10. Ugly Americans and Indeterminate Asians: Strategies/Symptoms of Southeast Asian Representation in Cold War US Film

Adam Knee

Abstract
One facet of the US cultural Cold War strategy in cinematic soft-power terms was to be sensitive in on-screen portrayals of nations whose alignment it wanted to win over or ensure. This paper will make the case that one manifestation of this strategy is in portrayals of Southeast Asia that obfuscate clear national designations, thereby muting or obviating the issues of contention that might arise with respect to specific nations. It will further be argued that such muddling of national designation goes hand-in-hand with a figuration of American characters and/or US influence as partially problematic but also ultimately well-intentioned and potentially beneficial. The examples analyzed are Terror is a Man (1959), The Ugly American (1963), and Operation CIA (1965).

Keywords: Southeast Asia, Thailand, soft power, masculinity, location shooting

This chapter is concerned with exploring one particular phenomenon that arises in relation to a handful of US-produced (or co-produced) Cold War feature films with Southeast Asian settings—the rendering ambiguous of the specific national and geographical coordinates of those settings. Although this is not a particularly widespread phenomenon, an analysis of the examples can prove illuminating in terms of the dynamics of the Cold War cinematic relationship (representational, industrial, geopolitical)
between the US and Southeast Asia and some of the logics of US cinematic engagements with the region.

More specifically, I will examine three American (or partly American) film productions released in a relatively short span of time that share this interesting trait of being set in an Asia that is in some way unclearly and/or contradictorily defined: the low-budget Filipino horror co-production *Terror is a Man* (1959), the major studio literary adaptation *The Ugly American* (1963; based upon what is considered one of the key novels of the Cold War),1 and the low-budget espionage adventure *Operation CIA* (1965). There is a series of interesting parallels across these in many ways disparate films, and while I am certainly not suggesting any causal link between them, these parallels are highly evocative of (and illuminating about) certain shared Cold War determinants and suggest a particular facet to the US desire to negotiate a distinctive position in relation to Southeast Asia in the global order of things. Significantly, all three films not only in some way obfuscate the precise identity of their respective Asian settings, they are also involved in substantial textual machinations to figure key American characters as possessive of a certain virility—a distinctive American machismo—but at the same time as not overbearing in their assertiveness, indeed, in some instances, not completely in control of their circumstances and/or lacking in the qualities needed to demonstrate heroism in situations that would appear to call for it.

Plainly, I am also suggesting here that we can see a correspondence between the blurring of the specific real-world referents of the Southeast Asian setting on the one hand, and a characterization of Americanness as constituted by a compromised masculinity on the other. Both of these traits function to support the ends of a cinematic soft power that constructs the American presence in Southeast Asia as certainly something less than an existential threat and as potentially a benevolent presence—and does so in these films at precisely the time that US involvement in the evolving Vietnam War was becoming more entrenched and legislatively supported and entailing ever more hands-on engagement in combat. All three films do this, first of all, by rendering the Asian setting vague enough to mute any specific threat or offense that might be precipitated by US presence or activity—though the films also all attempt to compensate for this geographical unreality by putting a particular emphasis on the material and topographical details of the (albeit unclearly specified) settings. And the films do this, second of all (and in tandem), by populating these ambiguously Asian

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settings with American protagonists and institutions that somehow do not have the drive, deftness, or wherewithal required to make a substantial impact upon those settings or the people who live there, even if they are also represented as largely well-meaning. Furthermore, one can see overlayed across this form of Cold War textual outreach a very directly paralleled production outreach as well, as all three films required, at the very least, a substantial level of support and cooperation between US media-makers and Southeast Asian collaborators.

In arguing that these textual and industrial practice proclivities constitute a kind of Cold War charm offensive, I am in part taking a cue from the important work of Christina Klein in her book *Cold War Orientalism*, wherein she shows how such (slightly earlier) Cold War US films set in Asia and the Pacific as *The King and I* (1956) and *South Pacific* (1958) implicitly offer support to US foreign policy goals in figuring the relationship between the US and Asia as characterized by sentiment and emotion, for example through romantic or familial ties. The representations are thus consonant with US foreign relations strategies of containment on the one hand (keeping communist or Soviet forces from gaining too much Asian influence) and integration on the other (fostering US presence and influence around the globe). The later films discussed in this essay register ramped-up tensions as the supposed Cold War in Asia becomes ever hotter but still attempt to mute concerns and imagine the possibility of positive and sentimental connections, even in a context of greater strife and suspicion.

