PROCEEDINGS
International Conference on Literature
Himpunan Sarjana-Kesusastraan Indonesia (HISKI)
E-ISSN 2988-4357

From *Pee Mak* to *Kang Mak*: Cultural translation and narrative transformation in Southeast Asian film adaptation

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Abstract: *Transnational film remakes in Southeast Asia offer a rich site for comparative literature and intermedial studies, yet how deeply rooted cultural-religious systems are negotiated across national borders remains under-researched. This study analyzes the cultural translation and narrative transformation in the adaptation of the Thai horror-comedy Pee Mak Phrakanong (2013) into the Indonesian remake Kang Mak (2024). Using an intermedial comparative literature approach, the study combines Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation with Lawrence Venuti's distinction between domestication and foreignization, and applies a qualitative textual-visual analysis of both films. The analysis shows that the remake domesticates the setting into a vintage Indonesian rural context, transposes Buddhist-animist protection into Islamic-traditional spiritual frameworks, and reshapes the folkloric ghost into a kuntilanak-like figure, while retaining the core narrative structure and the theme of love that transcends death. Its humor is hybridized with Indonesian comedic traditions and star images. The study recommends that comparative literature curricula include regional intermedial adaptations to foster transnational cultural literacy.*

Keywords: *comparative literature, cultural translation, adaptation, intermediality, Southeast Asian cinema*

INTRODUCTION

Transnational film adaptations in Southeast Asia, particularly cross-national horror-comedy remakes such as the transformation of Thailand's Pee Mak Phrakanong into Indonesia's Kang Mak, constitute a rich yet insufficiently explored site from the perspectives of comparative literature and intermediality. This is especially true of the ways in which deeply rooted cultural and religious systems are negotiated across national borders. Official film remakes have become a widespread industry phenomenon in Asia, as studies of transnational cinema have noted, highlighting how global narratives are transformed within local contexts (Rawle, 2018; Stam, 2019). This phenomenon is increasingly relevant in light of recent research on Hollywood remakes in Asian cinema, which shows that cross-national adaptation is not merely passive translation, but a deliberate process of cultural recalibration designed to produce narratives that resonate locally while remaining globally intelligible (Sonni et al., 2025). Pee Mak is particularly worth examining because it has been studied as a cinematic tourism object that negotiates Thai national identity with the appeal of the international market (Thapthep, 2024). A similar pattern can also be found in Thai television, where Korean dramas are adapted for domestic audiences (Sinpongsporn, 2018).

Although research on Indonesian and Thai horror has developed considerably, studies specifically comparing religious domestication, the transformation of folkloric archetypes, and the hybridization of comedy in a single pair of official Southeast Asian remakes remain rare, particularly in the relatively recent case of Pee Mak and Kang Mak.

*Corresponding author:
How to cite (APA 7th): Ernalida & Sholikhah, H. A. (2026). From Pee Mak to Kang Mak: Cultural translation and narrative transformation in Southeast Asian film adaptation. *Proceedings 35th KIK, 35*, 273–287. https://doi.org/10.68634/kik.v35i.192

Research on hybrid genres in other transnational horror cinemas, such as contemporary British horror, shows that genre hybridity can provide a means for both film industries, the borrowing and the borrowed, to comment on one another (Decker, 2021). This dynamic may also be present between the Thai and Indonesian film industries, but it has not been explored extensively. In addition, the comedy and star image dimensions of this remake require a theoretical framework from star studies, especially the idea that a star's image is constructed through accumulated roles and a public persona associated with the actor (Dyer, 1986), alongside cultural-representation theory, which emphasizes that media meaning is always constructed through particular systems of representation (Hall, 1997), and a feminist-psychoanalytic framework for monstrous female figures in horror films (Creed, 1993). In response to this research gap, this study analyzes cultural translation and narrative transformation in the adaptation of Pee Mak Phrakanong (2013) into Kang Mak (2024) through an intermedial comparative-literature approach, combining Hutcheon's adaptation theory with Venuti's strategies of domestication and foreignization, thereby contributing a new perspective to research on cross-national adaptation in Southeast Asia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adaptation and intermediality

