

Making Meaning Travel: Thai Cinema, Cultural Agency and the Limits of Inter-Asian Decolonization

Yuetongtong Qu^{1,*}

¹*Shanghai Normal University, Shanghai, China*

**Corresponding Author*

Keywords: Thai cinema; Cultural agency; Inter-Asian circulation; Popular culture; Cultural decolonization

Abstract: Thai films have spread throughout Asia through action films, horror films, youth romance films, remake networks, cinema releases, and digital dissemination. This development raises a question that cannot be fully explained by common terms of cultural imperialism: what happens when cultural products from the global South gain audiences and continue their influence through regional paths that do not begin with Western recognition? By re-examining *Ong-Bak* (2003), *Shutter* (2004) and *First Love* (2010), this paper views cultural communication as an intermediary practice rather than a neutral commodity circulation. The article argues that Thai films develop cultural agency by placing globally recognized types in the local meaning structure: a disciplined body oriented by collective responsibility, a concrete karmic debt, and a daily modernity shaped by abstinence, effort and relational emotions. The spread across Asia provides a broader space for these meanings to be understood and, to a limited extent, weakens their dependence on the Western verification system. However, visibility is not equal to cultural authority. Capital, platforms, key institutions and translation resources are still unevenly distributed, while regional communication may reconstruct a new hierarchical order within Asia. Therefore, the flow of Thai films does not really expand the group of people who can organize cultural significance, but does not mean the arrival of a new cultural center.

1. Introduction

Thai films have spread throughout Asia in a form that is both common and difficult to explain in the traditional global cultural landscape. An action film left Bangkok for regional exhibitions and discussions; a horror film was adapted to other markets; an ordinary campus love story is watched and recommended through the network to obtain a long life extension. These flows are often described as evidence of business success or cultural proximity. Although both of these statements are useful, they fail to capture the political problems caused by the flow of films. Their journey shows that cultural products from the global South can enter a broader field of identity by not relying on Western film festivals, critics or publishers. At the same time, this also raises the question: to what extent has this spread changed the conditions for the emergence and vocalization of non-Western cultures?

Cultural imperialism theory is still an indispensable starting point [1]. Schiller's discussion of

transnational media power reminds us of the concentration of capital, technology, distribution rights and symbolic authority in Western institutions. Hollywood, English media, international film festival system and large distribution networks continue to influence which works are funded, translated, promoted and remembered. Digital communication expands access channels, but places choice, visibility and ownership in the hands of powerful intermediaries. Cultural exchanges are carried out in these power structures.

At the same time, a model that is entirely centered on the spread from the center to the periphery can hardly make room for the horizontal flow of culture. Tomlinson's critique of cultural imperialism and Appadurai's discussion of fractured global mobility have raised this issue many years ago. The audience interprets, screens and recodes the introduced cultural forms; cultural objects flow along the cross path; the region forms its own production and acceptance cycle. Trans-Asian pop culture makes these issues particularly clear. Korean TV dramas, Japanese animations, Chinese Hong Kong films and Thai genre films have built their respective audience groups through regional markets, fan translation, adaptation, piracy, streaming media and social media. Their movements did not disintegrate the global hierarchy, but they did disrupt the picture of the silent edge, waiting for the recognition of the metropolis[2, 3].

Thai film provides a thought-provoking case, because its regional influence is gradually formed through a variety of types or institutional paths. The study of contemporary Thai films underscores the diversity of genre film production and the importance of cross-cultural communication [4, 5]. *Ong-Bak* is closely related to the amazing charm of Thai boxing and the potential of the no need to assist fighting body internationally. *Shutter* has entered a wider field of horror films and adaptations. *First Love* have gained longer-term vitality through online viewing and discussion for young people. These films belong to different genres and historical periods, but each has adopted a familiar film format and has been reorganized through the local moral and emotional world. Therefore, their mobility is not only related to the meaning they carry, but also closely related to their communication channels.