The first and earliest example of a film embodying such tendencies to be examined here is also a bit of an outlier in a number of ways—yet even in these variations in characteristics, the same broader Cold War thrust is evident (which is to say, it is an exception that nevertheless supports the rationale). First of all, while that film, *Terror is a Man*, is technically a US co-production with the Philippines, a number of writers (drawing in part from remarks made by the producer Eddie Romero himself) would point out that all the key creative input was from the Filipino side, with the filmmakers collaborating with an American producer–distributor to facilitate reaching the US drive-in theater circuit (which this film was largely aiming for). Although we cannot precisely describe this film as being a

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3 See, for example, Bliss Cua Lim, “American Pictures Made by Filipinos: Eddie Romero’s Jungle-Horror Exploitation Films,” *Spectator* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 24–26, 29–30; and Andrew
US co-production in the usual sense, it still marked an instance on the industrial level of close US-Southeast Asian cooperation (as with the other films), and it also self-consciously attempts to offer an American perspective or sensibility, even if technically “authored” by a Filipino director and crew (who self-consciously saw their aim as one of making an American-style film, in order to be able to exploit a US market).

*Terror is a Man* is also an outlier among the trio of films discussed here in that, though shot in Southeast Asia, it not only fictionalizes/anonymizes that Southeast Asian location, it goes a step further in giving multiple indications that the diegesis does not occur in Southeast Asia at all but rather in another region. However, it still (like both of the other films) puts the matter of designation of place front and center at its opening. Its first image is that of a map that encompasses a group of islands as the camera moves in on the area marked “*Isla de Sangre*” (that is, Island of Blood). The wrinkle here is that this is a fictive setting, with no country clearly alluded to as the plot (about an American shipwreck survivor washing up on the shores of the *Isla de Sangre*) unfolds, though we do hear the place referred to as a “South Seas Island,” and that it is 1,000 miles from Peru. Further cues that arise include the fact that the American, Fitzgerald, met his accident en route from South America (where he had been employed for some years) to his hometown of San Francisco, and that a helper employed by a US doctor who is doing some work on the island hails from Guatemala—all of which, combined with the lush tropical vegetation and regular and heavy rainfall on the island—would suggest a location somewhere in the Eastern part of the South Seas, more toward South America than towards the actual shooting location of the Philippines.

But again, while the narration explicitly positions the plot as not unfolding in the Philippines, or even in Southeast Asia, there is a wealth of cues present to enable the informed reader who is so inclined to derive a clear allegory about the Philippines—allegories that have been explored in detail in the work of Bliss Cua Lim, José Capino, Leong Yew, and others (and so will not receive extended focus here). Even if the narrative denies it, the Filipino setting and secondary actors, the snippets of Filipino dialect that can be heard, and the extra-textual knowledge of a director and producer very


engaged elsewhere in their work with issues of Filipino politics and identity all directly invite a reading in terms of colonial and political allegory, in particular about the relationship of the US with the Philippines.

Most readings of the film along these lines would point to the plain allegorical resonances of the *Island of Dr Moreau*–inspired plot about a medical doctor from New York who has come to Blood Island to conduct ethically questionable experiments to turn a panther into a human—with American scientific arrogance showing its usual disregard for the Southeast Asian resources and personnel under America’s sway. As Lim and Yew point out, the anonymization (and, I would add, displacement) of the setting supports a broader allegory of US presence in Southeast Asia by allowing it to stand in as a generic, symbolic locale rather than a specific site.5 I am adding the point here that, in a Cold War context, this anonymization also makes the presence of the allegory more tolerable and less harsh and disruptive (because it is no longer specific to a place).