Contemporary adaptation studies are theoretically grounded to a considerable extent in Hutcheon's view of adaptation not as an inferior copy of its source, but as both a process and a product involving repetition with variation (Hutcheon, 2006). This view is reinforced by the argument that the success of an adaptation should be understood biologically, as a form that mutates and adapts to its new cultural environment, rather than measured by its literal fidelity to the original text (Bortolotti & Hutcheon, 2007). Leitch further argues that many assumptions in conventional adaptation theory, including the belief that the source text is always superior to its adaptation, are methodological fallacies that need to be corrected in contemporary adaptation studies (Leitch, 2003). Intermediality studies, meanwhile, provide an additional framework for understanding how narratives move and transform across media, including from oral legend to film, as explained by the concept of intermediality as intermedial reference and transformation (Rajewsky, 2005). This perspective is also emphasized in contemporary comparative-literature scholarship, which positions intermediality as an important intersection between literary theory and comparative media studies (Baetens, 2016).

Cultural translation

In addition to adaptation theory, this study draws on Venuti's theory of cultural translation, particularly the concepts of domestication and foreignization, initially developed to explain strategies for translating written texts but later extended to the analysis of cultural transformation in audiovisual products (Venuti, 1995). Domestication refers to changing a foreign text so that it aligns with the norms and expectations of the target audience, whereas foreignization preserves the cultural unfamiliarity of the source. When applied to Asian film remakes, research indicates that domestication often operates simultaneously at multiple levels, from narrative structure and character relationships to visual aesthetics and thematic emphasis (Sonni

et al., 2025). The frameworks of intermediality and cultural domestication complement each other in explaining how a folk legend can move between media and cultures while retaining its emotional appeal for a new audience (Rajewsky, 2005; Stam, 2019).

Folklore and female spirits in Southeast Asia

The significance of Pee Mak and Kang Mak also lies in their folkloric roots. Pee Mak is adapted from the legend of Mae Nak Phra Khanong, a Thai folktale about the ghost of a wife who dies in childbirth but continues to wait for her husband to return from war. This motif has been widely examined from a gender perspective as a representation of women's bodies in Southeast Asian cultures. The figure of a woman who dies in a maternal context is not unique to Thailand; similar patterns appear in Indonesia's Kuntilanak and Malaysia's and Singapore's Pontianak. This is demonstrated by research on Kuntilanak narratives and Malay modernity in Pontianak (Duile, 2020). These cross-cultural similarities point to a regional archetype that some scholars describe as a "sisterhood of terror", a network of structurally related female ghost figures across Southeast Asia (Ng, 2014). Recent scholarship has even identified Pee Mak as a key example of religious and cultural hybridity in contemporary Southeast Asian supernatural cinema, combining Buddhist cosmology with comedy and melodrama to reach audiences across generations (Anphanlam, 2025).

Islam and Indonesian horror

When this kind of myth is relocated to the Indonesian context, it encounters a significantly different religious landscape, namely the dominance of Islam in social life and popular culture. Studies of transformations in the representation of Islamic identity in Indonesian horror films show that religious representation in the genre has evolved substantially from 1980 to 2020, in line with social and religious changes as well as market strategies targeting a predominantly Muslim audience (Ahmadi et al, 2025). A similar pattern appears in analyses of antagonists in five decades of Indonesian horror cinema, which show that archetypes such as the kuntilanak and sundel bolong are rooted in women's trauma from violence and rape during significant moments in Indonesian history (Adiprasetio, 2023).

Other studies reveal how religious symbols in Indonesian horror films undergo both commodification and desacralization, with kiai or ustaz figures becoming the sole authorities opposing mystical forces in popular narratives (Suroyya, 2022). Islam's involvement in Indonesian popular culture is not new, as shown by research on how Ayat-Ayat Cinta helped shape Indonesia's Muslim public sphere (Huda, 2010), consistent with historical observations of Indonesian cinema as a national culture represented on screen since its early decades (Heider, 1991). Multimodal studies of contemporary Indonesian horror also confirm that fear is constructed through interactions among visual, audio, and narrative elements imbued with religious and cultural meaning (Rahmalina et al., 2025), while research on the film Mumun shows how traditional ghost figures such as the pocong can be reconstructed for contemporary audiences (Adiprasetio & Larasati, 2023).

