Nang Nak—Ghost Wife: Desire, Embodiment, and Buddhist Melancholia in a Contemporary Thai Ghost Film

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Discourse, Volume 31, Number 3, Fall 2009, pp. 220-247 (Article)

Published by Wayne State University Press

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A poster for the 1999 film Nang Nak introduces the problem of the story in two lines of poetry: “Mae sin lom sin jai / rue ja sin alai sineha” (Although she was dead / her desire persisted)\(^1\) (figure 1). The film poster summarizes the predicament of the ghost, who aims to prolong her love life beyond her death. Throughout the film, Nak faces a problem of temporal incongruity when she attempts to reclaim her lover, a situation that is productive of great agony for her.\(^2\)

Nonzee Nimibutr’s Nang Nak reinterprets the story of a woman thought to have resided in the Phra Khanong district of Bangkok over one hundred years ago. According to the legend, Nak dies in childbirth while her lover, Mak, is away at war. When the unsuspecting Mak returns to Phra Khanong, Nak awaits him as a ghost, accompanied by her ghost infant. The temporal incongruities that result—she’s dead, he’s alive; she knows, he doesn’t; and both lovers want something that they can no longer have—usually produce comical effects in the story.\(^3\) Nonzee’s horror-ghost remake, however, brings an entirely novel perspective to the more than two dozen previous film versions of the story.\(^4\) Nonzee’s translation of the legend into a Buddhist parable excises many of the fearsome and sexual, as well as comedic, aspects of Nak’s haunting and instead turns on the grand emotions of love, loss, and Buddhist detachment.\(^5\) Nang Nak’s period setting in the nineteenth...
century, a feature that the director advertises as constituting the film’s historical accuracy, further works to present the legend with the pathos of nationalist historiography.6

This essay examines Nang Nak’s rendering of the temporal incongruities of haunting in relation to struggles over Thai sexual contemporaneity in the late 1990s and 2000s. Specifically, it concentrates on anachronisms that cultural and social policy makers aimed to install at the core of new bourgeois conceptions of Thai sexualities. In Nonzee Nimibutr’s Nang Nak, the revenant’s desirous gaze from the ghostly sphere onto the life that she could have had outlines a model of heterosexual femininity of the present. This essay argues that Nonzee’s novel, Buddhist framing of the legend is especially instructive for understanding how, since the late 1990s, state agencies and bourgeois publics have imagined Thai sexualities as something that should and can be moored—however minimally—to historical elements. In this context, bodies have come to bear some of the burden of representing a baseline cultural good onto which national economic and cultural hopes could be mapped.

Buddhism’s vital role in the production of national modernity in Thailand has been examined mainly in the arena of nation building and official politics.7 This essay, however, seeks to highlight the

Figure 1. Film poster from Nang Nak (Nonzee Nimibutr [Bangkok: Phraeo Entertain, 1999], 202–3). Courtesy of Nonzee Nimibutr.
centrality of Buddhist representation to conceptualizations of sexual subjectivity in contemporary Thai cinema. We can understand Nang Nak as a strong example of Buddhist-nationalist cultural recovery in the domain of sexuality. The film achieves this, as I will argue, by producing a historically inaccurate relation between the story’s setting in the nineteenth century and an ideal of femininity in the present. However, the remarkable effect of Nonzee’s translation of the legend into a Buddhist genre of stories—in which women have to embody the truths of impermanence and of the futility of desire—is not only that it legitimates a contemporary nationalist outlook. Rather, one of this essay’s main concerns is to examine how the film’s Buddhist framing elaborates the affective dimensions of desire in the story.

Most scholarly writing on Buddhism and sexuality focuses solely on the issue of toleration and its obverse, prohibition, and directs little attention to the relation of Buddhist stories, teachings, or images to sexuality as fantasy. With the argument that Buddhist elements directly inform notions of sexuality and desire, this essay in contrast extends Justin McDaniel’s claims about the counter-doctrinal qualities of Thai Buddhism into the sphere of sexuality. More than foreground its counterdoctrinality, however, my concern is to emphasize that Buddhism is not only brought to bear on sexuality in a regulatory manner. Rather, Nonzee’s adaptation brings into play a synthesis of ghostly return with Thai Buddhist motifs to elaborate the affective dimensions of sexual desire. Buddhism does not only permit or inhibit sexuality here but itself plays a part in the constitution of desire.

In addition to examining how the film makes Nak into a type, an icon of updated traditional femininity, this essay investigates the partial failure of typification when desire is rendered in a Buddhist idiom. Thus, while the ghostly fantasy becomes symbolic of collective, national life, the cracks in the fantasy also provide insight into the breakages of current dominant concepts of sexual cultural difference. This essay suggests that the vicissitudes of Nak’s haunting reveal the inconsistencies especially of new notions of exemplary femininity in Thailand. In this context, the analysis makes the temporal incongruity of desire that is highlighted in Buddhist stories available to a feminist perspective on the ghost’s longing.

**A Distressed Genre: Buddhism, History, and Embodiment in Thai Heritage Film**

Nonzee Nimibutr’s film is the first to present Nak’s story in a significantly nationalist context—which is in turn underwritten by
the Buddhist narrative of the adaptation. On first viewing, the film’s nationalism may not be self-evident. What *Nang Nak* highlights after all is face-to-face community—to all evidence, in a prenational setting. On the level of its story, *Nang Nak*’s nationalism becomes evident only through the dating of an eclipse and through the appearance of the abbot Somdej Phuthajan To. The framing by historically significant personae and events marks the communal or local occurrences in the story as national. According to Susan Stewart, this “nostalgia for the presence of the body and the face-to-face, a dream of unmediated communication”—and this articulation of the communal with the national—are marks of the “distressed genre.”10 In a prominent passage, Stewart describes the temporal disjunctures that the distressed genre relies on: “Thus distressed forms show us the gap between past and present as a structure of desire, a structure in which authority seeks legitimation by recontextualizing its object and thereby recontextualizing itself.”11 In the Thai context, *Nang Nak* was the signature film of a reviving and globally circulating national cinema that emerged in the period of political-cultural recontextualization after the Asian economic crisis in 1997. When May Adadol Ingawanij describes *Nang Nak* as a “heritage film,” she stresses that this genre’s distinguishing features include an emphasis on marketing, high production values, the presentation of Thainess as a visual attraction, the pastiche of historical personages and traumatic episodes in the biography of the Thai nation, and most significantly the wishful claim to quality as films of a sakon or “international/Western” calibre.12

As May Adadol further shows, the heritage genre is inextricably linked to bourgeois nationalist hopes for economic recovery and the international recognition of Thailand after 1997. Building on this argument, this essay focuses on concomitant notions of embodiment in Thai film and politics. It argues that *Nang Nak* combined the new sakon filmic idiom with a highly conservative form of cultural recovery that took recourse especially to bodies and sartorial detail. More specifically, the essay relates the film’s use of a particular Buddhist notion of female embodiment to the “distressing” of bodies and identities in recent state sexual politics.

