

Thailand Cashes In On International Film and TV Productions as Incentive Scheme Takes Root

Matthew Scott | August 22, 2019



Thailand Film Office, the body responsible for handling foreign shoots in the country, reports that 462 productions were shot in the country between January and July this year, injecting around \$117 million into the local economy.

Thailand's supporting role in big international productions dates right back to the likes of Bruce Lee's breakout *The Big Boss* in 1971 and Michael Cimino's Oscar winner *The Deer Hunter* (1978), but it's only been in recent years that the numbers of visiting filmmakers have become impressive, and consistent.

The Thailand Film Office — an offshoot of the department of tourism and the body responsible for handling international shoots — reports that 462 foreign productions were shot in the country between January and July this year, covering everything from advertisements (208) to reality TV series (12). Combined they were responsible for injecting around \$117 million into the local economy.

An impressive 36 of the projects shot were feature films and there are a few blockbusters on the horizon, including the ninth installment of the billion-earning *Fast & Furious* franchise, which recently shot in the Thai islands around Phuket and Krabi.

With Netflix (the pending series *The Stranded*) and HBO (the series *Food Lore*) increasing the presence of streaming platforms using the country for locations, it's little wonder the Thailand Film Office director Ubolwan Sucharitakul is in a buoyant mood when she sits down to discuss the lay of the

land with *The Hollywood Reporter*.

It's her first day on the job, too, or rather the first day of her second stint in charge of the department. "I'm not new but I'm renewed," says Ubolwan.



Thailand Film Office director Ubolwan Sucharitakul.

What's been the secret behind this uptick of international filmmakers wanting to come to Thailand?

Incentives. The incentives and the cash rebates are working and [production] numbers are rising a lot, compared to before 2017 [when they were introduced]. It took a year or so for people to learn what we are offering and to wait to hear reports from other people about if it worked. I think the rise in numbers shows it is.

How do you gauge the incentive in terms of success, and why do you think you've been successful so far?

Actually we look at revenue rather than simply number of productions. And revenue is higher. The way we sell ourselves is simply by letting people reflect on what we have done so far. The process is straightforward. We have the money. Come and get it. You have to get a film permit. You have to hire a local coordinator. You have to spend more than 50 million Baht (around \$1.4 million). For that you get a 15 percent rebate.

And there are a few add-ons?

Yes. There's an extra 3 percent rebate for hiring Thai crew and if the film helps to promote Thailand and Thai culture there is another 2 percent.

Plus you get to come to Thailand to work!

Yes, and apart from the fact, we have many different types of locations, like our beaches and islands and our jungles. There are lots of choices. Plus Thai crews are very experienced. We get lots of compliments about how they work. We are ahead of other countries in Southeast Asia in that regard. We have been making a lot of films for a long time. We know we have the locations but also local expenses are very cheap compared to other countries, or compared to shooting in the United States.



What role does film play in Thailand in general?

Well, we are under the Ministry of Tourism because of how important this role is. Foreign productions generate income for local people. That's one of their important roles. But the image of the country is very important. Tourism is huge to Thailand and

these films can be a kind of promotion. That's why we have the incentive.

How much attention is then paid to content, and to what the film is actually about? How careful are you?

We read through the whole script. If it is about Thailand we can have concerns but if it is not about Thailand, if it is generic, it is less of a problem. Mostly it is common sense.

Are you seeing increased interests from specific markets?

India has become more and more important. Not just Bollywood but filmmakers from all over the country. Traditionally the main markets for us are the U.S., the U.K. and Hong Kong but you can see the international industry is expanding.

What have you identified as the challenges ahead?

We need to ensure we have the personnel. The role the Thai coordinator plays on a shoot is a very important one and in the past there have been problems. Some have not been professional. So we are looking to set up a standard of competency. This will make sure our service is of international standard. This is my goal, and my challenge. We have to keep raising the level of competency. Thailand has lots of beautiful places and if they see them they might want to visit. But if they are impressed with the quality of people they will come back again and again. ■