

Hybrid Horror: Cultural-Religious Syncretism and Market Adaptation in Contemporary Southeast Asian Supernatural Cinema

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the convergence of cultural-religious syncretism, narrative hybridity, and market adaptation in Southeast Asian supernatural film in Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia. The research employs a qualitative, multi-method approach, incorporating comparative textual analysis and expert interviews, to assess sixteen films released from 2004 to 2024. Utilizing Homi Bhabha's (1994) notion of the "third space," the study examines how filmmakers amalgamate indigenous spiritual traditions with global cinematic conventions to forge hybrid narrative forms that resonate on both local and international levels. The approach delineates three fundamental mechanisms of cultural authentication: incremental spiritual revelation, spatial-temporal anchoring, and institutional religious integration. These narrative techniques allow films to maintain cultural identity while captivating global audiences. The research outlines three stages of how the market has changed: Foundation (2004–2013), Development (2014–2018), and Contemporary (2019–2024), showing how technology and streaming services have affected how films are shared, what genres are created, and how audiences connect with them. Research indicates that Southeast Asian horror cinema serves as a platform for cultural mediation and creative defiance, wherein syncretic narratives preserve local belief systems while yet conforming to the algorithmic frameworks of global media markets. The research adds to discussions in film studies, cultural mixing, and global media by showing how local horror films express spiritual concerns in ways that everyone can understand.

Keywords: Southeast Asian Cinema, Supernatural Horror, Cultural-Religious Syncretism, Narrative Hybridity, Transnational Media Circulation.

INTRODUCTION

Research Rationale

In the twenty-first century, Southeast Asian supernatural films have become a popular and culturally significant genre. Thai, Vietnamese, Indonesian, and Philippine films show how indigenous spiritual cosmologies and international cinematic systems interact dynamically (Ong, 1999; Khoo, Ainslie, & Barker, 2020). While Metaveevinij (2019) emphasizes the transnational consumption and nostalgic attraction of cross-border cinema cultures, scholars such as Ainslie (2017) and Sinpongsorn (2018) have examined how national films, particularly Thailand's, negotiate modern identity through ghostly narratives. Southeast Asian ghost films are sites of "cinema-spiritualism," exposing changing ideas about the paranormal in quickly modernizing countries, claim Bräunlein and Lauser (2016). The concept of a "hauntological anthropology," developed by Good, Chiavenda, and Rahimi (2022), places ghost stories within more general concerns about memory and historical trauma. McPherson (2024) goes on to say that by employing ghostly beings to examine concerns that transcend generations, these movies help shape modern hauntology. As Ancuta (2023) illustrates in her critique of The Medium, these films combine folkloric horror with modern storytelling techniques to exhibit both local authenticity and international appeal.

Box office hits like *How to Make Millions Before Grandma Dies* in Thailand and *KKN di Desa Penari* in Indonesia show regional audience engagement and underscore the changing role of horror films as a cultural mirror (The Bangkok Post, 2024; The Jakarta Post, 2023). These movies frequently blend social realism, horror, and dark comedy—what Galt (2021) calls "decolonial monstrosity"—to examine generational conflict, the enduring power of spiritual belief systems, and dissatisfaction in contemporary society. While Grgić (2024) explores how the genre adapts to digital streaming platforms to preserve cultural identity amid global accessibility, Ng (2014) emphasizes the "monstrous feminine" as a recurrent motif used to critique patriarchal structures and cultural taboos.

This study examines how Southeast Asian ghost films mediate local identity and global reach. Drawing on Rawle's (2018) work on foreign cinema and Lobato and Ryan's (2011) distribution-oriented approach to genre, it examines how narrative structures, thematic aspects, and marketing methods support the dual objectives of cultural expression and entertainment commodity. Hayward (2013) and Harrington (2017) offer conceptual tools for examining genre hybridity and gendered monstrosity. These skills are crucial for comprehending the cinematic language and emotional resonance of these films. Finding the methods via which Southeast Asian horror films acquire cultural resonance and make their way around the world's media circuits is the aim of this study.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural and Religious Hybridization in Southeast Asian Horror Cinema

Southeast Asian horror films explore the interplay of postcolonial identity, spirituality, and modern anxieties through culturally embedded themes. These films often employ hybrid spiritual traditions, ancestral rituals, and indigenous mythology to illustrate social problems.

Regional ghost films, as noted by Bräunlein and Lauser (2016), embody collective memory and historical trauma, with specters symbolizing loss and displacement. Kitiarsa (2005, 2008) challenges inflexible notions of religion and advocates for the perception of spiritual practices as fluid and continually evolving under the impact of popular culture.

This perspective aligns with Ancuta's (2023) analysis of Thai supernatural cinema, highlighting the significance of folk mediums and animist rituals for narrative and cultural authenticity rather than exotic embellishments. Similarly, Ng (2014) examines the "monster feminine"—figures like Nang Nak and the Tiyankak—as confluences of nationalism, religion, and gender that expose societal anxieties and shifting moral paradigms.

Ainslie (2015) elucidates regional appeal through the concept of "cultural proximity," positing that shared cosmologies foster a distinctive Southeast Asian horror genre rooted in spiritual familiarity and modern experience.

Transnational Circulation and Distribution Networks

The global impact of Southeast Asian horror is shaped by its distribution tactics and narrative structure. Lobato and Ryan (2011) assert that the genre is collaboratively shaped by circulation networks, which affect global access, categorization, and reception. Grgić (2023) underscores that digital platforms such as Netflix and MUBI facilitate "minor transnationalism," enabling localized horror films to bypass traditional gatekeeping while preserving narrative distinctiveness. These sites employ algorithmic curation, metadata, and subtitling to facilitate viewer interaction with ritualistic and spiritual content. The planned sharing of Southeast Asian horror when it first became popular worldwide (2004–2013) can be explained by Appadurai's (1996) idea of "controlled circulation," where filmmakers arranged festival showings and limited releases to keep the culture genuine and avoid making it seem strange.

