

Contemporary Horror Story-Telling: Its Function and Reproduction of the Belief in Ghosts in the Thai Context

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Abstract

This article explores the function and reproduction of the belief in ghosts in the context of current Thailand through contemporary horror story-telling on the Internet. The study reveals that contemporary horror story-telling employs motifs and tale types as key elements in creating fear. Horror stories can be categorized into three tale types: ghost, sixth sense, and haunted place. Key motifs are the characters, objects, events or actions, and places. Contemporary horror story-telling plays crucial roles in creating entertainment, shaping moral standards in the society, reflecting fears, concerns, and problems in the contemporary society, and passing on Buddhist belief and ceremonies in the Thai setting. The transition from traditional horror story-telling to online platform exemplifies a success formula of horror stories on ghosts, which have long been popular in Thai society. Horror stories are reproduced as a vehicle for traditional horror story-telling in the contemporary Thai context. The phenomenon highlights the prevalent notion of traditional ghost stories while also building a new framework of horror stories tailored to the modern period.

Keywords: *Contemporary Thai Horror Story-Telling, Reproduction Of Belief, Motif And Tale Type*

INTRODUCTION

Horror story-telling features stories with content on ghosts, spirits, and otherworldly powers emerging to terrorize the living. It also includes mysterious stories of people, objects, and phenomena. As the belief in ghosts and supernatural powers has long persisted in Thai society, these stories are part of the story-telling tradition that has provided entertainment for the Thais. In the past, narration of horror or ghost lores was limited to local communities through oral traditions. Passed down from generation to generation, these stories have evolved into a genre of literature known as folklore (Anantasan, 2000: 144 – 145). Later on, ghost lores are narrated as fictions and media, such as novels, short stories, comics, movies, TV dramas, stage plays, radio programs, and TV shows.

An interesting phenomenon over the past decade has been the shift of horror stories from their traditional form to being presented through digital media, especially the internet, including a channel or a website that provides various social networking services.

Over the last decade, there has been an interesting shift in the presentation of horror stories from conventional story-telling to digital media, particularly the Internet, which includes a channel or website that provides different social networking services, which in this paper is called “online media.” Today, online media plays an essential part in daily life. Statistics collected by Global Digital in 2018 from We Are Social and Hootsuite indicate that Facebook and YouTube are the most popular social media platforms in the world with over 2.147 and 1.5 billion users, respectively. The same study also reported that Thai citizens have the highest level of Internet or online media access in the world through mobile devices. More precisely, Thai netizens spend an average of 4 hours and 56 minutes every day navigating the Internet (Prasertpitoon & Jiarananon, 2019).

Horror story-telling online is similar to oral traditions. One notable distinction is that online story-telling allows interactions between a large number of audiences. The primary target audiences are urban folks who communicate through modern technology as they can listen to these channels whenever and wherever they are convenient. Furthermore, they can view videoclips in retrospect when they are not available when the programs

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are aired or when they want to watch the videos again. For these reasons, online horror story-telling is extremely popular.

In the perspective of folklore studies, online horror story-telling usually features urban legends or contemporary legends with interesting content, plots, and language. It is related to a new culture of urban residents who are familiar with modern advancements. The content of online horror stories also reflects social dynamics. To elaborate, ghost lores in the past encircle natural elements, such as trees, rivers, forests, and mountains. On the other hand, the settings of modern ghost stories are related to places reflecting the urban lifestyle, including classrooms, apartments, dormitories, universities, buildings, condominiums, and sharp curves. Modern ghost stories also reflect the urban lifestyle influenced by the media and technology amidst the expansion and changes in capitalism, politics, and cultures.