In addition, Thailand also occupies an unstable position in the discussion of colonial modernity. It was not formally colonized like most of its neighbours, but modern Siam was formed through continuous consultations with imperial powers, territorial pressures, and legal and administrative reform projects [6]. Therefore, Thai films cannot be regarded as a transparent expression of untainted national culture. Its significance lies in the fact that local traditions and foreign types are constantly recombined in the regional media environment. This historical background makes Thai films particularly suitable for thinking about agency without assuming that culture is pure or completely independent.

This article explores this connection through the concept of cultural agency. The so-called cultural agency refers to the ability of individuals or groups to organize meaning from specific social experience and make it understandable beyond the meaning of the origin. It does not mean a pure cultural interior that is completely unaffected by external influences. Genre films are constructed through reference, translation and repetition. Institutions emerge in the process of borrowing forms of residence, reorientation, and responding to local ethical relationships. At the same time, when cultural works find reception paths, it also shows this phenomenon, which temporarily weakens their dependence on Western communication and evaluation systems.

The discussion revolves around two related issues: First, how does the film text itself - action, terror, and youth love - become the carrier of Thai physical practice, moral causality, and daily emotions? Secondly, it deals with the issue of communication: what regional understandings will emerge when these meanings are viewed, reconstructed and discussed in other parts of Asia? These questions also limit the celebratory narrative of decolonization. Visibility can coexist with foreignization; regional success can coexist with unequal industrial power; the new propagation

cycle can replicate its own center and edge. The following analysis regards cultural decolonization as an unfinished field of practice, which is reflected in the transformation of expression ability and also in the constraints that still exist.

The selection of these films is not to represent Thai films, but to serve as a case for comparative analysis. Each film has gained recognition outside Thailand through different types of combinations and modes of transmission: *Ong-Bak* is in the form of international action film distribution, while *Shutter* is in the form of horror film transmission and adaptation, and *First Love* is in the form of online viewing and youth film discussion. These comparisons enable us to trace cultural agency on a spectacular, ethical and everyday level. The analysis combines the detailed interpretation of the narrative structure, body, emotion and moral causality, and pays attention to the dissemination path of the film's visibility. Dissemination evidence is used in a specific context rather than as a quantitative indicator of the degree of reception.

This approach also needs to be cautious when using the term Global South. These three films do not represent a coherent southern subject, and Thailand cannot replace the very different historical backgrounds covered under this label. Recently, the Chinese academic community has also regarded the Global South as a political category with historical formation and internal differentiation, rather than a fixed geographical identity [7]. This term is of great significance here because it points to the positioning of inequality in the global cultural system and turns attention to the horizontal relationship between societies that are usually regarded as recipients of Western culture. Its value is not to describe a stable identity, but to raise a question: who has the ability to disseminate experience, set an explanatory framework, and become a reference point for others.

2. Negotiating with inter-Asian popular culture

Popular culture is often regarded as the most fluid and compromising part of cultural life. It spreads through the market, relies on replicable forms, and is entertaining to the audience. These qualities sometimes make it seem less politically profound than literature, art films, or explicitly confrontational works. However, the popular type is also the place where the cultural hierarchy is most fiercely negotiated. They collide local experience with business expectations, traditional conventions, and the reading habits of distant audiences. The regionalization movement of Thai films is carried out in such a crowded space.

This ambiguity is the core of this paper. The reason why popular films can transmit experience across borders is precisely because they have been mediated by genre, performance, publicity and commercial mechanisms. The same intermediary process, while promoting communication, may also erase historical differences. The body of Thai boxing may become a portable real symbol; ghost stories may be packaged as interchangeable Asian horror films; campus love stories may also exist independently from the social relations that shape their emotional rhythm. Therefore, cultural agents cannot be positioned in untouched local content under commercial forms. It arises in the struggle of how form organizes locality, how communication transforms it, and how audiences are invited to recognize it.

