

Being Chanthaly, Becoming Lao Cinema

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Abstract

Mattie Do's *Chanthaly* (2012) is the first horror film directed by a Lao filmmaker and the ninth Lao film produced in the highly state-regulated film industry of post-socialist Laos PDR. The paper locates *Chanthaly's* position in the development of Lao film history, particularly in light of the political and cultural conditions and constraints that have shaped the country's national cinema. It also explains the significance of *Chanthaly's* arrival in relation to the circumstances of its production. Finally, it offers an interpretation of the film's narrative of haunting as a spectral double of Lao cinema, demonstrating how the film transcends the binary themes that have produced simplistic and exoticized images of Laos onscreen and opens up the possibilities of conceptualizing new futures for Lao films.

Keywords: Cinema of Laos, national cinema, regional cinema, Southeast Asian cinema, horror, post-socialism

I

Mattie Do's *Chanthalay* (2012) is a historic film for Laotian cinema. It is the first Laotian film to be directed by a woman director; the first horror film from the Laotian film industry; one of only a handful of locally produced films that has been screened internationally. *Chanthalay* achieved international recognition, having been screened at over thirty film festivals in Asia, Europe, and North America. When Do and her creative collaborator, Chris Larsen, successfully solicited enough funds from film fans across the world via an online crowdsourcing campaign to produce their follow-up film, *Dearest Sister* (2016), they uploaded *Chanthalay* on the Internet Archive and released the rights to the film and its raw footage to the public domain.¹

Set in contemporary Laos, *Chanthalay* tells the travails of the eponymous young woman, who, suffering from a congenital heart disease, is overprotected by her father and kept cloistered in their middle-class residence in the capital city of Vientiane. The middle-aged father dotes on his daughter. Chanthalay loves him but is also vexed by his excessive solicitousness and feels imprisoned in her own home. She is forbidden even to peek through their gate and interact with their next-door neighbor. The many restrictions and prohibitions imposed on Chanthalay by her father breed in her ambivalent feelings toward him that beget frustration and mistrust.

She is told by her father that her mother, from whom she inherited her delicate condition, died in childbirth. But Chanthalay begins to doubt this story when she is visited by vivid memories of her mother that she should not possess if she had never met her. It seems, in Chanthalay's uncanny recollections, that her mother killed herself and that her father, ambiguously, had something to do with her mother's tragic end. Quietly rebelling against her father, she refuses to take her medication not only to rule out the probability that hallucinogenics are making her see spectral visions, but also to remove any hindrance from her reaching out to her mother who, Chanthalay has come to believe, is trying to contact her from the afterlife with an urgent message. In the end, she must choose between the truth of her earthly father and the promise of her ghostly mother, both of whom are striving to gain hold of her heart.

How can we productively interpret *Chanthaly* not only as a horror tale but, more important, as a Lao story conversing with Lao film history? What does this film inaugurate as an originary moment for Lao cinema and occasion as haunting returns from Lao film history?² In this article, I try to answer these questions by contextualizing the importance of Do's film beyond simply marking its achievements as first-time breakthroughs.

At the outset, I follow a series of detours and map out both the milestones and outlying landmarks of Lao cinema. In these detours, I reflect on several films co-produced by Laotians with Vietnamese and Thai filmmakers and those produced by non-Lao filmmakers featuring Lao spaces and experiences that illustrate the historical struggles that characterize the formation of Laos's national cinema. Ultimately, I trace the trajectory of Lao film history to demonstrate the significance of the arrival of Do's *Chanthaly* in light of the circumstances of its production, offer an interpretation of its narrative as a spectral metaphor for Lao cinema itself, and assess how the film has transcended the binary themes that for so long have produced narrow and exoticized images of Laos onscreen.

II

A Survey of Lao Film History

Chanthaly was only the ninth Lao-produced feature film when it came out, and *Dearest Sister* the twentieth. As of 2019, only about 25 Lao-produced films have been released, three of which were co-directed by either a Thai or a Vietnamese filmmaker.³ Most of these productions are small-budget genre movies that are produced in greater numbers in other established industries. Many of these Lao genre movies have the quality of television soap operas, thus setting them apart from more cinematic works like the films directed by Do and other filmmakers who make up the production company, Lao New Wave Cinema (LNWC), such as Anysay Keola's crime thriller, *At the Horizon* (2011), Phanumad Disattha's musical comedy, *Huk Aum Lum* (2013), and the romantic comic omnibus, *Vientiane in Love* (2014) by Keola, Disattha,

Xaisongkham Induangchanthy, and Vannaphone Sittirath. Appearances notwithstanding, the production of these Lao films marks an important moment for the struggling Lao film industry, which, according to pioneering filmmaker Som Ok Southiphone, did not exist in the twentieth century.⁴

By all accounts, the cinema of Laos began quite recently. Prior to 1956, the year of release of the oldest known Lao film, *Go to Gather in the Zone of Two Provinces*, a documentary co-produced with the Vietnamese, it is difficult to speak of Lao film history. As the concept of “national cinema” was gaining currency around the world after the end of the Second World War through the 1970s,⁵ Laos was, meanwhile, a divided nation, waging a thirty-year civil war (1945-75) between the communist Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao Government (RLG).

