

movies, as well as some of the most powerful screenplays that were social commentaries of the time.

Lee and Laurel represented the progressive and radical threads of the Tsinoy story, wherein anti-American nationalism and Filipino liberalism mixed seamlessly with social democratic ideas, radical theology, and Maoist thought. Laurel represented the above-level, moderate reformist politics, while Lee was accustomed to Leninist-type underground work. In the post-Marcos era, however, both the social democratic and radical wings of the anti-Marcos opposition weakened, and protest politics shifted to groups like the Citizens Action Against Crime and Kaisa para sa Kaunlaran Incorporated (Unified for Progress), which zealously campaigned against the kidnappings. Kaisa's leader Teresita Ang-See, however, was a different kind of activist. Her concern was to keep the community protected and defended, while her predecessors — Laurel and Lee — saw the community as part of Philippine society, whose perils and hopes were no different from other Filipinos.

It remains to be seen whether Kaisa will eventually repeat what the activists of the 1960s and the martial law era had done. The prospects of this happening appear positive, for despite the abductions, Chinese integration continued. At the start of the twenty-first century, 'hundreds of Chinese [had moved out] of the commercial niche and join the professional class (as lawyers, doctors, architects, engineers), even producing some Chinese-Filipino cultural workers (writers, visual artists, filmmakers)'. Tsinoy had become television personalities as well as movie stars. The film series *Mano Po* (Seeking your Blessings), which centred on a Chinese-Filipino family, was popularly acclaimed, suggesting, among other things, that the Tsinoy were now finally part of the national culture.

Hau is one of the best Filipino-Chinese scholars of her generation, and *The Chinese question* is just another evidence of her depth. This book is a must-read if one is interested in the vibrant and complex world of the Tsinoy, who have embedded their stories in a larger Filipino narrative.

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Thailand

Ghostly desires, queer sexuality and vernacular Buddhism in contemporary Thai Cinema

By ARNIKA FUHRMANN

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Arnika Fuhrmann's *Ghostly desires, queer sexuality and vernacular Buddhism in contemporary Thai Cinema* takes film, religious and queer studies of Thailand in exciting new directions. Thematically a series of chapter-length analyses of significant

recent Thai films and video art, in analytical terms *Ghostly desires* is a multidisciplinary account of, 'the fundamental ways in which Theravadin and other Buddhist concepts, stories, and imagery inform contemporary understandings of sexuality' in Thailand (p. 5). Fuhrmann's foundational premises are that contemporary Thai queer and feminine identities have emerged within an Asian modernity that is deeply religious and permeated by non-orthodox beliefs and rituals, and these diverse religious forms contribute to the minoritisation and stigmatisation of women and queer people in the country. This study shows the need to cross intellectual borders and disciplinary boundaries in order to analyse Asian modernities that do not conform to the Western notion of the secular that still dominates much research in the humanities and social sciences. *Ghostly desires* also crosses the divide that sometimes separates gender studies from queer studies, bringing a queer analytical lens to consider the often demonised place of women within Thai Buddhism, and as reflected in the Thai ghost films *Nang Nak* (Nonzee Nimibutr, 1999) and *The Eye* (Danny and Oxide Pang, 2002) studied here.

Arnika Fuhrmann is especially interested in filmic accounts of familial, romantic and sexual relationships between the living and the dead, a form of eroticisation of the sphere of loss that she labels 'Buddhist melancholia' (p. 2). A central feature of the theme of Buddhist melancholia that Fuhrmann argues runs through much recent Thai cinema is an ascribed negativity of queer personhood and femininity. Fuhrmann argues that in Thai Buddhism women, transgender *kathoey*s and gay men are all marked by 'karmic ontological deficiency' (p. 4) because they are identified with the negative ethical qualities of desire and attachment, which are the sources of suffering that Buddhism maintains must be overcome in order to attain *nibbāna*. Fuhrmann explores how women and queer men in Thailand resist this religiously ascribed negativity, and she contends that Thai independent films after 1997 have 'invent[ed] a cinematic, affective, and political language' to 'describe an alternative Thai sexual contemporaneity' (p. 9). The critical aim of *Ghostly desires* is to examine, 'the possibilities of agency of women, trans people, and gay men both in the political arena and in the cultural imaginarity constituted by contemporary cinema and a digital avant-garde' (p. 13).