It is of great significance to distinguish popular culture as a wide field of daily cultural practice from popular culture as a form of entertainment for commercial production [8]. Although Thai genre films operate in the commercial industry, their social significance cannot be simplified into market calculations. A film may be designed to spread widely, but it still carries body knowledge, religious imagination and emotional discipline beyond the sales logic. On the contrary, local symbols may also be packaged into exotic differences for foreign consumption. The political power of communication exists in the unstable relationship between use, identity and commercialization.

This broader understanding also helps to avoid a common technical determinism. The contact of

regional culture does not begin with the streaming media platform, and the flow of movies cannot be explained only by the novelty of technology. Theaters, TV introductions, pirated discs, fan captions, remake works, online forums and social media are intertwined with each other, rather than replacing each other. The change between these modes of transmission lies in the distribution of access and authority: who chooses the film, who translates it, how to classify it, and which elements are presented to the audience. Therefore, describing Thai films as travel is actually describing a series of intermediary processes, rather than frictionless flows.

From a trans-Asian perspective, this historical scale has changed [9, 10]. It focuses on the way cultural works are disseminated among Asian societies, and does not regard the region as a closed civilized space, nor does it simplify communication as a national soft power. Similarly, research on Thai films also links local experiences, genre filmmaking, and cross-cultural communication, but does not see it as a pure substitute for global culture [11]. Propagation paths may include commercial publishers, informal reproduction, fan subtitles, TV sales, remake rights, or online recommendations. These channels overlap with each other, and their political influence is often not the same. What they have in common is that they have created certain opportunities for Asian cultural works to gain meaning in another Asian context outside, beyond or in parallel with Europe and North America. Therefore, such dissemination is neither detached from capitalism nor automatically resistant. It is a kind of cultural contact reorganization with historical characteristics.

2.1 *Ong-Bak*: the disciplined action body

Ong-Bak entered this relationship through action films. Its publicity and overseas repercussions highlight Tony Jaa's physical skills, his limited use of avatars and special effects, and the immediacy of physical impact [12]. The film uses the language of real body to distinguish it from action films that rely on special effects and help to build its international appeal. However, this language also exposes the film to an earlier interpretation of Orientalism, that is, the non-Western body is depicted as primitive, crude and full of dramatic existence. Hunt's analysis points out this risk: Once separated from the narrative world, Thai boxing may be seen as a special physical skill, and its meaning is given elsewhere.

The film itself also puts pressure on this interpretation. Ting's body is formed through wai khru, that is, respect, discipline and restraint to the teacher. His journey began with the theft of the head of the Buddha statue in the village, a move that undermined the community's moral and ritual order. Bangkok shows a world where sacred objects, bodies and loyalty are intertwined in a cycle of exchange. In this world, fighting becomes necessary, but it is constantly linked to recovery, obligation and sacrifice. The body in action undertakes a collective task. Its power does not come only from speed or pain, but from the ethical relationship that makes these actions necessary.

The stolen Buddha head is the core of this distinction. It condenses the moral legitimacy of village belief, collective memory and local order into an item that can be removed, priced and exchanged in the city. Ting's move from the village to Bangkok is consistent with the movement track of this object, but in the opposite direction of morality. In the space he enters, body skills are transformed into gambling performances, and he refuses to let this economic model define the purpose of his body. Repeated fights thus present a conflict between two value systems: physical strength as tradable entertainment, and physical discipline as responsibility to the community. The film's dynamism stems precisely from the fact that it makes this conflict understandable by exposing itself to type conventions in commercialization.

This ethical framework complicates the simple opposition between local authenticity and global type. *Ong-Bak* used the rhythm of international action films, including the pursuit, competition and upgrading of the fighting scene. It does not keep Thai boxing in a closed cultural space, but makes

this fighting art respond to another explanation of why the body fights and who it serves. Fanon's description of the body through external racialized gaze provides a useful comparative perspective, though not exactly the same [13]. The body defined from the outside is still an object of classification and appreciation. *Ong-Bak* endows the body with an internal domain of obligation, making it a source of narrative and moral comprehensibility. The cultural initiative of the film is under the framework of its own construction, making physical differences meaningful.