The strands of translation at work in Nonzee’s adaptation of the legend of Nak thus take three forms: the director’s translation of the legend into a Buddhist parable; the rendering of Buddhist pedagogy within a new, post-1997 sakon cinematic idiom; and, finally, the framing of the popular legend within the parameters of the distressed genre’s forms of nostalgia. What allows Nonzee to present the legend as a distressed genre is his novel choice of
references. Rather than cite the nonbourgeois, filmic history of the legend, Nonzee draws on its textual versions as well as on histories of the fourth reign, early anthropology and photography, and European accounts of Siamese customs of the time.\textsuperscript{13} A significant part of Nonzee’s deployment of Buddhism and Thai history is concentrated in the person of Somdej To, a high-ranking, popular monk under Rama IV (1851–68). This particular reference enables the articulation of elite, royally sponsored Buddhism with vernacular, popular Buddhist strains. It lets Nak’s updated traditional femininity appear in a seemingly specific and historically authentic context in which Buddhism plays a nationally unifying role.\textsuperscript{14}

In the context of contemporary Buddhist-inflected efforts to reinvigorate Thainess, femininity bears some of the burden of organizing claims to coherent national identity. In contemporary cinema, I argue, the ghost, a distressed version of Thai femininity, emerges precisely at the moment when the heretofore dominant form of femininity—that of selectively westernized, globalized, and economically startlingly productive femininity—had partially “exhausted” its effectiveness.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{Nang Nak} fell into a period in which official politics systematically realigned the connections between economy and culture after the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Since the Ninth National Economic and Social Development Plan (2002–6), the strategy for reentry into economic stability has explicitly been tied to the revival of Thai cultural elements. Thai government and non-governmental agencies began to espouse the royally initiated “sufficiency policy” (nayobai khwam pho phieng) in parallel with liberal, world market-driven reforms. Sufficiency was to apply to sectors of the economy but came to designate also social and moral principles that were to buffer Thailand from further economic and social upheaval. According to its proponents, sufficiency is essentially motivated by Theravadin Buddhist principles of moderation and detachment. The late 1990s were thus a time in which rhetorics of paring down, of rationing, and of exhortations to return to quintessentially Thai ways of living had high currency. At the same time, emergent conservative discourses on sexuality paralleled the logics of sufficiency in the demands of moderation that they made of public femininity.

This essay understands the reconceptualization of sexuality as an integral part of the refurbished Thai nationalism of the past decade. Since the late 1990s, national cultural identity and citizenship have been closely articulated with normative prescriptions for sexuality in Thailand. In this context, homosexuality, transidentitarian positions, and the public performance of femininity fell
under the scrutiny of the state in unprecedented ways but also came to stand at the center of new discourses about sexual rights and democracy.

In the beginning of the 2000s, the Ministry of the Interior and the newly established Ministry of Culture initiated disciplinary campaigns designed to order the sexuality of broad sections of the population. The state measures of “social ordering” (kan jad rabiap sangkhom) and “cultural monitoring” (kan fao rawang thang wathanatham) became detrimental especially to women, gay men, and kathoey. These disciplinary campaigns did not base themselves on new legislation so much as develop a new language for what femininity in public was supposed to look like and especially for what it was not supposed to look like. Combining the juridical domain with new forms of public speech about sexuality, the new disciplinary campaigns thereby created a novel, enduring form of supposedly moderate yet in fact highly restrictive sexual regulation. In great measure, the efforts at sexual streamlining relied on anachronisms that were anchored in bodies and sartorial detail. Female bodies, especially, now figured as a baseline cultural good, a kind of heritage.

In the Thailand of the 1990s and 2000s, it thus became common for intimate bodily detail and sartorial practice to be linked to questions of national-cultural identity and rights. Instead of explicitly emphasizing marriage or reproduction or generating restrictive legislation on a large scale, the moral-disciplinary campaigns singularly concentrated on delimiting the propriety of gendered and sexual bodies in public. Existing legislation, such as zoning laws, was used to enforce these standards. Although it cruelly instructed some bodies—such as that of actress Chotiros Suriyawong, who appeared in a revealing dress at an awards ceremony and was subsequently punished by her university—in the vocabulary of new Thai virtuous femininity and heteronormativity, state sexual politics concentrated primarily on aiming to control publicly visual forms of sexuality and gender identity. Rather than relying on active repression, the Thai “sex wars” thus focused on forging new lexicons of femininity and culture and on inducing behavior within certain newly staked-out limits of Thai propriety.

**Body and Pleasure**

To an unprecedented extent, Nonzee Nimibutr’s adaptation of Nak’s story turns on a Buddhist soteriological theme. Nonzee tells the ghost legend as a story of spiritual realization and elevation, and in this narrative strain a Buddhist version of female embodiment
plays a central role. Like other contemporary ghost films, *Nang Nak* draws its references especially from two traditions of the (pleasurable) witnessing of female death in Thailand. Both in Theravadin Buddhist soteriology and *sayasat* (Thai occult, necromantic practices), female death and sexuality are closely connected. Particularly relevant to this essay is the central function of horrific images of dead female bodies in a Theravadin Buddhist pedagogy that intends therewith to exemplify the truth of impermanence and the futility of attachment.

Against this background, it is my concern to emphasize that one of the registers of pleasure in the film is instantiated by the malleability of Nak’s body. In Thai ghost films in general, female haunting appears as a significantly embodied condition: the ghost possesses a changeable, alternately beautiful and decaying body. Most frequently the ghost splits into a spectral body—a temporarily beautiful, resurrected body—and an actual body, that of her corpse. The spectacle of the ghost’s changing bodies as well as the final, physical obliteration of the ghost and her desire provide for much of the viewing pleasure also in *Nang Nak.* However, in Thai figurations of haunting, the domain of the female ghost is also that of transgressive sexuality. In this context, her changing forms of embodiment also stand for the variability and elusiveness of female pleasure and sexual appetite.