What is softened here, I would argue, is not only the specific receiver of mistreatment or exploitation but also the national perpetrator of such mistreatment. Yes, the exploitative doctor in question comes from the US, but he is portrayed by an actor (Francis Lederer) who was born and grew up in what was then Austria-Hungary and whose speech thus bears traces of a European accent. The literary and cinematic associations given the nature of the experiments he is carrying out is in line with the old-world European mad scientist. There is also a further contemporary resonance, given the references to the scientist’s desire to create a “perfect race” and the clear racialization of the (black) panther as a “black beast,” with Nazi racial ideology and eugenics. The shipwrecked protagonist Fitzgerald is thus positioned as the recognizably more American man in this drama and potentially an American savior for others. The American once more leads the allegorical battle against the Nazi scourge.6

6 Plainly, the broadly allegorical valence of this scenario invites parallels to be made with not only the US’s global Cold War struggles but its internal racial tensions as well, conflicts between the narrative’s white, brown, and black dramatis personae opening themselves up to readings in multiple ways. In point of fact, these two sets of struggles were widely understood at the time as directly related: American policymakers were well aware of the evident contradictions of projecting an image of democratic benevolence to global neighbors while still dealing with the problems of racial discrimination at home. See, for example, Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2000), esp. Chapter 2. Again, however, the point here is that the distinctive textual dynamics work to displace the sense of US culpability for racial discrimination, just as it does for international exploitation more broadly.
But while this framework defuses allegorical American culpability in the Pacific or Southeast Asia, these films also show a tendency to mute American virility or heroism at the same time—to render the US as lacking the force to be *either* a major threat *or* a substantive support. Thus, while the film goes out of its way to set Fitzgerald up as the potential “white savior” (e.g., the actor Richard Derr’s blondeness in contrast to Francis Lederer’s coloring)—the man making assurances to a pair of native siblings to rescue them from the island and making romantic overtures to the doctor’s admittedly love-starved (also blonde) wife, and also standing in to cast a critical eye on the doctor’s experiments—the film also consistently goes out of its way to undermine these expectations, an undermining that Leong Yew has posited as recurring across Filipino export cinema. For example, Fitzgerald repeatedly seems to withhold judgment on the scientist’s experiments, appearing more curious than revolted by them; he fails in adulterously wooing the lonely wife beyond an initial tryst or two; and the native woman is killed by the creature before she can be rescued. At the close of the film, her younger brother—like her, a servant to the white settlers—has demonstrated his own solidarity with the creature by helping it to flee by boat (as Yew describes it, a “moment in which the native and the synthetically created native can form a brief but meaningful connection”), while the doctor’s wife too continues to have some sympathy for it and in the final scene wanders along the beach oblivious to and uninterested in Fitzgerald tagging along a few steps behind her. Again, the point being made here in the context of the particular argument is that the undermining of American “manhood” and agency in these films functions in tandem with their effacement of setting to ultimately mute the sense of threat brought on by US incursion into Southeast Asia in the Cold War era.

**Masquerades Multiplied**

The 1963 Universal Pictures adaptation of the widely read novel *The Ugly American* is at the other end of the budget spectrum from *Terror is a Man*. It is a glossy studio production, and one that much more directly and overtly deals with issues of US Cold War engagement in Southeast Asia than the earlier film—the plot being concerned with the efforts of a newly minted US ambassador to a Southeast Asian nation to keep that nation from falling

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7 Yew, “Sympathetic Collaboration.”
under the sway of communism. To speak to the pattern being traced out, we again have an opening image that directs us now even more explicitly to a qualified depiction of a Southeast Asian locale—a high-angle image of Thai countryside over which there is a text informing us that while “much of this picture was filmed” in Thailand, nevertheless “the events portrayed, while drawn from recent history, do not reflect the politics or history of Thailand.”

It might be noted that, technically, this disclaimer does not directly deny that the film might be set in Thailand. In point of fact, however, the film refers to its Southeast Asian setting with the fictive country name of Sarkhan, and broader plot details include a contemporary political context really only applicable to South Vietnam. And yet in keeping with the kind of geographical equivocations being symptomatically demonstrated across these films, at the same time, the visual cues, the renowned landmarks, and the use of Thai language in snippets (though it is called Sarkhanese) all mark a continuing return of Thailand masquerading as Sarkhan masquerading as South Vietnam. Of a piece with all of these substitutions of like-for-like and fictionalized real-for-real is also the brown-faced casting of the key Southeast Asian character in the film, the popular Sarkhanese leader Deong being portrayed by Japanese actor Eiji Okada (who would have been familiar to international viewers from his recent turn in the French New Wave film *Hiroshima mon amour* from 1959) under a heavy coat of make-up. Yes, this is Thailand in an acknowledged masquerade, with Thais playing a large proportion of the Sarkhanese characters (most notably the Thai author and scholar Kukrit Pramoj playing the local prime minister—a role he later took on in real life). But the unreal framework (along with 1963 Hollywood’s usual disregard for verisimilitude in things Asian) also permits this cross-Asian casting for a central role—a fact that produces striking irony in a scene in which Deong and his American foil (an ambassador with the all too apt name MacWhite, portrayed by Marlon Brando) bitterly accuse one another of being two-faced.

