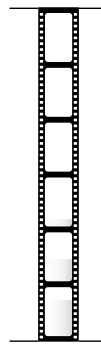


# Thailand at the movies

FOLLOWING THE SUCCESSFUL WRAP OF *SHANGHAI* STARRING JOHN CUSACK AND RUMOURS THAT *HANGOVER 2* WILL BE FILMED IN THE KINGDOM, JOEL GERSHON LOOKS AT THAILAND'S PLACE IN THE FILM INDUSTRY AND FINDS OUT WHY INTERNATIONAL PRODUCERS ARE FLOCKING TO SET THEIR SCENES HERE



*Shanghai* was filmed in Thailand in 2007. Amusing anecdote?

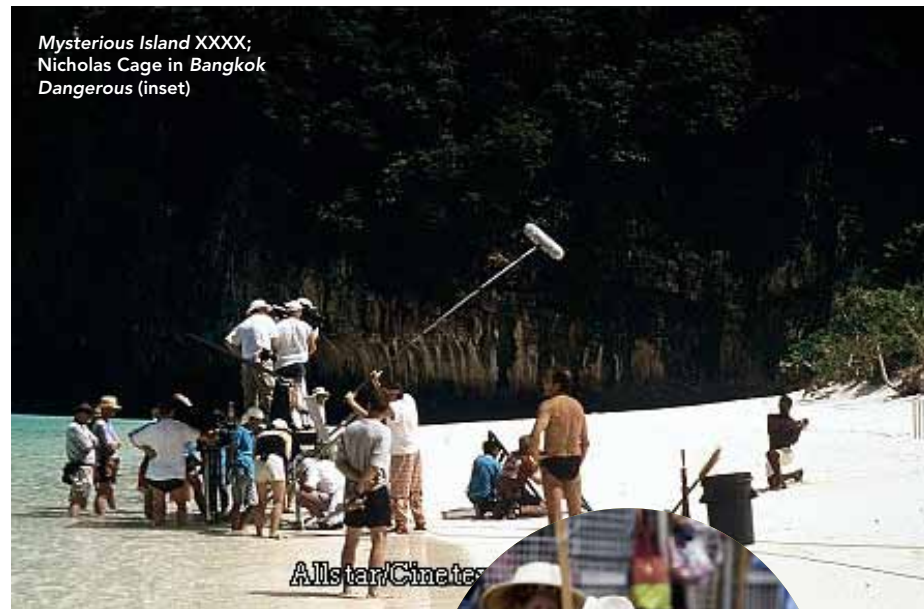


It's not just tourists who come to admire the spectacular natural settings in Thailand; filmmakers have been coming to the Land of Smiles for decades to capture some of the kingdom's gorgeous landscapes. Notable films that were at least partially filmed here include 1978 Academy Award-winning *The Deer Hunter*; Roger Moore-era 007 flick, *The Man With The Golden Gun* (there's still a James Bond Island in Krabi Province); Oliver Stone-directed biopic *Alexander*; Stone's *Heaven and Earth*; Danny Boyle's cult classic, *The Beach*; and Stallone's latest addition to the Rambo series.

Over the years, Thailand's film-service industry has built a reputation for performing at an internationally recognised high standard. Foreign filmmakers can still expect access to the most modern filming equipment, much of which is already available domestically. Local companies offer personnel who can operate all such equipment, often with greater flexibility than Western crews are used to, thanks mostly to a lack of unionisation.

Best of all, production crews coming from overseas can enjoy the benefits of working with Thai companies for much less money. The rule of thumb is that it costs about a third of the price of filming in the US or Europe (though recent fluctuations have seen this gap close slightly). Chris Lowenstein, a producer with Living Films, the company that coordinated the making of *Bangkok Dangerous* starring Nicholas Cage, said there was no need to import equipment for the large scale Hollywood production and that only five or six crew members were brought in from overseas.

