

*Introductory essay for the “Memory of the World” film series, as published in the catalogue of the Giornate del Cinema Muto, Sacile, Italy, September 2003*

## **EAST OF THE SUN, WEST OF THE MOON: A REGION IN MEMORY**

**Ray Edmondson**

It has so often been the lot of the nations of South East Asia and the Pacific to be defined not in their own right, but by reference to somewhere else. The countries clustered in and around the South China Sea are the “far east”, while the Pacific islands, Australia and New Zealand are “down under”. That is, if your vantage point is that of the “west”: the dominant nations of the northern hemisphere which colonised most of “down under” and the “far east” during the empire-building epoch of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Of course, the half-a-billion people who inhabit these countries see the world from their own perspective. Their cultures are complex, ancient and rich: indeed, the Australian aborigine represents the oldest continuous culture on the planet, and the Chinese, Malay, Thai and Indochinese peoples proudly trace their lineage back to the dawn of recorded history.

It should therefore come as no surprise to learn that both the kinoscope and cinematograph arrived in this region within months of their invention, and indigenous production soon followed. Most countries developed their own distinctive cinema industries and traditions, on varying scales. The Philippines, for example, has long been the world’s third largest producer of feature films, after India and the U.S.A. Australia is the world’s oldest, having originated the format itself in 1906. Indonesia’s and Hong Kong’s industries may, by some standards, be the best known – for they are the only South East Asian cinemas to receive any discussion in the recently released *Oxford History of World Cinema*.

Most countries in the region are developing countries, having emerged from long periods of colonisation. In some cases – as in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and East Timor – it has been with great difficulty, war and trauma. Others have been shaped by colonisers: after centuries of Spanish, then American, domination, Filipinos sometimes like to describe their culture as the product of “300 years in a convent, then 50 years in Hollywood”. The European settler societies of New Zealand and Australia seek to express their own sense of identity, the former as a bi-cultural European/ Polynesian society, and the latter still conscious of its origins as a grim penal colony for the social refuse of Britain.

The cinema has been the documenter – and in some cases the shaper – of these emerging nations during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of their coming to terms with globalisation, and of their peoples’ understanding of their national identity, history and culture.

Beginning with the Australian Commonwealth in 1901 and recently culminating in East Timor, the movie camera has actually recorded the birth of most of these countries as independent political entities in the modern sense.

Given the importance of these national cinemas, why are they so little known?

On one level, the reasons are linguistic, cultural and commercial. Each country makes films in its own language(s) and this automatically limits distribution possibilities. Trying to break into mature markets ruled by American and European paradigms is difficult, so the films tend to gravitate to the margins, consigned as exotica rather than joining the mainstream. Nor are they in a good position to compete on budgets or big marquee names.

On another level, the reasons are archival. The tragic truth is that cinema histories in the region, especially in the silent and early sound eras, must perforce be written about films that mostly no longer exist. They cannot be seen, studied and evaluated by the world's film historians, critics and students. It is here that we confront the cruel reality of film preservation in the developing world and especially in South East Asia-Pacific. So many of the films survive only in memory, and in fragments of publicity and other documentation.

In tropical countries, the hot and humid climate is very destructive of film stock, like all other audiovisual media. In developing economies with limited foreign exchange, the funds are simply not available to build the necessary climate-controlled storage buildings and to bankroll preservation work needing imported film stock, machinery and consumables. As we have been reminded by recent events in Iraq, Afghanistan, East Timor and Yugoslavia, the effects of war, ideology and administrative collapse are hardly conducive to the safekeeping of cultural heritage. For in addition to financial resources, film archiving requires not only stability and continuity, but the right administrative structures and professional expertise.

Film archiving began in the relatively affluent countries of Europe and North America, and historically its international structures and agendas have been largely focussed on that part of the world. That this is now beginning to change is largely due to the efforts of organisations in the "have not" countries which have realised that self-help is the best way to raise awareness, draw attention to their needs and begin changing the paradigm.

It is this background that led archives in the region to set up SEAPAVAA - the South East Asia Pacific Audio Visual Archive Association - in 1996. Like FIAF (International Federation of Film Archives), AMIA (Association of Moving Image Archivists) and the other federations it has a truly international membership: but its objectives and agenda are firmly focussed on the development of audiovisual archiving *in this region*. Like them, it has an annual conference – somewhere *in the region*. In its fairly short life to date it has graduated to formal relations with UNESCO and membership of the CCAA (Coordinating Council of Audiovisual Archive Associations). In 2004, in Hanoi, its annual conference will be held jointly with FIAF – the first time in FIAF's history that it

has shared its annual gathering with another association. Some see in SEAPAVAA a glimpse of the future shape of the audiovisual archiving field: a pattern based more on regional groupings than global. Time will tell.

SEAPAVAA provides a network for its members, runs training events, produces publications, a newsletter, and an annual symposium – in other words, the range of activities which would be expected of a professional association within the archiving field. Its distinctive feature, besides the fact that it embraces *all* the audiovisual media, not just film, is its *regional* focus. It has set out to help archives support each other and grow, share skills and improve the environment in which they operate within a logical and cohesive region of the world, and take opportunities to raise the profile of the region and make their collections more visible to the world.