Here we have a film that purports to directly engage with issues of Cold War American exploitation and self-interest and American imperialism in Southeast Asia but at the same time literally displaces and thus mutes, if not disavows, such real-world self-interest by obscuring the actual geographical and national contexts of such. This equivocation about

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9 An interview with Kukrit regarding his celebrated turn as the cinematic prime minister, where he notes he was requested to play the role after auditions of Chinese and Filipino actors were judged to be unsatisfactory, can be found in Steve Van Beek, ed., *Kukrit Pramoj: His Wit and Wisdom* (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1983), 216–22.
place (though offset by location shooting and authentic local details) allows for a softening—a making more acceptable—of images of US Cold War involvement in Southeast Asia, a messaging of such involvement as being fundamentally benevolent and respectful, despite difficulties it might engender.

Along these lines, the film concerns MacWhite’s efforts to facilitate the acceptance of various kinds of American aid, and the acceptance of Americans as genuine allies, and thus, in turn, to stave off the influence of communist forces, which evidently have a great deal of support locally and which are determined to wrest control of Sarkhan. MacWhite hopes to accomplish this not only through the capable management of US projects but also through cooperation with Deong, who happens to be an old wartime friend and is now the popular leader of a local revolutionary movement. Key hindrances that the ambassador encounters are the continued violent protests against his presence, assaults upon his projects, and a new falling out with his old friend, whom the ambassador thinks is wrongly suspicious of American intentions and thus not acting in the best interests of his people.

As the title suggests, the ambassador does indeed start to come across as a bit of the “Ugly American” at times owing to his assertiveness, if not bossiness, not only with the embassy staff and sometimes his wife but also with Deong and other Sarkhanese, whose best interests he insists he understands better than they do themselves. On balance, however, the ambassador is presented as a largely positive Western protagonist, as one would expect for what is a star vehicle for Marlon Brando. The cues that we are to understand him positively as the “hero” of this piece include the fact that he himself appears to have genuine integrity in his actions (even if they upset others) and a consistent motivation to ensure the efficient completion of his initiatives with the aim of helping the Sarkhanese people, even if this means personal difficulty for him.

MacWhite’s forcefulness and integrity, his masculine “straightness” in multiple senses of the term, extends as well to his relationship with his wife, whom he appears to be controlling of but also concerned about and faithful toward, staying within the assigned and accepted boundaries of Cold War gender roles. A number of cultural historians of the Cold War have analyzed at length the era’s discursive links between the performance of normative gender roles (viz., a biologically and economically productive heterosexual marriage) and the adherence to the American state’s ideological and foreign policy positions; that is to say, remaining within the domestic social norms was understood as crucial to supporting the goal of “containment” of a
range of anti-American currents both at home and in the world at large.\textsuperscript{10} Significantly, all three films’ main male protagonists, while largely keeping to accepted expectations of virile and able masculinity, also stray from it to a certain degree, in keeping with the softening tendency I am teasing out here, the rendering less imposing of machismo figures. At the same time, however, it is pertinent in this regard that \textit{The Ugly American} repeatedly goes out of its way to detail not only MacWhite’s largely robust performance of his Cold War husbandly role but Deong’s as well, and this ultimately makes sense in terms of the film’s Cold War political logic: although Deong shows antipathy towards MacWhite and the American imposition he represents, the film makes clear that he is far more opposed to the covert undermining of the Sarkhanese people’s desires and needs by foreign-backed communist fighters and \textit{agents provocateurs}. The two men’s shared performance of ideals of Cold War heterosexual marriage telegraphs to us in advance (as is eventually confirmed) that “deep down,” they are both more towards the side of US ideology than of the political threat that must be contained.