Genre Hybridization and Narrative Strategies

The narrative structure of Southeast Asian horror is defined by genre hybridity, merging global horror aesthetics with indigenous cosmologies. To enhance epistemic realism and include the supernatural in culturally relevant frameworks, Ancuta (2015) underscores the utilization of documentary and found-footage methodologies. Moreover, McCloud (2018) contests the binary distinctions between tradition and progress by asserting that technological modernity and spiritual rebirth coexist in the region. The spatial and temporal foundations of horror films—ritualized environments, rural terrains, and colonial backdrops—illustrate this dynamic and situate the supernatural within specific cultural contexts. This combination is exemplified by films such as *Satan's Slaves* (Indonesia, 2017) and *The Housemaid* (Vietnam, 2016), which integrate horror motifs inside profoundly spiritual and historically pertinent narratives. By acknowledging the epistemic legitimacy of local belief systems and including universal themes such as hauntings, possession, and the monstrous feminine, these hybrid forms enable Southeast Asian horror to expand the cultural scope of the global horror genre.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to examine how Southeast Asian supernatural film traverses the intricate landscape of cultural-religious syncretism and market adaptation. Its specific objectives are to:

1. Examine hybrid story building by investigating how filmmakers amalgamate indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices with global terror tropes to craft movies that appeal to both local and international audiences.
2. Analyze authentication procedures, emphasizing the examination of methods utilized to verify cultural authenticity, including gradual cultural immersion and institutional endorsement, and their influence on audience reception.
3. Evaluate adaptive distribution methods by examining distribution techniques, including theater releases, film festivals, and internet platforms, and their impact on the global circulation of Southeast Asian spooky films.

The study aims to enhance the broader discourse on cultural hybridization, international media flows, and the globalization of cinematic genres by addressing these objectives. It seeks to elucidate how regional cinema industries utilize cultural legacy and narrative creativity to attain global impact.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study uses a mix of methods to look at how Southeast Asian supernatural films from 2004 to 2024 balance cultural-religious blending and adapting to international markets. This research, situated within transnational media studies, analyzes how filmmakers from Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia incorporate narrative, representation, and distribution techniques to reconcile cultural authenticity with global appeal.

The methodology is organized around three interconnected objectives: 1) hybrid narrative construction, examining the integration of indigenous spiritual beliefs with global horror conventions in films; 2) authentication strategies, analyzing representational mechanisms that validate cultural legitimacy; and 3) adaptive distribution models, evaluating the effects of shifts in distribution platforms—from theatrical releases to digital streaming—on narrative strategies and the visibility of culturally specific content in global markets. These aims combined provide a comprehensive examination of the convergence between local customs and global market requirements.

Data Collection and Analytical Methods

This study integrates contextual mapping, expert interviews, and textual analysis to achieve its objectives. These methodologies provide a comprehensive understanding of the industrial and cultural dynamics of Southeast Asian horror films.

Data Collection

Selected Films

A curated corpus of sixteen supernatural horror films from Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia (2004–2024) was selected based on subject significance, national representation, and distributional diversity. The films, chosen for their relevance to the study of cultural-religious syncretism, reflect three historical phases: foundation (2004–2013), development (2014–2018), and modern (2019–2024). The selected films comprise *Shutter* (2004), *Pee Mak* (2013), *The Medium* (2021), and *Death Whisperer* (2023) from Thailand; *The Housemaid* (2016), *The Third Wife* (2018), *Vietnamese Horror Story* (2022), and *The Ancestral* (2022) from Vietnam; *Feng Shui* (2004), *Sukob* (2006), *Seklusyon* (2016), and *Eerie* (2019) from the Philippines; and *Satan's Slaves* (2017), *Impetigore* (2019), *KKN di Desa Penari* (2022), and *Satan's Slaves 2: Communion* (2022) from Indonesia.

For rationale for the film selection, these films were chosen for their thematic relevance and representational diversity within the supernatural horror genre. Intended to offer an equitable and comprehensive examination of the local cinematic landscape, selection criteria, each film aligns with the focus of the study on the intersection of supernatural elements and cultural-religious syncretism. This thematic perspective facilitates the examination of hybrid narrative structures, cultural authentication methods, and strategies for market adaptation. The research examines the tension between cultural specificity and transnational marketability in Southeast Asian horror by analyzing the interplay between local belief systems and global cinematic norms.

From 2004 to 2024, the corpus encompasses a period of significant technological and economic transformation, marked by the rise of streaming services and evolving audience consumption behaviors. These developments elucidate the genre's evolution over two decades, thereby informing narrative inclinations and distribution tactics.

The selected films depict various cultural and religious contexts: Buddhism and animism in Thailand, Islam in Indonesia, Catholicism in the Philippines, and ancestral worship in Vietnam, facilitating a comparative analysis of how diverse spiritual traditions influence supernatural narratives throughout the region.

The sample includes internationally recognized works such as *The Medium* (2021), *Satan's Slaves* (2017), and *The Housemaid* (2016), as well as commercially successful titles like *Shutter* (Thailand, 2004) and *KKN di Desa Penari* (Indonesia, 2022). This combination of critically acclaimed and commercially successful films facilitates an advanced analysis of the genre's creative and market dimensions.

The films illustrate three primary distribution phases: platform-optimized digital distribution (2019–2024), hybrid festival-digital models (2014–2018), and theatrical release (2004–2013). These stages illustrate the evolution of representational and narrative approaches in relation to the shifting dynamics of global circulation and digital accessibility.

The decision-making process was significantly influenced by the availability and accessibility of language. All films that feature English subtitles were ranked based on their accessibility through DVD, academic archives, or streaming services to ensure uniform analysis. These qualities collectively promote an extensive examination of Southeast Asian supernatural horror, thereby emphasizing the interplay between cultural embeddedness and global dissemination.