### The Politics of Ghostly Return

Interrogating notions of haunting’s potential for progressive historical and political transformation, this analysis focuses on an instance in which ghostly return is not primarily reparative. *Nang Nak* is not the only contemporary Thai film that features female haunting. Female death is a ubiquitous trope in the neofolklore of a reviving Thai cinema. The horror-ghost genre has made up a significant part of Thai cinema since 1997 and, as critics have noted, its specters are overwhelmingly female. This predominance of female ghosts in the genre metabolizes current crises around femininity or, as Adam Knee writes, “[T]he hidden pasts by which these texts are haunted are primarily those pertaining to women’s oppression.” But while the uncanny decidedly stands in for unresolved social and political crises in this domain, the manner in which female haunting is ultimately resolved in *Nang Nak* does not offer a feminist vision of social transformation.

Haunting is often described as the eruption of the past into the present in a manner that effects the reexamination of past injustices
and possibly leads to reparation. In this context, the ghost can be thought to represent a paradigmatic figure of minority subjectivity. Avery Gordon accords strong disruptive potential to such a figure:

Following the ghosts is sometimes about writing ghost stories, stories that not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a countermemory, for the future.24

In this conception, ghostly memory is charged with a quasi-redemptive mission and haunting bears the promise of historical revision. Gordon hopes that the ghost will provide unequivocal testimony for that which conventional justice has overlooked and for those whose stories usually remain untold.25

What, however, of a ghost that does not retrieve suppressed aspects of history? In contrast to Gordon’s ideal conceptualization of ghostly return, this essay examines haunting as a more variegated and compromised field of historical and political significations. In Nang Nak and a larger subset of Thai ghost films, the ghost’s testimony does not automatically furnish progressively revisionist historical accounts. Rather, in many films the nonsynchronicity produced by haunting becomes the very structure through which historical specificity is evacuated from the past. Haunting becomes purged of any counterhistorical content as the Thai past becomes merely a certain kind of effect. In this, ghostly return in Nang Nak is not primarily reparative; however, its narrative of temporal disjunction also comes to exemplify the contradictions in current state social projects that desire to moor bodies to recognizably Thai elements, yet have them remain superbly malleable in the context of economic flexibility and productivity.

What makes Nonzee’s tripartite mise-en-scène of the ghost legend so compelling is that, all along, it is both a narrative of parting and the story of an extended exorcism. As Buddhist pedagogy, it uses the story of the lovers’ extended leave-taking for instruction in the trailak (the “three characteristics”—the pervasive, general conditions of all existence, constituted by anijjang (impermanence), thukkhang (suffering), and annatta (nonidentity) (figure 2). For all but a few minutes of the film, Nak is already dead and the separation between the lovers is final. However, it is in this space that the intensity of her desire unfolds. As much as she exhibits devotion to Mak, the ghost directs violence against anyone who tries to obstruct her idyll. The action of the film is propelled by the tension between Nak’s desire and the villagers’ attempts to exorcize the ghost, as well as by the pressures of the ghostly illusion that Nak has to uphold while the realization that his wife is dead slowly dawns upon Mak.
First, Synchrony

Nak and Mak’s initial separation establishes the Buddhist-inflected gender politics of the film. Directly after the couple take leave of each other, the narrative proceeds to juxtapose their respective ordeals, as May Adadol points out. The synchrony of the couple’s suffering delineates a notion of quintessentially Thai sexual difference rooted in an agricultural and faith-oriented past. Consistently framed by a Theravadin Buddhist narrative and sayasat occult portents, Nak and Mak’s separation begins with a juxtaposition of the hard labor that each has to perform. Mak is called away to corvée military duty, while the pregnant Nak tends to the fields at home. The division of labor and synchronous suffering of the couple marks the simultaneity of the time of the nation, but in addition the sequence begins to play out notions of sexual difference in Theravadin Buddhist soteriology.

In a charged scene symbolic of fertility, Nak ploughs a rice field in the rain. When the pregnant Nak loses her grip on the plough and doubles over in the muddy field, this is the first indication that her fertility, and by implication her ideal femininity, is compromised (figure 3). Both the labor of pregnancy and the (also gendered) agricultural labor that Nak is charged with are disrupted at this point. Meanwhile, Mak experiences war trauma; he lies wounded on the battlefield, witnesses the death of his close friend Plik, and is finally taken to recuperate at a temple. At this point begins the most intense juxtaposition of their suffering. As
May Adadol writes, “[Parallel editing] emphasises the bond of love between them, especially the cross-cutting sequence where both simultaneously fight for their lives: the injured Mak being treated in a Bangkok temple; while Nak is in painful labour at home in Phra Khanong.” While the lovers’ gendered, synchronous suffering highlights their devotion, it also indicates their divergent yet complementary functions in the social and religious orders.

The sequence ends with Nak’s death in childbirth, and a later, repeat account of Nak’s demise is juxtaposed with a sex scene after Mak has returned to Phra Khanong. For Nak, the sex is interspersed with memories of the pain of childbirth, and sexual climax is juxtaposed with a flashback to Nak’s loss of her hold on life.

As May Adadol writes, the scene thereby makes “the disquieting invocation of the conservative cliché that sex is a danger that a good, loving wife must risk for the satisfaction of her husband.” The model of femininity and gender complementarity that emerges thus seems a conventional one. From the beginning of the lovers’ separation, the film aestheticizes Nak’s updated, traditionally inflected femininity in a way that resonates with current searches for gendered, culturally specific precedent in state sexual politics.

At the same time, the sequence of the couple’s initial simultaneous suffering begins to indicate the implications that sexual difference bears for Theravadin Buddhist soteriology. While there is prayer for the man, as the powerful abbot Somdej To tends to the wounded Mak in the temple, in Phra Khanong only an incompetent or malevolent midwife attends to the woman, invoking
occult beliefs as she supervises Nak’s labor and perhaps causes her death. This narrative of socioreligiously salient sexual difference will reach its conclusion in the soteriological finale of the film. It is in the charged domain between gendered (national) simultaneity and soteriologically relevant noncontemporaneity, however, that the couple’s exemplary conjugality attains the greatest symbolic density.

Temporal Incongruity and Sexual Difference

When Nak’s death makes the couple noncontemporaneous with each other, the ideal of sexual difference is heightened further. When Mak first returns to Phra Khanong, he does not know that Nak has died and that the woman and baby that he comes home to are ghosts. It is at this point especially that the ghost’s determination to uphold conjugal synchrony increases and comes to stand for a national, collective ideal. Now begins the long middle sequence of Nak’s hard work to uphold the ghostly illusion. While hinting at its imminent unraveling, the urgency and temporariness of the fantasy also reinforce the dream of cultural-sexual difference that the film began to set out.

In this sequence, Nak’s heartrending efforts to patch up rifts in the ghostly fantasy, her elimination of opponents, and her simultaneous caring for the husband and management of her own sorrow stand in for her commitment to new-traditional Thai femininity, as well as for the difficulties of inhabiting it. Always under fire, the urgency of Nak’s desires and the intensity of her sorrow in this section also engage our sympathy most strongly (figure 4).