At the same time, however, and in common with the other cinematic cases being discussed here, there are certain elements introduced into the portrayal of MacWhite and into the narrative situation that mitigate against this being too forceful or threatening an image of American Cold War masculinity. Chief amongst these is simply that, despite his cocksureness, MacWhite proves to be in error in his key understandings about the Sarkhan situation. He ignores the advice of an American manager of a highway project regarding pushing forward too quickly, and as a result there is carnage (largely among local bystanders) when anti-US fighters attack an opening ceremony for the project. And more importantly, he is completely in the dark about foreign communist forces actively working to foment a popular local revolution in the country so that they can then step in, assassinate Deong as leader of that revolution, and seize power. He is utterly shocked and caught off guard when this is revealed to him (as his facial expression betrays), as so too, subsequently, is Deong (who alas is disbelieving of his erstwhile friend’s warnings about the plot until the moment he is shot).

Nor does the film even do MacWhite the favor of showing him regaining control of the situation after the assassination or coming to a new understanding as a result of the revelations, although he tries to claim such to a chaotic crowd of reporters; and the film utterly undermines his explanation

of the situation by closing with a suburban television viewer shutting off his statement mid-sentence, so that neither the tevisual viewer nor we as his cinematic counterpart know what he was going to explain. Another dimension of irresolution at the film’s conclusion is that it is not spelled out whether MacWhite follows through on his commitment to bring in US forces to assist the sitting government should they be able to prove there were incursions by foreign communist forces on their soil (which they do prove). This again circumvents presenting the specter of US military activity in Southeast Asia or of directly grappling with the utility and ideological problematics of such.

Locational Contrivances

Similar kinds of fancy ideological footwork occur in Operation CIA (Allied Artists, 1965), which is in some ways the most bizarre case of an obfuscated or confused Southeast Asian setting (and thus calls for a more extended analysis here). As with The Ugly American, the narrative is overtly about US efforts to contain threats of communist influence in the Southeast Asian region, though in this case in the form of an action/espionage narrative regarding a CIA agent (Mark Andrews, played by Burt Reynolds) sent undercover as a visiting professor (of agricultural biochemistry) to look into the assassination of another CIA agent in Saigon and subsequently discovering that the death was linked to a communist plot to assassinate the US ambassador to the country. The film’s poster promises, “Actually filmed on location against the background of intrigue...mystery...terrorism and murder!” but the irony here is that while the film is explicitly designated as being set for the most part in Saigon, and Saigon is referred to several times over the course of the film, the film is shot entirely in Bangkok, Thailand. Nor are there any particular efforts made to disguise the image of Bangkok or to make it appear like Vietnam. Famous local Bangkok landmarks are used for the location shooting, the bits of dialogue among locals is done in the Thai language, Thai writing can be seen on buildings and on vehicles, and one character’s suitcase even has a clearly visible BKK airport luggage tag. In other words, the filmmakers chose to make no effort to disguise the real-world location of the filming, all the while designating it (in terms of surface narration) as being in a different Southeast Asian country. Indeed, the fact of real-world location shooting is highlighted as one of the few “hooks” this low-budget B-film can deliver on; and in part for this commercial reason, location is formally emphasized throughout (as we find has been the case for the other
films examined here as well). Thus, the opening shot of the film is a slow touristic panoramic shot of the Bangkok skyline from near the Chao Phraya River but with the place designation “Saigon” superimposed on the image.

The film is dependent on its geographical and cultural authenticity as key selling points, but for practical reasons (described in more detail below), this must be a false—or at the least mislabeled—authenticity. Bangkok may not be named as such, but a key attraction of a film at the time—and certainly the interest it holds in retrospect for anyone with an interest in Thai studies—is its exceptional visual record of the historic Phra Nakhon area of Bangkok in 1965—at that time more of a central business hub than it is today and home to many of the city’s internationally oriented hotels as well as to some of its embassies. This false/authentic record is constructed both through sparkling on-location cinematography and a geographically verisimilitudinous construction of space via narrative and editing. A good deal of the action is centered around that district’s popular Thai Hotel, where most of the film’s Westerners reside, while the hide-out of the film’s villains is a few blocks away along the bank of the Chao Phraya, directly across from the famed Wat Arun—and all of this is clearly laid out shot by shot, with relative locations established and re-established, for example in a sequence where an explosive device is readied at the hide-out, then driven via motorbike on the very streets that in actual physical reality did lead to the hotel. And a final chase sequence leading from the hotel is able to integrate the spectacular local scenery quite cannily, which is actually in that district (most notably the Temple of the Golden Mount), without resorting to the usual (falsifying) creative geography. So a falsely designated city and national setting, then, but paradoxically presented with exceptional fidelity.