"I love making films in Thailand," Lowenstein says, reflecting on his 17 years in the country. "Thais are professional and prepared for any type of film, and the



easy-going nature of Thai people makes the process of making films here so enjoyable," he continues. "The film crews work incredibly hard. During a night shoot at 4am, it's not unusual to see a Thai grip literally sprint across the set to grab a piece of needed equipment."

The good word of mouth about Thailand has encouraged an ever-increasing number of international filmmakers to shoot feature films, documentaries, commercials and music videos Siam side. According to Wanasiri Morakul, director of the Thailand Film Office, there were approximately 500 foreign productions of all types filmed in Thailand last year, which generated around one billion baht (more than US\$30 million).

In addition to the stunning natural attractions that draw millions of tourists to Thailand each year – beaches and islands, forests, waterfalls and caves – urban environments can be either replicated in the streets of Bangkok or in one of the 38 film studios across the city. There are also world-class sound stages available, motor homes for actors, as well as makeup and wardrobe trailers.

ไม่เพียงแต่นักท่องเที่ยวเท่านั้นที่ชื่นชอบธรรมชาติอันงดงามของประเทศไทย หากแต่บรรดาผู้สร้างภาพยนตร์ต่างพากันเดินทางมายังสยามเมืองยิ้มเพื่อถ่ายทำภาพยนตร์ เช่นภาพยนตร์เรื่องอเล็กซานเดอร์ของผู้กำกับโอลิเวอร์ สโตน หรือเรื่อง เดอะบีช ของผู้กำกับแดนนี่ บอยล์ ในช่วงไม่กี่ปีที่ผ่านมา อุตสาหกรรมภาพยนตร์ในประเทศไทยได้สร้างชื่อเสียงในระดับนานาชาติ ด้วยอุปกรณ์การถ่ายทำที่ครบครัน กอปรกับบุคลากรที่มีความเชี่ยวชาญ ในอัตราค่าใช้จ่ายเพียงหนึ่งในสามของค่าใช้จ่ายหากถ่ายทำที่อเมริกาหรือยุโรป >>



Shanghai in Bangkok: The ambitiously conceived backdrop for the soon-to-be released film would not have been financially viable in the West; Mikael Hafstrom directs a violent scene (inset below); and Chow Yun-Fat, Gong Li and John Cusack at ? (inset right)

Lowenstein's Living Films recently worked on *Shanghai*, the soon-to-be-released thriller from The Weinstein Company, starring John Cusack, Gong Li and Chow Yun-Fat. Elaborate sets constructed at Bangkok's Moon Star Studio evoked a 1940s Shanghai underworld feel, complete with vintage props, including World War II-era Japanese tanks. Other relics were sourced at local markets. Near the street sets, a massive ship façade was constructed on site.

"As far as Asia goes, I can't think of a place that's better suited for Westerners to film", says Jake Myers, who produced *Shanghai*. "Thailand has a better service industry for the way that we make movies", he adds. "Asia can be hard for Westerners to get to, but a lot of international crew have moved to Thailand and they know how to work in our system. It almost costs nothing to build sets there and you can stay at the classiest resorts in the world for very little."

Jude Walko, who previously worked on such films as

*Dude, Where's My Car?* and *The Wedding Planner*, came to Thailand to work at The 6th Element, a full-service production service company. The firm was hired to help coordinate the 2005 big-budget, *Stealth*, starring Jamie Foxx and Jessica Biel, along with films from Korea, Russia, Croatia and India (Thailand has become a very popular site for Bollywood films).

Companies like Living Films and The 6th Element work with foreign producers to help schedule films, set budgets, assign a cash flow system and get contracts signed.

"We facilitate all needs from pre-production through to the end of principal photography, and even post-production [see following page] if the client so chooses," Walko explains. "That means everything from logistics to planning are put into place. This includes getting permissions, location scouting, import of crew and equipment, travel



accommodations, crewing up, legal, financing and lab work," he

continues. "In short, from the moment the foreign producer arrives in Thailand to the time their last crew member leaves, we are responsible for assisting all their needs."