Hunt's discussion of the 'true' worship is helpful because it captures both the power and the danger of this bodily claim [12]. There are no visible image skills in the film, which means that the audience can directly face the authenticity of physics; however, this 'immediacy' itself is generated through composition, repetition, editing and publicity. *Ong-Bak* famously replays the selected action from multiple angles, transforming the risk into a verifiable display for the audience. Therefore, the real body is never separated from the intermediary. Importantly, the additional ethical narrative makes the authenticity of physics unable to become the only source of value for the film. Ting's body is impressive because it can bear; but its significance is that this endurance is closely related to discipline, inheritance and collective repair.

2.2 Shutter: images, guilt and karmic debt

Shutter traverses another set of dense routine networks. By 2004, Asian horror films have formed a cross-regional field jointly shaped by Japanese, Chinese Hong Kong, South Korean and Southeast Asian films. Ghosts, photos, mediated images, and delayed revelations provide shared type resources. The study of Thai horror films places *Shutter* in the broader context of the globalization of supernatural phenomena, while still focusing on Thailand's unique moral and religious forms [14]. The core image of the film is unforgettable, because it concretizes the ethical causality: the dead woman sits on Tun's shoulder, and the pain he suffers becomes the weight of an unconfessed crime.

The photos in *Shutter* are not only a tool to reveal supernatural phenomena, but also record what the protagonists try to erase from social memory. Natre's return combines images, guilt and physical torture to form a structure of karmic debt. The violence of the past remains, because responsibility has not yet been assumed. Ghosts are not merely invading the present from beyond irrationality; she occupies a moral relationship that the living refuses to acknowledge. Terror stems from the persistence of this relationship.

Photography also constitutes the film's moral argument about viewing. Tun is a photographer and a professional image creator. He knows how to compose, cut and develop images to present what others see. However, these photos refuse his control. Blurred images, shadows, and damaged surfaces resurface what the group is trying to suppress, placing violence against Natre in the medium that Tun usually uses to manage his appearance. Therefore, ghostly images are not mysterious additions to modern technology, but reveal the incompleteness of technical vision and the social work that needs to be carried out to keep misconduct away from the screen.

This structure helps to explain why the film can remain readable outside Thailand - where karma, retribution and moral causation are understood differently. Just because of cultural similarity is not enough to explain this process. The audience does not need to share the same religious beliefs, but also can accept a narrative that tells the story of debt wrapped around the body and hidden damage. The film provides a contextualized ethical grammar that can be interpreted across cultural differences. Its adaptations in different markets show that the communication process involves translation, although translation may also simplify the moral density of the original as a portable plot tool.

2.3 *First Love*: everyday modernity

The cultural context presented by *First Love* is relatively low-key. The film takes the campus as the background and tells the story of transforming self and secret love. These elements draw on the common narrative mode of youth romance films in many film industries around the world. In the discussion of Thai fresh films in Chinese academia, this film is often regarded as part of a recognizable youth film aesthetics that revolves around well-designed adolescence, emotional affinity, and the desire for everyday life [15]. The film is subsequently disseminated and recommended through the network platform, which is of great significance to this article, but this article does not try to fully measure its audience size or acceptance on different national platforms.

The lightness of the film's surface may obscure its unique portrayal of modern life. Nam's desire to change himself is closely related to education, friendship, ambition and the hope of being seen. Her transformation does not end with the declaration of complete individual independence, but gradually unfolds through effort, embarrassment, self-discipline, and careful attention to others. Emotions are often delayed or indirectly expressed. Characters maintain dignity, avoid open conflicts, and let emotions form quietly through memory and subtle actions. The result is a youth modernity, organized by relational sensitivity, rather than characterized by dramatic ruptures with family or community, as is common in many Western initiation narratives.