Such national substitutions become a bit more problematic still when it comes to the film’s character portrayals. Most of the supposedly Vietnamese secondary roles are played by Thais, who can be heard speaking Thai—which at least is consistent with the space of the on-location shooting and the broader conceit of Thailand substituting for Vietnam. The film does, however, have one Vietnamese actress (Kieu Chinh) in a main role, that of Kim-Chinh, a local contact and developing love interest of Agent Andrews; and, quite interestingly, we do catch a few snippets of the actress speaking serviceable Thai to Thai actors portraying secondary characters—so in effect, she manages to be authentic to both referenced Asian identities. On the other hand, the utilization of the Filipino character actor Vic Diaz as one of the local (Thai as Vietnamese) villains of the piece, aside from playing into the tritest of Hollywood stereotypes (effeminate and underhanded
male Asian villain who punctuates his comments with a peculiar and ominous high-pitched laugh), throws into bald relief the absurdity of the text's transnational cross-dressing. In one bizarre scene, the Filipino actor speaks in a not readily identifiable tongue (possibly gibberish) to a classroom of Thai students (in order to act the part of translating an English-language lecture given by Andrews), on the evident assumption that contemporary American film audiences would not know that what he is speaking is not Thai on top of not knowing Thai is not Vietnamese.

Just as in the other two films discussed here, in conjunction with this blurring of the film's geographical specificity, one finds an undermining and/or softening of the Cold Warrior–protagonist's masculinity and virility. Operation CIA arrives early on in a global wave of espionage films inspired by the phenomenal popular successes of the nascent James Bond cycle (starting with Dr. No [1962], From Russia with Love [1963], and Goldfinger [1964]), and while it does not share the Bond films' penchant for gadetry, it does share their emphasis on a (seemingly) sexualized spy protagonist and sexually oriented narrative situations. Significantly for the focus of this discussion, Bond's sexually active nature and his concurrent ability to control and regulate his sexual activity are a constituent element of his nationalist Cold War project; as Alan Nadel has described, the 1960s Bond's own emotion and desire are subsumed within—and his sexual activity deployed for—the aims of the state he serves above all else.

On the surface, and initially, Mark Andrews is narratively and generically in the same mold as Bond, and the contemporary spectator is clearly invited to initially read him in terms of this lineage: Andrews' briefing from his CIA boss directly after the assassination that opens the film makes repeated reference to the agent's reputed promiscuity in the course of his work, the boss judgmentally telling him “Oh I know what you're an expert on” and “Let's keep our mind on our work.” A young French female fellow spy (Denise) indicates she has been briefed not to take a taxi with him or to go to his apartment unless chaperoned. But the subsequent course of the narrative reveals that either such perceptions are false or exaggerated, or Andrews achieves a certain personal maturation and enlightenment over the course of the film, or (most plausibly) some of both. He flirts ceaselessly with Denise as

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11 The film is also part of a first (if much smaller) wave of explicit Hollywood representations of the CIA, which up until then had largely been absent from the screen for a number of reasons. Simon Willmetts, “Quiet Americans: The CIA and Early Cold War Hollywood Cinema,” Journal of American Studies 47, no. 1 (February 2013): 138.

12 Nadel, Containment Culture, Chapter 5.
she briefs him about Vietnam during the initial leg of his flight itinerary from Washington, but things do not go beyond flirtation, and he does evidently remember what he is being taught. Once in “Saigon,” Andrews immediately manages to get caught up in a partially unclothed encounter in a massage parlor of dubious nature, but this is not an expression of the Bond-like sexual prowess and control. On the contrary, it is an incident that deflates both the Western protagonist’s masculinity and his capabilities and judgment as an agent (much along the lines of how we see such protagonists represented in the other two films), highlighting his naivete in the Southeast Asian field of operations. Having been informed that his contact in Saigon goes by the code name “Credit,” Andrews assumes that the massage parlor flyer he receives while checking in to his Saigon lodgings that pointedly advertises “Cash or Credit” is to be taken as a means of signaling from his network, and he therefore heads over to the establishment immediately (paying no mind to the knowing looks and giggles he gets from the hotel porter and taxi driver alike). Once Andrews arrives to inquire after Credit, the two young masseuses who are assigned to this supposedly worldly international spy manage to quickly remove his shirt and pants, knock him out cold, and make off with all the cash in his wallet. What might on one level seem like merely a throwaway (if also deflating) narrative gag is moreover repeatedly harkened to by the film, re-emphasizing as it were Andrews’ gullibility and softness. Fellow Westerners he meets at a café afterwards inform him such places are tourist traps; a professor who later spots the flyer as it drops from his papers cannot stop laughing; and later still, Andrews alludes to it when he complains “I’ve been here two days, double-crossed by three dames.” This is hardly the smoothness and cocksureness of a Bond-like secret agent.

