

Screams Across the Mekong: A Horror Film Exploration in Five Nations

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Abstract

Horror films serve as powerful cultural artifacts through which societies express anxieties, preserve folklore, and negotiate moral complexities. This qualitative study investigates horror cinema across five Mekong nations—Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam—through a comprehensive comparative cultural analysis framework. The research examines how these films reflect and engage with local spiritual beliefs, historical traumas, societal concerns, and the tension between tradition and modernity. By analyzing 15 culturally significant horror films selected based on regional relevance, box office performance, and IMDb ratings, the study identifies recurring themes including death, spiritual retribution, karmic justice, isolation, gender dynamics, and the disruptive impact of technology on traditional belief systems. The methodology employs qualitative content analysis grounded in semiotic and narrative theory, triangulating film content with scholarly literature, film reviews, and cultural-historical sources. This approach reveals how Mekong horror films function as both entertainment and pedagogical tools that interrogate ethical dilemmas, preserve collective memory, and critique social structures. The study addresses a critical gap in global horror scholarship by offering the first comprehensive cross-national analysis of Mekong horror cinema, demonstrating how these films contribute to national identity formation, regional cultural dialogue, and global cinematic discourse. The findings underscore the role of horror cinema in preserving cultural identity while engaging with contemporary social dynamics, revealing shared regional anxieties alongside nation-specific narrative strategies.

Keywords: comparative film studies, cultural pedagogy, folklore, Southeast Asian cinema, spiritual beliefs

Introduction

Horror films have long served as a medium through which cultural anxieties, fears, and folklore are vividly expressed, offering a unique window into the collective psyche of societies (Carroll, 1990; Shaw, 1997). In the Mekong region—comprising Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam—horror films represent a genre that has evolved by integrating both indigenous traditions and global cinematic influences. These films function not merely as entertainment but also as cultural texts that encode spiritual beliefs, historical traumas, and moral frameworks specific to their national contexts.

The comparative study of horror films across different nations, particularly within non-Western contexts, is a relatively new domain of academic inquiry. Udy (1973) explores the methodological challenges inherent in cross-cultural studies, noting that such research often requires the synthesis of data from diverse cultural settings, each with its unique sociopolitical and historical backgrounds. His work emphasizes the need for a thorough and nuanced understanding of each culture to avoid misinterpretation or reductionism when comparing horror films across nations like those along the Mekong River.

Gallagher and Savage (2013) reinforce this need by pointing out that comparative cross-cultural analysis can reveal much about national identities and societal fears embedded in media like horror films. Their review suggests that online communities and media studies, though different from traditional film studies, offer valuable frameworks for understanding cross-national horror film traditions. For example, the rise of online horror forums across Mekong nations might serve as both a site of consumption and production of local horror culture, deeply influencing how films are made and received within each country.

Horror films' ability to elicit strong emotional responses such as fear, disgust, and anxiety is well-documented, but Martin's (2019) empirical review brings to light the nuances of how these reactions vary across cultures. His work identifies key psychological motivators behind audience preferences for horror films, including sensation-seeking behavior and coping mechanisms with fear. This is particularly relevant in a cross-national study of Mekong nations, where cultural attitudes toward fear and the supernatural significantly influence how horror films are both produced and consumed. For instance, horror films in Thailand often draw on Buddhist mythologies and local folklore, evoking a distinct cultural response rooted in spiritual fear and moral consequences, whereas Vietnamese horror may focus more on historical trauma and the supernatural as it intersects with the nation's past. Such national variations in audience responses suggest that horror films reflect and reinforce the psychological and emotional landscapes of their respective cultures, making them rich sites for cross-cultural psychological inquiry.

The work of Noel Carroll (1990), as analyzed by Shaw (1997), delves into the philosophical aspects of horror, particularly how audiences experience fear and disgust through the lens of fictional monsters. Carroll's concept of "art-horror," which distinguishes between the fictionalized monsters in horror films and real-world fears, helps explain the widespread appeal of horror films across different cultures. In the context of Mekong nations, horror films often present culturally specific monsters—such as spirits, ghosts, or mythical creatures—that embody local fears and superstitions. Carroll's theory that the satisfaction of horror comes not from the monsters themselves but from the narrative structure resonates with the storytelling techniques seen in Mekong horror films, where folklore and mythology are integral to the plot's suspense and resolution. This philosophical perspective on horror highlights the role of cultural monsters in the Mekong nations' cinematic traditions. These creatures serve as metaphors for social anxieties—such as fear of the unknown, political instability, or spiritual retribution—that transcend mere entertainment to offer cultural commentary. The frequent recurrence of such monsters in Mekong horror films suggests an ongoing negotiation of identity and fear within these societies.