METHOD

This study employs an intermedial comparative-literature approach and a qualitative method based on textual-visual close viewing. This involves repeated and systematic observation of the two cinematic texts, Pee Mak Phrakanong (2013) and Kang Mak (2024), to identify patterns of cultural, narrative, and religious transformation between the source film and its adaptation. The intermedial approach was selected because the study does not merely compare the two screenplays as written texts; it also considers visual, audio, and performative dimensions as units of analysis, in line with the view that intermediality encompasses media combination, media transformation, and intermedial reference (Rajewsky, 2005). The principal analytical framework is Hutcheon's adaptation theory, which regards adaptation as both process and product and requires analysis of three aspects: the form of adaptation, its creation process, and the audience's experience of reception (Hutcheon, 2006). This is combined with Venuti's framework of domestication and foreignization to classify each cultural change according to whether it brings the text closer to the target culture or preserves the unfamiliarity of the source culture (Venuti, 1995).

The research data fall into two categories. Primary data consist of audiovisual recordings of both films, analyzed through repeated close viewing to identify key scenes that demonstrate shifts in setting, religiosity, comedic style, characterization, plot structure, and thematic resolution. Secondary data consist of official synopses, critical reviews, and promotional materials for both films, which provide additional context on production and public reception. The analytical instrument took the form of a coding sheet that maps each unit of analysis onto Hutcheon's and Venuti's theoretical categories, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Analysis Instrument

Unit of Analysis	Coded Aspect	Theoretical Framework	Example Indicator
Time and place setting	Shift in historical period and geography	Domestication (Venuti, 1995)	Shift from nineteenth-century Siam to Indonesia in the 1970s and 1980s
Religious and spiritual systems	Replacement of belief frameworks and religious symbols	Religious domestication (Ahmadi, 2025; Suroyya, 2022)	Replacement of Buddhist amulets with prayers and traditional Indonesian religious figures
Folkloric archetypes	Transformation of spirit figures and folk myths	Adaptation as repetition with variation (Hutcheon, 2006)	Mae Nak becomes a kuntilanak or sundel bolong
Comedy style and sources	Changes in the basis of humor and comic performers	Popular-culture domestication (Dyer, 1986)	Thai slapstick and wordplay become Warkop-esque comedy and stand-up
Characterization and casting	Changes in the function of supporting actors	Star image and industry intertextuality (Dyer, 1986)	Use of comedians' reputations across generations
Plot structure	Stability or change in narrative stages	Adaptation as process and product (Hutcheon, 2006)	Return from war, social irregularities, revelation of the ghost
Thematic resolution	Consistency of the core message beneath surface changes	Adaptation as a negotiation of meaning (Bortolotti & Hutcheon, 2007)	The thesis that love transcends death

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Finding 1 (Transmutation of folkloric archetypes): Pee Mak is rooted in the popular myth of Mae Nak Phra Khanong, a Thai folk legend that has long been revered and repeatedly adapted in Thai popular culture. The figure of a ghost wife waiting for her husband to return from war, unaware, or pretending not to realize, that she died in childbirth, is the central motif retained in the Indonesian adaptation. Kang Mak relocates this mythic foundation into Indonesia's local horror ecosystem, activating collective associations with the ghost of a woman who died in childbirth, an archetype commonly associated in Indonesian horror with the kuntilanak or sundel bolong.

