

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION



Cinema has been known to people around the world for over a century. In Thailand, it came into existence in 1923 or approximately 80 years ago. The first feature films known to Thai people, for example, *Nang Sao Suwan* (*Miss Suwanna*, 1923), *Rob Rawang Rak* (*Battle In The Middle Of Love*, 1930), *Pleang Wan Jai* (*My Melody Song*, 1937), etc. were the assimilation of traditional performances (such as *Likay* and *Lakorn*) and western technology (i.e. the camera, lens, and projector). The influence of traditional art form was so deeply rooted that the development of Thai cinema in the early years was somewhat retarded. The factor that has been most obstructive to Thai films of that time is the 1930 Film Act. Imposed by the government, Section 4 of the Act states that theatrical films must not contain elements that are detrimental to morality, national security and social order. The Film Act, which is still in effect, evidently exerted constraint upon Thai filmmakers because it limited their creativity to a significant degree. Films were made with repetitious themes and story lines so as to avoid violating the regulation. Hence, they were far from being creative.

While the Film Act seems to be the most influential factor that contributes to the delayed development of Thai cinema, western influences, particularly Hollywood movies, may be regarded as the major external force that has shaped the outlook of Thai films from the early period to the present

day. The influences of Hollywood movies have occurred little by little throughout the history, starting with the use of technique. Thai films of all times have to compete with Hollywood whose business has long been well-established: it began from a small one run by enthusiastic entrepreneurs and quickly rose to an oligopoly run by big studios. Thus, with the long history of development, Hollywood movies are arguably the best in the world. They are produced with higher talent, expertise, and technology leading Hollywood to be “the biggest single market for feature films” (Turner: 8.) As a result, the United States turn out to be the dominant center for feature film production and distribution, not only in the English-speaking but also in non English-speaking world. The audiences in many countries around the world tend to favor Hollywood movies rather than the local products which are sometimes produced with lower quality and lesser talent.

This remark is especially true when we look at the case of Thai audiences who are the major consumers of Hollywood movies. Having been immensely imported into the country since 1897 (Bangkok Critics Assembly 1992: 38), Hollywood movies gradually make an inroad into Thai market and become the major sources which have caused periodic shrink in the output of Thai films - and more or less captured the interest of Thai moviegoers. Their popularity can be seen in the recent statistics on the percentage of Hollywood market shares over Thai films provided by the Department of Export Promotion. It was 60 percent in 1995; 75 percent in 1996; and 80 percent in

1997. Thai films, by contrast, have been showing a steady decline in market shares from 20 percent in 1995 to 18 percent in 1996 and 15 percent in 1997 (For Thai Film Industry[Online]: 2000, January 10.)

To attract the audience back to Thai films, contemporary filmmakers try to increase the quality of their films by improving the style of filmmaking and introducing new subject matters. This leads to subsequent change in the total outlook of contemporary Thai films. Henceforth, Hollywood influences are not merely inspirational but go so far as serving as an instant model. That is to say, a number of Thai films are now exact copycat versions of Hollywood movies.

This study, then, attempts to study the influences of Hollywood movies on contemporary Thai films. The research is to examine Thai films from the *Traditional Era* to *Contemporary Period* in order to identify the existence of Hollywood influences. The emphasis is placed upon two popular genres in which the influences appear to be most evident, namely, the action-thriller and horror. The method used in this study is in-depth analysis of two selected films which are regarded as a breakthrough in contemporary cinema: *Cloning: Khon Copy Khon* (Cloning, 1999) and *303 Klua/Kla/Akard* (*303 Fear/ Faith/ Revenge*, 1998). The results are then compared with a group of Hollywood movies belonging to the same genres.

Objectives

This study intends primarily to:

1. examine the influences of Hollywood movies upon Thai films throughout the history of Thai cinema.
2. identify the characteristics of Thai films in comparison with Hollywood movies.
3. indicate the influences of Hollywood movies on representative contemporary films at the peak of such influences.

Research Questions:

1. Are Hollywood movies an influential factor that has caused changes in Thai films throughout the history up to the present time?
2. What are the kinds of influences that Hollywood movies have on Thai films?
3. When do the influences become virtually evident?