Applying for permission to shoot for certain television shows or for music videos has been made easier by a one-stop service centre set up by the Thai Film Office, which sees the application process finished after three working days. For feature films, reality shows, TV dramas or mini-series, applications need to be filed at least 14 days in advance, as script approval must be sought from the Film Board. Wanasiri Morakul of the Film Office said filmmakers must be culturally sensitive to the monarchy, and any production showing the government or religion in a poor or negative light would be unlikely to receive permission to shoot.

Currently, there are no government incentives to give breaks to production crews as there are elsewhere, notably Canada: now a white-hot place to film thanks to the government's encouragement. Whether Thailand should incorporate incentives was a topic of lively debate during a special panel discussion at the 2009 Bangkok International Film Festival in September last year. Tom Waller, the Thai-British founder of De Warrenne Pictures (producer of the 2008 Cannes Film Festival entrant *Soi Cowboy*), attended the panel, but said he didn't mind that there were no fiscal enticements to attract foreign filmmakers.

PHOTO: JOEL GERSHON (ABOVE)

## WHO TO WATCH

### THE THAI ACTORS AND FILMMAKERS MAKING WAVES

As well as being an in-demand location for off-shore movie makers, Thailand has its own thriving cinema scene. These films are generally made for a domestic audience, who love horror and slapstick.

A few Thai films have penetrated the international market, such as the Muay Thai action flick *Ong Bak* and its sequel, featuring action star Tony Jaa; and gender bending drama, *Beautiful Boxer*.

**Prachya Pinkaew** (*Ong Bak*) is currently prepping for *Elephant White* starring Djimon Hounsou, a rare crossover opportunity for a Thai director to work with a Hollywood



star. **Ananda Everingham** appeared in a staggering 10 films in 2007-2008 and is one of the most recognisable local stars (though he's actually Lao-Australian). He is set to play the lead in *Red Eagle*, a remake of the 1960s Thai crime fighting action hero by director Wisit Sasanatieng (*Tears of the Black Tiger*).

Dancer/actress/model **Sirin "Cris" Horwang** and actor **"Ken" Theeradeth Wongpuapan** both made a big impression on Thai filmgoers in *Bangkok Traffic* (*Love Story*, a hit Rom Com directed by Adisorn Trisirikasem, which earned the most in the Thai box office in 2009).



คำบอกเล่าปากต่อปากถึงศักยภาพของประเทศไทยช่วยดึงดูดผู้สร้างภาพยนตร์ชาวต่างชาติ ในปีที่ผ่านมา มีกองถ่ายทำภาพยนตร์ต่างชาติกว่าห้าร้อยกองเข้ามาถ่ายทำในประเทศไทย สร้างรายได้เป็นมูลค่ากว่าพันล้านบาท

คุณเจด เมเยอร์ โปรดิวเซอร์ภาพยนตร์เรื่องเซียงไฮ้ กล่าวว่า ประเทศไทยเป็นหนึ่งในเอเชียเมื่อพูดถึงสถานที่ถ่ายทำภาพยนตร์ อุตสาหกรรมท่องเที่ยวของประเทศไทยช่วยให้การถ่ายทำเป็นไปได้อย่างง่ายดาย นอกเหนือจากนี้ ประเทศไทยยังมีบริษัทบริการการถ่ายทำครบวงจรอย่างเดอะ ซิกซ์ เอเลเมนท์ ที่ให้บริการตั้งแต่การขออนุญาตการถ่ายทำ การหาสถานที่ บุคลากรและอุปกรณ์ การเตรียมการเดินทาง ไปจนถึงเรื่องกฎหมาย >>

# “As far as Asia goes, I can’t think of a place that’s better suited for Westerners to film”

JAKE MYERS, PRODUCER OF *SHANGHAI*

“The reality is that filming in Thailand is extremely good value for money already, and it’s unlikely that the government here will come up with any dedicated incentives to promote the film industry,” Waller admits. “There is always talk of building studios and tax breaks, but really they amount to nothing more than wishful thinking. But I like the fact that there are no real rules here – that makes life much easier.”