The films and videos studied in *Ghostly desires* were all produced after the social and cultural upheavals brought on by the 1997 Asian economic crisis, and Fuhrmann views much post-1997 Thai cinema as centring on the theme of ghostly return. Each chapter presents an exegesis of one film or body of work of a visual artist. Chapter 1 details Nonzee Nimibutr's immensely popular 1999 film *Nang Nak* (*Ghost wife*), a lushly imaged period piece recreation of Thailand's most famous ghost story, in which a soldier returns from war to live with the ghosts of his wife and infant child, unaware that both have died during a difficult childbirth while he was away. Chapter 2 analyses Danny and Oxide Pang's 2002 Thai–Hong Kong coproduction *Khon Hen Phi* (*The Eye — The Ghost Seer*), in which a Hong Kong woman who has been blind from birth receives a cornea transplant from a Thai donor, and upon gaining sight is able to see ghosts. Chapter 3 considers Apichatpong Weerasethakul's award-winning 2004 *Sat Pralat* (*Tropical Malady*), which in two very different episodes traces male–male romantic and sexual relations in provincial Thailand, first through the lens of everyday life and subsequently through the medium of myth. Chapter 4 considers the performance video art of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook in which she relates with the dead — reading texts to bodies laid

out in a morgue in one piece, and dressing and redressing the corpse of a recently deceased woman in another. In a concluding coda Fuhrmann considers Thunskan Pansitthivorakul's 2008 independent film *Boriwen Ni Yu Phaitai Kankakkan* (*This area is under quarantine*), which uses explicit imaging of male–male sexuality across the Thai–Muslim ethnocultural and religious–political divide as a frame to critique military oppression of the Muslim population of Thailand's southernmost provinces. Many subsidiary themes are also addressed in the book, such as the growing reception of Thai films across East and Southeast Asia. Fuhrmann argues that in Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan, Thailand is often regarded in nostalgic terms as embodying a different Asian modernity that provides 'a proximate-distant reservoir of the modern occult [which] holds out the promise that there can still be magic in an Asian future' (p. 120).

There are some missed opportunities to highlight the queer dimensions of the films and texts that are studied. The second half of Apichatpong's *Tropical malady* includes an extended meditation on the were-tiger as a symbol for male homoerotic desire in Thailand. I would have liked some comparative study of the were-wolf as a queer figure in Western cinema, where male–male sexuality is similarly imaged in terms of a violent and carnivorous man-beast of the forest. It is also a pity that there is no extended analysis of the cultural phenomenon of 'cross-speaking' as a queer practice in Thailand. Fuhrmann notes that a manifesto penned by Araya is titled in Thai (*Phom*) *Pen Silapin*, which uses a male first person pronoun and translates as: 'I (a male subject) am an artist'. Fuhrmann could have deepened the queer-/gender analysis by considering the gender-transgressive title of Araya's manifesto, in which she uses a Thai male pronoun to enunciate the fact that for a woman to find voice, be heard and taken seriously in the country's patriarchal art scene and culture, she must first position herself within discourse as a man.

Fuhrmann concludes by observing, 'The contemporary neoliberal moment requires new analytic lenses through which to gauge the transformative potential of media and modes of expression' (p. 196). *Ghostly desires* has indeed opened new conversations on the question of how the diverse genres of recent Thai cinema challenge us to refashion theory. The provocative multi-gendered and multidisciplinary method that Fuhrmann adroitly deploys points to the forms of intellectual border-crossing that are needed to grasp and understand twenty-first century Asian cultures.

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Siege of the spirits: Community and polity in Bangkok

By MICHAEL HERZFELD

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Siege of the spirits tells of contestations over the right of a community of less than 300 people to keep living in a historic part of downtown Bangkok, Pom Mahakan, a small settlement adjacent to a citadel that dates to the 1780s and the reign of Rama I. The central