Expert Interviews

Purposive sampling facilitated semi-structured interviews with eleven regional experts, comprising filmmakers, distributors, critics, and academics. Chosen specialists were selected to provide a diverse range of perspectives on market adaptation, cultural authenticity, and narrative construction. Interviews conducted via Zoom or email encompassed subjects such as cultural representation, narrative selections, and industry constraints.

Regarding rationale for expert selection, this study includes expert interviews to enhance the analysis of certain films, helping to better understand the cultural, creative, and industry aspects of Southeast Asian horror cinema. Experienced professionals were deliberately selected from three primary sectors: filmmakers (including directors, screenwriters, and producers), scholars and critics specializing in Southeast Asian cinema or horror media, and distributors and festival organizers engaged with regional and international film markets. This thorough approach ensured an examination of narrative construction, cultural authenticity, and commercial adaptation from multiple perspectives.

Participants, drawn from four national contexts—Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia—exemplified the religious and cultural diversity present in the film sample. Their participation enabled a comparative study of the expression of religious syncretism and narrative hybridity within various socio-cultural contexts. Selection was predicated on demonstrated expertise, encompassing scholars with substantial publications on

Southeast Asian horror or religious media, directors with successful supernatural or horror films, and industry leaders engaged in film distribution at both domestic and international tiers.

To ensure accurate transcription and analysis, interviews were conducted in English or with the assistance of a translator. All participants provided informed consent and originated from academic, corporate, and professional networks. In accordance with qualitative research protocols for thematic saturation, a total of 11 interviews were conducted (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). When no significant new themes emerged, saturation was attained, hence confirming the appropriateness of the sample.

The study enhances the contextual richness and validity of its conclusions about cultural-religious hybridity, storytelling tactics, and the evolving dynamics of global distribution by incorporating diverse yet focused expert perspectives.

Contextual Mapping

Contextual mapping documented the production and distribution histories of the films, including release locations, co-production networks, censorship processes, and audience reception. This information elucidates the influence of distribution logic on content development and exposure, situating films within broader industrial and socio-cultural contexts.

Analyzing data

Textual Analysis

The research team conducted a comparative thematic analysis of the selected films, focusing on narrative frameworks, symbolic systems, and religious iconography. This study examines the interplay between global horror clichés and indigenous beliefs, drawing inspiration from Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space." The main areas of research include 1) mixing local stories with global horror styles; 2) ways to make cultural elements feel authentic through specific settings and rituals; and 3) how choices in representation change based on where and how the content is shared, especially on streaming services.

Thematic Coding of Expert Interviews

Reflexive theme analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke in 2006, was employed to analyze the interview data. NVivo software facilitated the application of both deductive and inductive coding approaches to identify recurring themes such as spiritual bargaining, narrative creativity, censorship navigation, and transnational placement.

Techniques for Triangulation and Credibility Assessment

The study employed triangulation of data source films, expert interviews, and industry documentation—to ensure methodological rigor, hence enhancing the reliability of the conclusions. Regular memoranda and iterative coding consistently upheld reflexivity and mitigated prejudice. Additional assurances of validity and contextual accuracy were achieved through peer debriefing and consultations with regional scholars.

RESULTS

This study demonstrates that three interconnected domains—hybrid narrative construction, authentication methods, and market-responsive distribution strategies—define the international landscape in which Southeast Asian supernatural cinema (2004–2024) operates. These domains illustrate how horror directors balance cultural distinctiveness with global economic viability.

Hybrid Narrative Construction: Cultural-Religious Syncretism in Horror Storytelling

Hybrid Cinematic Forms and the "Third Space" of Cultural Negotiation

The concept of "third space," articulated by Homi K. Bhabha in 1994, provides a critical framework for analyzing the hybrid narrative approaches of Southeast Asian supernatural cinema. This interstitial space facilitates the fusion of local traditions with global cinematic paradigms, thereby enabling the emergence of novel representational forms. The films *The Medium*, *Seklusyon*, and *Satan's Slaves* amalgamate Western cinematic methods, such as discovered footage and domestic horror, with local beliefs. For instance, *The Medium* integrates Thai animist rituals with the mockumentary style, while *Seklusyon* amalgamates Catholicism with Filipino mythology. Similarly, *Satan's Slaves* integrates Islamic spiritual practices into the narrative by merging Islamic eschatology with Western genre conventions.

Other films emphasize this hybridity. *Pee Mak* amalgamates Buddhist concepts of the afterlife with comedy-horror, reinterpreting the Mae Nak ghost legend to render the narrative universally accessible. *Death Whisperer* amalgamates karma with spiritual media at a tempo suitable for streaming platforms. *The Housemaid* merges

Vietnamese Buddhist and ancestral traditions with Western Gothic motifs, while *The Third Wife* explores gendered spiritual repression via the lens of animism. Recent films such as *Vietnamese Horror Story* and *The Ancestral* integrate local spirituality with global horror aesthetics through the incorporation of ancestor worship.

Eerie, originating from the Philippines, integrates Catholicism inside a gothic convent milieu, while *Feng Shui* and *Sukob* amalgamate Chinese and Filipino superstitions with Catholic guilt. Indonesian films such as *Impetigore* and *KKN di Desa Penari* preserve global genre comprehensibility by integrating Javanese mysticism with modern narrative structures.

These paintings depict what Mayward (2023) refers to as "emotional translatability," wherein local spiritual concerns are comprehensible to a global audience. Southeast Asian filmmakers strategically employ the "third space" for cultural mediation and creative resistance, intentionally redefining genre boundaries instead of merely adhering to global horror conventions.