In parallel, in the Theravadin Buddhist perspective of the film, the ghost’s duplicity also represents feminine duplicity. As Liz Wilson explains, Theravada Buddhism depicts samsāra itself—the being in and attachment to the world—as feminine and duplicitous.31 Ghostly femininity thus doubly points toward the fact that the world is always bifurcated. In this sense, the cracks in the ghostly fantasy always point also toward soteriological resolution. Read as Buddhist pedagogy, Nonzee’s film sets the ghost up to lead Mak and the viewer out of the māyā, the illusory nature, of the world.

The cracks in the ghostly world and the little private jokes that Nak makes moreover interpellate the viewer as someone who shares knowledge not only with Nak but with a cultural community that stretches from Southeast Asia to South Asia. The pleasure of recognition finds its culmination in the famous scene of the elongated
hand, when Nak stretches to pick up a lemon that has dropped to
the story below her kitchen.\footnote{32}

On the other hand, temporal and spatial stretching is also
productive of pain for the ghost. The radically separate tempo-
ralties and spheres of knowledge that the two lovers inhabit are
mainly responsible for Nak’s suffering. This noncontemporaneity
provides the background for Nak’s mourning of her own loss of
life and love. The ghost’s mourning in turn furnishes the film’s
most compelling mode of remembrance: the fusion of desire
and pain in Nak’s memory establishes a nostalgic perspective on
cultural-sexual difference. The creation of this particular formula
of cultural memory over Nak’s dead body begins with Nak’s own
consciousness of her loss.

In the period between her death and her exorcism, Nak has
traumatic memories of her first death while experiencing the slow
process of her second death open-eyed. In this part of the film,
the ghost’s persona is constituted largely through the constraints
and the violence inflicted on her and through a certain concept
of female servitude to which she adheres. Significantly, Nak’s final
words to Mak are that she will not be able to “pronibat”—“take
care of or tend to him”—in this life anymore.\footnote{33} It is this concept
of pronibat in particular that marks Nak’s as a femininity that is
anchored in tradition. That Nak mourns femininity at the fraught
moment of national(ist) history in which the film is set establishes
a historically inaccurate link of the femininity that she embodies
to the nation.\footnote{34}
Buddhist Melancholia

In *Nang Nak*, it is a Buddhist theme that “show[s] us the gap between past and present as a structure of desire.” The Theravadin Buddhist convention of figuring the female as horrific is particularly relevant to the history and causality of female haunting in contemporary Thai ghost films. Throughout *Nang Nak*, we see Nak change back and forth between her beautiful spectral body and that of a decaying corpse. This kind of transformation figures prominently in Theravadin Buddhist pedagogy, where the dead and decaying female body at once represents the (temporary) object of desire and the object that is supposed to end all desire.

In Buddhism, desire is central to an epistemology of suffering and to a soteriology rooted in nonattachment. The *patijjasamutpat* (Sanskrit, *pratītyasamutpāda*; Pali, *paṭiccasamuppāda*), the theory of dependent origination, provides an explanation of the causal chain that produces suffering as the basis of existence in the world. In this theory, it is desire (Thai, Pali *tanha*; Sanskrit *tṛṣṇā*, “craving”) that gives rise to attachment. According to the Theravadins, it is at this point, between desire and attachment, that the chain must be broken.

One of the practices used by monks, as well as by a small number of lay practitioners, to break the causality of desire-attachment-suffering, is a deliberate and protracted visual encounter with death—*asupha kamathan* (Pali, *asubha kammaṭṭhāna*), the meditation on corpses or images of corpses. This practice is supposed to let the beholder of death realize the illusoriness of desire and the futility of attachment. Both in practice and text, Buddhist pedagogy repeatedly turns to the female body in this matter.

In Theravada Buddhism, the moment of witnessing loss is ideally the moment of realizing the illusoriness of desire. The visual is primary in this process, and horrific figurations of the dead female body are prominent catalysts in it. Examining the instructional use of horrific images of women’s bodies in Buddhist hagiographic literature, Liz Wilson notes that

> [c]onfrontation with death and decay looms large in the history of Buddhism. . . . One of the lessons that the Buddha is said to have taught again and again in his capacity as the head of the monastic order (*sangha*) is the utter perversity of pursuing sexual gratification when the human body, in its natural state, emits substances as foul as those emitted by putrefying corpses.  

As Wilson shows, however, the moment of “perverse” attachment to the dead woman is also scrutinized for its erotic potential in many Buddhist texts before they end with a spiritual resolution:
The charming but ultimately cadaverous female forms that serve as object lessons for lovelorn monks beckon one moment and repulse the next. As in aversion therapy, the lust of the male spectator is initially engaged but ultimately subverted as an alluring spectacle is transformed into a repulsive one.\[^{57}\]

The sight of the dead woman is thus supposed to free the viewer from worldly illusion and affectively instill the lesson of impermanence in him.

The strength of Wilson’s analysis lies in its critique of the extent to which Buddhist pedagogy depends conceptually on infractions of the integrity of female bodies.\[^{38}\] As Wilson concludes, “An integral female body is a threat to the integrity of the sangha.”\[^{39}\] In what follows, I also want to draw attention, however, to the conceptual possibilities, especially feminist, afforded by the deferral of detachment that occurs in the contemplation of the female dead.

What Liz Wilson has shown for Buddhist hagiographies also holds true for contemporary Buddhist teaching in Thailand: here contemporary Buddhist didactics likewise rely on images of women as the horrific embodiment of impermanence and illusion.\[^{40}\] However, the visual encounter with death that is so important in Buddhist disciplines of the self has also been exceptionably productive of other fantasies organized around the dead female body. Although its institutional home is the temple, the motif of the female horrific spills over into popular visual culture.

Instead of only exemplifying the Buddhist truth that all existence is suffering, the story lines of contemporary Thai ghost films write complex plots for female death, desire, and the nature of collective sentiment in this realm. In ghost films, Buddhist closure is at least temporarily refused, and the moment of beholding death is drawn out and exploited for its erotic potential. The deferral of detachment provides a space of possibility, and the belatedness of desire in the realm of literalized loss creates a domain for fantasy. The witnessing of death thus precisely does not lead to detachment. The cognitive and affective experience of anijjang (impermanence) does not lead to leaving off attachment or inoculate against further thuk (suffering). Rather, it sets in motion a persistent attachment to loss or, at most, the redirection of attachment. Thus is formed a whole mode of pleasurable witnessing around Buddhist melancholia, at times with the alibi of following a religious imperative or practice.