The years from 1960 to 1975, remarkably, were a productive period for cinema in a divided Laos. With the support of North Vietnam, the Soviet Union, and China, the Lao Patriotic Front Documentary Film Service in the so-called “Liberated Zone” produced propaganda documentaries. According to Lao National Film Archive director Bouchao Phichit, the most notable of these were *20 Years of the Revolution* (1965), *The Land of Freedom* (1970), and *Dry Season Victory* (1970).⁶ Backed by South Vietnam, the US, and Thailand, the “Vientiane Zone,” meanwhile, produced at least ten pictures, only three of which have survived. *The Untrue and True Friend* and *Our Land* (both ca. 1970-73) are considered the first Lao narrative features. They were patriotic films produced by the propaganda arm of the army. Another film, *Three Wheels* (1965), was made by Lao director, Khamking Bandasack, and co-produced with the French. The rest are known only by their titles, as they have been lost. By 1974, nine theaters operated in the capital city of Vientiane. They screened films from the US, Europe, Thailand, Hong Kong, and India. Despite these aforementioned film activities in Vientiane, an infrastructure for a national film industry did not rise from the ground.

When Laos was reunified under the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR) in 1975, the newly consolidated communist state regarded the notion of launching an independent film industry as

anathema. Film production came under the control of the government—all film artists had to join the Lao Patriotic Front Film Service, and, for a time, they were not permitted to make feature films. All scripts, from that point on up to this very day, must first be approved by the Cinema Department under the Ministry of Information and Culture before filming could begin. From 1976 to 1988, the Cinema Department imported an average of 70 films a year, mostly from the Soviet Union, Vietnam, India, Hong Kong, and Thailand. It produced an average of five newsreels per year used for the purpose of “educating the masses and serving the dissemination of the new policies of the government.”⁷ Only two feature-length narrative films, *The Sound of Gunfire from the Plain of Jars* (1983), a co-production with Vietnam, and the other, *Red Lotus* (1988), were released during this period.

While these two narrative features did not foster the establishment of a film industry, they reflected efforts by the state to help give rise to a national cinema. The storylines of both films are set in the past, presenting and evoking originary moments of crisis that ostensibly created the nation-state in its present form. *The Sound of Gunfire*, co-directed by Somchith Pholsena, a Laotian, and Pham Ky Nam, who is Vietnamese, is a war film that features Laotian landscapes and culture along with choreographed hand-to-hand combat and shootouts. It also serves to dramatize the key political events of 1958. The film tells the story of how Lao and Vietnamese troops, working with the indigenous Hmong people, fought together against the brutal soldiers of the colonial, Westernized, and traitorous RLG and achieved victory against all odds. Its climactic conclusion portrays the heroic escape of liberation troops from the Vientiane Army in the Plain of Jars in Xiengkhuang Province. Despite its many spectacular action scenes and the fact that no Lao feature film had been released since the early 1970s, the film failed to attract audiences, and the government lost its investment.

The Sound of Gunfire no doubt attempted to present a heroic image of the new nation, where previously marginalized figures like working-class men and non-Lao ethnic groups take their place at the center of history—and the screen. The film depicts how the courageous Lao peasants were justified in overthrowing the regime based in a decadent

Vientiane. However, as documentary filmmaker Scott Christopherson argues, the film exhibited “no creative deviation from the Lao PDR’s model of propaganda,” casting in doubt the position of its filmmakers to speak authentically about the situation of the country.⁸ He notes, for example, that any symbols of and allusions to Buddhism that audiences expected were deliberately omitted, following the policy of the government to discourage the practice of religion among the population.⁹ He also points out that the heroic portrayal of Hmong people as revolutionaries was an attempt to “rewrite history” because many of them had in fact been strongly opposed to the Pathet Lao.¹⁰ There was, thus, a mismatch between the endeavor to produce a film about a nation for propagandistic purposes and the complex multiethnic reality of Laos as a modern nation.

The last state-subsidized film of the twentieth century, before Laos embarked on its post-socialist transition into a liberal economy following the fall of the Soviet Union, is *Red Lotus*, a love story, which, like *The Sound of Gunfire*, is set in the years prior to the establishment of the Lao PDR. It tackles conflicts across several thematic levels—within the family, within the nation, between classes, and between traditional and modern values. At the center of the film is the heroine, Boa Deng, who represents the ideal of the working-class/peasant Lao woman—she is delicate, beautiful, and strong-willed. She stands up against her lustful stepfather, defies the tradition of arranged marriage by refusing to wed a rich man and choosing to be faithful to her beloved, a revolutionary soldier. She thus resists the corruption of materialism in favor of leading a simple life in the rural village.

As the brief narrative outline suggests, *Red Lotus*’s story remains within the bounds of Lao state ideology, portraying wealthy men as lecherous and depicting the rural girl as being free of material desires and exhibiting purity of motivation and aspiration. Her choices and actions serve as the glue to bind the family and, by extension, the community and the nation. The film also shows that the proverbial national soul—“the untold stories of the resilience, valor, and solidarity of the Lao people”—is kept intact in the grassroots even when the country was under the French- and US-backed government.¹¹ Professor

of Comparative Literature Panivong Norindr argues, however, that *Red Lotus*, while it toes the party line, should be viewed as an “independent” film because it exceeds the influence of Vietnamese socialist realism and is distinctly Laotian in its themes, storytelling style, and aesthetic achievement.¹² Notably, *Red Lotus* refocuses the national narrative from the perspective of soldiers to that of a noncombatant woman who displays unquestionable leadership qualities. For these reasons, the film exhibits a clear progression from *The Sound of Gunfire* in the direction of portraying Laotians in a more nuanced way in cinema.