The move from traditional horror story-telling to internet story-telling opens up opportunities to portray Thai people's belief in ghosts in the context of contemporary society. It emphasizes the existence of the notion of traditional ghost stories while introducing a new concept of ghosts that evolve across time. As stated by Goldstein (2007: 1-22), the belief in ghosts and supernatural powers is common in modern cultures, including entertainment, commercial businesses, among other contexts. Ghost stories narrated in contemporary society is part of the contemporary ghost lore. They are comparable to old spirits in new bottles and new spirits in old bottles. That is to say, also contemporary ghost lore originates from the traditional way of life, it has been passed onto the mass culture. Despite modern technological and scientific advancements, the belief in ghosts and supernatural powers still persist in society. The ghost lore has even adapted to the modern era in an intriguing way. Therefore, the researcher is inspired to examine the existence of online horror story-telling, its distinctive features in terms of the content and language, and how they represent the popularity of ghost stories and Thai people's way of thinking in this modern context.

This article employs purposive sampling to conduct the study horror story-telling on websites and online platforms used by Thai people, including YouTube channels, Pantip.com, and Facebook pages. The data was collected from 2020 to 2023, incorporating 120 stories from the top 20 favorite stories from six channels, namely *Sampad Sayong*, *Lorn Diary*, *The Shock Story*, *LoyChinE*, *Sayongkwan Variety*, and *Mitileelab*.

Objectives

To investigate the tale types, motifs, and functions of horror story-telling and the reproduction of ghost lore in the contemporary Thai context

Research Methodology and Theoretical Frameworks

This study utilizes the qualitative research methodology. Textual analysis and document analysis were performed. Results are presented descriptively. Relevant theoretical frameworks in folklore studies and social sociology include tale type and motif, functions, and the concept of reproduction of social beliefs.

Relevant Literatures

The book *Haunting Experiences: Ghost in Contemporary Folklore* (Goldstein, Grider & Thomas, 2007) raises the issues of functions of ghost stories in pop culture through a variety of media, such as television and movies. The authors argue that, while modern technologies and media develop and perpetuate the concept and knowledge of supernatural powers, ghosts in the digital era are no different from those portrayed by oral traditions. Additionally, the book analyzes the functions of ghost story-telling in other interesting aspects, such as socialization and gender. Furthermore, the interpretive studies titled *Haunted halls: ghost lore of American college campuses* (Tucker, 2007) presents interesting ghost stories in American colleges from 1960 to 2006. Tucker paid special attention to stories told by 21st century students through emails and instant messages. Aside from being a collection of interesting ghost stories, Tucker analyzes ghost stories through the concepts of sociology, psychology, and cultural studies to reflect the campus life of college students. Furthermore, ghost lore in campuses also functions as a key message about injustice experienced by native Americans and African Americans. There are also Thai folkloristic studies investigating ghost story-telling as modern folklore that is adapted and altered by social contexts, such as *Ghost Stories in Contemporary Thai Society: Functions and Cultural*

Hybridization by Sindhuprama (2017), *Narratives in the shock radio program as ghost tale in popular culture* by Ngamsophon (2018), and *Motifs and Tale Types of Modern Horror Tales on the Joylada Application* by Jiteesup and Narut Kupthanaroj (2019).

RESULTS

The author presents the results in three main topics: 1) tale type and motifs of horror story-telling, 2) the functions of horror story-telling, and 3) reproduction of the belief in ghost in contemporary Thai society.

Tale Type and Motifs of Horror Story-Telling

The concepts of tale types and motifs are a main expertise of Thompson (1928), an American folklorist. A tale type is a storyline that distinguishes one tale from another (Thompson, 1928) while motifs are smallest elements that are special, strange, remarkable, and interesting in terms of ideas and imagination (Thompson, 1977: 415-416). The study of tale types categorizes stories based on storylines. This way, different plot patterns of ghost stories are distinguished, making it easier to identify many different stories of a similar plot in the same tale type. In addition, tale types also indicate the plotline and series of major events in the stories. Motif analysis, on the other hand, exposes crucial tale elements and minor subtleties. It was observed that horror stories employ tale types and motifs as crucial elements for instilling terror in an intriguing way.