The familiar metamorphosis plot is especially revealing. South's transformation can be interpreted as a kind of compliance with a transnational beauty culture, which revolves around fair skin color, slim body and visual self-management. The film is not outside of these norms, and its popularity partly depends on people's sense of pleasure brought about by the visible transformation. However, narrative does not allow appearance to carry the full meaning of change. Nam studies hard, participates in collective activities, cultivates friendship, and learns to enter the public space more confidently. Her growth is scattered in the social world, rather than condensed into a declaration of independent self. This makes the film a useful example of how local modernity not only conspired with global norms, but also built ambitions through local relationships and emotional habits.

The focus is not on moderation or self-cultivation only belongs to Thailand. If this proposition is made, it will transform a contextualized emotional model into a national essence. The film more effectively organizes those familiar experiences through a rhythm of interpersonal relationships - campus competition, physical insecurity, class pursuit, and first love. In this rhythm, the characters deal with embarrassment, debt and discomfort that others may feel. Social sensitivity, usually described by *kreng jai* (restraint and decency), becomes a measure of behavioral scale here, although it should not be used as a complete framework to explain Thai emotions. Importantly, the modernity presented in the film is not narrated by the dramatic liberation of individual sovereignty, but by means of daily interpersonal adjustment.

These three films show how popular genre films play an intermediary role between local experience and regional communication. Muay Thai, karmic debt and campus love are not equal cultural objects, nor should they be pieced together into a fixed essence called Thai culture. The connection between them lies in their respective functions: each type leads the cross-border identifiable type elements to a specific world full of responsibility and emotion; at the same time, they also enter the field of commercial circulation, where their differences can be translated, appreciated, simplified or foreignized. The formation of cultural institutions is realized internally rather than externally in the negotiation process.

3. Cultural agency, regional intelligibility and partial delinking

Watching these films together makes the body a recurring medium of cultural significance. In

Ong-Bak, the body is trained, exposed to pain, and guided to restore collective order; in the *Shutter*, the body carries something that the subject refuses to recognize; in *First Love*, the body is gradually reshaped through the daily work of adolescence and the desire for social recognition. These films do not present a single body philosophy, but they resist the idea that “the body is a neutral surface, and the universal type writes its influence here.”

The *Shutter* subverts this trend. Rather than becoming strong through discipline, his body became an involuntary archive of his past. The revelation at the end of the film gives a visual form to the ethical fact that runs through the film: his suffering is relational, triggered by the man he helped create and then abandoned. The body speaks when the confession fails. This interpretation develops the moral connotation of the supernatural form of the film in the broader context specified by Ankuta [14]. It does not assume that every element of the explanation has been included in the study.

Nam’s body is neither heroic nor haunted by ghosts. It is a daily body, subject to the school hierarchy, aesthetic standards and the comparison between teenagers. This transformation theme can easily be interpreted as submitting to the standards of commercial feminization. The film is also involved in this logic to some extent. However, the process of Nam’s transformation also includes academic labor, public performance, friendship and the process of gradually gaining self-confidence. Her body is a scene in a broader growth practice. The emotional core of the film always lies in an effort, and this effort cannot be determined whether it will be rewarded.

From thrilling action to horror, and then to the transformation of campus love, it also expands the meaning of cultural agency. Cultural differences are most evident when they are associated with religion, rituals, martial arts or folklore. The reason why these symbols are easy to spread is that people can identify them as cultural features. Daily modernity is more difficult to be named. Education, ambition, embarrassment and first love seem to be universal, and their local organizations may also disappear in the analysis. *First Love* clearly points out that the ability to tell ordinary modern life itself is a cultural proposition. Thai society is neither a traditional library nor an incomplete replica of Western modernity. It has become a background in which modern emotions can be arranged and shared.

The acceptance of these films at the regional level depends on the fruitful tension between familiarity and difference. The type first provides an initial mode of contact. Audiences know how to watch fight movies, ghost stories or youth romances. Subsequently, the local ethical and emotional structure redirects this sense of familiarity. Regional comprehensibility is not derived from complete consistency, but through partial overlap. Buddhist thought, moral responsibility, family aspirations, and emotional restraint have different historical backgrounds across Asia, but they provide common ground for cognition without erasing differences.