Directed by Som Ock Southiphonh, who had studied filmmaking in Czechoslovakia, *Red Lotus* was the highest cinematic achievement of Laos up to that point, which is especially remarkable in light of how it had been shot on a low budget while under tight state scrutiny. It received critical and international attention, traveling to represent Laos in Russia, Japan, Hawaii, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam through the 1990s, during the decade when no other Lao feature film was produced. *Red Lotus* continues to represent Lao cinema in film festivals even today. Like *The Sound of Gunfire*, however, it failed to attract many domestic viewers and did not launch a viable film culture.¹³

Considering the fact that only two of the 25 Lao-produced narrative features to date were made before the 2000s, the coming of digital technology in the twenty-first century has clearly helped to nurture the budding Lao film industry. Other cinemas across Southeast Asia have benefited from the innovation of digital technology, which catalyzed the emergence of “new” and “independent” cinemas from the late 1990s to the 2000s. Young filmmakers from the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand broke new ground in terms of experimenting with film form and exploring provocative themes, countering accepted film practices sanctioned officially by the state or promoted commercially by the industry.¹⁴ Film culture in Laos at the turn of the century was still inactive by comparison.¹⁵

Before the establishment of LNWC in 2012, only Lao Art Media, with the support of nongovernmental organizations, had been able to produce films outside state institutions. Anousone Sirisackda, co-producer of and director for Lao Art Media, made *A Father's Heart* (2007) and *Only*

Love (2010), feature-length issue-based edutainments about bird flu and human trafficking, respectively. It is the tireless Sirisackda who helped make possible the first commercial production in Laos by co-directing the first Thai-Lao hit film, *Good Morning, Luang Prabang* [*Sabaidee Luang Prabang*] (2008), which was made in partnership with the Thai filmmaker, Sakchai Deenan, and co-produced with a Thai company. Lao Art Media would eventually back Do's efforts to produce horror films that evaded censorship by the state, beginning with *Chanthaly*.

When film production began to pick up in 2008, however, there were only three movie theaters in the whole of Laos, located in Pakse, in Savannakhet, and in Vientiane (before 2015, when a new Cineplex opened in the capital city), and these theaters screened mostly Thai and Hollywood films. Moreover, moviegoing has not been part of the regular pastime of Laotians, since a movie ticket, which costs (in 2016) around 10,000 to 15,000 kip for Thai and Hollywood films and 15,000 to 30,000 kip for Lao films, is quite costly compared to pirated DVDs that contain up to six movies per disc and cost only 5,000 to 10,000 kip each. Thus, there had been no incentive for Laotians to get into filmmaking, with practically no screens to show local films, no clearly identifiable market of movie-goers, no place for trained technicians to find stable jobs, and no film schools.¹⁶ The lack of both audience and infrastructure has meant that apart from the films produced by the state's Cinema Department, all films produced locally in the 2000s and 2010s, be they small-budget genre movies, are "new" and "independent" films. Such films can be considered as historic achievements, as they were made by risk-taking Laotians who were compelled to imagine a Lao audience that is yet to come into existence.

The emergence of Lao film culture with the production of *Good Morning, Luang Prabang* was buttressed further by the founding in 2009 of the Vientiane International Film Festival, initiated through a Lao-German cooperation, and the Luang Prabang Film Festival (LPFF), established by American programmer Gabriel Kuperman. Both film festivals had an impact similar to that of other festivals and competitions in Southeast Asia, such as the Cultural Center of the Philippines's Alternative Film and Video Awards in the 1980s, the Thai Short Film

and Video Festival in the 1990s, and the Vietnamese Cinematography Department's nationwide short film competition in the 2000s. The Vientianale and LPFF galvanized young filmmakers by providing a platform for showcasing independently produced Lao films and serving as gateways for Laotians to see non-Lao films. It was the LPFF that premiered Do's *Chanthaly* before it was shown at the Fantastic Fest in Austin, Texas, in 2013.

Becoming "Lao" Cinema

The 2012 edition of the LPFF spotlighted American filmmakers Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack's silent spectacle, *Chang: A Drama of the Wilderness* (1927). The programming decision gestured toward a view of Laos in early film history, predating the release of *Go to Gather in the Zone* shortly after the French officially withdrew from Indochina in 1954. *Chang* marked the earliest known presence of Lao culture in motion pictures. Such a gesture emphasizes the *longue durée* for the emergence of a Lao national cinema that antedates Lao-Vietnamese co-productions.

Perhaps because Laos is landlocked between present-day Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand and was considered by French colonial authorities as a mere extension of Vietnam,¹⁷ records of filming and screening in the territory of Laos are scarce. Between 1896 and 1899, the *cinématographe* had been transported around the Indochinese peninsula to gather footage of the French colonies but of the hundreds of pages of documents in the French archives pertaining to cinema in Indochina, only a few are verifiably about Laos.¹⁸ In 1924, the French government granted the *Société Indochine Films et Cinémas* an annual subsidy of 100,000 francs to produce propaganda films to screen in the theaters of Indochina. But of the more than 100 films distributed by the agency, only one is about Laos. Of the nearly 50 films exported from Indochina to France between 1924 and 1927, none is known to have been shot on location in Laos. The country is also absent in the list of twelve films "in progress" and figures as only one entry in the list of "films under consideration for production."¹⁹

Thus, it was a momentous occasion for Laos's leading international

film festival to screen the first Lao (in) film, made by celebrated ethnographic filmmakers Cooper and Schoedsack, who had become known earlier for *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life* (1925), a silent spectacle set in the Middle East, and eventually, for the fantasy epic, *King Kong* (1933). The occasion was noteworthy as well on a symbolic level, as *Chang* opens visually with an unpeopled landscape. The first intertitles proclaim that “before the first city in the world was built, before man trod the earth,” there was only the jungle, but “Man must live, so Man fights on. Such a man is Kru, the Lao tribesman.”

