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The Slow Birth of Thailand's Alternative Films



by *Tus Werayutwattana*

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Chiang Mai is just like most other cities when it comes to cinema, with a few large chains dominating the scene, often found on the top floor of shopping malls. Their mobile apps ping us to attention when the next Hollywood blockbuster hits the screens and people book tickets, almost like drones, eager to see the poorly produced twelfth instalment of a franchise still trying to make a profit. Meanwhile, the world of independent cinema flickers and hums in the background, the cameras slowly recording and the film reels slowly whirring. Small groups of people meet up at makeshift screenings, the latest independent film projected onto a white cloth in a dark room. Across the world, independent and art-house films are gaining a sturdier platform, celebrated and heralded as works of art, sharing a cinema with the latest blockbusters, but in Chiang Mai that scene is yet to be realised. Even in Bangkok where there is more talk about independent cinema than ever before, the city's underdogs still cower behind the behemoth of our two cinema giants — SF and Major Cineplex.



Apart from a number of low-key screenings that happen at locations well beyond their sell-by-date, Chiang Mai offers little access to alternative films. Sure, the cinema giants sometimes team up with Japan or Europe to show a few hand selected films that have been critically acclaimed, but on the whole they ignore anything independent — especially Thai. “It makes sense that cinema companies must make profits,” said Bodin Theparat, a film reviewer for Momentum and Bioscope and the co-founder of Panya Movie Club and CM Doo, two growing local independent film screening communities. “But it is sad to see the lack of interest in alternative cinema across the country.”

In 2015, Bodin and his friend Ploypilin Kasemsuk decided to do something about bringing better films to Chiang Mai. They created the Facebook page titled “Chiang Mai Need Lobster”, referencing the independent British film *The Lobster* starring Colin Farrell, Rachel Weisz and Jessica Barden, in hopes of bringing attention to the lack of independent films making their way to our big screens.

“I would say that our page has a certain amount of influence,” said Bodin, who explained how they changed the page name to “Chiang Mai Need This Film (https://www.facebook.com/CMneedthisFilm/?ref=br_rs)” after their success at bringing *The Lobster* to Chiang Mai in order to incorporate any other films locals may wish to see. “We do not put any demands on cinemas to bring films in, but we see it as a community space where local film lovers can talk about and discuss new films that are not shown here, which in turn may influence the big cinema managers from time to time. When the rare small and unknown films are screened here, they are often not promoted so people often miss them entirely. This means that they are pulled just days into a showing due to low audience numbers,” added Ploypilin.

With a growing number of members on their Facebook page which has now over two thousand followers and more and more people interested in independent and art-house films, Bodin and Ployilin decided to try their hand at hosting independent film screenings themselves, establishing

CM Doo in November 2017. This monthly alternative screening project partnered up with CMU Art Centre to show films that are not screened in any of the big cinemas.

However, after just two months the project has hit the pause button. "In January and February this year, the city welcomed a cinema truck from the Thai Film Archive that set up at the CMU Art Centre and we didn't want to confuse visitors with conflicting events," explained Bodin. "We plan to start again once the truck has moved on."

Chiang Mai Mise-en Scene

For Chiang Mai, the CM Doo project and the Thai Film Archive truck are not the first to try and bring independent cinema to Chiang Mai. Over the years there have been a fair number of one-off and regular screenings, often arranged by those who have either played a part in its production or had a desire to share it with the local community. One that is still active, and possibly the oldest in town is the regular monthly film night at Alliance Française, but being predominantly French films, it draws less of a crowd mainly due to language barriers.

