroes fighting against intolerable, cruel, and unjust aristocrats in order to protect the oppressed ordinary people who live their lives in hardship. These heroes are just ordinary men or outlaws. During the 1930s, the action adventure films' content was

broadened and covered wars between the opposing sides in World War I. Later, during the 1960s, these films developed into a subgenre called war films emerged. Action adventure films have rapidly developed and have gained in popularity continuously. Thus, they are numerous and various in form and content. In addition, Kerddee (2000, pp. 17–81) also explained that action adventure films present exciting stories of heroes' adventures. They have been popular among various groups of people because they function as an escape mechanism by bringing their audience into the world of imagination to escape unpleasant reality and to respond to their deeper desires. The release of destructive power, always found in the action adventure films, fulfills that desire. In addition, hero characters in these films are fascinating. They are men with potential and expertise. Therefore, they can conquer various kinds of danger and even supernatural power.

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With regard to Thai action adventure films in particular, [Arunrojsuriya \(2004\)](#), who conducted research on the history and development of Thai films, explained that after the action adventure film entitled *SuphapBurutSuea Thai*, which was shot on 16 mm film, was released in 1949 and its gross income mounted, many other 16 mm films were produced, especially during 1957–1972.

Up until now, there have been a great number of Thai action adventure films. In these films, hero characters are considered as the most remarkable components or the heart of such films. One of the outstanding features of heroes in these films is that they reflect the process of cultural hybridization between Thai and global cultures, especially Hollywood films. For instance, some Thai cowboys, outlaws, and masked heroes reveal the influence of Western hero characters in Western films such as *Zorro*. This process results in the emergence of hybrid heroes whose characters demonstrate the negotiation between global and local cultures. This makes the hybrid features of the heroes in Thai action adventure films worth a closer look.

The Thai action adventure films focused on in this study are those produced and released from 1997 to 2010. The films in this period were selected for three main reasons. Firstly, these films have been released for both Thai and international audiences. These films were well received domestically ([International frame of Thai films, n.d.](#)). Moreover, some of them were released on the international market, for instance, *OngBak*, *Tomyam Kung*, and *FaThalai Chon*. The films released during this period also had an English title which made them more appealing for international distribution. To mention some, *OngBak* was released as “The Thai Warrior” in English, *TomyumKung* as “The Protector”, *FaThalai Chon* as “Tear of the Black Tiger,” and *7 Prachanban* as “Heaven’s Seven.” Moreover, some of the films were dubbed into English and French. The information on some of these films is also available at the [www.iMDb.com](#), an online archive of international movie database. Some of these films were recognized internationally, among which *TomyumKung*, *OngBak*, and *FaThalai Chon* are the most remarkable. To illustrate, *OngBak* was selected to show at several international film festivals, including the Toronto International Film Festival 2003, the Stockholm International Film Festival 2003, the International Film Festival Rotterdam 2004, the Copenhagen International Film Festival 2004, and the Boston Fantastic Film Festival 2004 ([OngBak, 2003](#)). Secondly, from 1997 onwards, the intensity of globalization could be perceived in Thailand, and Thai society reacted in several ways such as the search for the Thai identity and nostalgia. In terms of the Thai movie industry, nostalgic sentiment also has an influence on movie production. During this period, several old Thai films were remade—*Nang Nak*, and *Bang Rajan* (*Bang Rajan: The Legend of the Village’s Warriors*). In addition, some movies instilling nationalistic sentiment were released, with the most remarkable example being *Suriyothai* (2001). [Jirattikorn \(2003\)](#) investigated this film against the backdrops of the 1997 economic crisis and cultural crisis in Thailand and stated that the film was a well-crafted Thai nationalistic response to the forces of

globalization, at the same time also projecting the official version of Thainess to the world (as cited in [Kitiarsa, 2007](#), pp. 257–256). With regard to Thai action adventure films, it is therefore hypothesized that these factors might influence the characterization of hero characters in the Thai action adventure films produced and released during this period. Lastly, during this period, the Thai film industry has developed and been presented to the wider arena both on a national level and abroad, which can be identified as the period when the Thai film industry stepped up internationally ([Nuangdiew, 2008](#), p. 6), and thus can lucidly reveal trends and developments reflecting the cultural hybridization within heroic characterization in the Thai cinema.

Literature Review

Although there have been several studies on Thai films ([Kitiarsa, 2007](#); [Srirak, 2005](#); [Suksamai, 2008](#)) only a few have focused on cultural hybridization ([Harrison, 2010](#); [Louiyapong, 2004](#); [Prasannam, 2007](#)). [Louiyapong \(2004\)](#) examined films in Southeast Asia and revealed that at the beginning of the film history in each country, film production was involved with the hybridization of film techniques and local entertainment. [Prasannam \(2007\)](#) pointed out that whilst the films *Muay Thai Warrior* and *Tom Yum Kung: The Protector*, explicitly express Thai cultural identity through ‘Muay Thai’ (Thai Boxing) and Thai martial arts from fighting settings and the hero’s personality, these films also present the quality of intertextuality through the referencing of foreign martial arts in many international films. [Harrison \(2010\)](#) focused on the hybridization found in the character of *Insee Thong*. It can be seen that relatively few works have investigated the hybrid heroes in Thai action adventure films during the period stated above. Therefore, this study will attempt to examine the hybrid features found in heroic characters in Thai action adventure films during 1997–2010.