Table 2. Comparison of Folkloric Archetypes

Aspect	Pee Mak (Thailand)	Kang Mak (Indonesia)
Mythic source	Legend of Mae Nak Phra Khanong	Archetype of a pregnant woman's ghost or kuntilanak in local horror
Cultural status of the source myth	Classic, deeply revered folktale	Popular horror motif familiar across generations
Cause of the ghost's death	Died alone in childbirth	Died in childbirth; the pattern is retained
Narrative function of the ghost	Waits for her husband to return from war	Waits for her husband to return from war; retained
Implied universal quality	Maternal death as a source of horror across Southeast Asian cultures	The same motif applies

Finding 2 (Transposition of the socio-historical setting): Pee Mak is set in the early Rattanakosin period, in the nineteenth century, as indicated by traditional Thai architecture, costumes from the Siamese royal era, and a Buddhist belief system featuring amulets and yantra tattoos as forms of spiritual protection. Kang Mak shifts the setting to Indonesia in the 1970s and 1980s, a period that allows the film to evoke nostalgia for the Indonesian countryside, vintage clothing, and village social dynamics in response to mystical phenomena.

Table 3. Comparison of Socio-Historical Settings

Setting element	Pee Mak	Kang Mak
Time period	Nineteenth century, early Rattanakosin period	1970s and 1980s
Conflict context	War during the Siamese kingdom	Indonesian military conflict, in the early New Order military context
Architecture and costumes	Traditional Thai, royal style	Vintage Indonesian rural style of the 1970s and 1980s
Implied spiritual framework	Buddhist; amulets and yantra tattoos	Local traditional religious beliefs
Effect achieved	Mythic historical distance	Collective nostalgia and vintage distance

Finding 3 (Hybridization of comedic style): The comedy in Pee Mak relies on Thai-language wordplay, physical slapstick gestures, and references to Thai popular culture of the 2010s. In Kang Mak, the humor is reconstructed into a distinctly Indonesian style, combining the ensemble comedy associated with Warkop DKI and the sensibility of contemporary stand-up comedy. This is reinforced by the casting of comedians known to Indonesian audiences across generations, Indro Warkop, Tora Sudiro, Rigen Rakelna, and Indra Jegel, whose group chemistry becomes one of the film's principal strengths.

Table 4. Comparison of Comedic Styles and Sources

Comedy aspect	Pee Mak	Kang Mak
Basis of humor	Thai wordplay and physical slapstick	Situational comedy, Warkop-esque style, and stand-up
Source of laughter	Text/dialogue and physicality	Actors' star images and situational dialogue
Comic characters	Mak's quartet of friends: Ter, Puak, Shin, Aey	Makmur's quartet of friends: Supra, Fajrul, Jaka, Solah
Cultural capital activated	Thai popular culture of the 2010s	Warkop comedy legacy and Indonesia's stand-up industry

Finding 4 (Reconstruction of the friend-group characterization): The quartet structure surrounding the protagonist is closely retained from the original to the adaptation, with four supporting characters appearing in both films, although the function of casting changes significantly. Kang Mak draws on the reputations of comedians who already have their own fan bases, so each character carries associations from the actors' public careers, a layer of meaning that the Thai version does not carry for Indonesian audiences.

Table 5. Mapping the Quartet of Friends

Narrative role	Pee Mak	Kang Mak
Husband protagonist	Mak, played by Mario Maurer	Makmur, played by Vino G. Bastian
Wife or ghost	Nak, played by Davika Hoorne	Sari, played by Marsha Timothy
Child	Not explicitly mentioned	Cipluk
Friends 1–4	Ter, Puak, Shin, Aey	Supra, Fajrul, Jaka, Solah
Star capital of the friends	Regular supporting actors	Comedians with cross-generational fan bases

Finding 5 (Stability of narrative structure): Although the setting, implied religion, comedic style, and social context change significantly, the core plot, from departure for war, return with friends, villagers' suspicions, gradual revelation that the wife has died, through to emotional resolution, is retained almost identically in both films. Reviews of Kang Mak have even noted that its close adherence to the original screenplay makes the plot relatively predictable for viewers who have already seen the Thai version.