Religious Syncretism and Genre-Conscious Storytelling

In Southeast Asian horror cinema, religious syncretism refers to the deliberate amalgamation of contemporary horror tropes with animist, Islamic, and Catholic concepts. This integration organizes the emotional and thematic experience of the movie rather than only offering superficial embellishment. For example, despite employing a Western-inspired found-footage technique, *The Medium* authentically depicts Thai animism, particularly ancestor spirits. Similarly, *Shutter* amalgamates Buddhist concepts of karma with themes of spectral vengeance to intensify psychological horror, while *Pee Mak* recontextualizes Buddhist notions of the afterlife inside a military comedy-horror framework.

In *Seklusyon*, indigenous beliefs in shape-shifting spirits intertwine with Filipino Catholic concepts such as sin and penance, resulting in a complex spiritual landscape. Early films such as *Feng Shui* and *Sukob* encapsulate urban anxieties by intertwining Chinese superstitions with Catholic guilt. *Eerie* presents Catholicism via a feminist lens, critiquing spiritual and institutional subjugation inside a gothic convent setting.

KKN di Desa Penari examines supernatural vengeance through ceremonial transgressions rooted in Javanese mythology, while *Impetigore* integrates Javanese occult traditions with shadow puppet folklore. *Satan's Slaves* employs Islamic eschatological concepts, hence prioritizing Islamic spiritual frameworks in the narrative rather than relying on Western horror conventions. Further expanding this Islamic horror framework is *Satan's Slaves 2: Communion*. *The Housemaid* and *The Third Wife* juxtapose contemporary horror motifs with Buddhist and ancestral worship practices to contextualize postcolonial spiritual hauntings, thereby amalgamating cultural traditions.

In Southeast Asian horror, religious syncretism serves as a cultural instrument and a narrative mechanism, enabling directors to present local spiritual ideas in accessible formats for a global audience. This blend of genre conventions enhances cultural uniqueness and emotional relatability for several audiences.

Authenticating the Sacred: Narrative Strategies of Cultural-Religious Realism in Southeast Asian Horror

Southeast Asian supernatural movies support cultural beliefs by telling stories that show spiritual systems as real and relatable, instead of focusing on folklore. By including local beliefs in the story and using modern cultural insights, historical settings, and official support to show that these beliefs are real in both the film's world and the culture, these movies avoid portraying them as strange or foreign.

Progressive Cultural Revelation—Belief as Lived Experience

Films increasingly highlight indigenous epistemologies in preference to Western paradigms, revealing spiritual concepts through the experiences, emotional transformations, and embodied rituals of characters. *KKN di Desa Penari* steadily introduces the village's cosmology, reflecting the audience's exploration of an unfamiliar spiritual terrain. *The Vietnamese Horror Story* delicately depicts possession, ancestral retribution, and karmic justice, whereas *Shutter* illustrates karmic retribution through the frightening repercussions of ethical transgression. *Sukob* gradually unveils Filipino marital taboos, incrementally intensifying the terror, while *The Medium* employs an observational mockumentary method to trace the protagonist's lineage of shamanic power. These strategies subtly impart cultural information and enhance narrative credibility.

Spatial-Historical Anchoring—Locating Belief in Place and Time

Supernatural occurrences linked to historically significant landscapes and colonial suffering establish spiritual legitimacy rooted in spatial and historical distinctiveness. The remote setting of *Impetigore* facilitates the preservation of ancient transgressions and ritual confidentiality. *Death Whisperer* situates modern Thai karma-related hauntings inside local village cosmologies and intergenerational retribution. *Pee Mak* reinterprets the Mae Nak mythology within the context of conflict, linking national trauma to supernatural absence. *The Housemaid* and *The Ancestral* connect spiritual turmoil to historical oppression, situating colonial-era specters within decaying French estates and palaces. The urban settings of *Feng Shui* and *Sukob* amalgamate Chinese and Filipino customs, thereby

introducing spiritual hazards into modern Manila. These physical and temporal conditions instill dread in historically and culturally defined locations; hence, they legitimize it.

Institutional Validation—Religious Authority and Ritual Accuracy

Theological institutions and ceremonies enhance cultural realism by aligning recognized theological frameworks with supernatural phenomena. In *Satan's Slaves* and its sequel, Islamic traditions such as prayer and burial rites shape the narrative, converting the mosque into both a site of judgment and a sanctuary for the soul. Incorporating traditions such as confession and penance into the horror genre, *Seklusyon* and *Eerie* explore the tension between institutional purity and folk spirituality within Catholic settings, including a seminary and a convent school. *The Third Wife* employs femininity and fertility within a Confucian context to invoke animism and challenge patriarchal structures. Comedic horrors such as *Pee Mak* and culturally hybrid films like *Feng Shui* exhibit ritual consistency and symbolic frameworks (e.g., geomancy, karma) that illustrate belief as both performative and rooted in legitimate spiritual authority.

These techniques—progressive revelation, spatial-historical anchoring, and institutional validation—help prove that Southeast Asian spiritualities are lively and trustworthy systems. These films ensure that belief is shown and accepted, both in the story and by the audience, by not reducing local beliefs to simple "folklore" for exotic appeal, but instead presenting them clearly through structure, feelings, and a logical story.

Market Adaptation and Transnational Circulation: From Theatres to Streaming Platforms

Three iterations of market adaptation for Southeast Asian horror films demonstrated the interplay between distribution strategies, hybrid narrative development, and cultural validation.

Phase 1: Foundation Phase (2004–2013) — Establishing Cultural Frameworks

Southeast Asian horror films garnered international recognition during the Foundation Phase (2004–2013) via theatrical releases and festival circuits, aligning with Appadurai's (1996) concept of "controlled circulation." Films such as *Shutter*, *Feng Shui*, *Sukob*, and *Pee Mak* employed hybrid narrative techniques by integrating indigenous spiritual concepts with global horror clichés. *Feng Shui* incorporated Chinese superstition into urban haunting, whereas *Shutter* merged ghost photography with Thai karmic cosmology. These films, by their authentic depiction of local traditions, captivated audiences universally via established horror conventions. Table 1 below shows that this era marked the initial global prominence of Southeast Asian horror, exemplified by significant films from Thailand and the Philippines.