This paper consists of five sections. In the next section (section [Literature Review](#)), the research objective and methodology will be stated. Section [Research Methodology](#) will provide background knowledge on the history of Thai action adventure films. The findings of the study will then be presented in section [Results and Discussion](#) in which three types of hybrid hero will be discussed. The last section [Conclusion](#) will conclude this paper.

Research Methodology

Objective

The purpose of this study was to examine the culturally hybrid features of the hero characters in the Thai action adventure films from 1997 to 2010. It was hypothesized that the characterization of heroes in these films has been influenced by that of the hero characters found in foreign films. The foreign influence has been adapted and mixed with local Thai beliefs and values. Thus, hybrid heroes have emerged, and this emergence demonstrates the dynamics of Thai film production in response to globalization.

Research Data

All Thai action adventure films produced and released during 1997–2010 were collected and analyzed. The titles of these films are:

- 1997: (1) *18 Fon Khon Antarai* [“Bullet Teen”],
(2) *2499 Antapan Krong Muang* [“Dang Bireley’s and Young Gangsters”],
(3) *Khon Puan Saifa* [“Destiny Upside Down”],
(4) *Ta FaLikit* [“Who is Running”];
- 1998: (5) *SueaJonePhanSuea* [“Crime King”];
- 2000: (6) *Yuwachon Thahan Pid Toem PaiRop* [“Young Soldiers”],
(7) *Fa Talai Jone* [“Tear of the Black Tiger”];
- 2002: (8) *Sap Suea Lam Nam Kasat* [“Tigress of King River”],
(9) *Dong Phaya Fai* [“The Trek”],
(10) *7 Prachanban I* [“Heaven’s Seven 1”],
(11) *2508 Pit Krom Chap Tai* [“Siamese Outlaws”];
- 2003: (12) *OngBak I* [“Muay Thai Warrior”],
(13) *MahaUt* [“Tattoo”],
(14) *ChomKhamang Wet* [“Necromancer”];
- 2004: (15) *Amanut* [“Unhuman”],
(16) *Paksawayu* [“Garuda”],
(17) *Ukkabat* [“The Meteor”],
(18) *Suriyakhat* [“Curse of the Sun”],
(19) *7 Prachanban II* [“Heaven’s Seven 2”],
(20) *Koet Ma Lui* [“Born to Fight”];
- 2005: (21) *Tom Yum Goong* [“Tom Yum Goong: The Protector”];
- 2006: (22) *Khon Fai Bin* [“Dynamite Warrior”],
(23) *ManutLek Lai* [“Mercury Man”];
- 2007: (24) *Chaiya* [“Chaiya”],
(25) *Ok Sam Sok Song Kampan* [“Fighting Beat”];
- 2008: (26) *OngBak II* [“OngBak 2: The Beginning”];
- 2009: (27) *Sam Phan Bok* [“The Sanctuary”];
- 2010: (28) *InseeDaeng* [“InseeDaeng”],
(29) *OngBak III* [“OngBak 3”],
(30) *Samurai Ayothaya* [“Yamada: The Samurai of Ayothaya”].

Theoretical Concept: Cultural Hybridization

Cultural hybridization, which is widely of interest among scholars in sociology and cultural studies, is the main concept adopted in this study. Cultural hybridization is a metaphor for describing the combination of two or more cultural forms (Featherstone, Lash, & Robertson, 1995, as cited in Phakdeephasook, 2004, p. 36). Cultural hybridization is a socio-cultural process or phenomenon where at least two different cultures encounter and mix with one another. The two cultures may be traditional versus modern cultures or traditional versus modern ways of production. The encounter of these cultures does not cause the loss of traditional culture or ways of production. Conversely, it allows the traditional culture or ways of production to adapt or collaborate with modern culture or ways of production which leads to the

emergence of new ‘hybrid’ cultures (Senakham, 2006, pp. 1–22).

According to Bhabha (1994), cultural hybridity or ‘culture in between’ is the result of the colonial period and its collision with imbalanced power. The inferior culture tries to escape from the superior one’s hegemony. It then negotiates and blends with the powerful culture and produces a hybrid culture or ‘a third space’ so it can preserve its space and co-exist with the dominant culture. Young (2005, pp. 21–22) states that cultural hybridization destroys the division between us and the others. It, therefore, does not lead to cultural conflict, but creativity.

In a contemporary context, cultural hybridization generally results from the impact of globalization. According to Appadurai (1996), globalization causes five dimensions of global flow involving the flows of people, machinery, money, images, and ideas. These global flows result in a new way to imagine the world as a world with moving landscapes and the increasing interconnectedness of difference. These aspects lead to three important cultural features: 1) cultural homogenization, a reduction of cultural diversity through the transformation of local culture by the dominant outside culture; 2) cultural polarization that constructs concepts of *self* and *other*, and 3) cultural hybridization based on cultural exchange or borrowing from any sources of culture (Appadurai, 1996, as cited in Wan'gaeo, 2004, pp. 118–119).