Table 6. Comparison of the Main Narrative Arc

Plot stage	Pee Mak	Kang Mak	Status
Departure for war	Mak leaves Nak, who is heavily pregnant	Makmur leaves Sari, who is heavily pregnant	Retained
Formation of the quartet of friends	On the battlefield	On the front line or in the conflict zone	Retained
Return to the village	With four friends	With four friends	Retained
Social irregularities	Villagers are frightened and rumors spread	Villagers whisper among themselves	Retained
Revelation of the ghost	Friends discover supernatural irregularities	Friends are torn between fear and loyalty	Retained, with a different emotional emphasis
Resolution	Confrontation and acceptance	Confrontation and acceptance	Retained

Finding 6 (Transcendent love as the thematic core): Both films consistently reject portraying the ghost wife merely as a monster who must be destroyed. Nak and Sari are depicted as humane figures bound by deep love and care for their husbands and families, even after death. This theme of love transcending death remains the thread connecting the films, despite the complete transformation of surface elements such as religion, historical period, and comedy.

Table 7. Comparison of Thematic Resolution

Thematic aspect	Pee Mak	Kang Mak
Position of the ghost	Humanized, not an absolute monster	Humanized, not an absolute monster
Motivation for remaining	Love and care for family	Love and care for family
Closing religious framework	Buddhist-animist	Traditional Indonesian religiosity
Core thematic message	Love transcends death	Love transcends death

Discussion

Overall, the six findings show that the transformation of Pee Mak Phrakanong (2013) into Kang Mak (2024) is not a one-way process of cultural translation, but a multilayered negotiation between fidelity to the source's dramatic framework and the need to ground the story in Indonesia's religious, social, and entertainment-industry ecosystem. The comparison of characters across the two films reveals a consistent pattern of cultural transposition. Table 2 shows that the ghost in *Pee Mak* is rooted in the legend of Mae Nak Phra Khanong, a classic folktale deeply revered in Thailand, whereas *Kang Mak* draws on the archetype of the pregnant ghost, or *kuntilanak*, a motif that has long circulated in Indonesian horror and is familiar across generations. Although the two sources differ considerably in cultural status, the films share a strikingly similar dramatic core: the wife dies in childbirth, and her waiting for a husband who has gone to war becomes the engine of the story. This suggests that the maternal death and the spectral return are not merely incidental elements but the structural foundation on which each film is built, and that the transposition operates more on the surface of the narrative than on its emotional logic. Table 3 further demonstrates that the socio-historical setting undergoes a significant shift. *Pee Mak* is situated in the nineteenth-century early Rattanakosin period, evoked through royal Siamese architecture, costume, and a Buddhist framework of amulets and yantra tattoos, while *Kang Mak* relocates the story to 1970s and 1980s Indonesia, against the backdrop of rural village life and military conflict in the early New Order era. These differences produce distinct effects: the Thai film creates a sense of mythic historical distance, whereas the Indonesian film generates collective nostalgia and a vintage sensibility that is more immediately accessible to its audience. The humor, too, is reconstructed. Tables 4 and 5 indicate that *Pee Mak* relies on Thai wordplay, physical slapstick, and references to 2010s Thai popular culture, while *Kang Mak* blends situational comedy in the tradition of Warkop DKI with contemporary stand-up. The casting of Indro Warkop, Tora Sudiro, Rigen Rakelna, and Indra Jegel gives the friend group an additional layer of meaning, since each actor carries a public persona and fan base that Indonesian audiences bring into the theater. The quartet of friends thus performs a function in *Kang Mak* that has no direct equivalent in the Thai version.

Despite these surface transformations, the narrative structure and thematic core are remarkably stable. Table 6 indicates that nearly every stage of the plot, from the departure for war and the return with four companions, through the villagers' suspicions and the gradual revelation of the wife's death, to the final confrontation and acceptance, is retained in both films, with the main divergence lying in the emotional emphasis of the moment the ghost is revealed. Table 7 reinforces this continuity at the thematic level: in both versions, the ghost wife is humanized rather than cast as a monster to be destroyed, and her continued presence is motivated by love and care for her family. The theme of love transcending death thus emerges as the common thread linking the two films, even as the religious framework shifts from a Buddhist-animist worldview to a traditional Indonesian religiosity. Taken together, these findings suggest that the adaptation of *Pee Mak* into *Kang Mak* is best understood not as a wholesale replacement of its story, but as a process of localization in which the emotional and narrative skeleton is preserved while its cultural flesh is reshaped for Indonesian audiences.

