

The Invention of Lao Horror:

Interview with Mattie Do

Patrick F. Campos

Mattie Do is the first female director of feature films in Laos. Her directorial debut, *Chanthaly* (2012), is the first horror film directed entirely by a Lao filmmaker. It was premiered at the Luang Prabang Film Festival, warmly received in Laos, and screened in various film festivals. The success of *Chanthaly* enabled Do to invite people on-board to help her produce her second film, *Dearest Sister*, which is set to be premiered in 2016.

As a research fellow of the Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia (DORISEA), I first met Do, with her husband and creative partner, Chris Larsen, in Hanoi, Vietnam, in October of 2013. She

was then talking about the journey they had taken to produce *Chanthaly*, and at the time I thought it was necessary to make it widely known how Lao cinema was experiencing a rebirth with the arrival of films made by young



artists. I visited Do and Larsen in their residence in Vientiane, which is also the main location for *Chanthalay*, in July of 2014, and we agreed to do the interview which now finds a suitable space in this *Plaridel* special issue on Southeast Asian horror cinema.

Patrick F. Campos (PFC): Describe the landscape of Lao cinema before *Chanthalay*.

Mattie Do (MD): Before *Chanthalay*, Lao cinema was actually pretty bleak. I would say that we're probably producing about two films a year now in Laos. Can you imagine? It isn't consistent though, the quantity of films we are able to make in a year.

The films we have that are made in Laos are usually Thai/Lao co-productions that are romantic comedies and melodramas, with production values similar to a television soap opera. Every few years we would get a Lao film that one could classify as "edutainment," usually funded by NGOs or other charitable organizations and was meant to be used as an educational tool, for topics like, "How not to get bird flu!" or "Why a Community Center is good for you!" or "Don't get yourself human trafficked!" I admit these films are fun to watch, but they aren't really works unique to what the filmmakers might have created on their own. Then there are government films that aren't exactly made for education, but I would probably categorize as "values-propaganda" films.

I was very lucky that in the same year as *Chanthalay*, I and another group of like-minded young filmmakers [the artists that comprise the company, Lao New Wave, led by Anysay Keola] also decided to create films for the sake of film, not because an NGO had commissioned them. Before *Chanthalay* and *At The Horizon* [Keola, 2011], we only had a handful of films like that. And now I feel like there's a film boom! Many young people aspire to make a film now. I just hope it will continue!

I'm trying to bring in more foreign co-productions to Laos, so we can start having access to an infrastructure that can become more sustainable and so that the number of productions each year will become more consistent. We'll see!

PFC: Were Anysay Keola's and your productions concerted efforts to usher in a new Lao cinema?

MD: It was very coincidental that Anysay and I started making films at the same time. I found out about his production when I proposed mine to my producers. At the time, there were two employees at Lao Art Media [the company that produced *Chanthalay*] who were also working with

Anysay on *At the Horizon*, and they told us about his production. They even brought him to meet us, hoping we could all work together! He was already in full swing by then, and I was only in preproduction stage, so we ended up not ever being on each other's sets.

PFC: Would you—or do Lao people in general—consider Thai/Lao co-productions, like *Sabaidee Luang Prabang* (2008), as Lao films, or do people tend to view them as foreign films?

MD: To be honest, people are still pretty torn about this. For a long time, I was adamant about *Sabaidee Luang Prabang* being more of a Thai film than a Lao film, because it followed the main character of a Thai man so strongly, and the film was directed by a Thai guy who actually seemed to have a rather superficial understanding of Laos.

I'd say, for the audience, it's more content-dependent than person-dependent. For instance, if the language and characters veer more toward Thai, then they would consider it more of a Thai film. However, I'm noticing a disconnect in style as well. When a film is made "in the Thai style," there seems to be a feeling of discord, unless the director is actually Lao. For instance, Ton [Phanumad Disattha] of Lao New Wave who is a Thai national of Lao ethnicity made a comedy [*Huk Aum Lum*, 2013] that is "in the Thai style" but completely in Lao language. In such an instance, the audience (including myself) is quick to say it's a Lao film, although many people notice that it is done in a "Thai-thai style" (as we say)!