It was found that there are three main tale types: 1) ghosts, 2) sixth sense, and 3) haunted places. Horror stories that feature ghosts or spirits are the most common. Horror stories of the ghost tale type can be subdivided into several subtypes based on particular purposes, such as ghosts seeking vengeance, ghosts helping people, ghosts chasing the truth, ghosts finding their substitutes, and deluded ghosts. Some stories feature people's acts, such as people helping ghosts, people challenging ghosts, and experiencing horror during funerals.

The sixth sense tale type tells stories about people who have extraordinary perceptions in addition to the five human senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. These unusual people can perceive or sense ghosts and supernatural powers or even communicate with spirits or foresee future events, for example, *Mor Tham Prap Phi Pop* (the exorcist defeating ghosts in Northeast Thailand ghost lore) in Sampad Sayong Program aired on 24 August 2020, as narrated below.

“I possess a sixth sense that allows me to perceive things others cannot. I heard a sound—a deep, malevolent laugh echoing from within. Moments later, the voice erupted in a furious outburst. Frustrated by its inability to achieve its purpose at my grandmother's house, it let out a cry. As the voice faded, I tried to sleep, though fear lingered. I didn't know when I finally drifted off. In the morning, I wanted to tell my mother about what I'd heard, but she seemed to already know and stopped me from speaking. Later, my father took us to Nong Chok temple to make offerings to the monks. It was there that I finally told my mother about the events of the previous night. The story gave her goosebumps, and my father insisted that we bathe in the sacred water. After making merit with the monks, we returned home and resumed our normal lives.”

Haunted place tale type is a collection of horror stories about locations said to have supernatural abilities or unknown objects buried within them. Supernatural events can occur in such areas. The settings in the stories are frequently familiar from ordinary modern way of life, such as schools, colleges, dorms, camps, buildings, gas stations, islands, rafts, overpasses, and roadways.

Characters, objects, events, behavior, and places are common motifs in all three tale types. Character motifs include both human beings and nonhumans. The majority of the human characters have unique qualities or are linked to ghosts, spirits, mysteries, and supernatural powers, such as persons with a sixth sense, a person facing a spirit, a person using black magic. Nonhuman characters are usually ghosts, gods, and mythical creatures, such as naga, Suea Saming (human-tiger shapeshifter). Lastly, the object motifs include talismans, amulets, and haunted objects.

Another interesting motif in horror stories is various methods of haunting spirits, such as ghost appearances, sounds, disappearance, medium objects, human possession, spells or black magic, and shapeshifting. There are

also the motifs encompassing communication with spirits, treating black magic, receiving help from ghosts, liberation of spirits, and exorcism.

Functions Of Horror Story-Telling

The study of folklore's roles and functions is the study of how folklore knowledge, as a category of cultural information, functions in society. It is conceptually influenced by functionalism or structural-functionalism theories of cultural anthropologists, who believe that culture in society has a duty to respond to human needs in terms of fundamental necessities, social security, and psychological stability. The book *Folktales and Society: Story-Telling in a Hungarian Peasant Community* by Dégh (1969) describes the functions of storytellers and storytelling in everyday life. Without an audience, storytelling has no role in society, and the texts themselves have no significance without daily stories, performances, and responses from listeners. From the perspective of anthropologists, such roles serve as a starting point for folklorists in researching the social context to demonstrate the value of folklore information in ensuring social stability. William R. Bascom who authors the article *Four Functions of Folklore* (Bascom, 1965: 279-298), is one of the reputable academics.

The study of the functions of online horror story-telling reveals many intriguing functions, such as creating entertainment, shaping moral standards in the society, reflecting fears, concerns, and problems in the contemporary society, and reproducing Buddhist belief and ceremonies in the Thai setting.