Findings of this study emphasizes cultural translation and narrative transformation, captures two simultaneous yet opposing movements: on the one hand, there is extensive domestication at the level of cultural surface elements, such as historical setting, religious system, and comedic style; on the other, the core narrative framework and thematic message remain almost unchanged. This duality provides the central thread of the following discussion, which places the findings in dialogue with previous research on adaptation, cultural translation, and Southeast Asian cinema.

Narrative stability and the theme of transcendent love

This finding merits closer examination because it confirms the stability of narrative beats as the foundation of commercially successful cross-cultural adaptation. The elements changed in the adaptation are the cultural surface, setting, comedy, religiosity, and casting, while the dramatic framework itself is retained as an anchor of familiarity. Fidelity to this dramatic framework does not indicate a lack of creativity; rather, it is a deliberate strategy. The story had already proved commercially successful in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries, so Indonesian producers took creative risks mainly at the level of cultural surface rather than narrative structure.

This situation accords with Hutcheon's idea that adaptation is fundamentally repetition with variation, rather than total reinvention. Nevertheless, the decision to preserve the structure so closely, as noted in reviews that describe the film as predictable, also reveals tension between fidelity to the source and the demand for creative originality. This tension is common in official remakes, whose producers must satisfy both audiences unfamiliar with the original and viewers who know it well.

The finding that narrative structure remains stable amid radical cultural change (Finding 5) aligns with Hutcheon's central argument that adaptation is essentially repetition with variation rather than the creation of something entirely new (Hutcheon, 2006). It also reinforces the argument that adaptation should be evaluated biologically, by the extent to which it can mutate and survive in a new cultural environment, rather than by its literal fidelity (Bortolotti & Hutcheon, 2007). This reading challenges the longstanding assumption in adaptation theory that the source text is always superior to its adaptation, an assumption criticized as one of the fundamental fallacies in fidelity discourse (Leitch, 2003). At the same time, the transmutation of the folkloric archetype from Mae Nak to Kuntilanak (Finding 1) shows that intermedial adaptation here does not stop at moving from oral legend to film; it also involves broader cultural intermedial reference and transformation, as conceptualized in the framework of media combination, transformation, and reference (Rajewsky, 2005), and reinforces intermediality's position as an important intersection between literary theory and contemporary comparative media studies (Baetens, 2016).

Transmutation of folkloric archetypes

The noteworthy aspect of this finding is that adaptation does not simply transfer a plot from one culture to another; it functionally substitutes one folkloric archetype for another. The two cultures appear to share structurally equivalent "narrative slots": a female spirit unsettled by dying in childbirth. This enables the story to be transplanted smoothly without disrupting local horror conventions or creating cultural dissonance for Indonesian audiences. Such equivalence is not merely coincidental; it suggests

structurally similar folk cosmologies across Southeast Asia, where maternal death is consistently positioned as a particularly powerful source of horror because it reverses the expected cycle of life: childbirth, which should bring life into the world, instead becomes the occasion of death.

A further implication is that the success of such cross-national adaptations depends on careful cultural research into folkloric equivalents in the destination country, rather than simply translating character names or locations. Failure to identify an appropriate equivalent may produce an adaptation that feels foreign or forced to local audiences. The choice of the kuntilanak as an equivalent for Mae Nak suggests that the producers understood the cognitive landscape of Indonesian horror from the outset of the creative process.

Setting transposition, comedy hybridization, and domestication

The shift in setting is a clear domestication strategy within Venuti's framework. Rather than retaining the unfamiliar setting of nineteenth-century Siam, which is distant from Indonesian audiences' lived experience, the filmmakers chose a period close enough to collective memory, the 1970s and 1980s, yet still nostalgically distant from the present. This period was not selected at random: in those decades, electricity had not reached many Indonesian villages, communication was limited, and mystical beliefs continued to coexist with early modernity. The film can therefore preserve a vintage supernatural atmosphere without burdening viewers with a truly unfamiliar historical setting such as the Siamese kingdom.

