



An aerial view shows the Buddhist temple Wat Samphran (Dragon Temple) in Nakhon Pathom, some 40km west of Bangkok. — AFP photos

DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS: THAI TEMPLES PUT QUIRKY SPIN ON BUDDHISM

A dragon encircles a tower, wretched souls face torture, superheroes scale a mosaic wall—these may seem like scenes from a half-remembered dream, but are in fact famed Thai temples. The Buddhist-majority kingdom has its share of solemn worship houses and pagodas, but there are also its quirkier counterparts which double as tourist attractions. In Nakhon Pathom, about an hour east from downtown Bangkok, the dragon tower inside Sam Phran temple came from the dreams of its former abbot. The 16-storey jewel-pink tower, with a dragon slithering up it, symbolizes the 16 levels of heaven in Buddhism mythology.

Its hellish counterpart is Saen Suk temple in Chon Buri province, where graphic tableaux of punishment and torture have been erected in a garden-like open-air dungeon for visitors to stroll through. Statues of eagles rip out the intestines of wrongdoers, liars get their tongues cut off,



The large foot of the dragon is pictured on the wall of the Buddhist temple Wat Samphran (Dragon Temple) in Nakhon Pathom.

and men who engage in pre-marital sex get their genitals stabbed with a spear. "If you choose to live an unrighteous life, you'll end up like these statues," says visitor Suchart Klaoteaw, 21, as he passes

other families snapping selfies with their children. "We just need to be conscious about everything we do... because karma is real."

A more light-hearted take on Buddhism will be found at Bangkok's Priwat Ratchasongkhrum temple, where worshippers can see Batman scaling a temple door and Winnie the Pooh trying to remove a beehive from a wall painting. Carrying the base of the Buddha is a David Beckham statue wearing his Manchester United jersey—a testament to the kingdom's football-crazy fans. For 53-year-old Lakkana Cherpichit, the "unique" design of Priwat Ratchasongkhrum is a breath of fresh air. "I really love it... we get to see characters we've never seen before at this temple," she tells AFP. — AFP



An aerial view shows the giant Buddha statue at the Buddhist temple Wat Samphran (Dragon Temple) in Nakhon Pathom.



A giant Buddha statue is pictured at the Buddhist temple Wat Samphran (Dragon Temple) in Nakhon Pathom.



The dragon head is seen on top of the Buddhist temple Wat Samphran (Dragon Temple) in Nakhon Pathom.



A visitor looks at statues illustrating the fate of people who do bad deeds in a garden depicting a Buddhist version of hell at the Wat Saeng Suk temple in the Thai coastal province of Chonburi.



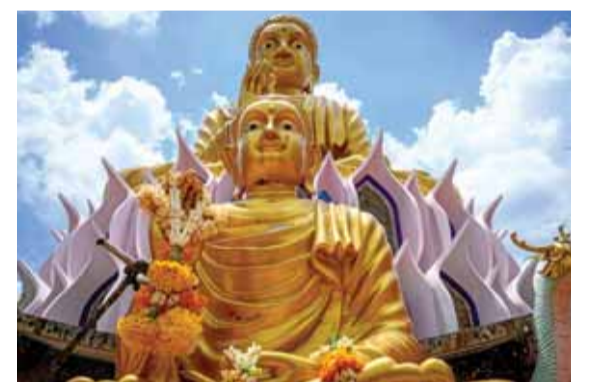
Figure of Captain America (center) among imaginary creatures on the facade of the Wat Pariwat Buddhist temple in Bangkok.



A figure of the cartoon character Popeye among imaginary creatures on the facade of the Wat Pariwat Buddhist temple in Bangkok.



A mythical figure for collecting coins is seen at the Buddhist temple Wat Samphran (Dragon Temple) in Nakhon Pathom.



Two Buddha statues are pictured at the Buddhist temple Wat Samphran (Dragon Temple) in Nakhon Pathom.