This distinction is particularly important for exploring cultural proximity. The reason why a film is spread is not just because the audience finds each other culturally similar. Cultural proximity is produced by comparison, translation and type identity. The karmic logic of *Shutter* may be familiar to some audiences, but it is a new interpretation for others. The campus world in *First Love* may evoke common pressure while retaining the imprint of Thai performance style and social etiquette. Therefore, regional understanding stems from partial overlap, not exactly the same. Difference is not an obstacle that must be eliminated in communication. Instead, it can become a medium for the audience to put their own experience in another social context.

Therefore, acceptance cannot be imagined as the audience with cultural similarity regaining some complete local meaning. Audiences in the region are exposed to these films through subtitles, dubbing, publicity, prior genre knowledge, and unequal familiarity with Thailand. The audience may still understand the logic of karmic reincarnation without having the same religious background; others may respond to Nam’s school life by recalling the experience of education in

other parts of Asia. These cognitive behaviors are partial transformations, and their incompleteness is not a defect that needs to be eliminated, but a necessary condition for cross-Asian culture to become a comparative place. The reason why these films are able to spread is that they allow people to have attachment without requiring each other to be the same.

This requires further expansion of the concept of cultural proximity. Proximity is often used to explain the audience's preferences in terms of language, values, appearance or shared historical experience, which makes the acceptance process seem automatic, as if cultural similarities naturally facilitate communication. Cross-cultural communication should be understood as a conditional practice constructed through translation, interpretation and unequal access to resources [16]. The development of Thai films also depends on multiple forces such as publishers, screening agencies, remanufacturers, translators, fans, websites and platforms. These practices create and activate proximity, but also selectivity: some aspects of the film are revealed, while others are gradually hidden. Therefore, the regional life of cultural works is an intermediary process, rather than simply confirming some pre-existing identity.

In this context, the concept of delinking also gained a narrower and more useful meaning [17]. Mingnolo used "de-links" to describe a movement of knowledge detached from the authority of Western modernity, and decolonization studies have emphasized that such movements remain controversial in the field of cross-cultural research [18]. The regional spread of Thai films did not constitute such a complete break. These films are of a global type, rely on the commercial industry, and often circulate through multinational distributors or digital platforms. However, the process of their dissemination will still create moments of identity for Asian audiences and interpretation networks. In this paper, this limited transformation is called partial disconnection: that is, it broadens the communication path and reference point, rather than exiting the world cultural and economic system.

The reason why partial disconnection is important is that the recognition mechanism shapes the form in which cultural works are recognized. When the value of a film is recognized only after a Western film festival, critical acclaim, or box office success, its place in regional culture is often described as the result of a return from the center. The Thai films discussed in this paper have gained an important part of their own cultural life through other media. Regional audiences regard *Ong-Bak* as an action film, *Shutter* as a part of the horror film network, and *First Love* are presented through youth-oriented viewing and discussion. These meanings are not only created by Thailand, but also not entirely given by the Western gatekeepers.

This is particularly relevant to the global media and China, because China is one of the areas of large-scale reorganization of regional media communication. Chinese scholars have classified *First Love* into the category of Thai youth film or newborn film, which shows that the film can be spread as a regional cultural reference without prior recognition from Western academic circles [15]. However, the specific path and scale of this acceptance need to be illustrated by more systematic platform and audience research than that provided in this article. Therefore, this case illustrates why regional identity should be understood as a process of media redistribution, rather than its demise.

The limitations of this development are still quite significant. The body can be sold as an exotic sports commodity out of its ethical framework; *Shutter's* karmic structure can be transformed into a generalized supernatural formula; the *First Love* may also be absorbed into the platform economy, which benefits from the flow of emotion but hides labor and ownership. Visibility does not guarantee control over interpretation. Although commercial Thai films cannot be equated with the "lower subject" referred to by Spivak, her distinction between the institutional conditions of speech and audibility still has practical significance [19]. The process of speech and being heard depends on the system that can recode the said discourse.