The transposition of the setting also creates space to explore the authentic social texture of Indonesian village life rather than merely imitating Thai mise-en-scène superficially. By choosing the 1970s and 1980s, the film can present distinctly Indonesian social details, such as village neighbor relationships, traditional social hierarchies, and local responses to supernatural phenomena that differ from those in Thailand. Domestication thus operates not only at the level of visual decoration, but also at the level of social relationships that frame the entire story.

An important point is that humor is not translated literally at the linguistic level; it is reconstructed through star image. Indonesian audiences laugh not only because the jokes are textually funny, but because they recognize the actors' comic personae from their earlier careers outside the film, especially Indro Warkop, whose decades-long history as an Indonesian comedy icon carries substantial cultural weight. This mechanism is much more complex than translating verbal jokes from Thai into Indonesian because it involves audiences' extratextual knowledge of each actor's career. Humor therefore operates on two levels simultaneously: the narrative level within the film and the intertextual level beyond it.

This phenomenon can also be understood as domestication at the level of entertainment-industry intertextuality, rather than merely linguistic or visual domestication. When an adaptation relies on star image to replace the wordplay and slapstick of the original, it shifts the burden of comedy from the film text itself to the collective cultural capital accumulated by the national entertainment industry over decades. This helps explain why Indonesian audiences can feel close to the film even when the structure of its jokes originates in a different culture.

The findings on socio-historical transposition (Finding 2) and the hybridization of comedic style (Finding 3) both reinforce and extend Venuti's framework of domestication, originally developed for written texts but also relevant to cultural strategies in audiovisual remakes (Venuti, 1995). The multilayered domestication identified in this study, operating at narrative, visual, and thematic levels, is consistent with findings on Hollywood remakes in Asian cinema, where cross-national adaptation involves deliberate cultural recalibration across several dimensions rather than merely replacing the setting (Sonni et al., 2025).

A similar tendency appears in studies of Korean dramas remade for Thai television, where hybridization of local and foreign cultures is a common strategy used by Southeast Asian entertainment industries to appeal to domestic markets (Sinpongsporn, 2018), and in research on Pee Mak as a cinematic tourism object negotiating Thai national identity and global appeal (Thapthep, 2024). The mutual borrowing and commentary between film industries identified in research on hybrid genres in contemporary British horror (Decker, 2021) is also relevant to the relationship between the Thai and Indonesian film industries in the case of Pee Mak and Kang Mak, although this relationship has not yet been explored extensively in the literature on transnational cinema (Rawle, 2018; Stam, 2019).

Star image and casting

This casting strategy serves two functions and deserves closer attention. First, it accelerates the audience's emotional attachment to the quartet of friends without requiring extensive early exposition, because viewers already bring expectations and affection for each actor before the film begins. Second, the strategy functions as a marketing attraction independent of the original story's strength. The film can sell two things to prospective audiences at once: the appeal of a horror-comedy story already proven successful in Thailand and the appeal of a local comedy ensemble with established recognition in the domestic market.

Characterization in this adaptation therefore does not arise solely from screenplay transformation; it also emerges from negotiation between the screenplay and the local film industry. This demonstrates that cross-national adaptation is not merely a textual matter between two screenplays, but also a matter of the political economy of the entertainment industry, where casting decisions are shaped by market considerations, reputation, and commercial appeal, rather than dramatic suitability alone.

Religious negotiation and love beyond death

This finding merits further consideration because it supports the argument that the success of cross-cultural adaptation lies not in literal fidelity to details, but in fidelity to the emotional and thematic core of the source story. The concept of transcendent love functions as a universal element that allows the story to be received across different religious frameworks, whether in Thailand's Buddhist-animist cosmology or Indonesia's traditional religious framework. Both provide narrative space for a spirit unwilling to depart because of love, even though the formal theologies of the respective religions differ considerably in their views of the fate of the dead.

