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Give it up for the ghost

Capitalism trumps nationalism as Pee Mak Phra Khanong dethrones Suriyothai to become the highest-grossing film in Thai history

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The lovelorn banshee has finally vanquished the antediluvian queen, with a little help from inflation. Though the number isn't official (it never is), it's safe to announce that Pee Mak Phra Khanong has become the highest-grossing movie ever released in Thailand, dethroning the once-invincible historical epic Suriyothai.



Payback time: Actress Davika Hborne, from the film Pee Mak Phra Khanong, fulfills the pledge she's made to the shrine of Mae Nak at Wat Mhabaur after the film surged past the 500-million-baht mark and became the highest grossing film ever.

Pee Mak, produced by GTH and directed by Banjong Pisanthanakul, has rocketed past the 500 million baht mark — that's just the receipts from Bangkok and surrounds alone. The studio's publicist believes that the nationwide box-office revenue will be between 800 million and 1 billion baht once the nationwide numbers are concluded by mid-May.

Three weeks ago, it was unthinkable that any "normal" movie could defeat the 500 million baht record set by Suriyothai, a sumptuous epic about a 16th century Ayutthaya queen released in 2001. That film, directed by MC Chatreechaleem Yukol, is more than just "a movie", and that helped explain its miraculous box-office sum at a time when a ticket cost 100 baht or less. Financed by the state (though we still had to pay to see it!), Suriyothai was intended to transcend "cinema" and become something like a national monument. It was promoted as "the film of the Siamese nation" and its level of ambition, passion, publicity, visibility, budget and princely prestige were unprecedented in Thai film history. As it happened, the enormity of it rubbed off on citizens. Students were marched in to see it, and private companies booked out cinemas for their staff. Repeated viewing was reportedly normal.

Since we all contributed through our tax, Suriyothai is an equivalent of, say, the pyramids — a project that (tries to) symbolise the collective pride of the entire nation. Of course it will always be remembered for its sheer scale, but now its record has been eclipsed. A folklore ghost has unseated the dead queen. Savvy marketing, post-mortem romance and higher ticket prices have booted out the solemn record holder of an antiquated dynasty that fights the Burmese. As Pee Mak outshines Suriyothai, capitalism has trumped nationalism.

Now let's take a look at the numbers. Nothing is 100% "official" in terms of Thai figures and statistics, and that underlies the shaky methodology of box-office tracking and movie distribution in this country. In the US for instance, an independent company observes, records and reports the box-office revenue of each film every week for official economic reference. In Europe and South Korea, the popularity of a film is measured not by how many euro or won the film generates, but how many tickets have been sold at the cinemas — or admission. The latter system is usually more comprehensible; it's easier to picture the most famous South Korean film of all time, The Thieves, selling 13 million tickets than Tom Cruise's Oblivion making US\$35 million over its first week.

In 2001, Suriyothai made about 500 million baht nationwide. At that time, it cost about 100 baht to see a movie. A dozen years later, you have to give offerings to all the sacred deities to pay less than 140 baht to see a film at a Bangkok multiplex. Pee Mak's fantastic ride is partly borne aloft by the higher average ticket price of about 140 baht, or 40% more than Suriyothai.

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So in 2001, roughly five million tickets were sold for Suriyothai; for Pee Mak, if we stick to the studio's claim of "a billion baht nationwide" (it sounds exaggerated), that means 7.1 million tickets would be sold, or 2.1 million more than Suriyothai.

(Please note that while big hits in South Korea regularly sell 10 million tickets or more, our six million for Pee Mak shows our domestic market is still much smaller. The population of South Korea is 50 million, 20 million fewer than Thailand.)

Another complication is at hand here. In the past month when we kept hearing that Pee Mak has made 100, then 300, then 500 million baht, the figures only represented multiplex incomes from Bangkok and adjacent provinces. The system of film distribution in Thailand is that a producing studio oversees the release only in the capital. For the rest of the country, the studio sells the rights of the film to regional distributors called sai nang. So the northern distributor buys Pee Mak from the studio at a fixed price and controls the theatrical release in the northern region. The same goes for the southern and northeastern regions. The studio won't be able to track down the revenue from other parts of the country until the regional distributors report back, usually later than when we hear the Bangkok numbers.

Besides inflation, what else has pushed Pee Mak past Suriyothai? Finding out what constitutes a sure-fire hit is the Holy Grail of film producers from Hollywood to Botswana, and Pee Mak benefits from a gamut of factors that have aligned to create a remunerative blessing. The film is funny (but not that funny) and the director's comic rhythm is admirable. Its romantic reinterpretation of an age-old story is also endearing to the young crowd. And maybe the national, pre-Songkran mood swung in the film's favour. The list goes on.

If I may, I'd venture to suggest that it's the packaging that has worked its magic: the comedy in Pee Mak isn't that different from a litter of low-quality Thai comedies, but the film packages it differently, with half-farang stars, a good-looking set, an arsenal of urban marketing, and a sense of middle-class prestige slapped onto the familiar folk story that has a vulgar element. It's smart, corporate-style manufacturing that blends in quite effectively with the filmmaker's creativity.

It doesn't always work. What makes a big difference is that this time, it does. Congratulations.

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