Wuhan film captures horror and humanity at coronavirus ground zero

Back in February, when few Americans were aware of a distant and oddly named phenomenon called coronavirus, two Chinese filmmakers strapped on hazmat suits and embedded themselves in Wuhan's overrun hospitals. There, they captured harrowing footage of terrified citizens hammering on hospital doors, medics collapsing from exhaustion, and relatives begging in vain to say goodbye to infected loved ones. Now, those images have been edited together by New York-based director Hao Wu ("People's Republic of Desire"). Premiering at the Toronto film festival Monday, "76 Days"—named for the duration of the central Chinese city's draconian lockdown—is the first major documentary from the disease's original epicenter to hit theaters.

Shot in a claustrophobic, cinema verite style—without voice-over or direct-to-camera interviews—the film relies on the intimacy of the footage of doctors and patients grappling with a terrifying new reality. Wu first contacted the two filmmakers, one of whom is anonymous for his own safety, after witnessing China's early lockdown first-hand during a family visit for Chinese New Year. The footage they sent him revealed how, in the chaos of the disease's early weeks, they were able to get remarkable

access—but at considerable personal risk and suffering. "It was a horrible, horrible shooting experience for them," Wu told AFP. "They were fainting, it was really warm. A few times [filmmaker Weixi Chen] wanted to throw up inside [his] goggles, but he couldn't because once you throw up, once you remove your PPE, you have to get out, you could not come back again." "It was like shooting in a war zone," he added. Wu also had a personal motivation for pursuing the project.

His grandfather died from cancer soon after the outbreak, unable to find a hospital bed as resources strained under the weight of Covid-19. "In the beginning I was angry with the Chinese government—I really wanted to find out who's at fault, what caused this," said Wu. But once the pandemic spread—with exponentially greater tragedy—to other countries like the US, the desire to place blame was replaced by a desire to document how "as human beings live through this, how we can share this experience."

'Scar'

Ironically, despite Beijing's tight controls on information, access was in some ways easier in China. Privacy and litigation concerns proved far more of a

barrier to filming in New York hospitals, Wu found.

Wuhan hospitals desperately lacking personal protective equipment initially welcomed coverage that could boost donations and volunteers, he added. The film eschews politics and blame to focus on personal stories of tragedy and bravery, hope and despair, which repeated around the world after emerging in China. Medics tenderly hold the hands of patients locked away from their families, and are distinguishable to viewers only by the colorful doodles they scrawl upon each other's head-toe hazmat suits.

But it remains unclear whether the movie will ever be seen in China, where news about the pandemic has been tightly controlled since day one—leading to many in the West, including US President Donald Trump, accusing Beijing of a vast cover-up. "I would love to show it in China, because I feel that for the entire country with Covid, it has been such a scar on the nation's psyche," said Wu, who hopes it could help his ancestral home to mourn its losses. "Obviously right now most Chinese feel proud the country has been able to control it. But it is a trauma." — AFP

Actor John Boyega quits Jo Malone over Chinese ad

British actor John Boyega yesterday said he had stepped down as brand ambassador for fragrance company Jo Malone, after he was replaced in an aftershave advertising campaign in China. "I have decided to step down as Jo Malone's global ambassador," Boyega, best known for playing stormtrooper Finn in the Star Wars sequels, wrote on his Twitter account. "Their decision to replace my campaign in China by using my concepts and substituting a local brand ambassador for me, without either my consent or prior notice, was wrong. "While many brands understandably use a variety of global and local ambassadors, dismissively trading out one's culture this way is not something I can condone."

The perfume brand responded on the social media platform, calling the 28-year-old Londoner "an incredible talent, artist and person". "We respect John's decision and we wish him all the best," it added. The company, which is



John Boyega

owned by Estee Lauder, was earlier reported as saying that dropping him for the Chinese market was a "misstep". The commercial featuring Boyega was reshot for the Chinese market using the actor Liu Haoran. Boyega's move follows his criticism of the marketing of non-white characters in the latest Star Wars films and his outspoken support for the Black Lives Matter movement. In June, he made an emotional speech in central London at the height of anti-racism protests following the death of George Floyd, an unarmed black man, during a US police arrest. — AFP