Nederveen (1995) construes globalization as the “process of hybridization which gives rise to a global mélange.” That is, globalization is the process which causes cultural expressions and commodities to be decontextualized and then recontextualized in new contexts. The outcome of this is not cultural homogenization of the superior global culture, that is Western culture. On the contrary, this process leads to fusion between the global and local cultures as the global culture is localized and given new meanings and sign values. Globalization makes the boundaries between global and local become blurred which facilitates the process of cultural mixing. Furthermore, globalization allows the prominent local culture to step out from its local areas to be known globally (Nederveen, 1995, as cited in Phakdeephasook, 2004, pp. 32–36).

According to Featherstone et al. (1995), localization and globalization must be considered as interrelated processes. Featherstone et al. (1995, pp. 24–44) states that it is not helpful to regard the global and the local as dichotomies separated in space or time; rather, it would seem that the processes of globalization and localization are inextricably bound together. Robertson (1995, p. 44, pp. 25–44) also emphasized this interrelatedness by using the term ‘glocalization’.

The current research hypothesized that cultural hybridity is the remarkable feature of heroes in Thai action adventure films produced and released during 1997–2010. During this period, Thai society was economically and socio-culturally influenced by globalization (Kitarsa, 2007, p. 6). The production of films in Thailand was therefore, to a certain degree, affected. Before presenting and discussing the findings of this study, a brief survey of the history of Thai action adventure films is provided in order to give a

background for readers who may not be familiar with the development of this genre in Thailand.

Results and Discussion

History of Thai Action Adventure Films

According to [Sukwong and Suwannapak \(2001, p.11\)](#) there are dynamics in the characterization of hero characters in Thai action adventure films from the past to the present that inseparably relate to Thai action adventure film history. Foreign films entered Thailand in the late reign of King Rama V. In 1949, the first highly successful Thai action adventure film, *SuphapBurutSaea Thai* was screened. Its plot was adopted from that of Robin Hood. These films shared the motif of hero characters who turn to being outlaws and fight for justice and morality. The heroes help and protect the oppressed villagers. Moreover, they share the motif of the outlaw hero's behavior in that they rob the rich (villains) and then distribute valuable things to the overcharged villagers. The characterization of the hero character as inferior to villains makes the hero special and the film very popular. Because of the success of *SuphapBurutSaea Thai*, later, a number of Thai action adventure films were made, adopting a similar plot and characterization such as the film series *InseeDaeng* (1959–1970).

From 1957 to 1962, there were a number of Thai film productions and foreign film imports suggesting the initial growth of the Thai film industry. The most popular film genre among Thai film producers and audiences during that period was the Western or Cowboy genre. In general, the Western genre tells of various kinds of conflict in western communities in the USA. These conflicts include those between the western versus eastern USA, town versus jungle, social organization versus anarchy, farm versus forest, and cowboy and white man versus Indian and local people. All the western genre's components such as characters, setting, situation, and theme relate to the conflicts mentioned above. Furthermore, the Western genre relates to US history, especially the conflicts between cowboys and Indian people. The most prominent element in this genre is the scene involving a gunfight between the protagonist and the antagonist that ends the conflict ([Kerddee, 2000, p. 61](#)). Many films in this genre were imported over the period in question ([Nuengdiaw, 2007, pp. 14–17](#)) such as *Shane* (1953), *Run of the Arrow* (1957), and *Alias Jesse James* (1959). The popularity of the Western genre in Thailand might have resulted from the US influence, because 25 percent of Hollywood films shot during this period were in the Western genre. In addition, Thailand was supported by the USA in many ways while allowing US military bases to be established in Thailand during their war against communism (as cited in [Kerddee, 2000, p. 61](#)). US support, was also directly related to the Thai film industry's growth, especially that from The United States Information Service. Thais have vigorously learned both production and film content from this organization ([Sukwong & Suwannapak, 2001, pp. 12–13](#)). Noticeably, heroes in Thai action adventure films during this period were presented as masked heroes or masked outlaws like their American prototypes, such as Zorro and the Lone

Ranger. Thai masked heroes could be found in *YiawRatri*, *Nakak Dam*, and *InseeDaeng* ([Nuengdiaw, 2006, p. 12](#)). This can be considered a Western genre's influence in Thai film production (as cited in [Kerddee, 2000, p. 61](#)).