Table 1. Foundation Phase (2004–2013): Early Strategies of Hybrid Narrative Construction and Cultural Authentication in Southeast Asian Horror Cinema.

Country	Films	Hybrid Narrative Construction	Authentication Mechanisms
Thailand	Shutter, Pee Mak	Shutter: Integrates spirit photography tropes with Thai ghost traditions. Pee Mak: Reimagines Thai folklore (Mae Nak) with comedy and romance.	Pee Mak: Temporal anchoring via wartime setting; gradual cultural revelation.
Philippines	Feng Shui, Sukob	Both blend Chinese and Filipino superstitions with horror devices.	Use of familiar religious rituals and home-centered hauntings as anchors.

Table 1 highlights the fundamental narrative and cultural methodologies characterizing the initial period (2004–2013) of Southeast Asian supernatural horror cinema. During this period, filmmakers explored hybrid narrative structures that fused local mythology with universally recognized horror tropes, subsequently including elements of cultural authenticity to situate these narratives inside national contexts. *Shutter* exemplifies this dual approach in Thailand by merging Thai concepts of restless spirits and karmic justice with the universally recognizable theme of spirit photography. *Pee Mak* exemplifies early genre hybridity by reinterpreting the renowned Mae Nak ghost narrative through an unconventional amalgamation of horror, comedy, and romance. The film is set against a historical conflict backdrop and gradually unveils culturally specific elements such as society conventions and ceremonial rituals, thereby genuinely conveying its narrative.

Chinese and indigenous Filipino superstitions are amalgamated in the Philippines within a horror framework in *Feng Shui* and *Sukob*. These films anchor their topics in domestic settings and quotidian religious rituals while constructing hybrid tales through the interplay of foreign and indigenous concepts—exemplified by the Bagua mirror curse in *Feng Shui*. This foundation in familiar contexts and methodologies enhances audience recognition and cultural relevance.

These films collectively illustrate initial efforts to reconcile local specificity with worldwide appeal, so establishing a basis for subsequent advancements in narrative hybridity and cultural authenticity within the genre.

The interview results corroborate these conclusions. Filmmakers intentionally crafted scenarios that would resonate with local audiences while remaining comprehensible to a broader demographic. The director of *Shutter*

stated, "We aimed to illustrate that horror can be both culturally specific and universally appealing." Through Shutter, we synthesized a concept that is both recognizable and innovative by merging the common fear of ghosts and the afterlife with regional spiritual beliefs. Critics recognized Shutter and Feng Shui as early examples of Southeast Asian supernatural hybridity. A commentator from the Philippines stated, "*Feng Shui* embodies the cultural amalgamation of the Philippines, merging Filipino and Chinese superstitions." Audience reactions corroborated this, as a Thai viewer stated, "Watching *Pee Mak* resembled an ancient ghost tale brought to fruition—humorous, frightening, and deeply intertwined with our beliefs." These disclosures indicate that the Foundation Phase established not only narrative conventions but also the emotional and cultural foundations for the global acceptance of the region.

Phase 2: Development Phase (2014–2018) — Expanding Narrative Complexity and Ritual Depth

The Development Phase (2014–2018) marked a period of transformation as hybrid distribution models—cinema, film festivals, and emerging digital platforms—facilitated enhanced direct audience engagement through social media. This created feedback loops between producers, artists, and spectators. Films such as *The Housemaid*, *The Third Wife*, *Seklusyon*, and *Satan's Slaves* expand the genre by integrating global standards with national religious and historical motifs. *The Housemaid* examined Vietnamese colonial suffering via a Western gothic lens, but *Satan's Slaves* converted sorrow into existential dread by integrating Islamic eschatology into a familial horror narrative. Table 2 below shows that these films employed advanced cultural authentication methods, including institutional validation through religious iconography and rituals, as well as spatial and historical anchoring and validation.

Table 2. Development Phase (2014–2018): Expanded Narrative Experimentation and Evolving Authentication Strategies in Southeast Asian Horror Cinema.

Country	Films	Hybrid Narrative Construction	Authentication Mechanisms
Vietnam	<i>The Housemaid</i> , <i>The Third Wife</i>	<i>The Housemaid</i> : Gothic ghost story meets colonial Vietnam setting.	Spatial anchoring in colonial plantation; temporal anchoring in Indochina era.
Indonesia	<i>Satan's Slaves</i>	Blends Islamic eschatology with family-horror tropes.	Use of Islamic prayers and mourning rituals; gradual revelation.
Philippines	<i>Seklusyon</i>	Catholic imagery (confession, sin, exorcism) fused with rural folklore.	Institutional integration via Church spaces and clergy roles.

Table 2 shows the development of Southeast Asian supernatural horror films, marked by complex ways of connecting to culture and significant changes in storytelling. Filmmakers of this era began to expand genre conventions by integrating historical, theological, and institutional frameworks to enhance the narrative and cultural essence of their films.

The Housemaid exemplifies the fusion of a Western Gothic background with a distinctly Vietnamese colonial setting. Situated in French-occupied Indochina, the ghostly plantation estate serves as a site of both historical tragedy and horror. This spatial and temporal context in a colonial history not only authenticates the ghost narrative but also allows postcolonial subtext to emerge inside the genre.

Satan's Slaves revitalizes a longstanding Indonesian horror franchise through an Islamic eschatological framework. The film adeptly situates its horror by integrating religious motifs such as prayer rituals, funeral ceremonies, and otherworldly concepts aligned with Islamic religion, thereby intertwining it with familial tragedy and a suspenseful pace. The gradual revelation of supernatural abilities enriches the tale, illustrating the tension between visible and unseen elements within Islamic belief systems.

