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Mae Nak Through The Years

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The story is apocryphal, but fiction has entrenched it as our reality. The tale of Mae Nak Phra Khanong _ a woman of the early Rattanakosin period who died during childbirth but continued to live with her living husband _ is the most romantic zombie story ever. Whether she be ghost, ghoul or the original overly attached girlfriend, the living dead Mae Nak has over the years transcended the status of a lovelorn, screaming banshee in pulp-horror into a recognisable pop-icon and one of the most marketable characters in Thailand. It doesn't matter if she really existed, because she does in our consciousness, for every few years in the past seven decades, a new movie or television series has passed on her memory to successive generations.

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Nang Nak, 1999

Mae Nak Phra Kanong, 1959

Nak the animation, 2008

The tale of Mae Nak has been made into nearly 30 films, the earliest one in the 1930s and the most recent adaptation coming out tomorrow. The oldest film that still exists is the 1959 version _ the 16mm film survives in poor condition _ starring Preeya Rungruang as the female ghost; that film was a precursor of the comedy-horror hybrid we've seen a lot of in Thai cinema. Perhaps the best-known version is the 1999 one, called Nang Nak, starring Intira Charoenpura and directed by Nonzee Nimibutr. There are also Mae Nak 3D, Mae Nak as animation, Mae Nak as porn, Mae Nak as musical, Mae Nak as opera, Mae Nak as sonnet, and in the 1970s, a film about Mae Nak terrorising Tokyo and Mae Nak America, in which the spirit took the form of an American woman who falls in love with a Thai soldier.

The latest film version, Pee Mak Phra Khanong, shifts the perspective to the side of Nak's husband (see main story), and it's yet more evidence of our ongoing fascination _ and the marketing possibilities _ of this ancient tale and its many possible interpretations.

"I suspect that the Nak tale's ongoing popularity resides in its engaging with not only one but multiple themes with strong cultural resonance, which have been able to shift over time," says Assoc Prof Adam Knee of Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, who's done extensive research on Thai horror films. "Probably most prominent is the theme of the fearful _ and tenacious _ feminine, but equally important are notions of her as being willing to challenge dominant power structures, and of her as a paradigm of wifely and motherly devotion.

"One tendency in more recent versions of Mae Nak has been the effort to place Nak in more modernised and globalised contexts, presumably both for storytelling novelty and to ensure the tale's relevance," adds Assoc Prof Knee. "This goes back as far as The Pot, with its blonde American Nak figure. Even the 1999 version by Nonzee, though set in the past, registers a context of modernisation in its efforts to aim for international cinematic standards. But interestingly, as Nak is placed in more global contexts, she herself comes to function more and more clearly as a symbol of traditional local culture. This creates a bit of a paradox, in that Nak is understood at once to be a figure of horror and a point of local pride, that which distinguishes the Thai horror film in an age when Asian horror films abound.

"In fact, the cinematic iterations of the Mae Nak tale have often privileged the husband's point of view _ he's the one through whose eyes we come to apprehend Nak's monstrousness and the one who remains alive at the close of the narrative. So I'm curious to see in what way the new version might possibly be still more from the husband's perspective _ if in actuality it is."

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