Later, during the Post-World War II period, rather than simply adopting the features of heroes from Western films like in the early period, Thai action adventure film producers added local features and elements in order to make heroes in these films more appealing to the Thai audience. There emerged outlaw heroes or ordinary heroes who dared to fight with local influential gangsters. In Thai culture, the term *saea* <ເສົາ> literally meaning 'tiger' was used as a title for casually referring to a bandit. The heroes in this group, many of whom dressed remarkably in black costume, adopted this title as part of their name; for instance, *SaeaBai* <ເສົາໄບ>, *Saea Dam* <ເສົາດ້າ>, and *SaeaMahesuan* <ເສົາມະເຫສວົນ> in the film *Sam SaeaSuphan* (2524), a film based on the life story of these three legendary outlaws who fought against corrupt government officers as well as cruel local capitalists. These heroes can be categorized as a new type of Thai hero of that period and can be considered as a new product of cultural hybridization between the two significant features. The first is the influence of concepts from and characterization of the famous Western genre's cowboy protagonists and the globally popular Hollywood films' masked heroes. The latter is widespread legends of the king of thieves, based on the true stories of *SaeaBai* and *Saea Dam* in the local areas of Central Thailand. This cultural hybridization is distinctively presented through the heroes' costumes and gestures in the fighting scenes in the films *SaeaMahesuan*, *Saea Dam*, *SaeaBai*, and *Sam SaeaSuphan*. Thai film critics called these heroes "Thai cowboy heroes" ([Nuengdiaw, 2006, p. 5](#)). It can be seen that the adaptation of foreign film components in accord with Thai audiences' familiarity and taste led to the emergence of hybrid heroes in Thai action adventure films.

Hybridization between Thai and foreign components can also be found in the creation of heroes in Thai action adventure films up until now. In the following section, the findings of the investigation of hybrid heroes in the films released during 1997–2010—the period during which Thai society was influenced by the flux of globalization—will be presented and discussed.

Three Types of Hybrid Heroes in Thai Action Adventure Films During 1997–2010

In this paper, hybrid Thai heroes are the hero characters in Thai action adventure films featuring the heroes' characteristics in foreign films and that of Thai heroes in traditional Thai literature and films. These hybrid features make these heroes different from the heroes in traditional Thai folk tales and literature. The characteristics of the hero in Thai traditional literature represent significant cultural aspects in Thai society. Some previous interesting studies pointed out that the appearance of the hero is significant. The most distinctive characteristics of heroes are to be good-looking, attractive, and charming. Similar to the heroes in Thai folk tales, they are also skilled, intelligent, and attractive. However, in the sense of Thai readers,

beautiful appearance alone is not enough to maintain the status of hero characters. At the same time, skill or ability alone cannot maintain the persona, thus most heroes in Thai tradition literature generally have both beauty and talent (Ruengruglikit, 1996, pp. 41–57).

There are three types of hybrid hero characters in Thai action adventure films produced and screened during 1997–2010: 1) local Thai cowboy heroes, 2) Thai martial arts heroes, and 3) Thai necromancer heroes.

Local Thai Cowboys, Outlaw and Masked Heroes: The Return of Legendary Heroes

A Thai cowboy or an outlaw hero is a protagonist that is a king thief, the head of the gunmen, or an escaped outlaw. He is unwillingly forced to become a thief or an outlaw. He later returns to ask for justice. The protagonist is highly moral and is rather a protector than a criminal. He will rise to fight against unjust local power, merciless rulers, or civil servants. The hero is typically middle-aged, tall, and a strong and good looking man with a charming face, usually appearing in a cowboy costume (black shirt, trousers, and a cowboy hat), carrying a pistol, and using a horse for transport. This type of hero is found in the films *Crime King*, *Tear of the Black Tiger*, *Siamese Outlaws*, and *InseeDaeng*.

Hollywood films have had a strong influence on the emergence of the Thai cowboy, outlaws, and masked heroes. These characters are the result of cultural hybridization between western heroes such as Zorro and a Thai socio-cultural context and content such as the stories of great local thieves.

Thai cowboy hero characters, who emerged during the period of 1957–1967, preserved both the Western cowboy's prominent elements and remarkable stereotypes such as costumes, gestures, horse-riding ability, and pistol-using skill along with the Thai characterization of legendary king thieves in central Thailand's environment. The proper cultural hybridization, thus, made Saea Thai, Saea Bai and Saea Dam become local Thai cowboy character prototypes. Consequently, king thieves in local Thai legend were eventually established as heroes in Thai action adventure films.

More interestingly, these legendary thieves also reappeared in the action adventure films produced during 1998–2004. During that time, Thai society had been affected by the global economic problems. The emergence of this type of hero in many of the action adventure films produced during this period might have been related to the impact of the economic crisis in Thailand in 1997, known as *The TomyumGoong Crisis*. The great financial crisis caused many factories, companies, and shops to go out of business which brought about huge unemployment (Phongpaichit & Baker, 1998). During that difficult time, Thai people craved for hope and help to get through the depression. The heroes in action adventure films who helped the poor by taking money from the cruel rich people and giving it to help those who were taken advantage of can be viewed as a symbol of hopefulness (Chaloemtiarana, 2009, p. 43). The remaking of films about these outlaw heroes could be considered well suited to the social context.

These heroic thieves could be seen as heroes because they had Robin Hood elements in their characterization—they robbed the rich to give to the poor and eased the pain for the locals. The return of these heroic thieves in Thai action adventure films during 1998–2004 still revealed the same distinctive motives which included the distribution of the stolen goods to the poor. In other words, their returns were interestingly juxtaposed to the despair of people in the society who were looking for someone to help ease their suffering. These motives perhaps gave hope to and reduced stress of the poor in the audience who were encountering the economic crisis.