Seklusyon (2016) exemplifies genre hybridity in the Philippines by merging rural supernatural narratives with Catholic iconography, including confession, penance, and demonic possession. The film's realism is enhanced by its institutional backdrop in a secluded religious retreat and the prominent roles of clergy, thereby depicting the Church as both a site of terror and a moral guide. This distinctive amalgamation of theological doctrine and folkloric dread creates a multifaceted landscape of spiritual horror in the Filipino context.

These films collectively demonstrate an evolution in Southeast Asian horror cinema, wherein genre innovation is increasingly aligned with historically and theologically rooted cultural expressions, hence offering more nuanced and evocative storytelling.

Responses from interviews during this period reveal filmmakers' growing self-awareness and global consciousness. An Indonesian filmmaker stated, "We aimed to investigate horror not solely as fear but also as faith, grounded in everyday existence." Disturbing recollections of religious mourning rituals and funerals inspired *Satan's Slaves*. One commentator remarked, "It was not solely about ghosts; it was about haunting as a legacy of colonialism," while Vietnamese commentators praised how *The Housemaid* intertwined terror with historical grief.

Audience feedback evolved; social media facilitated more complex interpretations of culture. "The portrayal of the Catholic Church was abysmal as it mirrored our genuine apprehensions—not of demons, but of compromised institutions," stated a Filipino *Seklusyon* observer. These findings indicate that the development phase marked a transition toward complexity, in which horror transformed from societal critique to spiritual contemplation.

Phase 3: Contemporary Phase (2019–2024) — Platform Optimization and Cultural Intensification

During the Contemporary Phase (2019–2024), streaming platforms became the main way to distribute films, which changed how movies are made by focusing on improving algorithms, adding international subtitles, and making metadata more visible (Lobato, 2019). Films such as *The Medium*, *Death Whisperer*, *KKN di Desa Penari*, *Satan's Slaves 2: Communion*, *Vietnamese Horror Story*, *The Ancestral*, and *Eerie* have increased their connection to local spiritual beliefs, even though there are concerns about losing cultural identity. Films such as *The Medium*, *Death Whisperer*, *KKN di Desa Penari*, *Satan's Slaves 2: Communion*, *Vietnamese Horror Story*, *The Ancestral*, and *Eerie* have augmented their engagement with indigenous spiritual systems, notwithstanding apprehensions regarding cultural dilution. These works focus on immersive surroundings, institutional symbolism, and ceremonial precision. *Eerie* situates Catholic tyranny within a gothic monastery, employing a media that fuses mockumentary aesthetics with Thai animist shamanism. Table 3 illustrates how these films optimize national specificity while expanding global distribution, thereby demonstrating how horror in the streaming era increases cultural sensitivity.

Table 3. Contemporary Phase (2019–2024): Platform-Optimized Storytelling and Strategic Cultural Authentication in Southeast Asian Horror Cinema.

Country	Films	Hybrid Narrative Construction	Authentication Mechanisms
Thailand	<i>The Medium</i> , <i>Death Whisperer</i>	The Medium: Animist rituals, mockumentary, possession horror.	Deep ritual accuracy, spatial anchoring in Isan region
Vietnam	<i>Vietnamese Horror Story</i> , <i>The Ancestral</i>	Blend of Vietnamese ghost lore with Western jump-scare aesthetics	Settings grounded in old houses or war-era trauma; gradual revelations
Indonesia	<i>Impetigore</i> , <i>KKN di Desa Penari</i> , <i>Satan's Slaves 2</i>	Local village myths and urban horror tropes; Islamic elements	Use of rural isolation, rituals, and time-specific community beliefs
Philippines	<i>Eerie</i>	Catholic school haunting, repressed trauma, and convent iconography	Institutional integration of Catholicism; nuns, confessionals, prayers

Table 3 illustrates the contemporary age of Southeast Asian supernatural horror films characterized by the dominance of digital media and a conscious strategy for cultural representation. Filmmakers have changed their storytelling methods to appeal to viewers who watch online from 2019 to 2024, focusing on eye-catching stories, shorter explanations, and rich cultural settings, which improves how they showcase and sell cultural uniqueness. *The Medium* exemplifies this dual inclination in Thailand with its amalgamation of mockumentary style, possession horror, and Thai animist traditions. The film's commitment to genuine ritual depictions and its setting in the rural Isan region root the supernatural elements in cultural uniqueness, while the pseudo-documentary technique enhances realism and engagement. Integrating frightening narratives with local spiritual traditions, optimized for viral online appeal, *Death Whisperer* perpetuates this pattern.

Both *Vietnamese Horror Story* and *The Ancestral* amalgamate contemporary horror conventions, such as Western style jump scares and stylish pacing, with traditional Vietnamese ghost folklore. Cultural anchoring can be done by evocative settings—often antique colonial residences or war-torn landscapes—that reference national trauma and familial disintegration, aligning effectively with the psychological and sensory expectations of digital audiences.

Films such as *Impetigore*, *KKN di Desa Penari*, and *Satan's Slaves 2* illustrate Indonesia's consistent role in enhancing genre hybridity during this period. Frequently located in isolated rural areas where terror arises from local traditions and ancestral convictions, these narratives amalgamate Islamic apocalyptic themes, urban legends, and folkloric practices. This spatial and temporal specificity enhances cultural relevance and captivates viewers globally who are intrigued by exoticized dread rooted in genuine mysticism.

Eerie skillfully intertwines Catholic iconography with themes of institutional authority and female anguish within the context of a haunting convent school in the Philippines. The film's horror distinctly illustrates Catholic elements—nuns, confessionals, and religious discipline—depicting the Church as both a spiritual authority and a psychologically oppressive entity. This setting, while familiar, is unsettling and facilitates both local engagement and global acknowledgment.