The symbolic association is intriguing and grand. The man who heroically tames Nature is a Buddhist Lao who dreams of proving himself a fearless warrior. The LPFF, in effect, pushes back against history and inaugurates a “new” origin of Lao cinema, one that is older than records suggest—indeed, even “prehistoric.” At the same time, the screening illustrates how the attempt to locate the originary moment of Lao cinema is reliant on enabling a prior set of histories, populated by films that will follow *Chang* in the sequence of history, and a transnational framework of signification, in this case the international film festival whose cultural capital both underwrites and gains from screening *Chang*.²⁰

Chang chronicles the lives of Kru, his family, and his village, who live among and domesticate beasts while constantly battling tigers and bears, struggling to survive in unrelenting circumstances. Its penultimate sequence presents breathtaking scenes of a herd of stampeding elephants leveling their entire village, forcing the survivors to start all over and rebuild from the ground up. The closing image is of the same empty landscape from the beginning, and the final intertitle reads, “For first was the Jungle. Always will be the Jungle...the Unconquered...the Unconquerable!” Intriguingly, *Chang*'s ending does not declare the triumph of Man, or of Kru himself, but it acknowledges more humbly that Man must ever struggle. It is an ending that renders the gesture of screening *Chang* as the first Lao film more circumspect in its proposition. The ending also metaphorically intimates the “true” history of Lao cinema, which will try to survive in an inhospitable environment only to be repeatedly leveled.

Of course, there are limits to treating *Chang* as an originary moment for Lao cinema. While its epic scale is impressive, it is undeniably an orientalist film that portrays rural spaces as mysterious and undifferentiated. Consider part of film critic Mordaunt Hall's fawning review of the film in 1927: "The producers have requested newspaper writers not to reveal the meaning of the word 'Chang.' It is perhaps not the most suitable title for this film, inasmuch as many persons will believe that the picture is concerned with the ways of the Chinese."²¹ The portrayal of an undifferentiated Asian culture and setting hints at the tentative status of Laos as a referent in a Hollywood movie, a presence that serves the drive of Hollywood toward global cultural hegemony more than it does Laos by putting the country in the cinematic map.

Moreover, though *Chang* has been claimed as a Lao film, having been shown in the LPFF in this spirit,²² it is actually set in the jungle between Lan Xang (present-day Laos) and Siam (Thailand). It is a region that, then as now, remains culturally ambiguous. The ethnonym "Lao" is flexible and has been used to identify various groups before modern-day boundaries divided the land. Since the landscape depicted in *Chang* dates back to a time before the formation of the nation-state of Laos, then Kru could be recognized as being either ethnically Lao or Thai in today's terms.

In the sixteenth century, the term "Lao" referred to Buddhist lowlanders who inhabited remote areas not easily accessible from the center of the kingdom of Siam.²³ As historian Grant Evans notes, "The people of what is today northern Thailand were formerly known as Lao, and were only formally integrated politically into the Thai state a year before the French asserted their control over Laos in 1893."²⁴ By the late nineteenth century, as historian Thongchai Winichakul explains, "Lao" began to take on a negative meaning, referring to Thailand's ethnic "others within," the "savage" peoples from the provinces that Siam "lost" to France, a symbol of what is external to the nation, and thus signifying an obstacle to Thai nationalism in reified national geographical space.²⁵

This blurring of lines between the ethnic and cultural identities of Thais and Laos²⁶ has been another significant condition, or constraint, apparent from at least as early as *Chang*, for the invention of "Lao"

cinema. In the 2000s, the flexible meaning of “Lao” was harnessed productively in art cinema on the side of Thailand and genre filmmaking on the side of Laos. On the one hand, Thi-Von Muong-Hane, a director of art cinema, proposes that Lao film culture look to the avant-garde cinema of internationally renowned Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul to imagine its own future possibilities. Although he is a Thai citizen, Apichatpong hails from Khon Kaen, located in the Lao-speaking region of Isan, which serves as the setting for his prize-winning films.²⁷ On the other hand, the folk imaginary behind the Thai-Lao co-production, *Good Morning, Luang Prabang*, which projects an idealized rural Laos, produces representations that are anchored on the imagery of earlier Lao films, *The Sound of Gunfire* and *Red Lotus*.

From a Thai perspective, Apichatpong’s “Lao” films can be seen as being critical of state repression and the homogenizing tendencies of mainstream commercial cinema. Because Isan is geographically remote and culturally distinct from the urban and cosmopolitan capital of Bangkok, Apichatpong’s decision to set his films there enables him to dwell on an alternative space that is not symbolically defined by the center of power of Thai society and is thus more capable of critiquing it.²⁸

Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives (2010) illustrates the critical edge of the “village surrealism” of the Thai-Lao borderland.²⁹ It chronicles the final days of the eponymous old man, who, together with the spirit of his dead wife and a son that has assumed non-human form, contemplates the meaning of his life and the reasons for his terminal disease. It is set in a sparsely populated rural area that is neither pastoral nor touristic in appearance but jungle-like, not unlike the wilderness depicted in *Chang*. In *Uncle Boonmee*, Apichatpong depicts how hardworking migrant workers from Laos interact with contemptuous Thais and compares the linguistic similarities between Laos and Thais that the latter tend to suppress. The film also touches upon everyday folk and religious beliefs that are disconnected from state ideology and movie genre conventions alike.

Moreover, by locating his narrative in “Lao” spaces, Apichatpong is able to comment on the history of violence witnessed or suffered by rural people and glossed over by Thai official history.³⁰ In the 1960s and

1970s, the Thai border police and army persecuted local communities in Isan, torturing and killing many of their men on suspicion of being communists or communist sympathizers.³¹ In Apichatpong's film, Uncle Boonmee's participation in this history of conflict is part of what the old man must come to terms with before dying and is possibly the cause of his fatal illness.