Another attendee at this panel was Gregg Hale of Haxan Films, who produced *The Blair Witch Project*, which at the time was the most profitable film ever made, earning about a quarter of a billion dollars. Hale said he liked what he saw during his trip to Thailand.

“We are absolutely planning on shooting in Thailand in 2010,” says Hale. “We are concentrating on a mixed martial arts (MMA) film that would connect to the amazing tradition of Muay Thai (Thai kickboxing).”

However, anyone out there thinking about shooting in Thailand should consider certain issues before filming here, according to Jake Myers, the producer of *Shanghai*. “A big one is the heat and you can’t control that. You can get sweaty actors and melting wardrobes,” he explains. “There are solutions out there that the Thais have come up with, but the weather is not to be overlooked.”

Still, Myers says he was very happy with his experience in Thailand and has fond recollections. “What I found wonderful was at the wrap party all the Thais brought their families and wanted us to take pictures with them; it was all really great.

“I would bring another movie there in a second if it were the right fit. It’s better than shooting in Hong Kong and [mainland] China, and if I had to build a huge back-lot like the one for *Shanghai* I could never pull it off in the West.”

## IT’S A WRAP

### THAILAND IS GAINING GROUND AS A POST-PRODUCTION DESTINATION

While it makes sense that the elephants, beaches and Thailand’s fascinating culture would draw filmmakers, why has the country become a hotspot for editing?



According to John Galvin,

director of post-production at Oriental Post in Bangkok, clients can save 20% on Western facilities’ rates.

Paul Stambaugh, Technicolor Asia’s MD in Bangkok, points also to other intangibles that make Thailand attractive for this work, which is why the 90-year-old company set up shop in Bangkok seven years ago.

“Of the countries we looked at, we found the Thai workforce to be dedicated, hard working, with a sense of *sanuk* [Thai for happy and fun],” said Stambaugh.

Big budget films that have used Technicolor Asia’s facilities include *American Gangster* and *Bangkok Dangerous*, and the Japanese film prints for *Where the Wild Things Are*.

Oriental Post has worked on *Rambo IV* among other recent releases. “Besides the relaxed atmosphere, Thailand has a reputation for offering good value for money and commitment to the scheduled deadline,” said Galvin.

An Oriental Post Bangkok

แม้ว่าในปัจจุบัน รัฐบาลไทยไม่ได้ให้ทุนช่วยเหลือสนับสนุนอุตสาหกรรมการถ่ายทำภาพยนตร์เช่นประเทศอื่นๆ  
อย่างแคนาดา คุณทอม วอลเลอร์ ผู้ก่อตั้ง เดอ วาเรน พิคเจอร์ส กล่าวว่า ประเทศไทยเป็นสถานที่  
ที่ถ่ายทำที่คุ้มค่าเงินอยู่ในตัวอยู่แล้ว ไม่ว่าจะรัฐบาลจะให้ความสนับสนุนหรือไม่ก็ตาม

อย่างไรก็ตาม กองถ่ายที่สนใจถ่ายทำในประเทศไทยไม่ควรละเลยเรื่องบางเรื่อง คุณเจด เมเยอร์กล่าวว่า เรื่องสำคัญ  
เรื่องหนึ่งคืออากาศที่ร้อนระอุ ที่อาจทำให้นักแสดงเหงื่อแตกหรือเสื้อผ้าร้อนจนละลาย แม้กระนั้น คุณเจดก็ยังชื่นชอบ  
ประเทศไทยและกล่าวว่า เขายินดีที่จะถ่ายทำภาพยนตร์ในประเทศไทยอีกโดยไม่ต้องเสียเวลาคิด หากเนื้อเรื่องเหมาะสม