I still consider it up to the content, and I guess that's a particularly vague answer. Maybe it's personal, since when I make a film, people who personally wish to attack me point out that I also have a US passport, yet they choose to ignore when other filmmakers might perhaps have a passport to another country as well. It's quite arbitrary.

PFC: Describe the process that a producer has to go through in relation to government regulation.

MD: I'm not certain how difficult it is to make a film in other countries, but I find Laos to be quite open to filmmaking despite its censorship regulations. Yes, we do have censorship! But it really isn't so bad. First, we have to submit a synopsis and treatment to the Department of Cinema, which is a part of our Ministry of Information and Culture. They'll either approve it or they won't. Unless it's very inflammatory or hard-core, they'll probably approve it, quite frankly. Then we submit a script, and that's how we get our production permit. Once we have the production permit, we then pay for our shooting permit, and then

cameras can start rolling! The fees are minimal compared to permits and fees one would pay in a Western country. Sure, there's no government approving your script in America or Canada, but there's a marketing department, script readers, agents, lawyers, etc. etc. It sounds ultra-complicated for a small-town filmmaker like me!

Our censorship is surprisingly laid back. If we can avoid things that the government is sensitive about, then we can make a film. It's not difficult. Things that the government will censor include negative criticism of the government and other countries (they don't want anyone to be offended). One cannot portray graphic sex, pornography, nudity, violence. The sexual content issue is kind of funny, because even innocent displays of affection can still be put under review, but for the most amusing reason: Actors aren't actually in real relationships, so we shouldn't make them do anything on the big screen that could damage their real-life marriages! But I think we'll get over that one soon.

PFC: What were the circumstances that led to the production of *Chanthaly*?

MD: *Chanthaly* happened quite by accident! My husband has been working in film for most of his life, both in production and as a writer. When we moved to Laos to be near my father, he looked around and said, "There should be more films here. We should find the film people here and get involved." He made an effort to find Anousone Sirisackda and Doangmany Soliphanh.

We sought out Anousone very purposefully, since we knew he was one of the people (at the time) pioneering and forging Lao cinema. I mean, at this point, there were only films from Lao Art Media. This was two years before Lao New Wave and I even existed! We were familiar with his work, though we had no way to get in touch with him at all.

These two men had single-handedly revived cinema in Laos after the war had basically ravaged all theaters and after we essentially lost our filmmakers either to age, refugee escapes, or some other reason. Both Anousone and Douangmany had the motivation and determination to create new cinema after the war, on their own! That was very inspiring. When Chris said he wanted to contribute to and work with Lao cinema while we were in Laos, we both knew that Anousone of Lao Art Media and his VP Douangmany were the people to go to. But how? It turned out that we accidentally ran into them at a party and became great friends, plus close work colleagues, after all! Vientiane is a small village!

At the time, I was a makeup artist and a ballet student and teacher. I had no intention of ever working in film, outside of a few gigs doing makeup or something. So we sought out Anousone and Douangmany

to see if there was anything my husband could assist them with in Lao cinema, and they immediately told him they wanted more Lao films. They suggested that he direct Lao films for them instantly! He was shocked and informed them that besides being a screenwriter, not a director, he couldn't speak the Lao language, so it would be a somewhat difficult feat for him to attempt to direct a Lao film. Even more shocking was when he turned around and suggested that I could direct a Lao film for them. When all eyes were turned on me, I was mortified. Really, really, I was terrified. I had NEVER considered directing a film in my life. I made a failed attempt to write a synopsis for a short film I wanted to suggest to a friend, but never did I consider producing or directing.

Anousone and Douangmany thought it was a grand idea and were immediately supportive. It was like, "Oh great! We've never had a film from a woman before, that'll be super! What a good idea." I think I nearly murdered my husband when we went home that night, but he gave me a book that was called *Directing*, made me read it all, discussed it with me, and then I started the process of making a film. No joke.