Crime King was reproduced and released in 1998. It told the story of SaeaBai who robbed corrupt, rich men and distributed valuable things to the poor. Later, *Tear of the Black Tiger* was reproduced and released in 2000. It told the story of Saea Dam's sorrowful life and unhappy love. Four years later, *Siamese Outlaws* was released. It told the story of the conspiracy of thieves in Central Thailand and their important market robbery. The characters of these king thieves, who were reproduced during the late 1990s and the early 2000s, still preserved their inherited hybrid hero characters from the late 1950s as mentioned in the previous section. That preservation was expressed through many elements, such as putting on a cowboy hat, a black shirt, and black trousers, using a pistol for fighting, riding a horse, and especially robbing the rich to help the poor.

Tear of the Black Tiger is an example of cultural hybridization worthy of elaboration. Harrison (2010, pp. 27–39) pointed out that the scene where Saea Dam's spits was a reference to Director Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* in 1992 and Henry Fonda's *Once upon a Time in the West* in 1968. The plot, face close-ups, and cowboy costumes were inspired by Sergio Leone. The scene of a drop of water falling on Saea Mahesuan's hat referred to Woody Strode's ending scene of *Once upon a Time in the West*. The color of settings and costumes in this film used in retrospect to a rural scene in the past could be traced back to Brian De Palma's *Scarface* in 1983.

The return of these legendary thief stories relates to nostalgia in Thai society. Thai people have been desperate and have felt uncertain because of the economic depression since 1997 and also the strong current of globalization in Thai society (Wan'gaeo, 2004, p. 2). The return of legendary heroes may make Thai people feel as though they were being protected by the heroes. Moreover, particularly given the return of *Tear of the Black Tiger* that was globally praised by film critics, received rewards, and was selected to be shown at the Cannes Film Festival, the film automatically represented Thainess or Thai identity on a global stage.

InseeDaeng ("Red Eagle"), the well-known Thai masked hero, is considered a remarkable character demonstrating hybridization in Thai action adventure films. The story of *InseeDaeng* was reproduced in 2010. Although in the previous version of *InseeDaeng*, the Thai masked heroes had been influenced by western cowboy heroes, and remarkably the protagonist in *Lone Ranger* (Nuengdiaw, 2006, pp. 5–12), the 2010 *InseeDaeng* film was influenced by Hollywood films released more recently, namely *Batman Begins* in 2005 and *The Dark Knight* in 2008 which made the new *InseeDaeng* different from the *InseeDaeng* prototypes

produced during 1957–1967. With regard to the new version of *InseeDaeng* from the aspect of cultural hybridization, the Western influence on this film is found in two elements: the protagonist and magic objects. *InseeDaeng* and Batman are both characters with dual personalities. *InseeDaeng* in his normal life is known as Rome Ritthikrai, a playboy. This personality is not different from the young millionaire Bruce Wayne. Both Ritthikrai and Wayne also share the qualities of social alienation, solitude, and have hidden inner conflicts. Ritthikrai also owns his secret room for special weapon restoration as Wayne does.

The 2010 *InseeDaeng* film is different from its former versions. The distinctive change is the adjustment of the storyline to address current socio-political issues, such as the conflict over the nuclear electricity project and corruption. The character, thus, demonstrates the dynamics of the Thai masked hero in new circumstances, though the Hollywood film's influence has still been strong from the past to the present.

The hero in *InseeDaeng* who is highly moral and cares greatly about other people, dares to fight bad and corrupt politicians, entrepreneurs, and civil servants. The return of this hero means so much to Thais, especially when their worry levels were high and a protector is needed, owing to the political unrest and economic crisis in Thai society. The return of Thai heroes not only demonstrates the long period of Hollywood films' influence over Thai films, but also allows the development of these characters in conjunction with contemporary Thai circumstances and works as wish fulfillment for the Thai people (Na Nongkhai, 2010, pp. 69–87).

Thai Martial Arts Heroes: The Flow of Thai Identity in the Eastern and Western World

The next type of hybrid heroes found in the Thai action adventure films released during 1997–2010 is Thai martial arts heroes. These heroes generally have a muscular body and Thai boxing skills, and have practiced Thai boxing for a certain period of time. When they face a crisis, their Thai boxing skill can save their lives. These heroes sacrifice themselves to fight the villain for the sake of their peaceful community. Data collected in this study show that there were 10 movies in which Thai martial arts heroes are the main characters: *Muay Thai Warrior* or *Ong-Bak I Born to Fight*, *Tom Yum Goong: The Protector*, *Dynamite Warrior*, *Chaiya, Fighting Beat*, *Ong-Bak 2, The Sanctuary*, *OngBak 3*, and *The Samurai of Ayothaya*.

Indeed, the martial arts heroes are the crucial part of martial arts films. To better understand the hybrid features of this type of hero, it is imperative to have a full understanding of what a martial arts film is. This is an extremely influential genre consisting of a wide range of films appearing in a number of different contexts and featuring some forms of martial art. Martial arts films are associated in particular with the cinema of China, Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, and Korea, though they are prevalent throughout Southeast Asia and now have a global appeal (Kuhn & Westwell, 2012, pp. 257–256). Moreover, Vick (2008, pp. 123–134) explained the derivation of this film genre as during the 1970s to the 1980s, the martial arts films which

were widespread in the international market were mainly about Ninja and Kung Fu produced by the Shaw Brothers and other companies mainly from Hong Kong. According to Teo (2009, pp.17–36), the martial arts films were also well-known and popular in the USA. Later their popularity spread across the world. The historical background of martial arts movies indicates movements of the cultural and industrial movie production from Asia to the USA and European countries and across the world. During the 1970s, martial arts films reached their peak because of Bruce Lee, who was the idol and influenced his successors: Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Donnie Yen, to name but a few.