The tension between formal religious doctrine and the narrative need to present a loving spirit means that both films engage in a kind of implicit theological negotiation. In both Buddhist and Indonesian traditional religious frameworks, a spirit remaining in the human world for an extended period does not fully align with orthodox teachings. This tension is resolved not through explicit theological argument, but by emphasizing the emotional dimension of the story, so audiences tend to accept the spirit out of empathy for the love story rather than dogmatic justification.

In the domains of religion and gender, the findings on theological transposition and the thesis of transcendent love (Finding 6) enrich discussion of Islam's representation in Indonesian horror films. This includes research on the evolution of Islamic identity in Indonesian horror from 1980 to 2020 (Ahmadi, 2025), analyses of the commodification and desacralization of religious symbols in popular horror films (Suroyya, 2022). The involvement of Islam in Indonesian popular culture identified here also resonates with research on how films can shape Indonesia's Muslim public sphere (Huda, 2010) and historical accounts of Indonesian cinema as a representation of national culture on screen (Heider, 1991).

The transmutation of female folkloric archetypes (Finding 1) further confirms the existence of a cross-cultural network of female ghosts in Southeast Asia, from Mae Nak in Thailand to Kuntilanak in Indonesia and Pontianak in Malaysia and Singapore, structurally linked as representations of social anxieties surrounding women's bodies and maternal death (Duile, 2020; Ng, 2014). This is consistent with research that positions Pee Mak as a representative example of religious hybridity in contemporary Southeast Asian supernatural cinema (Anphanlam, 2025). Meanwhile, the finding on the reconstruction of the friend group through star image (Finding 4) can be interpreted through star studies, which emphasize that an actor's persona develops through accumulated roles and public history (Dyer, 1986); this is complemented by cultural-representation theory, which argues that meaning in media is constructed through particular sign systems (Hall, 1997), and by the feminist-psychoanalytic framework concerning the monstrous-feminine, which is relevant to interpreting the ghost wife as a humanized figure rather than an entirely monstrous one (Creed, 1993).

Novelty and limitations

The novelty of this study lies in three aspects. First, it is among the early studies specifically comparing the official remake pair Pee Mak and Kang Mak. This is a particularly new research object because Kang Mak was released only in 2024, so academic literature specifically addressing it remains limited compared with the more established literature on Pee Mak. Second, the study combines Hutcheon's adaptation framework with Venuti's domestication–foreignization framework to analyze the same case simultaneously. This combination moves beyond the narrow question of narrative fidelity toward the broader question of how thematic fidelity and cultural domestication can coexist in a single adaptation.

Third, the study positions the theological transposition from Buddhist-animist cosmology to Indonesia's traditional-religious framework as a central finding, a dimension rarely foregrounded in previous studies of Southeast Asian horror-comedy remakes. It therefore contributes to discussions of what some scholars call Southeast Asian Gothic aesthetics, which bridge fear and laughter across religious and national

borders. Nevertheless, the study has limitations that must be acknowledged: the analysis still relies on synopses, critical reviews, and comparative points summarized from popular sources, rather than direct frame-by-frame close viewing of both films. The findings should therefore be treated as an initial interpretive framework that needs to be strengthened through primary textual and visual data before broader generalizations can be made.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of Pee Mak (2013) into Kang Mak (2024) demonstrates that cultural adaptation is not a one-way process, but a multilayered negotiation between fidelity to the core narrative structure and the need for local cultural domestication. The study identifies a distinctive duality: on the one hand, radical adjustments occur at the surface level, including the transposition of the historical setting, the hybridization of Indonesian comedic styles, and the shift from Thailand's Buddhist-animist cosmology to Indonesia's Islamic-traditional religious framework. On the other hand, the main dramatic structure and the thesis of transcendent love remain intact. These findings support modern adaptation theory (Hutcheon) and domestication theory (Venuti), which view adaptation as a form of biological mutation that enables a work to survive in a new environment, while challenging the older paradigm that consistently privileges the source text over its adaptation (the fidelity discourse). The study also recommends that contemporary comparative-literature curricula include regional intermedial adaptations to foster cross-national cultural literacy and critical media-consumption skills.

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