But Andrews is eventually largely redeemed by the narrative, his effectiveness as a Cold Warrior achieved in part by this “softness.” In a subsequent encounter with Denise, who shows up in the shower in his Saigon hotel room, he shows significantly more restraint over his carnal desires and thereby picks up on clues as to her own duplicity in the plot he is investigating (and is thus also prepared to protect himself, as he had not been able to earlier). But more important still to what I have argued is the Cold War project of these films to take the edge off the Western presence, to avoid the appearance of American aggression and imposition. Thus, Andrews shows not only measured restraint in his interactions with local collaborator Kim-Chinh—even with signs of developing romantic interest on her part and even in the “heat of battle”—but also an evolving care and tenderness (to the extent a pulp spy film like Operation CIA can take the time to articulate it). The film closes with the pair sharing a brief kiss and Andrews professing his desire
not to “say goodbye” to Kim-Chinh as he steps away to his US-bound plane, thus leaving vaguely open the possibility of a future romantic relationship but also avoiding any explicit image of interaction beyond that of benevolent concern for his Vietnamese counterpart.

While this is a bit of an extreme reversal from the hypersexual CIA agent we meet at the film's opening, the shift is at the least prefigured by sequences where Andrews is shown experiencing shock and remorse at the carnage that occurs in relation to his presence in Saigon. In one such sequence, he is shown interacting in a friendly avuncular fashion with some impoverished children selling wilted flowers on a roadside. No sooner does he buy some of the flowers (enabling the children to buy snacks in turn) than a grenade is tossed from a passing vehicle, presumably intended for the agent, but killing the children instead. Interestingly, two American servicemen themselves happen to be passing by and are able to give some aid to the survivors, though they had not been able to prevent the sudden attack. The overall image given is not one of Andrews and his fellow American servicemen as deleterious intruders but rather as those whose wish is to deliver aid—but who may not even have the force and wherewithal (as in this instance) to do that very effectively.

One can see here that this film and the others I have discussed here attempt to carry out a very delicate balancing act, perhaps doomed to fail to some extent in each case owing to a priori contradictions. While these films on the one hand begin to position themselves as Cold War narratives of containment, they are driven at the same time to blur any sense of threat emanating from the West, obfuscating a context of Western colonial exploitation—but also attempt to do so without completely negating the potential force and effectivity of the West. The result (to varying degrees) in all cases here is strange and inconsistent texts. But the point I want to continue to emphasize (in tying all these films together) is that this very strangeness is a function of the unease of certain kinds of Cold War ideological negotiation, of the impossibility of achieving certain kinds of desired compromises and outcomes given the actual geopolitical (and cultural industry) facts on the ground—with the US wanting to be perceived as non-interfering and supportive of its overseas partners (in the face of post-colonial struggles over ideological influence), at the same time as feeling the need to assert its own (increasingly military) interventions as well. These films evince an impulse to represent coherent and integral forms of national and regional identity and international relations within a Cold War and late or post or quasi-colonial context that makes it, for most intents and purposes, impossible to do so; and nowhere do these contradictions cinematically
manifest themselves in as quite as bizarre a manner as they do in Operation CIA’s locational cross-dressing.