From the perspective of Laos, where a film industry has not fully bloomed and all film productions are closely monitored by the state, the space for a critical "Lao" cinema has yet to be cleared. In its place, *Good Morning, Luang Prabang* is a fitting reassertion of Lao presence onscreen and a harbinger of new beginnings after *Red Lotus* which was released twenty years earlier. The film tells the story of Sorn, a Bangkok-based photographer with Lao roots who is hesitant to embark on his assignment to take photographs of the ancient city of Luang Prabang, and Noi, Sorn's Laotian tour guide. In this road movie that turns into a love story, Sorn learns to embrace Laos, as he reconnects with his distant relatives, allows the idyllic landscapes of Luang Prabang to transform him, and falls in love with the amiable and virginal Noi.

The film contrasts Thailand with Laos's primary tourist destination, the scenic Luang Prabang, and shows how the rural way of life in Laos is more harmonious than the frenetic urban world of Bangkok. Like *Red Lotus* before it, *Good Morning, Luang Prabang* likens the natural beauty and resilience of Laos to the quiet but strong will of a woman, who is simple but in no way inferior to a man, especially a cosmopolitan Thai man.

The resonance of such a depiction among Lao and Thai audiences is noteworthy. According to Laos Studies scholar Vatthana Pholsena, Lao state authorities and ground-level respondents have tended to imagine the relationship between Thailand and Laos in moralistically binary terms.³² In its bid for economic progress, Thailand is seen as being "contaminated by the ill-effects of capitalism" and as having succumbed to materialism.³³ Such a view mirrors the Thai view of Laos as the communist other. Contrariwise, as Pholsena explains, Laos is typically viewed as having kept its authenticity in modern times. One Thai tourist visiting Laos sums up this binary view succinctly: "The Lao and the Thai

peoples share similar culture and traditions, but Laos has managed to preserve her culture.”³⁴

It is little wonder, therefore, that the Lao government green-lighted the production of *Good Morning, Luang Prabang*. The storyline held the promise of a Lao commercial film that would not be objectionable to state censors and that would assert Laos’s cultural purity and difference from, or superiority to, Thailand. It is also no wonder why *Good Morning, Luang Prabang*, starring the Lao beauty queen, Khamly Philavong, and Australian-Lao-Thai star and co-producer of the film, Ananda Everingham, could achieve box-office success in both Thailand and Laos. It capitalized on existing and comfortable prejudices and stereotypes about Thais and Laos.

At the same time, vacillating between the extremes of idolizing and demonizing the other, many Laotians do consider Thailand to be “an idealized symbol of modernity.”³⁵ Such attitudes can be explained by the fact that Laos lives “in the shadow of [the Thai] electronic media superpower.”³⁶ Throughout the 2000s, Thai radio, television, and cinema dominated Lao media culture,³⁷ prompting geographer Jonathan Rigg to claim that Laotians “often know more about what is going on next door in Thailand than they do about events in their own country.”³⁸ Thus, for Laos, a country that is continually being drawn into the Greater Mekong sub-regional market, permitting the production of a film like *Good Morning, Luang Prabang* and banking on its success are ways to promote the budding film industry while maintaining a positive self-image of the nation.

However, as with propaganda films like *The Sound of Gunfire*, the capacity of such a genre movie to speak authentically of the national experience is narrow. As with *Chang*, the image of Laos in *Good Morning, Luang Prabang* is produced against the presence of the foreign other and relies on exoticizing the land from the outsiders’ perspective. And the viability of the genre of cross-cultural romance genre to succeed commercially is likewise limited. In fact, *Good Morning, Luang Prabang* prompted the production of two less commercially successful sequels, *From Pakse with Love* (Sakchai Deenan, 2010), and *Lao Wedding* (Sakchai Deenan, 2011), which had less to do with Laos in terms of financial,

creative, and technical inputs and more to do with a Thai production company's attempt to cash in on the success of the first film, business decisions that further reinforce a simplistic image of Laos as a pastoral refuge from modernity.³⁹

III

Lao Cinema and Its Spectral Double

Mattie Do's *Chanthaly* shuns the strategy of idealizing Lao rural landscapes, makes no grand gestures about cultural origins, and evokes no historic crises of national proportions. Instead, it is set in domestic interiors and captures the quotidian drabness of urban existence—a situation not unfamiliar to bourgeois moviegoers in Vientiane, the film's primary audience.⁴⁰ The urban setting of the film thus allows Do to offer a nuanced dramatization of and critical commentary on everyday life in Laos. It also locates the film in spaces coded neither as marginal nor as nostalgic, as in *Uncle Boonmee* and *Good Morning, Luang Prabang* respectively. It instead places the film in a kind of limbo, a setting that serves as the film's source of meaning and horror.

Chanthaly may appear disconcerting to fans of horror movies.⁴¹ Insinuations of odious events abound in the film, hinted at by the uneasy quietness of the house, the handheld camerawork that hovers over people's shoulders, and the sudden intrusions of flashbacks. But the suspense that is set up in many sequences never erupts into anything explicitly terrifying. Viewers familiar with "Asian horror" conventions who expect jump scares or grotesque imagery will discover that none of these techniques are employed in the film.⁴² Instead, it relies on conceptual and thematic dichotomies between father and mother, the old and the young, knowledge and memory, science and religion, and modernity and tradition to unfold its storyline as well as to produce the feeling of dread.

According to Do, the storytelling techniques of *Chanthaly* deliberately eschew Thai horror tropes that are popular globally and familiar to the film audiences of Laos, in favor of creating fear by evoking what Laotians

would find terrifying in folk culture.⁴³ This would partially explain the unconventional style of the film. At the same time, the restraint in executing its horror scenes and its cerebral approach to presenting the uncanny are in fact determined by the constraints imposed by the Cinema Department on the producers of *Chanthalay*, which the filmmakers were able to surmount in a creative manner. Like *Sounds of Gunfire*, *Red Lotus*, and *Good Morning, Luang Prabang* before it, *Chanthalay* was also subject to censorship and regulation.