PFC: Describe the creative process of *Chanthalay* .

MD: Our production process is funny, because I think (for good reason) I didn't know exactly what I was doing. Let's not forget, *Chanthalay* was made by me, someone who accidentally stumbled into film, four of my other friends who had media experience in one way or the other, and my geriatric dog. Creatively, my husband and I spent a lot of time on the script. We didn't storyboard at all, and he taught me what a shotlist was and made a sort of game out of it. We would watch my favorite films, and he'd ask me to break down the shots and the edits. It was super fun! It also opened an entirely new understanding of how a film becomes what we know as a movie.

After that exercise of learning what different shots were, why they might be used, and what I liked, I was able to put together a shotlist and create *Chanthalay*! Now both *Chanthalay* and *Dearest Sister* were made this way. For *Chanthalay*, I had shotlists written all over the place. For *Dearest Sister*, I had a dedicated notebook with some storyboard pages that I drew myself. I still can't believe I somehow made *Chanthalay* despite my complete lack of knowledge. I don't know how I pulled it off! Now that we've made *Dearest Sister*, I've overseen the organization that goes into costuming, art department/set decor, and scheduling. Thank god we are in the digital age. Anytime the actors and I weren't sure about what was missing from the set or costuming, one day to the next, we could easily go and turn the camera or computer on and check!

PFC: Why horror?

MD: I chose horror because I LOVE horror! Horror is universal in the thrilling way that people love to be scared. It's kind of like going on a roller coaster ride; you fully anticipate that it's intimidating, possibly scary, even a little dangerous, but you go on and take that ride anyway, because you love the thrill, chills, and adrenaline rush. In fact you go on that ride over and over again! Even as a kid, I used to love the scary stories my big brother and relatives would tell each other at gatherings, in the dark or over a campfire. When I was exposed to scary films (prematurely, I might add), I would cover my face during the frightening parts, but peek between my fingers to see what was going on. I still do that.

PFC: Is *Chanthalay* the first Lao horror film?

MD: If we got very technical about whether or not *Chanthalay* is the first ever Lao horror film, it might not be. My own producer/boss, Douangmany, wrote and produced an edutainment film about the bird flu that revolved around a nightmare of a father losing his child to bird flu. There was even a scene where his dead wife haunted him through her portrait. Literally, a ghost jumped out of a picture frame to punish the husband for his carelessness with their child, who suffered with bird flu!

Films solidly claiming to be horror have been few. Mine was the first horror project to be proposed to the government, but not the first to finish production. There was a Thai director who made a horror film [Red Scarf, 2012] here, but his project was proposed to the government and passed later than mine, although he was able to finish it before mine since his production time is so short!

PFC: Would you consider *Chanthalay* to be a specifically Lao horror film?

MD: *Chanthalay* is to me a very specifically Lao horror film, because I didn't feel the need to follow any of the pre-established tropes of horror from other cultures or societies. I love the very personal feel of Lao ghost stories. Perhaps they feel personal because we are still very much a "word of mouth" culture, and the traditional ghost stories easily morph into something nontraditional, as we pass stories on by retelling and/or experiencing them.

I also love that tangible and not ethereal ghosts are in our culture—like they're living, fleshy beings, not just transparent spirits. I think it's nice to be able to portray our supernatural beliefs like these corporeal

ghosts, spirit shrines and offerings, and most definitely the atmosphere of Laos proper (warm and colorful, and not some exoticized, backward jungle). I wanted to show middle-class Vientiane families that aren't powerful and rich or impoverished and oppressed, so people could see that there are average folks, who firmly believe in the supernatural in their daily lives and happen to live in Laos!

With *Chanthalay*, I was able to take stories and experiences I heard in Laos. I was able to show an average Lao family and how differently each character approaches their cultural beliefs. This was important to me, because I wanted people to see the decision-making process from a Lao perspective, not from a "horror film" or "Asian horror" perspective. I guess that makes *Chanthalay* very Lao!