One might well wonder what the filmmakers were thinking when they chose to blur the film’s national designations in this way. In point of fact, the key reason was one of plain exigency rather than a pre-meditated creative choice. When the project was still being developed under the title of Last Message from Saigon, the plan had indeed been to shoot on location in Vietnam. Despite the challenges this posed, shooting in Vietnam itself could also make for profitable product differentiation (an action film on a topic of rising current interest in authentic locales) and had already been demonstrated to be feasible in a release the previous year from the same distributor, Allied Artists’ A Yank in Viet-Nam (1964) featuring the Vietnamese actress who was also going to act in the new film, Kieu Chinh.\textsuperscript{13}

So such location shooting might have seemed a reasonable risk for a low-budget venture such as Last Message from Saigon and on a highly exploitable topic. But the real-world lack of stability made it so that this production was not so simply or coherently containable. What happened, rather, is that all non-military personnel were suddenly ordered out of the area, and the filmmakers had to come up with a new plan of action, which in this case comprised retaining the intended Vietnam setting (the crux, after all, of what was being exploited here and the central premise of the narrative) but doing location filming in another country.\textsuperscript{14} Indeed, though the point is debatable, given the relative dearth of any real-world awareness of or interaction with Asia overall or Southeast Asia more specifically on the part of most Americans as of 1965, such a substitution might not have been such a risk or have registered as so outlandish (if at all) at the time—this despite the fact that Thailand would have remained on the popular cinematic radar as a result of the overwhelming success of The King and I. Reviewers at the time did not make mention of the obvious incongruities of place, language, and culture, nor indeed do later analyses of the film take much heed of these, some even suggesting (incorrectly) that some of the shooting was done in Saigon.\textsuperscript{15} On another level, the odd phenomenon of this film’s flagrantly misidentified shooting location is an index not only to the instability of the production context but also to the lack of Western knowledge of the region with which it is about to be intimately and violently bound up.

\textsuperscript{13} Wayne Byrne, Burt Reynolds on Screen (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2020), 21.
\textsuperscript{14} Byrne, Burt Reynolds, 21.
With regard to the film’s theme of a Cold War protagonist who achieves success through developing a measure of self-restraint, a relevant footnote here—one that might help to account for the mix of impulses evident in *Operation CIA*—is that the film’s director had earlier directed another Cold War narrative (indeed an archetypal narrative of containment) with a protagonist experiencing very much the same kind of development as Andrews. Christian Nyby, though a highly prolific television director in the Cold War era, only directed a handful of feature films, the first and far away the best known being *The Thing from Another World* (1951)—now considered a classic allegory about foreign threats to the American social, political, and cultural way of life. In that film too, an agent of the American state (Air Force Captain Patrick Hendry played by Kenneth Tobey) develops from a position of relative immaturity in both his misunderstanding of alien threats and his lack of self-control regarding women, to an improved apprehension of a malevolent invader (an extra-terrestrial wanting to start a colony of its own) and in tandem a better understanding of the need for self-restraint regarding the woman he desires.

Given *Operation CIA*’s highly distinctive, if also disguised, embeddedness in the real physical space of 1960s Thailand, an appropriate additional closing footnote regarding authorship and influences might be one regarding an assistant director on the film, the only Thai crew member with a screen credit and (one could readily surmise) quite likely one of the reasons for the film’s attention to location detail and effective use of location shooting. That crew member, Santa Pestonji, is the son of one of the most celebrated Thai film directors, the late Ratana Pestonji, and (subsequent to *Operation CIA*) has had a life-long career with his family’s production services company (now known as Santa International Film Productions Company). He himself served as production supervisor for such shot-in-Thailand Hollywood productions as *Cutthroat Island* (1995), *The Beach* (2000), and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004). More to the historical point in this discussion, however, is that Americans were, in this case, dependent upon the work of Thai production personnel (even if effaced) to enable them an entrée into Southeast Asian filming locations in order to produce their narrative of benevolent Cold War presence in the region—just as Thai assistance would also be important for facilitating Americans’ entrée into a Southeast Asian theater of operations as the Cold War turned increasingly hot in the months immediately following.16

16 On the rise of Thai assistance to the US at that historical juncture, see, for example, Nongnuth Kimanonth, “The U.S. Foreign Aid Factor in Thai Development, 1950–1975.” In *Thai-American
Bibliography


About the Author

**Adam Knee** is Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Media & Creative Industries at Singapore’s Lasalle College of the Arts. Prior to this, he held appointments at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (where he was Head of the School of International Communications and Professor of Film and

Media Studies), Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, and Ohio University in the US. He has also been a Fulbright grantee (in Thailand) and a Research Fellow at the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden, the Netherlands. He has broad interests in Southeast Asian and US popular film.