That *Chanthalay* was approved at all for production in a highly regulated film culture is in itself a telling step in the evolution of cinema in a one-party communist state. One obstacle to its approval is the fact that the communist government officially repudiates the existence of the supernatural. When the story concept was first pitched by Do and Larsen to Lao Art Media, the producers knew immediately that it was going to be rejected, since it features spiritual elements that the state had never up to that point permitted Laotians to film, although Thai horror movies have been accessible in Laos much earlier.

Indeed, the Cinema Department did not approve the original concept, although it gave concrete input on how to revise the screenplay to make it acceptable for production. That the Department did not reject the proposal outright reflects the state's new openness to genre movies and its readiness to relaunch the film industry. But, more interestingly, the Department's intervention in the film's narrative had a far-reaching though unforeseen implication on the subtextual meaning of the film.

First, the censors, as guardians of public taste and morality, prohibited the filmmakers from creating "direct horror," presumably monstrous characters and nightmarish images that the Lao audiences might find repulsive.⁴⁴ This forced Do to make an ironic horror movie that is not explicitly frightening but also to evoke fear in the audience not from the use of genre conventions but from the depiction of familiar rituals. For instance, Do shows Chanthalay praying to a shrine that is commonly found in Lao residences.⁴⁵ Chanthalay supplicates the spirits to protect their home, a prayer to which her mother responds by making her presence felt. On the same shrine, the young woman beseeches her dead mother to manifest herself. Later, in a crucial moment in the

story, Chanthaly's father desecrates the shrine, in a scene whose chilling implications may not be readily apparent to non-Lao viewers.

Second, the censors only allowed the production of the film when the filmmakers agreed to introduce "a non-believing character, a logical, level-headed worker who absolutely refuses to acknowledge the spirit world, in order to have a contrast with the character of Chanthaly,"⁴⁶ as his presence might disprove the reality of ghosts in the storyline itself and display the state's perspective on and tolerance of the people's spiritual beliefs. The filmmakers complied by introducing not one but two scientific-minded men: Chanthaly's father, an unbeliever who forbids her daughter to make offerings to the spirit shrine, and her French-educated doctor, who tries to woo her but eventually marries her cousin Bee.

The inclusion of these characters ironically heightens the unsettling premise of the story by opening up an allegorical reading of the film that implicates the state itself. State intervention inextricably entwines the making of *Chanthaly* with the main strand of Lao film history. It leaves an imprint of these historical conditions on the form and narrative of the film itself. At the same time, the filmmakers' creative approach to overcoming censorship enables the film to speak to this history and have this history intervene on a cinematic level.

Consider the series of conflicts the film presents to Chanthaly and, by extension, the Lao audience. When her doctor courts her and she entertains the prospect of becoming free of her father's control, Chanthaly begins to relish the small moments of waiting in her cloistered existence. One night, however, when she and her suitor arrive from their first date, giddy and delighted, her overprotective father banishes the doctor from her life, thereby thwarting her desire for love and freedom and stripping her of the will to determine her own adult life.

Her mounting frustrations at being isolated, repressed, and controlled cause Chanthaly's anger and resentment toward her father to grow. She clings to the spirit of her mother, begging her to rescue her. Soon after her father's altercation with the doctor, the young woman's anger reaches its peak. When she is told one evening to stop pouting like a child and take her pills, she takes the ultimate defiant step of self-determination

and commits suicide by overdosing. Images of her swallowing each pill are intercut with the enigmatic memories of her mother committing suicide by hanging, while her father is shown covering Chanthaly's eyes. Whether he wants to shield her from trauma or keep her from the truth, it is now unclear.

The associations are suggestive on a metaphorical level, given the circumstances of *Chanthaly's* production. The father's regimentation of his daughter's life parallels the control that the state exerts on Lao film industry, which is expected to grow but is not provided the freedom to do so. Like Chanthaly's triangulated relationship with her conservative father and her liberal suitor, Lao cinema's options—as I have outlined its contours in the previous sections—seem restricted to circumscribed options.

Provocatively, Do adds a third term in Chanthaly's situation, an alternative that teases to be viable but has yet to be clearly manifested and understood. This third term recasts the daughter's limited options from choosing between the father and the potential husband to choosing between rejecting her present ground of being with her earthly father—her identity as a daughter, her life history—and opening up to a ghostly past that promises a new future in the realm of the mother. The third term—the ghost and its promise—offers no certainties to Chanthaly and yet invites her to make a radical decision from which she cannot turn back.

Should she continue to trust her father whom she has known all her life and who she knows cares for her, or must she change her view of him and consider it as nothing but a lie? Should she choose the safety of the known (father, medicine, accepted account of the past), or should she believe her inexplicable visions and pursue the promise of vitality (mother, spirit, alternative narratives) at the risk of physical death? Should she root her existence in the present, or should she uproot herself and chase down spectral traces? The choices before her are intriguing whether understood as life-or-death gambles in a horror movie or as metaphorical provocations pertaining to Lao history and culture.

Up to the point of her suicide, the viewers have been made to consider the situation from Chanthaly's limited point of view. From this

perspective, her heroic act of negation appears inevitable. But as the film itself is made by acquiescing and conforming to state directives, *Chanthaly* itself obviously does not epitomize the form and politics of disconfirmation, as a film like *Uncle Boonmee* does.