Creating entertainment Since ancient times, Thai society has had a history of telling stories or tales as entertainment, both in families and at public gatherings for many major events. Fun and enjoyment from listening to stories can come from many factors, including strangeness, excitement, happiness, and even fear. Horror stories are a type of story that is popularly told to create entertainment. Even though they are mysterious and frightening stories, many people still like them. The fun may come from the fear and excitement of events that differ from ordinary stories. This is because most horror stories are about supernatural and otherworldly themes, such as spirits, hell, heaven, or the afterworld. These events do not occur in everyday life.

Fear in horror stories may come from shock as a normal event suddenly changes to an abnormal event and from fear of the unnaturally severe consequences of an act. This is because an ordinary act may lead to fatal outcomes. Considering the motifs and tale types presented in the above section, it was observed that all these elements contribute to fear. For example, the ghost tale type describes odd characteristics of ghosts. The ways ghosts terrify people also create fear, including unusual appearances of dead corpses, the appearance of unnatural death, ghastly incomplete body conditions, strange voices, being touched but not seeing the toucher, and strange smell from an unknown source.

Horror stories are usually narrated with contemporary settings and characters, making readers feel that these events may happen to them in daily life. For example, the haunted place tale type features places where deaths or violence occurred, such as jails, prison execution grounds, hospitals, three-way junctions, or curved roadways. These places are real places that everyone may experience, and therefore, they are involved.

Storytelling strategies may be another key factor in creating fun and excitement because some horror stories are characterized by taking personal experiences and adapted them into complex stories, containing suspense, and trying to keep the listener engaged. In the end, however, the story will be revealed, and the doubts will be resolved for the listeners.

Shaping moral standards in the society Aside from being an informative source of knowledge, Thai society also uses the story-telling tradition for socialization through the folklore mechanism. This includes instilling proper attitudes, teaching morals, keeping order in society, and maintaining ethical and behavioral standards acceptable to society. The story-telling tradition allows members of society to learn the rules, attitudes, values, norms, and standards of behaviors and social ethics through various types of folklore. Socialization is achieved through the mechanism of various folkloristic data. Horror stories are a type of information that shapes the behaviors related to ethical standards in society. Behaviors or norms based on beliefs and religions are associated with Thai people's way of life as portrayed in several horror stories. These norms include humility, greeting and farewelling older people, compliance with rules of places and communities, punishments for those who disrespect sacred beings, and characteristics of people who are not accepted by society.

Some horror stories in Thailand do not clearly reflect restrictions or typical societal norms; instead, they depict the repercussions of failing to obey social norms. These stories showcase the consequences of people's actions. People, for example, should speak with respect. This is one of the more appealing manners or behaviors. Thais cherish seniority. Hence, they prefer to respect seniors, including qualifications and age. As a result, demonstrating respect, particularly through spoken language, is critical for human relationships in society.

Horror story-telling plays an essential function in creating fears (as discussed earlier in Section 2.1). Then, these fears will shape people's behaviors. These stories convince the audiences that what they do every day may lead to the same consequences as the characters in the stories, including fear due to shock as they are not aware or do not expect any abnormality. In addition, fears for the consequences of certain behaviors tend to be associated with interpreting the meaning of such behaviors. The fact that horror stories shape people's behavior does not aim at teaching morality, ethics, and virtues, or passing on society's moral standards like religious or moral tales. However, they likely to shape the behaviors that may lead to harms or dangers for life. For example, when people tell ghost stories, they are advised not to go to the toilet alone. This phenomenon also depicts undesirable outcomes of certain behaviors, causing a sense of terror and insecurity. Therefore, horror story-telling plays a role in shaping people's behaviors to achieve safety in society.

Reflecting fears, concerns, and problems in the contemporary society Consumers of online horror story-telling are mostly urban residents since access to online story-telling requires technology and devices, including knowledge in technology, such as the radio, the Internet, and smart phones. Online horror story-telling functions as space for expressing inner feelings of people in society, especially in urban communities. Urban societies are highly populated, but people have very little interactions due to environmental constraints and social and economic structures. In contrast, rural folks interact closely because communal or local activities bring rural people closer together than people who live in cities. Individualism of urban citizens also leads to loneliness and isolation. For these reasons, apart from instilling fears, horror story-telling also reflects the urban lifestyle, especially fears, unsafety, and insecurity in modern life. They depict capitalist society, which includes sophisticated materialism.