In Thai martial arts films, Tony Jaa, the leading actor of the movie *Muay Thai Warrior*, is well-known and successful both in Thailand and across the world as a martial arts hero who is an expert in Thai boxing. The success of the film has led to the popularity of Thai boxing, and movies about Thai boxing have been repeatedly produced. It can be said that the creation of Thai martial art heroes indicates the hybridization of the universal martial arts hero and Thai martial arts content. That is, instead of using different martial arts, Thai boxing has been used as a weapon to fight the villains. Boonthing, the hero in *Muay Thai Warrior*, is represented as a *Muai Thai* fighter as well as a Thai man in general, who has to confront numerous international martial arts specialists in, for example, Kung Fu and Kickboxing (Kitiarsa, 2007, p. 3).

Further, an investigation of the role of Boonthing, the hero in *Muay Thai Warrior* and Kam the hero in *Tom Yum Goong: The Protector* helps to elucidate the hybrid of this type of hero. Even though Boonthing and Kam in both films have several common characteristics, the most noticeable trait is being an expert in Thai martial arts, and using their fighting skills to fight off the villains. The villains in both films are foreign investors and mafia who run underground and illegal businesses. These villains enter the village and destroy the peaceful way of life. In *Muay Thai Warrior*, Boonthing volunteers to retrieve the OnkBak Buddha's head which was stolen by the wicked investors. For the villagers, the OnkBak Buddha's head is very sacred and meaningful. Boonthing has to fight with the villain's followers in the human ring fight. In each fight, Boonthing has to use his Thai martial arts skill to triumphantly beat the bigger and more powerful opponents. In *Tom Yum Goong: The Protector*, Kam, volunteers to follow the poachers who stole elephants from the village. The villagers have planned to give the male elephant to His Majesty the King because it is sacred and has the features that are a symbol of royal power. Kam cannot let the mafia get away and he follows the villains to Australia. He is almost killed by T.K and Jonnie, followers of the mafia head, Madame Rose who is running a female human trafficking business in Sydney, Australia.

From the synopsis, it can be seen that Thai martial arts heroes have the common character traits of the Wuxia heroes in the sense that they played the role of a protector with great skill in martial arts who dares to fight for righteousness. Both Boonthing and Kam are selfless young men who volunteer to retrieve the treasure of their village. Both of them wholeheartedly help the victims of the villains despite the trials and tribulations. In *Tom Yum Goong: The Protector*, Kam helps a Thai woman who is deceptively

brought to Sydney by the villains to work as a prostitute in Australia. Furthermore, with strong determination to get the village treasure back, Kam and Boonting are brave, devoted, and trustful young men who have dedicated themselves to the community and peace.

Thai martial arts heroes have a close association with the heroes in Kung Fu movies, while distinctively reflecting Thainess. Thai martial arts heroes vividly hold Thai values such as high respect and adoration toward teachers of Thai martial arts. They tend to be humble and able to control emotional turbulence. The conceit of respect and adoration toward martial art teachers can be clearly seen in *Muay Thai Warrior*, *Tom Yum Goong: The Protector*, *Chaiya*, *Fighting Beat*, *OngBak 2*, *OngBak 3*, and *Yamada: The Samurai of Ayothaya*. In *Fighting Beat* and *Yamada: The Samurai of Ayothaya*, the martial arts teachers are monks. Being taught martial arts skills by monks signals that Thai martial art is related to Buddhist philosophy and practices. The learners must be calm and practice the skills in solitude. They need meditation to be able to have a clear focus and concentration when they fight. The heroes, when encountering a crisis, tend to calmly compose themselves with full concentration. They seem to be conscious of everything at that moment. This idea is closely related to Buddhist philosophy which emphasizes concentration, meditation, and wisdom.

The very same characteristics can be widely found in Chinese Kung Fu movies especially in the creation of heroic characters. The heroes are likely to be rigorously trained. The training emphasizes not only the strength of the body, but also the power of the mind (no matter whether the master is a Thai monk or a Shaolin monk). The fighters who fully understand the philosophical dimension of fighting can be unbelievably calm with full consciousness and emotional stability when they have to fight. It is worth noting that martial arts heroes always have a scene when they spend some time controlling their thoughts, emotions, and consciousness before conquering their wicked opponents. This close association vividly indicates the influences of Chinese Kung Fu movies on Thai martial films as well as the substitution of Thai cultural content.