Do, in fact, suspends the meaning of the narrative's third term until the end and refuses to turn the ghostly haunting into just another option in a new dichotomy. When Chanthaly wakes up in the realm of the spirits after her suicide, she finds that the ghost who had been communicating with her is not her mother, but a *phi* (a nonhuman, sometimes anthropomorphic, spirit from Laos' ancient animist roots).⁴⁷ But this *phi* is not an evil and deceitful ghost, as one would normally find in morally dualistic horror movies, and could likely have had a human past. In her current form, she is manifested as a lonely mother pining for her long-lost daughter.

When Chanthaly realizes her grave mistake, she is distraught. She herself has turned into a ghost. In the years that follow, she haunts her father and her cousin, Bee, who had moved in to care for her bereaved uncle, so they could be scared into performing the religious ritual that would free her from the house. The same ritual was apparently never performed for the *phi*, who has given herself over to the delusion she has conjured in her own mind, namely that she lives in that house and Chanthaly is the daughter she must never let go of again. But Chanthaly's father is beyond the reach of the ghost's influence; after all, the state has promoted the belief in science aimed at disproving popular superstitions.

One night, Bee prays to the spirit shrine for Chanthaly to leave the house, but the *phi* convinces Chanthaly to harbor resentment toward the family who wants to banish and forget her. As Bee is praying, her new husband and Chanthaly's old suitor, the doctor, sees her and says, "My mother told me that the more you speak to the spirits, the less likely they are to find peace."

Bee retorts, "You don't even believe in ghosts." To which the doctor responds, "Well, my mother did. My family is full of superstitious daughters that take after their mothers and realist sons that work hard like their fathers. Our kids will probably be the same."

These words cut to the heart of the film's final, seemingly insurmountable, and cross-generational dilemma, premised on false dichotomies that have not been resolved but merely kept in abeyance. When Bee, who knows that Chanthaly still lives in the house, tries to persuade her husband to hold the ceremony that would release Chanthaly, the rational and scientific doctor dismisses the suggestion as ridiculous. Unable to continue living in a house haunted by ghosts, Bee then convinces her husband to move them out. The couple leaves Chanthaly's father, who could not forgive himself for the death of his precious daughter. Finally, he is alone again with Chanthaly who will never be free.

Chanthaly's suicide and the film's shift from her limited earthly viewpoint to a more knowing one as a ghost reveal that the situation, including its allegorical dimension, has been all the while a matter of "time out of joint." Her predicament arose from the fate of being dislocated and stuck in a cul-de-sac that faces "the (dead) end of history" and refuses to come to terms with the frightful consequences of deferred origins.⁴⁸ At the start of the story, the *phi* makes Chanthaly believe that a ghost, who comes from the past and haunts the present but belongs neither to the past nor the present, holds the key to her future. When Chanthaly concedes and embraces her mother, she herself becomes the ghost, trapped in perpetual return to the house of her father who refused to let her become independent and now refuses to acknowledge her being.

The concluding sequences of *Chanthaly* are powerful, for they do not give simplistic answers to the question that the film and the film history of Laos raise. Instead, the first Lao-produced horror film opens a gateway through the realm of the spirits, where ghosts can reorient questions, choices, narratives, trajectories, and identities and challenge contemporary Lao cinema to open up and anticipate new futures beyond what has heretofore been historically conjured.

Notes

¹ Mattie Do, "(Nong Hak/Dearest Sister)-Community Challenge," Vimeo, accessed

August 15, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/98327805>; Mattie Do, "Footage Collection: Chanthaly," Internet Archive, accessed August 15, 2015, <https://archive.org/details/Chanthaly.Open.Source.Project.Footage-MANGO>.

²These questions are framed by Jacques Derrida's notion of hauntology first put forward in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994); and enlarged upon by Mark Fisher in *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014) and Peter Buse and Andrew Stott, "Introduction," in *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*, eds. Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (London: Macmillan, 1999), 1-20.

³Aya Hashimoto, "CIRAS discussion paper No.67: Absent Fathers," *Cine Adobo*, no. 67 (2017): 65.

⁴Som Ock Southiponh, "Starting an Asian Cinema: Laos Past and Present," *Yamagata International Documentary Film*, no. 12 (1990), accessed August 15, 2015, <http://www.yidff.jp/docbox/12/box12-3-e.html>.

⁵The concept of national cinema, while arguably as old as the early years of the twentieth century, was problematized by theorists in the post-World War II period, especially in the 1960s. See related discussions in Philip Rosen, "History, Textuality, Nation: Kracauer, Burch and Some Problems in the Study of National Cinemas," *Iris* 2, no. 2 (1984); Paul Willemsen, "The National," in *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 206-19; Stephen Crofts, "Reconceptualising National Cinema/s," *The Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 14, no. 3 (1993): 49-67.

⁶The historical information in this and the following two paragraphs is based on Bounchao Phitchit, "Lao Cinema," in *Films in South East Asia: Views from the Region*, ed. David Hanan (Hanoi: SEAPAVAA, 2001), 83-92; Panivong Norindr, "The Emergence of Laotian Film Industry: A Short Overview," in *Southeast Asian Cinema*, eds. Gaetan Margirier and Jean Pierre Gimenez (Lyon: Asiexpo Edition, 2011), 236-43.

⁷Phitchit, "Lao Cinema," 87.

⁸Scott Christopherson, "Lao Filmmakers Break Free from their Cultural Chains," *The Journal of Lao Studies*, Special Issue 2015 (2015): 98-112, the quote is from page 101.

⁹Grant Evans, "Buddhism and Economic Action in Socialist Laos," in *Socialism: Ideals, Ideologies, and Local Practice*, ed. C. M. Hann (London: Routledge, 1993), 123-40.