A particular form of Buddhist melancholic remembering becomes evident in the embodied narrative of loss, in which Nak watches her own body gradually fall apart and her hold on the world loosen. On the one hand, this feature of the film almost literalizes Buddhist orthodox expectations of how detaching is
supposed to occur. Women, especially, are supposed to realize
the truth of impermanence through contemplation of the repul-
siveness of their own bodies. In a key scene set late at night while
Mak is asleep, Nak combs her hair with the comb that was ritually
broken after her death. As a whole lock of her hair falls out, Nak
mourns for the dissolution of her body and the inevitable end of
her fantasy. Instead of beginning to detach from this fantasy, how-
ever, she persists in her desires.

That Nak’s body becomes the site and medium of gender nos-
talgia is most evident in three scenes of flashback memory. These
flashbacks culminate in the scene of the ghost’s final Buddhist
exorcism through the powerful abbot Somdej To.

Detachment

The long sequence in which Nak finally acquiesces to leaving life
can be read to provide closure on the incongruities of desire in the
film. It is here that the Buddhist narrative most strongly underwrites
the film’s nationalist theme. For the final successful exorcism, the
community is arranged around Nak’s grave, witnessing the specta-
cle in which Nak’s haunting is disciplined. It is over this event that
the villagers reconstitute themselves as a community, with the Bud-
dhist patriarchal authority at their head (figure 5). The scene at
the graveside invokes all the truisms of Thainess that are currently
gaining ascendancy over pluralist and egalitarian values. Around
the grave, an emotional economy of sufficiency—of communal
harmony, the virtues of knowing your place, of graciously giving in,
and of nonattachment—is restored as communal-national charac-
teristic under the auspices of the abbot. As Michael Connors writes,
in official nationalism “the Thai nation is ‘imagined as a happy and
calm village.’ An immemorial and morally bounded community of
intimate ties.”41 The exorcism scene that ends Nang Nak replicates
such a vision of national communality over the invasive intimacy
with Nak’s corpse. In Susan Stewart’s terms, this scene exemplifies
the distressed genre’s “nostalgia for context, for the heroic past,
for moral order, for childhood and the collective experiences of
preindustrial life.”42

In this scene, Nak is positioned as the object of loss and the
object that generates nostalgic desire. The power of this object,
according to Stewart, “arises not from intrinsicality, but from the
narrative of the subject [it] engender[s].”43 The power of Nak’s
destroyed body and of the deployment of femininity as loss in the
film is then that it positions the viewer as someone deeply and
meaningfully connected to the femininity that Nak represents and to its import for perduring cultural community. As the viewer watches Nak and Mak detach, he or she is further supposed to attach to the truth of Buddhist principles and to identify with the community that functions so beautifully under these principles.

For Mak, the instruction in the *traillak* (impermanence, suffering, nonidentity) and in the necessity of detachment seems almost complete at this point. In the last scene of the film, Mak stands in yellow robes and with shaved head, attending to Nak’s corpse burning on a funeral pyre of stacked wood. As we view the piece that was taken from Nak’s forehead, the final voice-over informs us that it was passed down from monk to monk as an amulet, but finally lost, and “only the legend of Nak’s love and devotion to her husband is left, an eternal legend that is recounted until today.” In the final scenes of the film, the gendered soteriological division of labor thus reaches its end point. Mak takes the robes in order to transfer merit to Nak, but it is also over Nak’s dead body that Mak gains entry into one of the highest states of personhood that Thai society holds available, that of the monastic male. The last series of shots highlights the serene beauty of the monastic male, acquired by Mak, in proper Buddhist manner, through the acceptance of his loss and the viewing of the cremation and final destruction of Nak’s corpse (figure 6).

In this resolution, *Nang Nak’s sayasat*, or “death magic”—its manipulation of a female corpse for a future end—lies in how it makes female haunting serviceable to a vision of contemporary gender ideals. Most important in this respect is the film’s use of
Nak’s painful embodied remembering. Nak’s mournful remembrance of love can be thought to situate conjugal heterosexuality at the heart of a national vision. Through manipulations of Nak’s dead body, *Nang Nak* further creates the vision of Thailand as a site of simple splendor and Buddhist-infused intersubjective and communal affective sufficiency. This lost world is cruelly accessed via the psychic and bodily trauma of the female ghost. The villagers’ witnessing of the ghost’s acquiescence to the ideal of sacrificial femininity seals the vision of the organization of Thainess around sufficiency and Buddhist ethics.

On the one hand, the theme of Nak’s embodied remembering culminates in the idea that the piece that was chiseled from Nak’s forehead during the exorcism has become an amulet that symbolizes, and literally embodies, Nak’s love and loyalty. The final exorcism would thus have domesticated excessive female desire and made it exemplary for the present. In the realm of ghostly fantasy, *Nang Nak* thereby elaborates how cultural recuperation takes recourse to an invasive intimacy with female bodies in order to fashion futurity. On the other hand, the fact that the forehead amulet was lost can be read to give the trajectory of Nak’s desire yet another twist.

**Buddhism and the Failure of Typification**

What perspective would a consideration of this ending from the point of view of the story’s female protagonist provide? If we do
not stop at the categorical resolution that Buddhism provides—the transcension of desire—then Buddhist thinking usefully parses the anachronisms of bodies and desires for us. Nonzee’s narrative of love, loss, and detachment can be understood not to end only with the social and soteriological foreclosure of Nak’s desire. Despite the closure that its ending suggests, *Nang Nak* leaves the viewer with a profound impression of the details and persistence of Nak’s desire. In this, the film is reminiscent of the many Buddhist stories in which women furnish what Liz Wilson calls “object lessons” that convey the truth of impermanence and the futility of attachment. Although this is the pedagogical intent of such stories, the viewer or reader will, however, hardly (be able to) make the *dhammic* turn that most of its characters take at the end.

To illustrate this, I turn to the hagiographic account of Upagupta and the courtesan Vāsavadattā, which cruelly literalizes Buddhist dynamics of desiring, witnessing, and detaching.44 At the same time, the story furnishes an alternative account of sexual anachronism, or of how pastness adheres to sexual desire.45 The beautiful Vāsavadattā desires the perfume merchant Upagupta and repeatedly sends her servant to him to request a meeting. Upagupta’s enigmatic response is that he will see her when the time comes. Cut to the scene when Vāsavadattā, who has been brutalized for reasons unrelated to Upagupta, is sitting mutilated and waiting to die in the cremation ground. It is at this point that Upagupta decides that he will see her. Upagupta’s soteriologically motivated pleasure lies in witnessing the fragmented, cut-up, and mutilated body that now properly literalizes the inherent repulsiveness of the female body and the futility of attachment.46 After seeing Vāsavadattā in this state, Upagupta attains *nonreturning* (the state of an *anāgāmin*), while Vāsavadattā dies and also attains a soteriologically more advantageous position (that of a *srotāpanna*, one who has entered the stream), though not equal to that of Upagupta’s.