These films collectively illustrate a refined period of transnational horror production, when cultural markers are not only narratively significant but also commercially viable, attracting both domestic audiences and the global streaming market.

Filmmakers in the contemporary day increasingly utilize digital platforms not just for global visibility but also to reaffirm cultural and spiritual identity. A Thai producer of *The Medium* emphasized the film's objective of "documenting the functioning of rituals," thereby incorporating animist practices into familial narratives. An Indonesian filmmaker said that although streaming "provides us with reach," it also necessitates "accuracy, respect, and pride" in authentically representing local values. Critics observed a resurgence of rural settings and traditional paradigms, which revealed the inherent tension between local substance and globalized structure. A Vietnamese audience member remarked that audiences appreciated this hybridity, stating that *The Ancestral* resembled "my grandmother's stories with Netflix production values." This period represents a convergence of economic strategy and cultural profundity, as Southeast Asian horror employs international platforms to preserve and showcase indigenous knowledge systems.

Cultural Heritage and Narrative Innovation as Global Strategy in Southeast Asian Horror Cinema

The Southeast Asian horror film strategically leverages cultural legacy and narrative hybridity over three phases—Foundation (2004–2013), Development (2014–2018), and Contemporary (2019–2024)—to attain global relevance while maintaining local uniqueness. Regional filmmakers reinterpret indigenous cosmologies, ceremonial systems, and colonial legacies as narrative resources instead of emulating Western horror, so transforming cultural obscurity into emotionally resonant cinema.

Films such as *Shutter* and *Feng Shui* amalgamated indigenous spiritual beliefs with universal horror tropes (e.g., karmic retribution, ancestral apparitions, geomancy), thus situating supernatural menaces inside recognizable urban and domestic settings. This phase reconciles accessibility with cultural uniqueness, so embodying Appadurai's concept of "controlled circulation."

Due to internet distribution and festival exposure, the development phase experienced increased experimentation. Through spatial-historical anchoring and institutional validation, films such as *The Housemaid* and *Satan's Slaves* integrated horror within the contexts of colonial trauma or Islamic burial customs. Interviews with filmmakers from this period reveal a conscious effort to enhance spiritual realism while engaging international audiences, suggesting that innovation was driven by refinement rather than the obliteration of tradition.

Platform optimization in the contemporary phase engages with more stringent ceremonial detail. Streaming algorithms and global subtitling impact films such as *The Medium*, *Eerie*, and *KKN di Desa Penari*, which are grounded in regional languages, visual symbolism, and ritual authenticity. Rather than compromising culture for broader appeal, directors employ contemporary techniques to enhance visibility and cultural authenticity. "We desire the ceremony to convey experience rather than explanation," remarked a Thai director.

Comments from social media audiences have underscored the necessity of spiritual sincerity. A Filipino observer noted that "the most terrifying aspect was not the demon" in *Seklusyon*. The film demonstrated how our actual experiences can taint sacred locations. Horror consequently becomes a medium for ethical storytelling, cultural remembrance, and socio-religious critique.

Southeast Asian horror films have achieved global significance by combining narrative creativity with cultural richness. This "third space" facilitates hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), transforming the genre from a source of concern into a platform for cultural assertion and global discourse.

DISCUSSION

Southeast Asian supernatural film has emerged as a crucial site of cultural expression where local knowledge systems intersect with global cinematic forms. This genre constitutes a cultural practice that redefines itself through spiritual realism, hybrid cosmologies, and narrative immersion, rather than merely replicating Western horror.

Hybrid Epistemologies: Horror as "Third Space"

Southeast Asian supernatural films operate within what Bhabha (1994) refers to as a "third space," a realm of cultural negotiation characterized by hybrid forms rather than mere replication of global horror archetypes. Films such as *The Medium* (Thailand), *Seklusyon* (Philippines), and *Satan's Slaves* (Indonesia) exemplify this hybridity by integrating animist, Islamic, and Catholic concepts into the core of their narratives. These are epistemic systems that shape character, narrative, and emotional tone rather than superficial concepts (Bräunlein & Lauser, 2016; Ancuta, 2023; McPherson, 2024).

Kitiarsa's (2005, 2008) theory on religious hybridization is essential, as it shows how belief systems in these films are fluid and negotiated, reflecting the broader spiritual landscape of the region. *The Medium* presents shamanic ceremonies as fundamentally moral and emotional rather than merely folkloric exhibitions.

Ritual Realism and Emotional Resonance

These films engage audiences in indigenous spiritual reasoning through "ritual realism" (Ancuta, 2023), thereby associating fear with spiritual experience rather than skepticism. Gradual narrative revelations and meticulous aesthetics effectively depict karmic justice and ancestral grievances in *KKN di Desa Penari*, *Shutter*, and *Vietnamese Horror Story*. Ong's (1999) notion of "spiritual modernity" is particularly insightful: the supernatural does not oppose contemporary existence but serves as a means to critique capitalist disruption, familial disintegration, and moral decline.

This storytelling technique enhances what Mayward (2023) describes as "emotional translatability," the capacity to evoke love, grief, and horror across diverse cultural contexts. Horror thus becomes both affectively universal and culturally distinctive.

Spatial Memory and Moral Geography

Rural settlements, colonial estates, and convents serve as the geographical settings of the genre, functioning as what McCloud (2018) describes as "spiritual topographies." These environments are permeated by trauma, memory, and unresolved spiritual energy. In *Impetigore* and *The Housemaid*, haunting serves as a metaphor for generational trauma and historical brutality, in addition to functioning as a supernatural device (Hollan, 2022). The supernatural is positioned inside moral geographies, where cultural transgressions have spiritual repercussions.