The Mekong region encompasses five nations with interconnected yet distinct cultural, historical, and spiritual landscapes. This diversity stems from shared geographical proximity along the Mekong River, yet divergent colonial experiences, religious traditions, and political trajectories have shaped unique national identities.

Colonial Legacies and Historical Trauma: The region bears deep scars from colonialism and conflict. Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam experienced French colonial rule as part of French Indochina (1887-1954), which disrupted traditional governance structures and introduced Western cultural influences. Cambodia's subsequent trauma under the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) resulted in the deaths of approximately 1.7 million people, creating a profound collective wound that continues to resonate in contemporary cultural production. Vietnam's protracted wars—first against French colonialism, then the American War (1955-1975)—have left indelible marks on national consciousness. Myanmar's

British colonial experience (1824-1948) and subsequent military dictatorships have created layers of suppressed memory and ethnic conflict. Thailand, while never colonized, has navigated complex relationships with Western powers and regional influences, maintaining cultural continuity while adapting to modernization pressures.

Religious and Spiritual Traditions: The region's spiritual landscape is characterized by syncretic belief systems that blend formal religious traditions with indigenous animistic practices. Theravada Buddhism predominates in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand, emphasizing concepts of karma, rebirth, and moral causation that profoundly influence horror narratives. In Vietnam, Buddhism intersects with Confucian ethics, Taoist cosmology, and ancestor veneration, creating a distinct spiritual framework that shapes cultural production. Across the region, animistic beliefs in spirits (*phi* in Laos and Thailand, *neak ta* in Cambodia, *nat* in Myanmar, *ma* in Vietnam) coexist with formal religious structures, providing rich symbolic resources for horror cinema.

Ethnic Diversity and Internal Tensions: Each nation contains significant ethnic minorities whose cultural practices and historical experiences differ from dominant groups. Myanmar's ongoing ethnic conflicts, Thailand's tensions with Muslim populations in the southern provinces, Vietnam's highland minority groups, and Cambodia's Cham and Vietnamese minorities all contribute to complex national narratives that occasionally surface in horror films as metaphors for otherness, suppression, or unresolved historical grievances.

The comparative study of horror films across cultures, particularly in non-Western contexts, necessitates robust frameworks that balance cultural specificity with analytical comparability. Udy (1973) underscores the challenges inherent in cross-cultural research, stressing the importance of contextual sensitivity to avoid reductionism. Similarly, Gallagher and Savage (2013) contend that comparative media studies must consider national production contexts and audience reception to effectively capture the embedded societal fears and identities.

From a psychological standpoint, Martin (2019) illustrates how emotional responses to horror—such as fear, anxiety, and disgust—are influenced by cultural beliefs regarding death and morality. In the Mekong region, these variations become particularly evident: Thai horror often draws on Buddhist concepts of karmic fear, while Vietnamese horror frequently channels historical trauma and familial guilt, thereby revealing culturally specific psychological landscapes.

Philosophically, Carroll (1990) and Shaw (1997) define “art-horror” as rooted in narrative structures rather than merely in the presence of monsters. Mekong horror aligns with this notion by employing culturally distinct supernatural figures—like karma-driven ghosts or animistic spirits—that metaphorically convey social and moral anxieties.

Cole (2016) further develops the idea of cinema as a form of pedagogy, positing that films transmit ethical and societal values through emotional engagement. Mekong horror serves as a prime example of this concept, using fear to explore themes of communal identity, collective memory, and ethical dilemmas.

Finally, Tamborini and Salomonson (1996) investigate horror's impact on social behavior, suggesting that repeated exposure to fear and moral conflict can shape societal perceptions. This lens helps elucidate how Mekong horror films either reinforce or challenge cultural norms, religious beliefs, and collective fears, functioning as both entertainment and social commentary.

Despite the richness of cultural diversity, spiritual beliefs, and historical complexity embedded within horror cinema from the Mekong region, this area remains significantly underrepresented in global academic discourse. While substantial scholarship has been devoted to Japanese horror (J-horror) and Korean horror (K-horror), Southeast Asian horror—particularly from the five Mekong nations—has received comparatively limited critical attention. This study seeks to address that gap by offering the first comprehensive, cross-national comparative analysis of horror films from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. It explores how horror narratives are shaped by, and respond to, specific historical traumas and cultural contexts unique to each nation. Moreover, the research identifies both shared regional motifs and distinct narrative strategies that reflect each country's socio-cultural landscape. By examining how horror films serve as cultural artifacts—preserving folklore, interrogating moral frameworks, and negotiating tensions between tradition and modernity—this study not only enhances understanding of Mekong horror cinema but also contributes to the broader field of global horror scholarship by foregrounding non-Western traditions.