Before that occurs, much else happens, however. In addition to literalizing brutal social and soteriological inequalities, both *Nang Nak* and the story of Vāsavadattā fundamentally reflect on the anachronism of desire as such: what the actors in these two stories want is either already in the past, or not yet what they want it to be, or otherwise incongruous with them, in time or space. In the film and the hagiographic text, the respective things that Nak and Vāsavadattā want are already in the past. Nak wants back her life as it was, and Vāsavadattā wants Upagupta as he might have been before he became a quasi ascetic. Upagupta in turn wants Vāsavadattā as she will be, but, at the time, isn’t yet. Only Upagupta’s desire will ultimately be felicitous, because Vāsavadattā’s body happens to change into a state that represents Upagupta’s ideal
object of dhammic desire. Before he goes to see her, Upagupta expresses the past incongruity of his desire, as well as its ultimate felicity, as follows:

> When her body was covered with excellent clothes and bedecked with variegated ornaments, then it was better for those who have turned away from rebirth, and are set on liberation, not to see her.

> But now that she has lost her pride, her passion and her joy, and has been wounded with sharp swords—this is the time to see her form in its true intrinsic nature.\(^47\)

As for Mak, the trajectory of his desire is the opposite of Upagupta's; for him, desire seems temporarily congruent—he wants Nak as he thinks she is, but does not know that she is not anymore. When, before his eyes, Nak changes into an object that is not yet the object of his desire, however, Mak reluctantly adapts his desire to it—over the witnessing of her cremation, he ultimately transforms his desire for Nak into a desire for the dhamma.

The women's desires have been the least felicitous in this scenario. Yet it is their desires that furnish central themes especially of the film, but also of the hagiography. In the text, the temporal incongruities of the plot let Vāsavatā consistently appear as a subject of desire. Even in the cremation ground, as she hears that Upagupta is approaching, she attempts to influence the scenario: “She told her servant girl to gather the hands, feet, nose, and ears that had been cut from her body, and to cover them with a piece of cloth.”\(^48\) Whether she does so consciously or not, Vāsavatā aims to maintain a remnant of the image of her old body and thereby refuses entirely to embody Upagupta’s ideal object of desire. What is more, when she addresses Upagupta, it is in the register of complaint. In the course of this complaint, it becomes clear that even at this point she has not entirely given up on her desire:

> Seeing him standing there, Vāsavatā said: “My lord, when my body was uninjured and well-disposed for sensual pleasure, I sent a servant girl to you again and again, but you only said: ‘Sister, it is not yet time for you to see me.’ Now my hands and feet and ears and nose have been cut off, and I sit in the mire of my own blood. Why have you come now?” And she added:

> When this body of mine was fit to be seen, soft like the womb of a lotus, and bedecked with costly garments and jewels,
then I, the unfortunate one, did not meet you.  
Why have you come here to see me now  
that my body is unfit to be looked at,  
plastered with mud and blood, causing fear,  
having lost its wonder, joy, pleasure, and play?  

Distressing as Vāsavadattā’s discourse on the incongruity of desires and bodies may be, it also clearly articulates her desire and the pleasure that she took in her body in its former state. Before Upagupta arrived, in the hope that even at this late point he might actually want Vāsavadattā herself, as opposed to just desiring her mutilated body as a pedagogical tool, the servant girl had moreover said to Vāsavadattā, “My lady, that Upagupta to whom you sent me again and again has arrived; surely, he must have come impelled by passion and desire.” As an extension of Vāsavadattā’s hope for the gratification of her desire, the servant girl’s utterance seems almost deliberate in its misrecognition of Upagupta’s desire. Even at this belated point, the women’s narrative hints at the fact that Vāsavadattā’s was a desire for pleasurable equity. The qualities that had initially inspired Vāsavadattā’s attraction were Upagupta’s beauty and honesty. Vāsavadattā’s fantasy is one of reciprocating these qualities with her own beauty and generosity: “She wished to pursue pleasure with him,” the text says, and even waived her fee of five hundred pieces of gold.

Like Vāsavadattā, Nak holds onto her fantasy until the very last moment. Just as Vāsavadattā’s despair eloquently conveys also her notion of pleasure, the most significant affective quality of Nang Nak—that of Nak’s melancholy—also impresses on the viewer the strength and qualities of Nak’s desire. While Vāsavadattā in the end fully accepts the teachings of the dhamma and relinquishes her desires entirely, the nature and trajectory of Nak’s desire are slightly different.

In the sequence at the grave, Nak can be understood as slowly relinquishing her claims on bourgeois generationality (figure 7). She had expressed her determined adherence to this ideal earlier when she threatened the villagers, “If you try to separate man, wife, and child, I will kill you.” But this is also the time when Nak formulates her wish for family and conjugality most precisely. During the Pali recitation that is intended to vanquish the ghost’s desire, Nak, sitting in her grave, reviews in detail her love life as it was and as it could have been. Nak’s first flashback memory is of herself and Mak sitting on a wide tree branch as water drops off a leaf. The second flashback to a moment of play with Mak in the canal is followed by the view of a field of young rice. Tall trees follow the memory of Mak putting his ear to Nak’s pregnant belly. The dream
of fertility, growth, and lives unfolding across generations according to natural rhythms comes to an end only when she reaches the final memory of her death in childbirth. A dead leaf falls at the abbot’s feet, and he brings his recitation to an end.

In what follows, Mak is called to the graveside, and the lovers have a last conversation about karma and conjugality. Although both invoke Buddhist concepts that determine life trajectories, it is only to underwrite their wish for eventual reunion. “Let’s be born as man and wife again in a next life,” Mak finishes. As Mak leaves the grave, the minutely rendered final slipping of Nak’s hand from Mak’s literalizes Nak’s insistence on her desire until the last moment.

In Buddhist stories such as these, the presentation and witnessing of female demise thus also furnish the occasion on which women’s desires—for something other than death and spiritual advancement and for a variety of sexual and social pleasures—are most clearly articulated. Read against the grain, Buddhist melancholy further highlights women’s protest against the ways in which trajectories of desire have been scripted for them. What ultimately resonates long beyond the supposed end of desire in these two stories are the detailed accounts of what Nak and Vāsavadattā “would have wanted.”