The ghost tale type of horror story-telling reflects fears or anxieties in several ways, such as unsafety in daily life, road accidents, the afterlife, romantic and relationship problems, fear for separation from loved ones, economic concerns, or risk in everyday life. These feelings call for protection for lives and properties. In addition, the haunted place tale type reflects fears when people enter an unfamiliar or remote place. Such fears and concerns emphasize that danger can occur anytime. These worrying feelings also indicate insecurity in life and properties. For example, shopping for food at night may be the end of someone's life. Therefore, horror stories do not only guide people what they should or should not do, but also on where and when they should avoid visiting so as not to put themselves in danger.

The function of passing on Buddhist belief and ceremonies in the Thai setting Generally, in traditional society, a legend or story is the centerpiece of a ceremony. It might take the form of performing a ceremony along with the narration or content of the story to illustrate the origin of the ceremony. Many horror stories functions to pass on Buddhist doctrine and practice known as "Thai Buddhism", which combines Buddhism, Hinduism, and animism. In particular, Buddhism is used as the moral principle. Traditional beliefs and other ideologies are embraced, but Buddhism is always of paramount importance. Most ceremonies in the current Thai society are not performed according to Buddhist philosophy that focuses on Buddhist teachings, but following a mix of Hinduism and animism rituals. For example, the belief in shrines is frequently heard in horror stories.

Furthermore, the motifs of main events in horror stories are partly influenced by Thai Buddhism. For instance, they feature humility to house guardian spirits, respect for rules and social values. In these stories, a character who believe they have witnessed a spirit tends to make merit for the spirit because they believe that the ghost needs it. Also, when the person is troubled or possessed by a ghost, they tend to seek help from religious figures, such as Buddhist monks, mediums, or people who can communicate with spirits.

Reproduction of the belief in ghost in contemporary Thai Context

Cultural reproduction is an integral process of cultural dynamics. When a culture is passed on from generation to generation, the culture maintains its functions in society. Some faded cultures are resurrected for reproduction or practiced again. These reproduced cultures may be modified to suit the current intents. Raymond Williams (Williams, 1997: 39) describes the process of selecting a culture for cultural reproduction. A certain form or practice is brought back and transmitted. Its continued survival depends whether the society selects and accepts it as a “culture”. The form or practice that society values will be selected to be passed on. Certain aspects may be altered to align with other elements in the dominant culture. Therefore, only some cultures will persist as they are reproduced and transmitted continuously by society.

Thais have traditionally believed in ghosts. As country whose agricultural practices are closely related to nature, ghosts play a critical role in their lives, work, unity, and social harmony. In Thailand, the belief in ghosts varies depending on the social setting. Historically, ghosts symbolized traditional communities. Following that, the belief in ghosts grew into invoker practices, resulting in the emergence of various summoned holy beings, including kings, historical figures, and local heroes based on the foreign notion of gods.

Online horror story-telling has a contemporary modern setting. However, most motifs and elements are inherited from Thai traditional culture, especially the motifs about ghosts, which are closely related to the traditional belief in ghosts among the Thais, especially types, appearances, and haunting methods of ghosts. In particular, the belief that there are both good and bad ghosts is clearly handed down to the current generation. In horror stories, there are ghost characters that have protective powers, such as the city guardian, house guardians, ancestor spirits, and teacher spirits overseeing the wellbeing of students on campus. On the other hand, evil spirits have ill intentions or seek to terrify humans in several ways, including their appearances and haunting schemes. Moreover, numerous ghost characters in horror stories are associated with traditional mythology, such as Pret (extraordinarily tall ghosts), dancing ghosts, mediums, exorcists, hermits, and ancient city guardian spirits.