Objective

The research objective is to examine horror films as cultural artifacts that express the social values, beliefs, cultural, and spiritual dynamics of the Mekong region.

Lens

Analytical Framework

This study employs a comparative cultural analysis framework grounded in qualitative content analysis. It integrates semiotic theory, narrative analysis, and elements of cinematic discourse analysis to interpret horror films as culturally-embedded texts. The semiotic approach, informed by Roland Barthes' theory of cultural semiotics, allows for an examination of how films encode meaning through visual symbols, sonic cues, and narrative codes. This includes analyzing religious iconography, natural elements, architectural spaces, and costume design as visual signifiers, as well as traditional music, chanting, and ambient sound to create affective atmospheres.

The analysis also explores narrative codes, such as culturally-specific story structures, archetypes, and moral plot devices. Drawing from narrative theory, particularly Vladimir Propp's morphology of folktales and Joseph Campbell's hero's journey, the study investigates character functions (e.g., protagonists, antagonists, helpers) and plot structures that convey moral and cultural messages. It examines how resolutions—whether through redemption, punishment, or ambiguity—reflect underlying value systems.

Additionally, the study delves into cinematic language by analyzing formal elements such as *mise-en-scène* (lighting, setting, and spatial composition), camera work (framing, motion, perspective), editing (pacing and temporal shifts), and sound design (dialogue, silence, music) to uncover how meaning is constructed through film form. Finally, discourse analysis is utilized to explore the ideological dimensions of the films, focusing on themes such as gender roles, class hierarchies, tradition versus modernity, individual versus collective responsibility, and spiritual versus secular worldviews.

This multi-layered analytical framework provides a nuanced reading of horror cinema as a cultural medium that reflects and negotiates societal anxieties and values across the Mekong region.

Film selection criteria

This study offers an analysis of a curated sample of 15 horror films, showcasing the three most prominent titles from each of the five Mekong nations—Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam—as of October 2024. The selection coincides with the Halloween season, a time when interest in horror cinema typically peaks.

To ensure both cultural significance and analytical validity, several criteria were applied during the film selection process. The primary criterion was cultural relevance; the selected films needed to engage meaningfully with local traditions, spiritual beliefs, folklore, or societal issues, thereby serving as cultural artifacts that reflect each nation's unique horror conventions. Box office performance was also considered, as commercial success within national markets serves as an indicator of local resonance and cultural relevance. Additionally, critical reception was evaluated through IMDb ratings, providing a cross-cultural perspective on the films' impact and visibility beyond their countries of origin. To capture the evolution of the genre and maintain contemporary relevance, the films span a temporal range from 2004 to 2024. Accessibility was also a key consideration; all selected films were required to have English subtitles or adequate translation resources to facilitate accurate interpretation.

Although the sample size of 15 may appear limited, it is strategically justified. A focused sample allows for in-depth analysis rather than a broad overview, enabling a detailed examination of each film's narrative structure, symbolic systems, and cultural context. Furthermore, selecting three films per country ensures balanced national representation, supports analytical feasibility for triangulation with secondary sources, and provides ample scope for comparative analysis while preserving cultural specificity. The selected films and synopsis summary are described below.

Cambodia

Don't Close Your Eyes (2023): A group disturbs an ancient pagoda's burial site, awakening vengeful spirits who enforce karmic retribution for sacred space violation.

The Ritual Black Nun (2023): A nun's spirit, embodying both Buddhist authority and Khmer Rouge collective trauma, returns to punish those who desecrated religious spaces.

Tenement (2024): Urban poverty and social alienation in Phnom Penh manifest as supernatural horror within a neglected apartment building.

Laos

Chanthaly (2012): A young woman confined by illness confronts her deceased mother's spirit, exploring grief, isolation, and familial bonds.

Dearest Sister (2016): A woman's ability to see ghosts becomes commodified for lottery numbers, critiquing modernization's impact on spiritual beliefs.

The Long Walk (2019): A protagonist communicates with spirits from the past, reflecting Laotian belief in spirits' continued proximity to the living.

Myanmar

The Mother (2019): A vengeful mother's spirit seeks retribution for violations of family honor and traditional values.

Stranger's House (2019): Psychological horror explores internal terrors and historical amnesia through a haunted house metaphor.

The Naked Ghost (2021): A ghost embodies unresolved shame and humiliation, representing societal pressures around honor and conformity.