Another project in Chiang Mai that had some traction was Documentary Arts Asia (DAA), a centre co-founded by Ryan Libre dedicated to promoting documentary photography and film in the region. "It worked for a time but now I have decided to do something that has more impact on the community," Libre explained at a film premiere of his former student from Kachin State. "The problem we faced was lack of support from the city, community, businesses and the universities. They had helped in the past but not many people understand how difficult it is to run a project like that. We would have up to 50 volunteer staff but we couldn't even afford their lunch most of the days so it just got harder and harder for everyone." During its heyday, the centre would hold a film screening twice a week, amounting to over 400 screenings during its tenure, not to mention hundreds of workshops and dozens of exhibitions. They were even featured in Citylife back in 2014 [Pictures Worth a Thousand Words: Catching Up with Ryan Libre of Documentary Arts Asia (<http://www.chiangmaicitylife.com/citylife-articles/pictures-worth-a-thousand-words-catching-up-with-ryan-libre-of-documentary-arts-asia/>)]. "What was most disappointing about DAA's demise was the lack of response from local young artists. Very few Thais participated or wanted to get involved with DAA," added Libre who has now moved into Kachin State and is working with locals in revealing their stories to the world.

Untitled for Film was another regular screening event that was organised by Media Arts and Design students from Chiang Mai University. It was held every Saturday for free, starting in the classroom for students before opening to the public and moving to the rooftop of the building. Again, when active, several renowned independent film makers were invited to host open discussions and Chiang Mai premiers. But although the page is still active, there has been no events or updates since April 2017.

An Incandescent Flicker of Hope

The arrival of the Thai Film Archive truck however, has been hailed as a beacon of hope to film lovers in Chiang Mai. The truck itself will come and go within the month, but it is a signal that for the first time ever, eyes are on the north.



"Whether you want us or not, we will come," Dome Sukavong, the director of Thai Film Archive said jokingly at the truck's opening ceremony. Their mission is to collect, study and distribute knowledge from films, audio-visual and related subjects often through the medium of movie screenings, film festivals and mobile cinema trucks that tour the country. "Our dream is to have a film archive in every province, but that seems a bit beyond our reach. Right now we hope to have one in each region to begin with," said Winai Sombunna, Head of Activity at the Thai Film Archive. "What we will be building is a cinematheque. It's like a church. Every Sunday people gather and listen to a sermon, sing songs, meet and discuss opinions and exchange information, and we want to do the same thing. Watching a film is a social activity, and it takes an audience to generate full knowledge and understanding. It can be a home to many young emerging artists, and despite what bad press we sometimes give ourselves, Thai film production has long reached the international level."

Today throughout Thailand, there are thousands of people working for hundreds of film companies, from massive media powerhouses to local independent filmmakers. Sadly, those working independently often see no interest in their home so seek foreign investment, and if they manage to screen overseas or even win an award, only then will Thailand notice. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, the winner of the prestigious 2010 Cannes Film Festival Palme d'Or prize for his film *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, is one such example. And we aren't even going to touch the agonising topic of Thailand's censorship that affects expression in almost all of our creative industries.

Although Chiang Mai does not have a film school, there are several production companies and numerous film makers that have set up shop in the north. Wayufilm Production is one company whose film, *My Bromance*, was screened throughout Thailand. However, after screening their first

film nationally, Nitchapoom Chaianun is reluctant to do it again. "The cost is just too high," he explained. "Ignoring the screen rental costs, 55% of the profits go to the cinema and we are left with very little after expenses."

"Although I try to produce one feature film a year, the costs involved almost always come from my own pocket," added Nitchapoom whose company main income is from video editing and graphic design. "Now making a film is a whole lot easier than it ever was before. You can make a film with one phone and a laptop, but the reality is, you can't survive just being a film maker. It does not generate money," said Akara Pacchakphathi, an award winning short film director who runs a hotel called Rumpai Loft Habitat to pay the bills.

Bodin reflected that the whole industry, ignoring the mainstream film giants, is short on money. "Although we are endorsed by Chiang Mai University, we still have to pay for the venue ourselves and in some cases pay the filmmakers for the screening rights. We do everything by the book which is why we must charge for the tickets, but even then sometimes we must dip into our own pockets. In the end, the more events like ours that are out there, the more filmmakers are supported as people are paying for the privilege instead of downloading the film illegally from the internet, which in turn helps the industry grow."

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