In the past, people are scared of ghosts, but could negotiate with them through rituals, including vowing, communicating with them through a medium, and worshipping. Even though ghost stories do not apparently illustrate the motif of ghost-related ceremonies, they usually describe the motif of communication with ghost, with a person with extraordinary senses as a medium. Therefore, communication serves as a pivotal tool in connecting between ghosts and people from past to present. In term of the place motif, even though the settings of horror stories are building in contemporary society, some places of traditional beliefs are also mentioned, including haunted graveyards, shrines, Thai wooden houses, traditional dance rooms, or inauspicious locations, such as three-way junctions and ghost passageways.

Aside from the belief in ghost, horror stories also feature other traditional notions, beliefs, and practices, such as supernatural power and Buddhist doctrines. The primary belief in treatment to supernatural powers that are common in horror stories is to not disrespect them. To clarify, people are convinced to not speak to, challenge, insult, or look down upon them. Additionally, horror stories also describe several beliefs influenced by Buddhism, including karma, adhering and never letting go leading to sufferings, as well as Buddhist practices and ceremonies, such as going to the temple, making food offerings to the monks, pouring water to dedicate good deeds to others, and ordination. Characters in horror stories are even mentioned to rely on holiness of Buddhism when facing a dead-end problem by consulting with monks, inviting monks to make merit at home, asking for holy threads or amulets from monks. Sometimes, monks are key characters in those stories as mediums or exorcists.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSIONS

The transition of horror stories from oral traditions to online platforms demonstrates the success formula for horror stories that centers on ghost stories. This is a long-standing storytelling tradition in Thai society. This tradition is reproduced and perpetuated through modern media as space for passing on the traditional belief in ghosts among Thai people while formulating a new concept of ghosts that is relevant to contemporary settings.

This highlights the survival of the traditional notion of ghosts while crafting a new framework that evolves along the course of time.

National development focusing on modernization promotes the shift from agriculture to industrial society. As a result, Thai way of life started to alter, and leading to a change or loss of certain knowledge, such as production or sustenance way of life and the relationship system between community and family. However, the belief and worship of ghosts thrive robustly in Thai society. Most Thais' religious framework includes the belief in ghosts, which might be described as a folk religion mixing Buddhism, Hinduism, and animism. Such a religion may withstand scientific advances without being destroyed since it meets the psychological and practical needs of individuals in society. People in modern society may choose to employ a technique or explanation to address their daily difficulties based on their socioeconomic status. According to this interpretation, horror story-telling is a significant tool that Thai people in contemporary society use and communicate for many purposes, particularly as a means of generating security and maintaining certain patterns that society values and wishes to preserve. Ghost stories are utilized as a guideline to shape the customary traditions that society wishes to keep.

Horror story-telling also functions to perpetuate traditional beliefs. Even though they are contemporary horror stories, several motifs and elements are handed down from traditional beliefs. This suggests that traditional beliefs are deeply rooted in contemporary Thai society, as evidenced by stories of good ghosts such as ancestor spirits, city guardian spirits, souls of cadaver donors at medical institutions, and schoolteacher spirits. These stories also incorporate traditional beliefs in supernatural forces, such as disrespectful act against sacred places. All of these elements have an impact on beliefs, and how community members perceive supernatural powers and treatment is influenced by traditional cultures.

In addition, contemporary horror stories also reflect Thai society characterized by a mix of various cultures. For example, Thai Buddhism serves as space that incorporate various faiths freely as evidenced by motifs derived from traditional beliefs, the belief in ghosts, Buddhism, and scientific way of thinking. These differences demonstrate the pluralism that was the very foundation of Thai society. At the same time, it represents the influence of globalization, which has resulted in cultural integration in Thai culture that is richer and more diversified. Horror stories are thus a cultural synthesis of traditional and modern cultures.

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