Thailand

Shutter (2004): Ghostly apparitions in photographs represent karmic consequences of past guilt and moral transgression.

The Medium (2021): A mockumentary exploring spiritual possession within rural shamanic traditions and tensions between authenticity and exploitation.

Death Whisperer 2 (2021): Vengeful spirits linked to unresolved moral consequences demonstrate Buddhist teachings about karmic justice.

Vietnam

Ám Anh (2016): Psychological aftermath of loss manifests as supernatural horror, representing unresolved grief and trauma.

Family Curse (2017): Generational transmission of trauma and guilt within patriarchal family structures creates supernatural consequences.

The Lost Tour: Vietnam (2019): Urban explorers in a remote village face supernatural forces, highlighting tensions between modernity and tradition.

Data Collection and Sources

Primary Data: The 15 selected films serve as primary data sources, treated as cultural artifacts that encode social, spiritual, and historical contexts. Multiple viewings of each film enabled detailed analysis of narrative structure, visual symbolism, character development, and thematic content.

Secondary Data: This study employs a diverse array of secondary data sources to enhance and contextualize its film analysis. Scholarly literature forms the theoretical foundation, encompassing academic research on Southeast Asian cinema, horror genre studies, cultural anthropology, and postcolonial film theory, thereby situating the research within established discourses. Insights from film reviews and critical commentaries by both regional and international critics further enrich the analysis, allowing for a broader understanding of each film's reception among audiences and critics alike.

Analytical Process

The analysis was conducted through a systematic five-stage process aimed at balancing close textual analysis with comparative and contextual depth.

Stage 1: Individual Film Analysis involved a detailed examination of each film, supported by extensive note-taking to identify key themes, symbols, narrative structures, and culturally significant visual or dialogic elements. This stage established preliminary interpretations rooted in the national and cultural contexts of each film.

Stage 2: National Pattern Recognition entailed comparing three films from each country to identify nation-specific horror conventions, recurring symbolic systems, and culturally embedded references, all of which were linked to the historical and social backdrop of each nation.

Stage 3: Cross-National Comparison provided a comparative analysis across all five Mekong nations, revealing shared regional patterns—such as motifs of spiritual unrest and unresolved trauma—while also highlighting divergent narrative strategies and stylistic choices that reflect each nation's unique sociopolitical landscape.

Stage 4: Triangulation with Secondary Sources sought to validate and enrich interpretations through the incorporation of scholarly literature, critical reviews, cultural-historical texts, and anthropological research, ensuring cultural accuracy and depth.

Finally, Stage 5: Synthesis and Interpretation integrated the findings to construct overarching analytical themes and a comparative framework that evaluates the contribution of Mekong horror cinema to the broader field of global horror scholarship.

Limitations and Mitigation Strategies

This study acknowledges several limitations inherent in its design and methodology. First, the potential for cultural interpretation bias arises from the researcher's positionality, which may influence the reading of culturally specific elements. To address this, the analysis is triangulated with multiple secondary sources, including the work of native scholars, and incorporates reflexive practices that explicitly acknowledge interpretive limitations. Second, film accessibility—particularly regarding titles from Laos and Myanmar—poses a challenge, as limited distribution restricts broader sampling. This limitation is mitigated by focusing on the most accessible and culturally significant films while transparently acknowledging sampling constraints and suggesting future research as national film industries evolve. Third, translation and language barriers may affect interpretation, as reliance on subtitles can obscure nuances in dialogue, wordplay, and culturally embedded references. To minimize this risk, the study checks multiple subtitle versions where available, cross-references native-language reviews, and emphasizes visual and narrative elements that are less language-dependent. Fourth, the study's temporal scope spans two decades (2004-2024), during which cultural sensibilities and filmic trends may have shifted. To account for this, each film is contextualized historically, and variation over time is acknowledged in the analysis of genre development. Finally, the relatively small sample size of 15 films may not capture the full diversity of horror cinema in each nation. Nevertheless, the selected works represent culturally significant and thematically rich examples, allowing for the identification of dominant trends, while recommendations for expanded future research are provided to encourage more comprehensive coverage.

Ethical Considerations

Although this research does not involve human subjects, it is guided by ethical standards concerning the representation of cultural and spiritual beliefs. A strong emphasis is placed on cultural sensitivity, ensuring that spiritual and religious elements are interpreted with deep respect for their cultural significance, and avoiding any dismissive, exoticizing, or reductive characterizations. To further uphold accuracy and respect, interpretations are grounded in scholarly literature and culturally specific documentation, minimizing the risk of misrepresenting belief systems or spiritual practices. The researchers also engage in reflexive awareness, acknowledging their own cultural positionality and the potential for interpretive bias or blind spots when working with non-Western cultural texts. Finally, all sources—filmmakers, cultural practitioners, and scholars—are cited appropriately, recognizing and crediting their creative and intellectual contributions to the cultural narratives examined in the study.