Methodology

This is basically a qualitative research in which the researcher acquires data from documents, magazines, periodicals, archives, etc. The research method includes a critical analysis of two representative Thai films selected on the basis of their vivid imitation of Hollywood prototype. The results are then compared with a group of Hollywood films of the same generic conventions.

Hypotheses

1. Contemporary Thai films are influenced by Hollywood genres, in particular, **action-thriller** and **horror**.
2. Thai films in general have been inconsistently influenced by Hollywood movies since the production of the first commercial film *Choke Song Chan (Double Luck, 1927)*.

Scope of Study

1. The study explores the history of Thai cinema to indicate the existing Hollywood influences from the **Traditional Era** in which the first film, *Nang Sao Suwan* was produced to **Contemporary Period** in which such influences are most apparent.
2. Three genres, namely, **action**, **thriller**, and **horror** are critically examined. All three are noted for their stimulating scenes, nerve-breaking storylines, vivid imagery, and spectacular use of special effects, both visual and sound. These genres also make the biggest box-office return and are widely popular among Thai audience.
3. Two representative films of contemporary period are used for in-depth study in this research, namely, *Cloning* and *303 Fear/ Faith/ Revenge*. These two films are considered unconventional since they can be

identified with certain Hollywood genres. Hence, they are chosen as study cases here.

Definition of Terms

Film, movie, and cinema – These terms are used interchangeably in this research to refer to motion pictures which are commercially produced. Film and movie both refer to individual motion picture that is usually shown in theaters. However, the term ‘film’ sometimes conveys an academic sense (as in ‘film study’) whereas ‘movie’ implies motion picture made with entertainment and commercial purposes. ‘Cinema’ is an umbrella term for both film and movie.

Hollywood movie – The motion picture that is produced by Hollywood Studios for commercial purposes and characterized by big budgeted production, high box office return, famous film stars, popular genres, and the use of special effects with advanced sight and sound technology. Hollywood movie is commonly known as the mainstream. Note that there is also another line of film which is recognized as ‘Indie’. This group of film is produced by independent filmmakers who have no contract with studio system.

The film is usually produced with low budget and is highly personalized in terms of style and content.

American movie – Generally means movies that are made in the United States.

Influences - The impact of the Hollywood movies upon Thai films which can be as direct as imitating the technique used in a film such as visual effect, or it might indirectly cover the idea of inspiring Thai filmmakers to enhance the quality of their films to reach Hollywood standard. Ultimately, the influences can be far more significant i.e. changing the entire formula of Thai film without a single trace of traditional formula. In other words, the extreme degree of such influences can lead to the copycat version of a Thai film.

Contemporary Thai film – The film produced from 1993 to present, during time which the existence of Hollywood influences is most or entirely evident.

Film genres – Categories, classifications or groups of films that have similar, familiar or instantly recognizable patterns, techniques or conventions that include one or more of the followings: setting, content, themes, plot, motifs, styles, structures, situations,

characters (or characterizations), and stars. Film genres were originated from pre-established conventions. They respond to the conclusion of a movie's type and content since there have been several movies produced into the world market. The genres are used as label for movies which serve as guidelines for film audience. Thus, the movies produced with the same genre share the same characteristics such as plot, theme, etc. Generally, more than one genre can be included into a movie but the genre whose elements are most prominent is considered as a major genre. The best known genres are the western, crime (gangster), horror, musical, science fiction, musical and comedy (Study of Film as Internet Application[Online]: 2000, March 1.) Note that there are also crossbreeds or hybrids with three of four overlapping genre types known as sub-genres. Examples are Indian Western, Slapstick Comedy, Romantic Melodrama, etc.

Limitation of Study

This study is restricted to the analysis of only three Hollywood genres i.e. **action, thriller, and horror**. However, a number of Thai films are influenced by other Hollywood genres but due to the limitation of space they are not included here.

Goals of Study

1. This research sets a precedent for a further academic study on Hollywood influences in Thai film.
2. It serves as an indicator to the future trend of Thai film industry.
3. It contributes to an understanding of a body of knowledge in Thai Studies, particularly one that relates to Thai films and culture.