The Story of Two Ghosts

I have described how Nang Nak can be read to make the legend of Nak available to orthodox Buddhist and nationalist sentiment.
Yet the trajectory of Nak’s ghostly return provides insight throughout into the breakages of concepts of corporeality and subjectivity that are by force moored to “tradition.” Especially the way in which the film fuses personal memory with national memory relies on a notion of privacy that is precisely ahistorical and thereby complicates the notion of Nak and Mak’s exemplary heterosexuality.

If Buddhist-informed anachronisms are at the basis of sexual difference in this film, there are moreover ways in which the story makes Mak and Nak semicontemporaneous again. Mak’s status of being alive has been contingent since he and Nak struggled for their lives simultaneously. After his postwar delirium, Mak frequently appears ghostlike, himself barely hanging on in the realm of the living. Both his war trauma and Nak’s passing into another realm have drained him of some life, as well.

As much as it is invoked in the early scenes, iconic cultural-sexual difference is already severely compromised from the moment when Mak returns to Phra Khanong. As they “resume their lives together,” the lovers exhibit also a companionate ghostly sameness. May Adadol Ingawanij calls Mak’s masculinity unusually “credulous” and describes how this type of masculinity was claimed as essentially Thai in the context of the film’s reception. However, Mak’s masculinity is not only defined by credulity, but is also as exhausted as Nak’s femininity is dissimulated. With both gender identities somehow bifurcated, theirs thus becomes a kind of ghostly male-female companionship marked by its ultimate untenability.

Though described as heteronationalist, Mak and Nak’s relationship is severely antagonistic at least to the immediate community. The hostility of such a conjugal unit to community would then also extend to the implied nation behind it. The idyll that unfolds for a short embattled moment in the secluded forest location takes place in almost total isolation. The couple’s domicile, a modest and tranquil traditional Thai wooden house, is located in jungle surroundings that completely cut the pair off from the rest of the community—something that would have been a virtual impossibility in the late-nineteenth-century Siamese life that Nonzee purports to re-create. At such a time, a Siamese household would have been distinguished precisely by the lack of such forms of privacy.

What further remains unclear in Nonzee’s epic is how the flow of goods and services works. How does Nak shop? Where does their food come from? Where are their relatives? When the first voiceover of the film informed us that Nak’s soul lingered, waiting to resume life with her husband, the narrator used the term kin yu duai kan—to cohabit or, literally, “to eat and live together.” This
is exactly what the two lovers will never do again, however, as they now inhabit different existential realms. In fact, when Mak returns to Phra Khanong, their short time together is riven with logistical problems for the ghost. For one, it seems as though they never eat together again (at least Nak doesn’t eat) and thus never fully cohabit again in the complete sense of the concept.33

Inasmuch as Nang Nak represents an ideal of heterosexual complementary difference for the present, it does not provide a model of how this ideal would be situated in a system of economic exchange—a concern that is pressing for imaginations of sexuality in cultural-nationalist recoveries of viable Thai social models. Although Mak takes part in communal harvesting once, on the whole the conjugal unit seems overly “sufficient,” also in present-day terms.

Even in the context of Buddhist soteriology, sexual difference does not maintain its coherence entirely when both Nak and Mak pass into states of nonworldliness. Whereas Nak may have given up her life so that Mak may live, he in the end abandons worldly life after her exorcism. The idea that haunting hyperbolizes sexual difference and that ghostly return is nationalist can thus not be upheld so seamlessly. In this respect, the temporal disjunctions that Nak’s insistence on prolonging her love life until after her death brings into play shed light also on the fissures of new-traditional sexual difference. Nak’s haunting thus also reveals the instability of the sexual forms that present-day culture monitors and policy makers are striving so strenuously to institute at the heart of new understandings of Thainess and Thai competitiveness in the world.

Ultimately, we can read the nonsustainability of the ghostly fantasy also to mark the untenability of current official notions of sexual difference in Thailand. In the realm of haunting, Nang Nak exemplifies both in its aesthetics and its content the ironies of demands for bodies and identities that are Thai and traditional in character but transnational in their implications for the national economic and cultural future. Nang Nak thus shows—in at times gruesome detail—the impossible relays between modernity and historical mooring demanded especially of women and the insupportable demands for a transparent heteronormativity in contemporary Thailand.

Notes

I thank especially Lauren Berlant and Danilyn Rutherford for meticulous feedback on earlier versions of this essay. Many thanks also to Bliss Lim for her editorial input.
1 Nonzee Nimibutr, *Nang Nak* (Bangkok: Phraeo Entertain, 1999), 202–3. The poem is in *klon plao*, a Thai version of blank verse, but nevertheless makes use of the metrics of two traditional poetic forms: *klon* and *klong*.


3 In older filmic versions, it is frequently the very fact of the ghost’s relentless devotion and the persistence with which she pursues her desire that is rendered as comical.

4 For a history of written accounts and stage and film adaptations of the legend since 1899, see Anake Nawigamune, *Poed Tamnan: Mae Nak Phra Khanong—Mae Nai: Classical Ghost of Siam* (Bangkok: Nora, 2000).


5 May Adadol Ingawanij writes, “[J]ealousy is a key compositional motivation of many of the previous film versions of the legend.” And, “In the 1959 version, as with many others, the narrative structure incorporates many comical set pieces” (“Nang Nak: Thai Bourgeois Heritage Cinema,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 [2007]: 180–93, quotations on 186).

6 Personal interview with Nonzee Nimibutr, September 12, 2005. In her article “Nang Nak” May Adadol centers some of her argument on this assertion of the director’s.


Andy Rotman’s work, in contrast, draws sexual and Buddhist affect into relation when it brings the notion of sexual arousal through visual affection to bear on the mechanics of the generation of *prasāda*, a kind of faith (“The Erotics of Practice: Objects and Agency in Buddhist Avadāna Literature,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 3 [2003]: 555–78).
Justin McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magic Monk: Text, Ritual, Film, and, Art in Thai Buddhism* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming). In this history of the abbot Somdej To, McDaniel shows, for instance, that Buddhist practice in Thailand does not necessarily intend detachment but is in many instances straightforwardly directed toward attachment.


Ibid., 74.


Nonzee, *Nang Nak*.

For a history of Somdej To’s nationalist significance, see McDaniel, *Lovelorn Ghost*.

Tani Barlow, in *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Next Wave: New Directions in Women’s Studies series [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004]), describes the process by which something becomes catachrestic or by which “norms or categories are formed and stabilized” (15) and supersede others, as follows:

Such moments of consolidation come with the naturalization of a new logic. These can be effected when another truthful knowledge is secured or a new lexicon or dictionary holds out, again, the promise of translatability; it comes with the satisfaction of knowing that a question posed at the horizon of history has finally been exhausted. Once stability and clarity are achieved, the game is over. (9)

Kathoey can roughly be translated as “transgender” and nowadays refers almost exclusively to male-to-female transgender positions.