Findings from Screams

Distinct Tone

The horror cinemas of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam collectively demonstrate how supernatural narratives serve as vehicles for expressing historical trauma, spiritual beliefs, and evolving cultural identities across the Mekong region. Despite their shared regional foundations—particularly in Buddhist and animist traditions—each nation’s horror cinema articulates distinct thematic priorities and sociocultural concerns.

Cambodian horror is influenced by concepts of karmic retribution and the unresolved trauma of the Khmer Rouge era. Films such as *Don’t Close Your Eyes* and *The Ritual Black Nun* link spiritual violations to national suffering while critiquing gender dynamics within religious authority and portraying urban alienation amid rapid modernization.

In Laotian horror, which is deeply rooted in animist beliefs, themes of existential isolation, fluid boundaries between life and death, and tensions between tradition and modernity are prevalent. Films like *The Long Walk* and *Dearest Sister* explore the commodification of spiritual gifts and the persistence of ancestral spirits, using ghostly presences to convey grief and socio-economic anxieties.

Myanmar’s horror tradition tends to lean towards psychological horror and social critique. Works such as *Stranger’s House* and *The Naked Ghost* externalize feelings of shame, familial pressure, and historical amnesia, employing ghosts as metaphors for suppressed memories and cultural conformity. Horror, in this context, becomes a reflective space for confronting societal taboos and collective silences.

Thai horror, the most technically advanced in the region, intricately weaves together Buddhist teachings on karma, spiritual possession, and moral causation. Films like *Shutter* and *The Medium* depict the inescapability of past actions, the commercialization of spiritual practices, and the tension between rural traditions and modern skepticism, often showcasing high production values and global appeal.

Vietnamese horror focuses on themes of war trauma, intergenerational guilt, and patriarchal family structures. Films such as *Family Curse* and *The Lost Tour: Vietnam* use supernatural frameworks to critique Confucian hierarchies, address national memory, and explore the psychological legacies of Vietnam’s violent past. Female ghosts often symbolize repressed voices demanding justice and recognition.

Across the Mekong region, horror cinema emerges as a critical medium for negotiating memory, morality, and modernity. These films do more than entertain; they serve as cultural texts—both unsettling and insightful—through which societies explore their haunting preoccupations, both literally and metaphorically.

Common Fears in Mekong Horror Films

Horror films from the Mekong region—encompassing Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam—consistently reflect shared cultural fears related to death, spirits, and the supernatural. These themes resonate deeply with local audiences due to their authentic incorporation of spiritual beliefs, cultural symbols, and societal concerns. Despite their cultural specificity, these films also address universal fears such as mortality, spiritual retribution, isolation, and the tension between tradition and modernity. A comparative analysis reveals nuanced differences in how these themes are approached across the different national contexts.

Fear of Death and Spiritual Retribution: Across the Mekong region, death is conceptualized not as an absolute termination but as a transformation into another ontological state. Spiritual entities remain actively engaged in human affairs, reinforcing moral expectations and sustaining cosmological continuity. While belief in spirit proximity is regionally shared, distinct national configurations reveal divergent ethical emphases. In Cambodia, spirits serve as agents of karmic retribution, particularly regarding violations of sacred spaces (Table 1). In Laos, spirits embody an existential connection, existing in a liminal space between presence and absence (Table 1). Myanmar's ghosts often represent internal shame and psychological repression, acting as metaphors for social judgment (Table 1). Thai spirits underscore Buddhist principles of karmic causation (Table 1), whereas Vietnamese ghosts bear the weight of intergenerational trauma and historical memory (Table 1). These national variations reflect diverse cultural, historical, and spiritual priorities, illustrating how supernatural figures convey meanings that resonate with each society's ethical and cosmological frameworks. The comparative synthesis presented above is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Death and spirit conceptions across nations

Nation	Conception of death	Spirit characteristics	Narrative function
Cambodia	Karmic transition; unresolved spiritual debts	Vengeful when sacred spaces violated; enforcers of karmic law	Moral instruction about spiritual obligations
Laos	Permeable boundary; spirits accompany living	Proximate, communicative; neither fully present nor absent	Exploration of existential connection and isolation
Myanmar	Psychological manifestation; externalized shame	Embodiments of internal guilt and social judgment	Social critique and moral enforcement
Thailand	Karmic consequence; inescapable past	Sophisticated, purposeful; seek specific justice	Demonstration of moral causation and karmic law
Vietnam	Historical trauma; unresolved collective memory	Carriers of inherited guilt and familial burdens	Processing of historical and familial trauma