Visibility must also be distinguished from authority. A film may be widely watched, but its

scope of being reviewed, marketed and archived is still outside the cultural world it presents. *Ong-Bak* may be regarded as the original authenticity, *Shutter* is regarded as an exportable Asian horror film model, and *First Love* is described as a universal sweetness. Each description captures a part of the film, but may detach it from the social relations that organize its meaning. Therefore, cultural institutions must not be guaranteed once and for all through communication. It must be constantly negotiated and constructed in publicity, criticism, translation, adaptation and audience use.

Regional communication itself also has its unique political and economic characteristics. Thailand's long-standing production capacity of genre films has given some of its films an advantage in terms of identifiability and marketability, although this article does not claim that Thai films have always dominated the spread of Southeast Asia [4]. The global South is a political and historical category defined by the global structure of shared experiences of colonization and inequality, but not a homogeneous cultural sphere. There are significant differences in market size, language influence, national support, platform acquisition and industrial capacity. A communication network that challenges Western centralism may still give priority to supporting a few regional producers.

In addition, industrial capacity should not be separated from symbolic forms. Thailand is able to maintain recognizable genres, stars and production methods, enabling its films to retain the readability of their Thai identity while gaining sales opportunities in markets that transcend national borders. This comparative advantage can support cultural autonomy, but it may also turn national differences into a brand that covers weaker regional films. Therefore, the political question is not only whether Thai films can get rid of the intermediary role of the West, but also how their success affects the financing, classification and attention conditions of other Southeast Asian works.

Therefore, the Global South is an unstable analytical scale. It points to a common history of unequal integration when integrated into the global power system, but does not describe a culturally unified community. Within Southeast Asia, differences in production funds, image communication channels, language markets, platform supervision, and publicity capabilities determine which cultural products are more easily disseminated. Regional success can weaken the dependence on European and American recognition, and enhance the status of regional industries with better resources. The political value of South-South cultural exchange depends on whether it can achieve meaning construction in a diversified way, or only reset the concentration of culture [20].

The analysis of the world system helps to reveal how hierarchies are reproduced on different scales [21]. The shift from a global framework to a regional framework does not eliminate the relationship between the centre and the periphery. Industries with more abundant resources may become regional reference points, while weaker industries struggle in terms of distribution and media attention. If we only praise South-South exchanges and ignore these differences, the discussion of decolonization may transform structural criticism into a narrative of successful national brands.

Therefore, the value of Thai film travel lies in a more humble transformation: it expands the number of places where cultural meaning can be organized, and also broadens the path through which this meaning can be obtained in public life. Even if this expansion fails to redistribute the deep infrastructure of cultural power, its political significance remains significant. Here, decolonization is manifested as a cumulative practice: creating, translating, viewing, adapting and discussing cultural works in a way that weakens the single-center hypothesis.

But this argument has obvious limitations. It is based on three highly representative films and does not cover the full diversity of Thai films, including independent films, queer subjects, documentaries, and works under political censorship. Text and communication analysis cannot replace audience research in multilingual contexts. These cases are valuable because they reveal different ways of combining meaning and mobility, but their success may also make them seem

atypical. Further research can compare the regional life of films with weaker commercial security, explore the phenomenon of fan translation as cultural labor, or trace how platform governance works.

4. Conclusion: cultural agency without a new centre

The spread of Thai films across Asia reveals a more crowded cultural field than the center-periphery model allows. Western capital, platforms and evaluation agencies still maintain considerable authority, but cultural significance also flows horizontally through regional cinemas, remake networks and digital public. It is through these channels that *Ong-bak*, *shutter* and *First Love* have gained broader vitality. Their significance lies in the relationship between action and text form: action is organized through disciplined responsibility, terror stems from the debt of karma, and youth love is embodied in an emotional modernity, that is, effort, restraint and caring in relationships.