These new standards for Thai sexualities became clear especially in public relations materials published by the Ministry of the Interior. See, for example, Pracha Malinond, *Jad Rabiap Sangkhom 2* [Social ordering 2], ed. Acharaphan Jarasawat (Bangkok: Ministry of the Interior, 2003).

In 2003, for instance, the Minister of Culture, Uraiwan Thienthong, made public her concern that Thai women would not be dressed properly during the water fights that traditionally take place in Bangkok during the Thai New Year. She warned that drenched skimpy clothes would lead to sexual harassment and attempted to ban tank tops and shorts, suggesting traditional Thai dress instead. The minister’s literal interpretation of newly traditional Thai femininity was not enforced and sparked much ridicule but also serious debate. See “Sexy Clothes Banned for Songkran: Thai Culture Ministry. Double Moral Songkran This Year?” *Nation*, 29 March 2003; and “Breast Cloths an Even Bigger Worry,” *Nation*, 11 April 2003.

The sartorial detail of films like *Nang Nak* and, shortly thereafter, *Suriyothai* (2003), has found great acclaim especially with the middle class. In his book about the making of *Nang Nak*, director Nonzee Nimibutr dedicates roughly twenty pages to the description of costume and to his understanding of dress and comportment in late-nineteenth-century Siam (*Nang Nak*, 45–55, 93–104). In the film, the ghost’s sartorial modernity, her recovery of Siamese fashion and styles of embodiment, signals to the viewer that nothing has in fact been lost.

For weeks, the press discussed topics such as Thai teenagers’ pubic hair styling, which the Minister of the Interior’s teams had observed during drug testing
in bar raids. See “Ji Fong Ran Tat Phom Lang Chi Anajan Lamood Phet Dek Sao” [Pubic hair styling salons accused of obscenity, sexual harassment of girls], Khao Sod, 2 June 2003.

20 I use soteriological to mean a Theravadin Buddhist conceptualization of salvation that relies on the contemplation of the repulsiveness of the female body. This course of action leads to the realization of the futility of attachment and thereby toward salvation or spiritual elevation.

21 Another good example is Pop Whid Sayong, in which the ghost’s body changes back and forth between that of an attractive liver-consuming teenager and the body or corpse of an old female liver-consuming ghost (Haeman Chatemee, dir., Pop Whid Sayong [Body jumper], Bangkok: Sahamongkol, 2001).

22 Many female ghosts are thought to attack men by sexually exhausting them to death or contaminating their bodies (see Mary Beth Mills, “Attack of the Widow Ghosts: Gender, Death, and Modernity in Northeast Thailand,” in Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia, ed. Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 244–73). This motif plays a role in the contemporary films Lhon (2003) and Bangkok Haunted (2001).


27 As Benedict Anderson writes in Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 1983),

What has come to take the place of the mediaeval conception of simultaneity-long-time is, to borrow again from Benjamin, an idea of “homogeneous, empty time,” in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar. (24)

28 May Adadol, “Nang Nak,” 184. May Adadol analyzes the trajectory and difference in outcome of Nak and Mak’s struggles and treatment, but does not examine their soteriological implications.

29 May Adadol writes, “[T]he editing makes parallel cuts between the sex act and gruesome shots of Nak dying as she gives birth, conveying her subjective point-of-view in this unnerving flashback, the ghost’s painful memory” (ibid., 187).

30 Ibid.


32 Somtow Sucharitkul’s opera Mae Naak (Bangkok Opera, 2003) renders the spectacular malleability of Nak’s body in a particularly pleasurable way when it lets Nak’s hand stretch once around the whole stage.
How a woman is supposed to tend to her husband is codified in literary texts such as nineteenth-century poet Sunthorn Phu’s Saphasit Son Ying. See Plueang Na Nakhorn, Prawat Wanakhadi Thai [History of Thai literature] (Bangkok: Thai Wathanaphanit, 1998), 315.

The story begins on the day of the famous total eclipse of the sun at Wako, on 18 August, 2411 BE (1868 CE), marking the occurrences in the film as events of historical import. For this day King Rama IV (Mongkut), inscribed in nationalist historiography as Siam’s first great modernizer, had correctly predicted a total eclipse of the sun by means of Western astronomical calculations and set his scientific mastery in scene in grand style for both Siamese and foreign observers. Thongchai Winichakul reads this public spectacle of Siamese rationalist triumph as marking Siam’s shift from traditional concepts of space to Western concepts of bounded territory. This new understanding of space was subsequently to constitute the basis for the formation of a racialized elite Thai nationalism. Beginning at this turning point of Thai modernity, the film once again reconfigures the relation between Thai pasts and presents (Thongchai Winichakul, Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation [Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994]).

Stewart, Crimes of Writing, 74.

Wilson, Charming Cadavers, 2–3.

Ibid., 86.

Steven Collins’s analysis of how the monastic practitioner’s psychological deconstruction of the body is integrated with the social construction of this same body omits feminist considerations but opens up a valuable perspective on how text, body, and psyche combine in the context of Buddhist efforts at sexual discipline. In particular, Collins stresses the essential role that the mind, or what we can think of as fantasy, plays in monastic practices (“The Body in Theravāda Buddhist Monasticism,” in Religion and the Body, ed. Sarah Coakley [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], 185–204).

Wilson, Charming Cadavers, 179.

Access to or familiarity with images of female death is not restricted to monks in Thailand. Instead, such images are widely known and available to laypeople.


Stewart, Crimes of Writing, 91.

Ibid., 91.


John Strong describes the story’s theme as follows: “We have thus set up here one of the classic scenarios of Indian literature: the encounter of the ascetic and the
harlot, with all the opposition that this applies between dharma on the one hand and kāma [desire] on the other” (Legend and Cult of Upagupta, 76).

47 Strong, Legend of King Aśoka, 180.
48 Ibid., 181.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 179, 180.

51 Nak says that she has too little wasana (luck or fortune that results from past deeds) in this life to be able to stay and take care of Mak any longer. Mak also says that they have acquired too little bun (Sanskrit, punya), merit, in this life to be able to stay together longer.

52 May Adadol describes how in a question-and-answer session, the director interpreted Mak’s credulity (his naive belief in the ghostly reality that Nak suggests to him) to symbolize Thai male conjugal loyalty (“Nang Nak,” 190–91).

53 Ideal cohabitation is also threatened by the constant necessity for Nak to go out and take care of ghostly business, especially that of eliminating opponents.