To illustrate how this is really happening, let me share two case studies: one involving Laos and Vietnam, the other Australia and the Philippines.

In 1998, the Vietnam Film Institute (VFI) in Hanoi repatriated to the Lao National Film Archive and Video Centre (LNFA) in Vientiane some 1600 reels of film which the VFI had been storing for over 30 years, because Laos had not, until recent times, possessed a film archive with storage facilities good enough to house the material in the country's tropical climate. During those 30 years, Hanoi itself had been under attack by bombing, and later had endured the privations of rebuilding an economy ravaged by decades of war. Nevertheless, it had protected the films of its neighbour.

Last year it went one step further. Under the umbrella of a cultural agreement between both countries, the VFI has launched a project to refurbish and re-equip the storage and other facilities of the LNFA with funding provided by the Vietnamese government. It is an eloquent expression of priorities that Laos, one of the world's poorest countries, is able to maintain an organisationally distinct national film archive when many richer countries do not: and that Vietnam, also a developing country and deserving of aid, is itself able to give aid to professional colleagues in need.

Let's move now to the Philippines and their huge film industry which, even before World War II, had accrued hundreds of silent and sound feature films to its credit – musicals, melodramas, romances, and horror films turned out by a studio system and star system which, by the 1930s, had created something of a golden age. How many films from this golden age are now known to survive? Two hundred? One hundred? Fifty? Twenty five?

No. Five. Yes, *five*. And not even all in good copies. For example, one of them, a 1939 musical called *Giliw Ko* ('Beloved') survived only in a single 16mm print so shrunken and distorted that it was presumed unrecoverable. The story of how *Giliw Ko* was restored back to 35mm, in a collaborative exercise between the Philippine Information Agency and the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, is a long and fascinating one which shows just how closely two archives in different countries can cooperate in a technical project. When, on 15 November 1998, the Australian Government formally presented the restored negative to the Philippine Government - as an official gift on the

occasion of the Centenary of the Philippine Republic - a cultural and political statement was being made which had many nuances. When, immediately following that presentation, the restored film was screened, in the presence of two of the original stars, to a packed VIP audience in the glittering Cultural Centre of the Philippines, the real significance of the film's recovery became clear. I was there: let me try to recreate the experience.

If you have ever seen a mediocre black and white 16mm image, copied up to 35mm and then projected with a magnification factor of many thousands, you will know how utterly awful it looks. Sitting in the darkened auditorium, as the jumpy and grainy main titles rolled up on the huge screen, I began to cringe. What had we done? What will they think? Had we all walked into a diplomatic and public relations disaster? Would the people in this prestigious audience quietly endure this deteriorating old movie, and at the end make polite remarks as they left the reception quickly to avoid embarrassment? Would they go away wondering why we had linked the whole thing to an occasion as important as their national centenary?

Ten minutes into the film the audience began to react. A laugh here. A murmur there. A little applause as a well-remembered actor appeared. And it kept building. Amazingly, this 60 year old musical reached out across the years, through all the technical limitations, and took hold of its audience. At the end, when the lights went up, the two stars were mobbed for autographs. Everyone realised that a precious piece of Filipino heritage had been rescued and restored to the people. You could feel it. Everyone was affected by it and the nation was the richer for it. I left elated, with the infectious music running around in my head, and was not surprised that *Asiaweek* later ran a special feature on the event.

Those realisations bring us to the series being inaugurated at this festival. Each year we hope to present a program of films from one country within the SEAPAVAA region. Not all countries will be equally covered, for not all have sufficient material surviving from their early cinema to make up a cohesive program. But we intend to recall the memory of the region as effectively as the surviving material allows us to do.

But we don't want to stop there. Other regions of the world, below the radar of the traditional Euro-American ideas of "world cinema", have their film heritage too – and their archives. The countries of Africa, Central America, the Arab world and Central Asia, for example. Of course, the same problems and economics of film survival loom large there as well. And so many of their archives are pitifully under funded. They are mostly outside the orbit of the professional federations, for which all too often they cannot afford the membership fees. The cycle is self-perpetuating: invisibility encourages neglect.

The vision which drives this series also drives a relatively new UNESCO program which is only now beginning to be recognised by the world's film archives and filmgoers. It's called the "Memory of the World" and this series is presented, with pride, under its auspices.

What is “Memory of the World”? It is, in a sense, the ‘document’ equivalent of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, through which the world’s most precious buildings and natural sites are recognised and protected. It has an extraordinarily ambitious aim: to lift the profile of all the world’s archives and libraries, to materially change the value and esteem in which they are held by governments and peoples, and to help preserve threatened materials by attracting attention – and assistance – to their plight. And ‘all’ means exactly that – not just the parts of the world that happen to be familiar to you or me.

Documents take many forms, and film is one of them. Like the World Heritage Convention, “Memory of the World” operates a register of the world’s great documents – things like the Gutenberg Bible, the manuscripts of Copernicus – and, if we go ‘down under’, Australia’s Endeavour journal of Captain James Cook and New Zealand’s Treaty of Waitangi. The register is so far just six years old, but films are beginning to be added. The very first to be included was Fritz Lang’s 1927 masterpiece *Metropolis*.