Isolation and Detachment: Themes of isolation—whether physical, psychological, social, or existential—are intricately woven into Mekong horror cinema, though they manifest in uniquely contextual ways. Vietnamese and Laotian horror films frequently portray physical isolation through remote villages or confined spaces, which leave characters vulnerable to supernatural forces (Table 2). For instance, films like *The Lost Tour: Vietnam* and *Chanthaly* employ spatial disconnection to underscore the fragility of modern individuals who find themselves detached from traditional communal structures. In Myanmar, psychological isolation is a significant focus (Table 2), particularly evident in *Stranger's House*, where the protagonist's internal detachment evokes a sense of dread that surpasses external threats. This dynamic reflects Myanmar's socio-political climate, where conformity and repression intensify individual alienation. Social isolation also plays a crucial role in Cambodian and Thai horror cinema (Table 2). In *Tenement*, for example, rapid urbanization and economic disparity contribute to a breakdown in community, with horror arising from the neglect of social bonds. Finally, Laotian and Burmese films often delve into existential loneliness (Table 2), illustrating how isolation represents not merely a situational condition but also a profound questioning of human connection, meaning, and memory. The comparative typology is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Types of isolation by nation

Type of isolation	Nations emphasizing	Horror function	Cultural significance
Physical	Vietnam, Laos	Creates vulnerability to supernatural	Anxiety about rural-urban divide, loss of traditional protection
Psychological	Myanmar, Vietnam	Externalizes internal struggles	Reflects socio-political pressures, historical trauma
Social	Cambodia, Thailand	Critiques modernization effects	Concern about community fragmentation, alienation
Existential	Laos, Myanmar	Explores fundamental human condition	Philosophical engagement with loneliness, meaning

Gender Dynamics and Power Structures: Mekong horror films frequently depict female spirits as embodiments of suppressed power and instruments of cultural critique (Table 3). These characters often challenge patriarchal structures within religious, familial, or social contexts. In *The Ritual Black Nun*, Cambodian horror confronts issues of institutional religious suppression, portraying the vengeful nun as a spiritual figure reclaiming agency within Buddhist frameworks (Table 3). Laotian films such as *Chanthaly* delve into familial obligations and maternal bonds, highlighting how traditional expectations limit female autonomy (Table 3). Myanmar's *The Naked Ghost* explores themes of gendered shame, illustrating the societal pressures that disproportionately affect women (Table 3), particularly when social honor is compromised. Vietnamese horror, especially in *Family Curse*, critiques Confucian family systems by revealing how inherited guilt and obligation are transmitted through female bodies (Table 3), often leading to devastating outcomes. Thai horror typically presents women as spiritual authorities—whether as mediums or shamans—but does so in an ambivalent manner, alternating between reverence and commodification (Table 3). Throughout the region, female ghosts are more than passive victims; they assert power, seek justice, and demand recognition, reflecting a complex negotiation of gender roles within spiritual and moral frameworks. The comparative framework is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 Gender dynamics comparison

Nation	Gender theme	Narrative approach	Cultural critique
Cambodia	Religious suppression of women	Vengeful nun with spiritual authority	Institutional marginalization within Buddhism
Laos	Familial duty and maternal bonds	Protective yet constraining mother spirits	Tension between filial piety and independence
Myanmar	Social shame and honor	Ghosts embodying gendered shame	Disproportionate social judgment of women
Thailand	Spiritual authority and possession	Female mediums with spiritual power	Ambivalent portrayal of feminine spiritual authority
Vietnam	Patriarchal inheritance of trauma	Generational transmission through women	Critique of Confucian patriarchal structures

Mekong horror cinema consistently portrays technology and modernity as ambivalent forces that destabilize established spiritual and social frameworks. Rather than celebrating technological advancement, these films frequently foreground its epistemological and ethical limitations (Table 4). In *The Lost Tour: Vietnam*, the failure of modern recording equipment to protect the protagonists from

supernatural entities underscores the limitations of rationality when confronted by traditional beliefs (Table 4). Thai films such as *The Medium* critique the commodification of spirituality, employing a documentary format to comment on the ways in which media exploits and distorts sacred practices. By contrast, *Shutter* creatively utilizes photography as a supernatural medium (Table 4), merging modern tools with traditional ghost narratives and demonstrating the genre's adaptability to evolving media landscapes. In Cambodia's *Tenement* and Laos' *Dearest Sister*, modernization is linked to social fragmentation, as economic development erodes spiritual and communal bonds. These films do not romanticize the past, but instead convey a sense of anxiety about what modernization displaces—ancestral wisdom, ethical frameworks, and communal connections (Table 4). Thus, technology emerges not merely as a narrative device but as a powerful symbol of cultural transition, loss, and moral ambiguity. The interconnected approaches to technology and modernity are summarized in Table 4, which presents the dominant thematic analysis along with their cultural anxieties.