¹⁰Christopherson, "Lao Filmmakers Break Free," 101; cf. Gary Y. Lee, "Minority Policies and the Hmong in Laos," in *Contemporary Laos*, ed. Martin Stuart-Fox (New York: University of Queensland Press, 1982), 199-219.

¹¹Panivong Norindr, "Toward a Laotian Independent Cinema?" in *Film in Contemporary Southeast Asia*, eds. David C. L. Lim and Hiroyuki Yamamoto (London: Routledge, 2012), 47.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³ Norindr, "The Emergence of Laotian Film Industry," 248.

¹⁴ Patrick F. Campos, *The End of National Cinema: Filipino Film at the Turn of the Century* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2016), 1-26.

¹⁵ Norindr, "The Emergence of Laotian Film Industry," 244-45.

¹⁶ The following overview of contemporary film culture in Laos is based on the author's interviews with Do, Keola, and Induangchanthy, as well as the author's observations and field research during his visit in Vientiane in May 2014. Parts of the interviews were subsequently published as Patrick F. Campos, "The Invention of Lao Horror: Interview with Mattie Do," *Plaridel* 12, no. 2 (2015) and "The Emergence of a New Lao Cinema: An Interview with Anysay Keola and Xaisongkham Induangchanthy," *Plaridel* 13, no. 2 (2016).

¹⁷ Vathana Pholsena, *Post-War Laos* (Singapore: ISEAS Publications, 2006), 19-45.

¹⁸ Research information in this paragraph is based on Norindr, "The Emergence of Laotian Film Industry," 245-46.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 246.

²⁰ Cf. Buse and Stott, "introduction," 11.

²¹ Mordaunt Hall, "Chang: A Drama of the Wilderness," *New York Times*, April 30, 1927, accessed October 13, 2015, www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=990CE0DD163CE733A25753C3A9629C946695D6CF.

²² Vientiane, "Chang is the first movie ever filmed in Laos....," *Facebook*, March 26, 2012, accessed October 13, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/Vientiane/posts/chang-is-the-first-movie-ever-filmed-in-laos-in-xaynaburi-in-1927-it-is-a-silent/311670975565155/>.

²³ Søren Ivarsson, *Creating Laos: The Making of a Lao Space between Indochina and Siam, 1860-1945* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008), 24.

²⁴ Grant Evans, *Laos: Culture and Society* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999), 21.

²⁵ Thongchai Winichakul, "The Others Within: Travel and Ethno-Spatial Differentiation of Siamese Subjects 1885-1910," in *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*, ed. Andrew Turton (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), 38-62; cf. Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 164-69.

²⁶ "Laos" here is used as a plural noun referring to the ethnic Lao and not to "Laotians," which refers to modern-day citizens of Lao PDR.

²⁷ Thi-Von Muong-Hane, "In Search of Laotian Cinema," in *Southeast Asian Cinema*, eds. Gaetan Margirier and Jean Pierre Gimenez (Lyon: Asiexpo Edition, 2011), 234.

²⁸ May Adadol Ingawanij and Richard Lowell MacDonald, "Blissfully Whose? Jungle Pleasures, Ultra-modernist Cinema and the Cosmopolitan Thai Auteur," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 4, no. 1 (2006): 37-54.

²⁹ Elvis Mitchell, "From Thailand, Adventures In Collective Storytelling," *New York Times*, November 1, 2001, accessed October 15, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/01/movies/film-review-from-thailand-adventures-in-collective->

storytelling.html.

³⁰ Cf. Vathana Pholsena, "The Changing Historiographies of Laos: A Focus on the Early Period," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 2 (2004): 235-59.

³¹ Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, 169-70.

³² Pholsena, *Post-War Laos*, 52-55.

³³ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, 54.

³⁵ Fanny Bolloud, "On the Tracks of Film Distribution in Laos," in *Southeast Asian Cinema*, eds. Gaetan Margirier and Jean Pierre Gimenez (Lyon: Asiexpo Edition, 2011), 256.

³⁶ Jonathan Rigg, *Living with Transition in Laos* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005), 9.

³⁷ Pholsena, *Post-War Laos*, 53; Bolloud, "On the Tracks," 256; and Norindr, "Toward a Laotian Independent Cinema?" 49.

³⁸ Rigg, *Living with Transition in Laos*, 9.

³⁹ Cf. Muong-Hane, "In Search of Laotian Cinema."

⁴⁰ Andrea Lauser, "Ghost Movies, the Makers, and their Audiences: In Conversation with the Filmmakers Katarzyna Ancuta and Solarsin Ngoenwichit from Thailand and Mattie Do from Laos," in *Ghost Movies in Southeast Asia and Beyond*, eds. Peter J. Bräunlein and Andrea Lauser (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 256-79.

⁴¹ Consider some horror movie fans who have posted online user reviews at Lettboxd, <https://letterboxd.com/film/chanthaly/>, and IMDb, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2837366/>, accessed October 15, 2018; cf. Lauser, 259.

⁴² Cf. Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2011), 219-20.

⁴³ Lauser, "Ghost Movies," 259.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁴⁵ For discussions on spiritual and religious practices in Laos, see John Clifford Holt, *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009).

⁴⁶ Campos, "The Invention of Lao Horror," 217.

⁴⁷ Holt, *Spirits of the Place*, see esp. 236.

⁴⁸ In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida repeatedly uses the phrase "time out of joint" (an allusion to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) to refer to the paradoxical and constitutive historical anachronism of identity formation in the present. Derrida, in the same work, discusses how the problematic optimism suggested by the notion of "the end of history," Francis Fukuyama's liberal democratic post-socialist thesis, is always haunted by its opposite and what it negates.