Besides the characteristics of the hero mentioned earlier, *Muay Thai Warrior* and *Tom Yum Goong: The Protector* beautifully demonstrates Thai martial arts through the fighting between the heroes and the villains. For example in *Muay Thai Warrior*, the fighting between Boonting and his rival in the underground scene depicts the beauty and the strength of Thai martial arts when being used to conquer more powerful and bigger rivals. This trait is the norm in martial arts films regardless of their origin. In kickboxing films, or movies involving Bruce Lee, Chuck Norris, Steven Seagal, or Jean Claude Van Damme, the heroes frequently show beautiful and incredible movements (Prasannam, 2007, pp. 164–165). Therefore, it can be said that Thai martial arts can substitute for other kinds of martial arts in these films.

In addition to the Thai heroes discussed above, Yamada, the main character in *Yamada: The Samurai of Ayothaya*, is the only foreign heroic character who learns Thai martial arts. Yamada is a Japanese soldier who is interested in Thai boxing. He learns Thai boxing from Suea, one of King Naruean's soldiers, and from PhraKru, a monk who was an

eminent boxing teacher. The friendship between Yamada and Suea is built through the practice of Thai boxing. It can be said that in this movie, the Thai martial art expands its definition from a Thai national martial art to the emblem of friendship especially when Yamada chooses to use Thai boxing art to dissolve his marginalized identity and acquires a new identity as a Thai soldier. For example, when Yamada is finally accepted by a group of Thai soldiers who are the royal guards of King Naruean, and when he fights for Ayutthaya, these scenes imply Yamada's ability to blend his old foreign identity to the new Thai related one because finally he chooses to use Thai martial arts as a weapon instead of a samurai sword.

Moreover, it was found that the violent fighting scenes in this genre reflect the gender rules of the male heroes. According to [Raksamani, Chunlawong, and Noinimit \(2007, pp. 53–210\)](#), two certain roles and duties of Thai men under the expectations of society are that 1) men are the protectors of people including women and property, and 2) Thai men must be brave. In Thai literature, the male characters must value honor and dignity, but not their own lives. They must fight until they die rather than run away from the fight. Male characters in Thai rural literature tend to hold the virtues of a gangster or, in Thai called "Nak-leng" <ນັກເລັງ>, at heart which includes bravery and mercy to the inferior. This indicates that Thai society places an emphasis on manliness and it has a huge influence on how to create a heroic character in literature and films. The fighting scenes of the Thai martial art heroes can be considered closely related to the social values of the roles and duties of Thai men, especially as brave fighters. Fighting is construed not as a sign of violence or arrogance but is considered the characteristic of a brave man who is willing to die to protect his land. Using Thai martial arts expertly in fighting is a strategy to represent ideal manhood according to the Thai social expectations. Therefore, Thai martial arts are the arts and skills of fighting for Thai men; the skills that can be used as weapons to fight against the invasion of the enemy, such as Burma and Western countries. This implication and the application of Thai boxing can be clearly seen in *Muay Thai Warrior*, *Tom Yum Goong: The Protector*, *Chaiya*, *Fighting Beat*, *The Sanctuary*, and *Yamada: The Samurai of Ayothaya* to name but a few.

Boonting in the film *OngBak* and Kam in *Tom Yum Goong* are heroes who also fight against threats from external enemies, in this case foreigners and community outsiders. The heroes and villains in those films are symbols of conflicts between Thainess and otherness. Since Thai martial arts have been used as weapons to protect the motherland for a long time, Thai martial arts can be considered an element of Thai identity and Thainess. The unique characteristic of Thai martial arts heroes leads to the success of Thai martial arts films around the world.

It can be said that the hybridization of Thai martial arts heroes is an example of cultural adaptation under globalization. According to the earlier explanation, the creation of Thai martial arts heroes reflects the back-and-forth journey of Thai martial art films from the Eastern world to the Western world. It can be seen that from the beginning, Thai martial arts heroes explicitly show that Thai boxing is the martial art of Thailand and is used as a

weapon to fight against the enemy. They then show to the world that Thai martial arts are an art of the Orient—a combination of beauty and strength. Thai boxing in this case can be considered to emphasize a unique identity which is relatively different from the other oriental martial arts. According to Said (1993, pp. 8–9), orientalism and exoticism are a fantasy of the West. However, the awareness of the Western world of the existence of Thai martial arts helps boost acceptance in the Western world. The Western interest in oriental martial arts makes Thai martial arts heroes successful in the Western market. It can be concluded that the creation of Thai martial arts heroes is a cultural combination caused by the reciprocal exchange of knowledge between the Western and Eastern worlds.

Thai Necromancer Superheroes

The last type of hybrid heroes found in the data was Thai necromancer superheroes. The heroes are ordinary men who take an adventure into the magic world where many disasters are caused by supernatural things, monsters, or black-magic power. The protagonists learn magic and then possess magical power. They use their magical powers to fight against the monsters or to deal with some mistake caused by scientific and technological experimentation in order to protect those in need. The Thai necromancer superheroes are found in *Destiny Upside Down*, *Who is Running*, *Kraithong*, *Tigress of King River*, *Tattoo*, *Necromancer*, *Unhuman*, *Garuda*, *The Meteor*, *Curse of the Sun*, *Dynamite Warrior*, and *Mercury Man*.

Thai necromancer superheroes are the most interesting hero characters in Thai action adventure films because they provide clear evidence of cultural hybridization between the characterization of superhero characters in Hollywood films and Thai beliefs about supernatural power and magic power.