Table 4 Approaches to technology/modernity

Approach to technology/modernity	Nations	Horror function	Cultural anxiety
Technology inadequate against spirits	Vietnam, Laos	Demonstrates limits of rationality	Fear that modernization abandons necessary spiritual protections
Technology exploits tradition	Thailand, Laos	Critiques commodification	Concern about authentic practices becoming commercial spectacle
Technology as medium for supernatural	Thailand	Innovative horror mechanics	Adaptation of traditional beliefs to modern contexts
Modernity creates alienation	Cambodia, Vietnam	Social critique through horror	Anxiety about community fragmentation and loss of traditional bonds

Moral Frameworks and Ethical Instruction: Mekong horror cinema serves as a form of moral instruction, deeply rooted in diverse philosophical and spiritual traditions (Table 5). In Buddhist-majority countries such as Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar, horror narratives highlight the principle of karma, illustrating that spiritual or moral transgressions lead to inevitable supernatural retribution. This reinforces Buddhist teachings on cause and effect (Table 5), with ghosts acting as enforcers of cosmic justice. In Vietnam, horror is significantly shaped by Confucian ethics, where values like familial harmony, filial piety, and generational responsibility are central. Violations of these duties invoke horror, reflecting a societal structure built on hierarchical family dynamics (Table 5). Laotian films, grounded in animistic traditions, emphasize the vital reciprocity between humans and spirits. Horror arises when this balance is disrupted—particularly when offerings are neglected or spiritual protocols are overlooked (Table 5). In Myanmar, horror often stems from the breach of social norms, where collective judgment and social conformity play a significant role in shaping individual behavior (Table 5). Across the region, horror films mirror culturally specific moral frameworks, presenting the supernatural as both a consequence of and corrective to human actions. Unlike Western horror, which frequently prioritizes individual survival or rebellion, Mekong horror emphasizes ethical lessons, communal responsibility, and spiritual accountability. The comparative moral configurations are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5 Moral frameworks comparison

Ethical framework	Nations	Horror trigger	Resolution	Cultural function
Buddhist Karma	Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar	Spiritual/moral transgression	Karmic retribution; moral restoration	Reinforces Buddhist ethics and moral causation
Confucian Filial Piety	Vietnam	Failure of family obligations	Acknowledgment of ancestors; family harmony	Maintains family-centered social structure
Animistic Reciprocity	Laos	Disrespect of spirits; protocol violations	Restoration of proper spirit relations	Preserves traditional spiritual practices
Social Conformity	Myanmar	Violation of social norms	Public acknowledgment; restoration of honor	Enforces social cohesion and conformity

The ethical, cultural, and theoretical dimensions of Mekong horror films reveal their significant role in both regional identity formation and global horror discourse.

Discussion: Mekong Horror as Cultural Pedagogy

First, these films serve as tools for ethical instruction, supporting Hong's (2010) view that religious horror fosters moral reflection. In Mekong cinema, supernatural horror vividly portrays ethical concepts like Buddhist karma and Confucian filial piety, making them emotionally relatable. Ghostly retribution highlights collective responsibility over individual guilt, contrasting with Western horror's individualistic focus. The narratives often present opportunities for redemption through ritual correction, emphasizing moral restoration rather than punishment as an end.

Second, these films operate as repositories of collective memory, fostering social cohesion in societies marked by rapid transformation. Cambodian and Vietnamese horror cinema, for example, address historical trauma linked to war and political violence, including the Khmer Rouge era (Table 6). The supernatural serves as a metaphor for repressed history, demanding acknowledgment. Additionally, these films reinforce communal values and identities by focusing on shared spiritual beliefs. They help transmit traditional moral codes and cultural narratives to younger audiences through popular entertainment, compensating for the decline of oral storytelling.

Third, Mekong horror critiques modernization by addressing its complexities rather than outright rejecting it. While recognizing the necessity of development, these films expose the cultural costs, including spiritual disconnection and the commodification of traditions (Table 6). The portrayal of technology as ineffective against supernatural forces in Thai, Laotian, and Vietnamese cinema raises concerns about losing traditional protections amid rapid change. These narratives promote a selective preservation of cultural values, advocating for adaptation while maintaining ties to tradition.