These films show that cultural agency does not require untouched traditions or absolute independence from global forms. It develops by dwelling on familiar types with local history, ethical claims and emotional rhythms. Regional audiences participate by interpreting and recycling these films, although their understanding may also simplify, alienate or strip away local symbols and the world they give meaning to. Therefore, this agency is mediated, unbalanced, and may be reversed.

The same vigilance also applies to cultural decolonization. The success of Thai films has not transferred control over global distribution, platform infrastructure, or critical authority, nor has it eliminated intra-Asian hierarchies. What it creates is extra space, in which non-Western cultural works can gain meaning before, outside or coexist with Western recognition. Although these spaces are limited, commercially entangled, and politically unequal, they are real.

Decolonization in cultural communication is best understood through this unfinished expansion of expression ability. Its vision is not a new center representing the global South, but a more intensive cultural world in which more participants can organize experience, respond to others, and debate on value issues without passing a single threshold of legitimacy. The flowing Thai cinema provides a narrative of how this world is being constructed, and it also reminds us how much of its infrastructure remains to be changed.

References

- [1] Schiller HI. *Communication and Cultural Domination*. White Plains, NY: International Arts and Sciences Press; 1976.
- [2] Tomlinson J. *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction*. London: Pinter; 1991.
- [3] Appadurai A. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; 1996.
- [4] Cui Y. Plural explorations within the framework of Asian cinema: Genre production in twenty-first-century Thai film. *Film Art*. 2020;(2):112-119. [In Chinese]
- [5] Li M. An analysis of the cross-cultural communication of Thai cinema. *International Communications*. 2018;(4):79-85. [In Chinese]
- [6] Loos T. *Subject Siam: Family, Law, and Colonial Modernity in Thailand*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; 2006.
- [7] Yang J, Shen R. The historical trajectory and contemporary mission of the Global South. *China International Studies*. 2024;(5):24-44. [In Chinese]
- [8] Chua BH. *Structure, Audience and Soft Power in East Asian Pop Culture*. Chinese Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press; 2012.
- [9] Chua BH, Iwabuchi K, editors. *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave*. Chinese Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press; 2008.
- [10] Iwabuchi K. *Recentring Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Durham, NC: Duke

University Press; 2002. doi:10.1215/9780822384083.

[11] Chen L. Local experience, postcolonial culture and strategies of resistance in Taiwan, Chinese Hong Kong and Thai cinema. *Theatre Arts*. 2009;(1):84-92. [In Chinese]

[12] Hunt L. Ong-Bak: New Thai cinema, Hong Kong and the cult of the 'real'. *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*. 2005;3(2):69-84. doi:10.1386/ncin.3.2.69/1.

[13] Fanon F. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Philcox R, translator. New York: Grove Press; 2008. Original work published 1952.

[14] Ancuta K. Global spectrologies: Contemporary Thai horror films and the globalization of the supernatural. *Horror Studies*. 2011;2(1):131-144. doi:10.1386/host.2.1.131_1.

[15] Wang H. Designed youth: A study of Thai 'fresh' cinema. *Contemporary Cinema*. 2013;(8):134-137. [In Chinese]

[16] Shan B. On the possibility of intercultural communication. *Journal of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies*. 2014;(3):5-12. [In Chinese]

[17] Mignolo WD. Delinking: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality. *Cultural Studies*. 2007;21(2-3):449-514. doi:10.1080/09502380601162647.

[18] Peng X, Gu M. The decolonial turn in postcolonial criticism: A new trend in cross-cultural research. *Comparative Literature in China*. 2021;(1):158-169. [In Chinese]

[19] Spivak GC. Can the subaltern speak? In: Williams P, Chrisman L, editors. *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press; 1994. p. 66-111.

[20] Chakrabarty D. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 2000.

[21] Wallerstein I. *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press; 2004.