Institutions and Ambivalent Authority

Numerous films conflate official religion with folk belief. Secularism and eerie inquiries challenge Catholic institutions by employing supernatural concepts that both bolster and subvert ecclesiastical authority (Ng, 2014; Galt, 2021). *Satan's Slaves* illustrates the intricate connection between institutional religion and the supernatural by merging Islamic rituals with elements of horror. Prioritizing spiritual accountability over knowledge uncertainty, these representations contest conventional understandings of terror.

Transnational Platforms and Cultural Optimization

Digital platforms like Netflix and MUBI have facilitated what Grgić (2023) calls "minor transnationalism"—enabling global circulation without eroding cultural specificity. Distribution infrastructure shapes genre perception: subtitling practices, algorithmic curation, and user analytics frame how Southeast Asian horror is received and understood (Lobato & Ryan, 2011). The result is a form of "cultural optimization," where filmmakers maintain ethnographic precision while aligning with global narrative conventions.

Genre Innovation and Market Risks

The hallmark of the region's supernatural films is genre hybridity. For younger, digitally adept audiences, films such as *Pee Mak* amalgamate horror, comedy, and melodrama (Ainslie, 2017; Khoo et al., 2020). Despite its risks, this genre experiment promotes cultural creativity. As Southeast Asian horror gains prominence, there is a danger of reducing cultural diversity to a commodifiable distinction—specifically, the commercialization of "authenticity" for global consumption.

Rewriting Global Horror

Ultimately, by deliberate hybridity, Southeast Asian spooky cinema asserts cultural agency. These films actively contribute to altering global terror dynamics, rather than only engaging passive viewers. By including animist beliefs, different religions, and memories of colonialism in ways that everyone can understand, these films challenge Western-style horror and expand the themes and spiritual ideas in the genre (Ainslie & Ancuta, 2018; Good et al., 2022).

Through this approach, they elevate beyond simple entertainment to serve as cinematic interventions that commemorate, challenge, and redefine the parameters of global cultural engagement.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Key Findings

This research examined how Southeast Asian supernatural cinema (2004–2024) navigates the complex interplay between global market adaptation and cultural-religious syncretism. This study used a detailed approach that included analyzing texts, interviewing experts, and mapping contexts to explore how directors from Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia create stories that blend local spiritual beliefs with common horror themes.

Findings indicate that Southeast Asian horror films inhabit a transnational "third space," where local ritual systems and spiritual beliefs are not diminished but intentionally utilized to achieve global appeal. Regional filmmakers recreate global horror aesthetics using regionally based narrative and representational techniques rather than adhering to established genre conventions. This hybridization process affirms the autonomy of Southeast

Asian creatives in advancing culturally authentic cinematic forms within the media industry and expanding genre boundaries.

Implications of the Study

This work has significant implications in theoretical, industrial, distributional, and audience dimensions.

This illustrates that cultural specificity and spiritual embeddedness do not necessarily hinder the circulation of global stories, thereby theoretically advancing transnational media and genre theories. Southeast Asian supernatural films illustrate how localized cosmologies can foster genre innovation and cultural hybridity, serving as a valuable platform for transnational negotiation.

Industrially, the findings challenge the prevailing notion that indigenous belief systems impede global appeal. In contrast, attributes such as symbolic complexity, spatial-historical context, and ritual authenticity have significant advantages in global horror markets, enhancing narrative impact and cultural distinction.

The study highlights the significant influence of platform-specific techniques, particularly film festivals and streaming services, on representational and aesthetic choices in distribution. Improving the worldwide visibility of culturally important content mainly depends on methods like optimizing metadata, providing subtitles in multiple languages, and using algorithms to curate content.

The increasing global preference for spiritual and culturally rooted horror indicates a broader trend toward emotional authenticity and ethical storytelling. Audiences want stories that connect with local beliefs, moral values, and social-spiritual backgrounds, showing that horror can reflect culture and help understand different cultures, not just provide entertainment.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its comprehensive methodology, this study has certain limitations.

Initially, there were merely sixteen films from Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia available for selection. While this facilitated relative depth, the exclusion of nations such as Malaysia, Myanmar, and Cambodia constrained the study's geographical comprehensiveness.

Second, the reliance on English-subtitled versions of the films may have resulted in the omission or simplification of culturally nuanced dialogue and ritual-specific terminology, thereby compromising interpretive precision due to linguistic and translational constraints.

The study looks at the years from 2004 to 2024, leaving out earlier important research and new trends after 2024, which limits understanding of both the past and the future. The absence of perspectives from religious leaders, government representatives, and rural audiences diminished the cultural and institutional breadth of the findings, despite the valuable insights provided by professional respondents.

Lastly, limited access to data from private streaming platforms made it hard to fully analyze trends in digital circulation, how audiences engage, and how algorithms affect what content is shown. These limitations indicate avenues for further research to substantiate and expand the study's conclusions.

Recommendations

This report offers several recommendations for future research, industry practices, and educational advancement.

Researchers should look at future studies to include supernatural films made after 2024 and explore how new technologies—like virtual environments and AI-assisted production—are changing the rules of the genre. Comparing this with other postcolonial horror traditions, like Latin American and African cinema, could help explain how different genres mix together across countries. Comparing this with other postcolonial horror styles, like those from Latin America and Africa, could help explain how different genres mix together across countries. We encourage national cultural agencies to acknowledge horror as a legitimate artistic expression for regional film enterprises. Financing development projects that promote ceremonial precision, spiritual direction, and culturally rooted storytelling would augment the creative and cultural value of the genre.

Streaming platforms ought to prioritize Southeast Asian horror for global distributors through co-production initiatives, strategically selected algorithmic promotion, and enhanced subtitle quality. These measures would enhance global awareness while preserving the cultural specificity essential for these narratives.

Film schools and training programs ought to integrate modules on ethnographic research, spiritual representation, and transnational genre theory for educators and filmmakers. These workshops would assist emerging filmmakers in navigating the demands of global markets while preserving cultural integrity.

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