Fourth, the genre serves as a powerful medium for gender critique and negotiation. Female ghosts in Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese, and Myanmar horror films often embody suppressed feminine voices and trauma (Table 6), using the supernatural to express resistance against patriarchal systems. While some narratives reinforce traditional roles by punishing female transgressions, others—such as *The Ritual Black Nun* or *Family Curse*—provide sharp critiques of institutional and familial patriarchy. However, this gender discourse remains complex: female spirits are both agents of justice and figures of fear, reflecting the region's intricate negotiation of evolving gender norms within a transitional social landscape.

Finally, Mekong horror significantly contributes to global horror theory by challenging Western perspectives that focus on individual survival and psychological terror (Table 6). It emphasizes collectivist ethics, karmic morality, and spiritual causality, offering locally grounded narratives that explore universal themes like death, guilt, trauma, and social alienation while preserving cultural authenticity. This genre presents alternative modernities, providing pluralistic models of development and identity rooted in regional traditions. As a result, Mekong horror expands the thematic and moral scope of global horror discourse and asserts Southeast Asia's role in defining horror as both cultural expression and ethical pedagogy. The interconnected ethical, historical, gendered, and modernity-related dimensions discussed above are comparatively synthesized in Table 6, which maps the shared patterns and national distinctions that collectively define Mekong horror cinema's moral and cultural architecture.

Table 6 Comparative theme matrix

Theme	Cambodia	Laos	Myanmar	Thailand	Vietnam
Primary spiritual framework	Buddhist karma	Animism	Buddhist/Social	Buddhist karma	Confucian/Ancestor
Ghost function	Karmic enforcer	Spiritual companion	Psychological manifestation	Moral teacher	Trauma carrier
Primary fear	Sacred violation	Existential isolation	Social shame	Karmic debt	Historical guilt
Gender representation	Suppressed religious power	Familial constraint	Social judgment	Spiritual authority	Patriarchal burden
Modernity approach	Urban alienation	Commodification	Historical amnesia	Exploitation	Technology inadequacy
Moral resolution	Karmic restoration	Spiritual reciprocity	Social conformity	Karmic justice	Family harmony
Historical context	Khmer Rouge trauma	Colonial/traditional tension	Military suppression	Continuous tradition	War trauma
Isolation type	Social fragmentation	Existential/physical	Psychological	Spiritual separation	Physical/historical

Resonant Screams and Conclusion

This comparative study of 15 horror films from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam reveals that Mekong horror cinema functions as a culturally rich and socially engaged genre. Far beyond entertainment, these films serve as cultural artifacts, pedagogical tools, and vehicles of collective memory, offering ethical instruction and social critique through deeply embedded spiritual and historical frameworks.

Key regional themes include death as transition, karmic retribution, spiritual influence, ambivalence toward modernization, collective ethics, and female ghosts as expressions of suppressed voices. Each nation contributes distinct narratives: Cambodian horror emphasizes karmic justice and historical trauma; Laotian films explore animistic spirituality and existential isolation; Myanmar's cinema blends psychological horror with social critique; Thai films deliver technically refined karmic and possession narratives; and Vietnamese horror processes historical and familial trauma.

Theoretically, the study expands horror scholarship by challenging Western-centric paradigms, establishing the pedagogical role of horror in non-Western contexts, and identifying a distinct Mekong horror culture with shared regional and divergent national traits.

Limitations and future research include the need for broader Southeast Asian comparisons, deeper thematic focus (e.g., gender, folklore, class), audience reception studies, production context analysis, and investigations into streaming's impact on regional horror. Longitudinal and transnational comparisons could further situate Mekong horror within the global horror landscape.

Weaver's book (2013) explores audience engagement with horror films, focusing on psychological and emotional responses. It discusses factors influencing preferences, such as individual differences and cultural background. The research is crucial for understanding how audiences in the Mekong region connect with horror films based on their local cultural contexts. Tamborini and Salomonson's chapter (1996) examines how horror films influence social perceptions and behaviors, particularly in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, influencing local social norms, religious beliefs, and collective fears.

Practically, the findings benefit filmmakers, educators, and cultural preservationists by highlighting horror's role in sustaining tradition, expressing contemporary anxieties, and fostering regional identity. For cultural dialogue, these films offer insight into how Southeast Asian societies process trauma, negotiate modernity, and articulate ethical worldviews.

In closing, Mekong horror cinema emerges as a vital space for cultural expression—one that preserves memory, interrogates power, teaches morality, and imagines futures—underscoring its value in both regional and global film discourse.

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