Mercury Man, a superhero who possesses the miraculous power of *leklai*, a magical metal amulet according to Thai folk belief, is one of the most prominent examples of the cultural hybridization between. This film tells about Chan, a fire policeman, who was born with a *Suriyan* (solar) metal amulet (in Thai called *leklai*) in his body. The power of the metal amulet causes him to be a bad-tempered person. Later, he is told that he possesses the metal amulet and must learn how to control its power in order to make use of it. In so doing, he has to practice meditation. After practicing meditation, he can take control of the amulet's power and can transform himself into a superhero "Mercury Man" whose power is far beyond that of ordinary people. Later, he is chased after by the terrorists led by Ussamah who possesses a *Chantra* (lunar) metal amulet. Ussamah wants to get Chan's solar charm to achieve absolute control of the two amulet's power. Chan fights against Ussamah and finally can get the lunar metal amulet from the villain.

Folk belief about the power of the metal amulet is shared among people in Southeast Asia. Thais and Malaysians believe that the metal amulet possesses miraculous power. Ordinary men cannot possess this magical object because it is protected by the sacred power that will destroy those who inappropriately obtain it. Those who

can possess this charm must be virtuous or practice black magic, otherwise the charm will destroy them (Phadungthai, 2006, pp. 54–62). When the belief in metal amulet is mixed with the concept of Western superheroes, it creates a hybrid hero, the necromancer superhero, as found in *Mercury Man*. Some examples are presented of cultural hybridization through the superhero character's ability, gestures, and costume.

The Mercury man's power can pull or push all objects made of iron. This power alludes to Magneto's power in *X-Men*. His heat power can also destroy everything. It is a reminder of the character of the Human Torch or Human Storm in *Fantastic 4* who was born of fire and could control fire in order to fly. Furthermore, the Mercury man's gestures are not different from American and Japanese superheroes, mixed with Thai national martial arts. In addition, the superhero's costume is itself a hybrid object. It is a noticeable motif that is created in the superhero films' convention mixed with Thai beliefs. The nine-topped tattoo (in Thai called *yankaoyod*) on the Mercury man's costume is the symbol of the Lord Buddha's nine types of marvelous kindness. It is believed to be able to prevent any danger and to make the hero invulnerable. His arm weapon is an ancient Thai one called *plongmaisok*. It is used to save its user and to attack any enemies.

The mixture of a superhero's costume and traditional Thai belief relates to Thai ways of life in contemporary society. Although their lives have been surrounded by modern technology, they search and expect for perfectly mental security and warmth from a supernatural power as it is represented in traditional Thai society. Therefore, the knowledge and concepts of black magic and supernatural power can still blend well with modern technology and coexist in the contemporary world.

Conclusion

This paper studied cultural hybridization as reflected in hero characters found in 30 Thai action adventure films produced and released during 1997–2010. The analysis revealed three types of hybrid hero found in these films: 1) Thai cowboy heroes, 2) Thai martial arts heroes, and 3) Thai necromancer heroes. Based on the analysis of the hybrid features of these characters, it can be argued that Thai action adventure films reflect the adaptation of foreign culture in Thai films. The creation of heroes interestingly illustrates the cultural hybridization between Thai and foreign cultures.

The Thai cowboy heroes such as SueaBai in the film *SueaJonePhanSuea* ("Crime King") and Suea Dam in *FaTalaijone* ("Tear of the Black Tiger") demonstrate the continuity of the influence of Hollywoods' Western cowboys in Thai films. However, the new masked superhero in the 2010 version of *InseeDaeng*, which was influenced by the character traits of Batman, is an example of a newly emerged subtype of hero in this group.

Next, Thai martial arts heroes are characters that clearly represent the Thai cultural identity in the internally well-known genre of martial arts films. Kam in the film *Ong-Bak* and Boonting in *Tom Yum Goong* share some heroic features and character traits with the characters in Western

and Eastern martial arts films while adopting *Muay Thai* to fight their enemies.

Lastly, the supernatural heroes demonstrating the confrontation between modern technology and the local traditional beliefs can be considered remarkably creative hybrid characters. The combination of these two aspects of the characters is related to the way of life of people nowadays. People in society today are surrounded by modern technology, but they also still need to find comfort and peace of mind from supernatural elements. It can be said that folk beliefs and supernatural elements can be blended with modern technology in these films. Furthermore, the creation of the supernatural heroes can be used to teach morality as well.

The study of cultural hybridization through the heroes in Thai action adventure films reveals the ways people in Thai society creatively respond to globalization. When global culture spreads to any local community, it can neither erase, nor have absolute control over the local culture. The local culture might negotiate, adapt, and adopt globalization to its environment. The cultural hybridization in Thai action adventure films is very remarkable because it creates hybrid heroes who are unique and especially different from orthodox characters. This process can be considered part of the dynamics of Thai action adventure films. The adoption, adaptation, and negotiation of heroes in foreign films into a Thai cultural context indicate wisdom in coping with the unstable, fluctuating nature of globalization.

Conflict of Interest

The authors whose names are listed certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript. There is no conflict of interest.

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