So, borrowing the evocative, peculiarly appropriate title of a 1914 book of Norwegian legends illustrated by Kay Nielsen, we start our journey “East of the Sun and West of the Moon” with a program from the National Film Archive of Thailand. The archive’s founder, Dome Sukvong, and others have laboured passionately for many years to trace and preserve surviving gems of early Thai cinema. For the historical information that follows, I’m indebted to one of the historians of Thai cinema, Chalida Uambumrungjit.

The earliest known film screening in Thailand was on 9 June 1897. It was promoted as “the wonderful Parisian cinematograph” and was presumably a program of Lumiere films. In the same year, Thailand’s ruling monarch, King Chulalongkorn, and his brother Prince Sanbassatra, travelled in Europe. Two film records of that trip, shot by European cameramen, survive. The prince brought cinema equipment from Paris back to Bangkok, and began the royal family’s fascination with film making. The prince proved to be a prolific filmmaker and his work was shown by commercial exhibitors.

At first, film exhibition was the province of travelling showmen. The first permanent cinema, “The Japanese Cinematograph” was opened in 1905 by Japanese entrepreneurs. So popular did it become that *nang yipun*, of ‘japanese film’ soon became a generic term for all moving pictures, and with the arrival of other theatres exhibition blossomed. Most screens were filled with European and American fare.

Another member of the royal family, Prince Kambeangbejr, set up a government film making unit, the Topical Film Service of the State Railways. It produced promotional documentaries for the railways and other government bodies, and released them for commercial screening: it also took on commission work from the private sector. The Topical Film Service became a training ground for the emerging industry. It cooperated with an American producer, Henry MacRae, to make what may be the first Thai feature film, *Nang Sao Suwan* (“Suvana of Siam”) in 1923 with an all Thai cast.

The first indigenous Thai feature was made in 1927 by the Wasuwat Brothers' Bangkok Film company. Called *Chok Song Chun* ('Double Luck') it can still be glimpsed in a surviving one minute fragment. Two months later the Siamese Film Company released a second indigenous feature, *Mai Kid Leuy* ('The Unexpected') of which only stills now survive. A total of 17 silent features were made in Thailand.

The Bangkok Film Company made two silent features after *Chok Song Chun*, neither of which survive, and then went on to experiment with synchronised sound films. Their first sound feature, *Long Tang*, ('Going Astray') was premiered on 1 April 1932, the Thai New Year and also the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Bangkok. The story of a farmer seduced by a bar girl, it was controversial for its provocative love scene and its nudity. Renamed as the Sri Krung Sound Film Company, it went on to considerable success, building a fully equipped studio, copying Hollywood methods and making 25 features over the next decade – almost all of which are now lost.

A specialty of Thai cinema is live dubbing. It originated in economic necessity, when the Siam Film Company, overstocked with silent films, adapted the Japanese "benshi" concept and developed the idea of a group of performers, equipped with background music and each able to provide a range of voices for different characters, who would provide narration and dialogue for silent and, later, sound films. In every cinema there was a small room next to the projection booth for the use of dubbing performers. Since many members of the audience could not read this was an important practice even when screen titles were in Thai. In regional areas the dubbing would be done in the local dialect.

The technique allowed foreign films to be screened easily to Thai audiences. It also helped in the transition to full synchronised sound production in Thailand, for some smaller studios could not afford the necessary equipment and so continued to make silent films, relying on dubbing performers to provide the dialogue and sound effects at public screenings. The practice of live dubbing lasted well into the 1960s, its style still influences production practice, and even today there are still performers proficient in the art.

The program you will see this year is mostly documentary material. Though it may not be very obvious from the images, bear in mind the context of a nation undergoing great change: modernising, coming to terms with foreign influences, moving through the difficult transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. Unlike its neighbours, Thailand was never colonised: it retained its independence through astute diplomacy and the capacity to adapt. Try to let your imagination extend beyond the surviving film clips and fill in the spaces: and let us cheer on the passionate archivists of Thailand who, even today, continue to find missing pieces in the jigsaw puzzle of the past.

I commend "our region in memory" to you in the hope that we will all travel a widening road with expanded vision, as we explore new territory in the filmic realm of the Memory of the World.

*Acknowledgement: Some parts of this essay have drawn on an introductory essay by David Hannan in the SEAPAVAA book “Film in South East Asia: Views from the Region” (2001)*

*To learn more about SEAPAVAA, visit [www.geocities.com/seapavaa](http://www.geocities.com/seapavaa)*

*To explore the ‘Memory of the World’, visit [www.unesco.org/webworld/mdm](http://www.unesco.org/webworld/mdm)*

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**Ray Edmondson** was founding President of SEAPAVAA from 1996 to 2002 and continues to serve as an ex officio member of its Executive Council. He also serves in various capacities at the national, regional and international levels of UNESCO’s ‘Memory of the World’ program and is the author of its current *General Guidelines*.