PFC: Did you encounter censorship problems, considering that *Chanthalay* is a horror film?

MD: I had the most hilarious censorship problems with *Chanthalay*! Since it was the first ghost or supernatural genre film made in Laos, the Department of Cinema initially told me they had to reject the script. They said, "We're worried you'll promote belief in the supernatural, and belief in such things as ghosts or spirits is not very Marxist. We are Marxists after all." I wasn't terribly surprised, but I took the time to go speak to the Department with my producers, and we had a good laugh about the fact that despite being Marxists, our entire nation still believes in the supernatural, and its people are very closely tied to their ancestors' spirits through our traditional and religious practices!

We ended up with a compromise. I asked them if, in the end, it would be all right if I added a non-believing character, a logical, level-headed worker who absolutely refuses to acknowledge the spirit world, in order to have a contrast with the character of *Chanthalay*. They accepted!

Now they wholeheartedly accept many film genres, regardless of how Marxist it may or may not be.

PFC: Can you say something about the function of the non-believing character, which the government asked you to add, in the overall theme of the film?

MD: Of course adding a character that was a staunch non-spiritual or non-believer of the supernatural wasn't merely for convenience! It was helpful in getting the material passed, but every element must be changed in the story once you introduce something new. A story is a bunch of tiny details intertwined into one complete tapestry, and if any of the threads are missing or don't fit, then your tapestry will be a mess. I'm actually

really glad we ended up adding the non-believer character of the father, because, in the beginning, the concept was much more about the ghost and *Chanthalay*. When we realized we were going in another direction, the relationship between father and daughter in the story became more interesting and much more fleshed out.

PFC: Talk about the spiritual premise of the film.

MD: The spiritual premise of *Chanthalay* is intertwined with our belief in Spirit Houses or Shrines. Many Asian cultures have a similar version of this. Our belief is that we burn incense and offer food, drink, flowers, and prayers or blessings at this shrine to appease our ancestor spirits in the afterlife, and to placate them so they will not harm us or so that they will guide us or be satisfied as spirits. What I really find fascinating about Lao beliefs is that it doesn't solely involve making offers to one's ancestors but also to whatever spiritual force or entity might be lingering or dwelling on that property as well!

In *Chanthalay*, this idea becomes a key aspect of the plot. *Chanthalay* feels she is speaking and praying to her mother, that she is leaving offerings for her mother, while her father is apathetic to her mother's well-being in the afterlife. However, we will learn that the entity that is trapped in their property is wholly unrelated to them but extremely attached to *Chanthalay*.

PFC: What have you been doing since the success of *Chanthalay*?

MD: I'm glad to say that I recently finished shooting my second film. I'm using the actress that played *Chanthalay* [Amphaiphan Phommapunya or "Newt"], because I think she's fantastic! This film is a companion film to *Chanthalay*, as I hope to make a trio of films that are semi-related by theme, though not in story.

Chanthalay was the story of a Lao woman and her part in a modern-day Lao hierarchical family. *Dearest Sister*, my second film, is the story of Lao women and their place in modern-day Lao society. And way, way, way in the future, I hope to direct the third of this trio, a film about a Lao woman and her place in society abroad, overseas.

I just received partial funding to work on my third film, *The Long Walk*, which will star an amazing older male actor. It's completely unrelated to the trio of films I'm talking about and will be a great stepping stone to prepare me for the last of the trilogy, which seems more intense and more complicated.

After *Chanthalay*, I had the opportunity to bring about international co-productions in Laos! That was ultra-exciting! This year, I produced

a North American/Lao co-production that premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival called *River* [Dagg, 2015]. And then I finished shooting my own second feature, which was a French/Estonian/Lao co-production. And now I'm getting ready to shoot a Japanese/Lao/Thai/France co-production called *BKK Nites*! It's been an active time for me since *Chanthaly*! Super exciting and super busy, but I love it and can't wait to make more films for you to write about, too!

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