



**E**lephants have been at the heart of Thai culture for centuries, whether in battle (King Naresuan's famous 1592 defeat of Burma) or as part of the logging industry (banned since 1990 due to deforestation). White elephants are one of Thailand's most famous cultural symbols. Elephants are even represented architecturally in Bangkok: Sumet Jumsai's stylised Elephant Tower in Lard Prao, opened in 1997, is the largest elephant in the world, at 335 feet high.

The Erawan Museum in Samut Prakan, designed by Lek Viriyaphant, is an extraordinary structure: a three-storey museum, housed within the body of a giant, copper, three-headed elephant. The exterior is a surreal sight along Sukhumvit Road, though the interior is even more extraordinary: an ornately decorated dome, complete with a stained glass depiction of the zodiac and an atmospheric Buddhist shrine. It's one of the

most remarkable, yet overlooked, attractions in Bangkok.

Elephants were also central to one of Thailand's first feature films, *The King Of The White Elephant*. The film, made in 1940, was produced by Pridi Banomyong, who led a pro-democracy coup against absolute monarchy in 1932 and briefly served as Prime Minister in 1946.

*The King Of The White Elephant* is the earliest Thai film to survive in its entirety, and it was restored in 2007 from a 16mm print. It begins with a scrolling prologue highlighting the significance of Thai elephants: "In this land where elephants abound, the white elephant is esteemed the most noble of all."

The film depicts the life of King Chakra, a figure inspired by King Naresuan, and it tells the tale - familiar from the nationalistic Thai school curriculum - of Naresuan's victory against Burma. The film, released during World War II, also carried a

contemporary political message: its prologue ends with an explicitly pacifist plea: "Chakra... fought bravely but he loved peace and to peace this story is dedicated." (It was filmed in English, which suggests that its true purpose was for international propaganda.)

The actors all enunciate in their finest Received Pronunciation, which gives the film a stilted tone, though the final battle sequence is still impressive even today. Two herds of elephants charge at each other, and soldiers fight with sticks and swords. After his victory, Chakra pardons the Burmese soldiers and sends them home unpunished. The effect is similar to Charlie Chaplin's pacifist speech at the end of *The Great Dictator* (and even last year's *Lincoln*, in which the US president pardons the Confederate soldiers after the Civil War).

The forthcoming epic *Naresuan V*, due for release later this year after numerous





delays, will also recreate Naresuan's elephant battle. The film attracted controversy, as it received hundreds of baht in state funding while independent film-makers were overlooked. Reportedly, the elephant battle sequence alone cost 100 million baht.

Thailand's first computer-animated film, Khan Kluay - clearly inspired by Hollywood's most famous elephant, Disney's Dumbo - is yet another retelling of Naresuan's elephant duel. Khan Kluay, a charming blue elephant, is ridden into battle by Naresuan, and must kill the Burmese elephant Nguangaeng. Again, the story is told in an overtly nationalistic fashion: the Thai Khan Kluay is sweet and innocent, while the Burmese Nguangaeng is portrayed as a satanic monster. Khan Kluay's commercial success led to a sequel, a cartoon series, and a computer game.

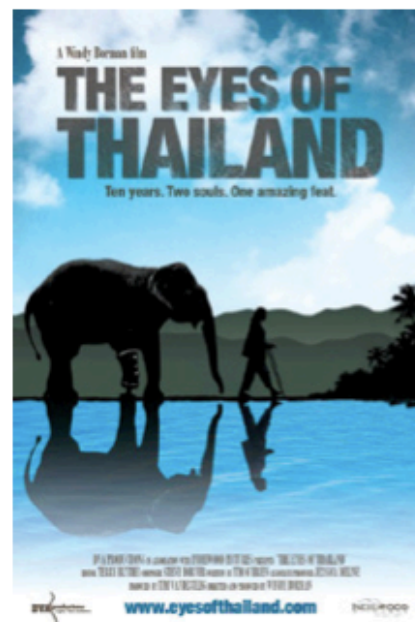
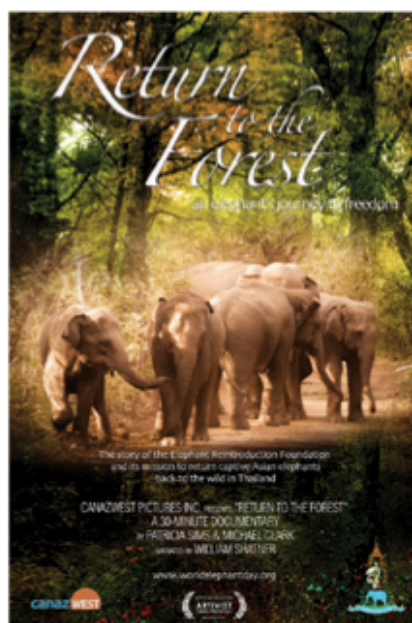
Elephants also featured heavily in one of contemporary Thai cinema's most famous exports, Tom-Yum-Goong. Tony Jaa's character is the last remaining 'jaturungkabart' or war-elephant guard, protecting the kingdom's traditional royal elephants. Though the martial arts stunts were apparently

performed without digital effects, a dream sequence featuring an elephant battle was produced with CGI animation.

Thailand's wild elephant population is dwindling rapidly due to poaching. Domesticated 'urban elephants' are grossly mistreated. Thai law still permits trade in domestic ivory, despite calls by conservationists for a complete ban. In the past few years, four documentaries have highlighted these issues and other problems facing Thai elephants today.


The Eyes Of Thailand and The Last Elephants In Thailand both profile Soraida Salwala, who established the Friends of the Asian Elephant Hospital in Lampang. Return To The Forest and Elephants Never Forget highlight the work of the Elephant Reintroduction Foundation.

The Last Elephants In Thailand is an extended interview with Soraida, accompanied by footage of the seven elephants she cares for at her Hospital. She reveals that she has survived several assassination attempts, as a result of her outspoken campaign against elephant trafficking. The documentary ends with footage of performing elephants being



trained - a cruel procedure, described by the narrator as "torture," in which they are repeatedly stabbed with a hook.

The Eyes Of Thailand, which is also structured around an interview with Soraida, focuses on one particular elephant she rescued after it stood on a landmine. One of the animal's legs was blown off, and, in a pioneering operation, Soraida's Hospital fitted it with a prosthetic limb. It was the first such operation in the world, performed at the world's first dedicated elephant hospital.

Return To The Forest follows the Elephant Reintroduction Foundation as it returns captive Thai elephants into the wild. Narrated by William Shatner, the documentary sometimes feels too much like an educational film for children ("the seeds that elephants eat are processed by digestive enzymes..."), and it sometimes anthropomorphises its subject ("elephants are a lot like us"), but nevertheless it's a valuable showcase for the work of the Foundation. The makers of the film are currently working on Elephants Never Forget, a feature-length documentary profiling a single Thai elephant's journey from captivity to the jungle. 

***ELEPHANTS IN THE MOVIES***

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