

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

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The Thai period films selected for this study clearly illustrate strong themes of Thai nationalism. In the past, this sense of nationalism was promoted by the ruling, powerful class, most notably the royal family. When Thailand suffered extensive losses on many levels as a result of the 1997 economic crisis, Thai people were led to feel that they had consequently been colonized by the West, particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Thus, during the late 1990s and into the beginning of the twenty-first century, Thai nationalism became much more visible. One such example of this increased visibility can be seen in the boom of Thai nationalistic films during the post-1997 period. While the ruling, powerful class, as a highly educated group, played an important role in promoting this newfound zeal for Thai nationalism, it was again, most notably, members of the royal family who played an important part. This is clearly demonstrated by the royal involvement in the production of one of the most renowned nationalistic films of the period, *Suriyothai*.

The period films discussed in this project, and others of the same genre, express this new nationalism through the prism of Thailand's glorious past. It was a tried and true strategy that had been used previously during other important times in Thai history to promote nationalism and unity, and was once again successfully employed after the economic crisis to help bring Thais together under a common theme, that of Thai nationalism. .

However, within the global context of the economic crisis, there were other types of nationalism. For example, women played a much more important role in the protection of the nation. In addition, the theme of "the other" was also an important aspect, in that it was presented as an "us" (Thais) versus "them" (Western powers) scenario, and the only guaranteed way to overcome "them" was to come together under the umbrella of Thai nationalism. Thus, the period films chosen to represent many kinds of nationalism in the late 1990s are discussed in detail below.

1. Women: Feminist Nationalism

The role of woman was clearly shown through in the context of the economic crisis. In ancient times, each kingdom and nation expanded their power by seizing or colonizing the land. They made war and they used their power and weapons both expand and protect the nation. However, it is much different in the present, wherein Western powers use new tools, such as economic policies, to expand their power and influence and colonize other countries. Thus, the power and weapons are not the only method of exerting control, and over time the pattern of fighting for control has changed from using power to using policy.

Given its place in the global context, Thai society needs the leaders who are able to appropriately recognize and respond to present-day crises, regardless gender. Both the post-economic crisis Thai context and the texts in the films demonstrate clear evidence that women have taken on more important and pivotal roles after economic crisis.

One example of how women have become more influential leaders in the Thai context is that of Princess Suphankalaya.¹ The princess's popularity soared to an almost cult-like status when her story of heroism and bravery was re-released and enjoyed a newfound popularity among modern Thai women. Dr. Naline Paiboon, was a Thai businesswoman who had fallen on hard times and was forced to declare bankruptcy. At her lowest point, she began to worship Princess Suphankalaya and was able to become very successful soon thereafter. The princess's pictures could be found everywhere and served as further evidence of the emerging, powerful Thai woman phenomena. This may be because many Thais were looking for a leader who was qualified and able to solve its problems, as well as understand and support its people on a more personal, emotional level. The answer for many to this type of leader was to be found in Princess Suphankalaya, a woman.

The film texts also emphasize the importance women. In the films, although the men were still played very important roles in protecting the nation, it is often during film's climax when women come to the fore and also play important roles in

¹ Princess Suphankalaya was a Thai heroine who fought against the invading Burmese in Ayutthaya. For more details of her story, see the section entitled "Feminist Nationalism" in Chapter 3.

protecting their nation. This is clearly evidenced in many of the films explored in this project. Suriyothai devoted her life to the kingdom and was killed as she was fighting the Burmese. Maneechan was willing to leave behind her life and all that she knew in the present day to use her knowledge and skills in helping to solve the Paknam crisis between Thailand and France in 1893. The women in Bangrajan also took up the sword to fight against the invading Burmese with the men.

2. Westerners depicted as the new aggressive invader

Nationalism after the economic crisis in Thailand clearly depicts Western powers as the enemy. In fact, the West had been seen as the enemy previously, but this was not always as clear. For example, posters among those collected by a Thai official from Field Marshall Phibun Songkhram's group, who worked with the Japanese in Thailand during World War II,² show that Japan specifically appealed to Southeast Asians, again depicting the "us" (Asians) vs. "them" (Western powers) rhetoric.



Figure 1: "The Puppeteer," copy of a Japanese army poster in Thailand during World War II. Seizing on the anti-colonialist argument, the Japanese encouraged Thais to see Britain as the enemy, as the master puppeteer or manipulator of Thailand.³

However, films such as *The Siam Renaissance* clearly presented the West as the enemy. The film showed both visual images and dialogues which made it clear that

² Arlene Neher, Southeast Asia During World War II, http://www.seasite.niu.edu/crossroads/aneher/warinsea_slbs.htm, (2008, 22 April).

³ Sang Pattanothai (Khwamnuak nai Krong Khang/Reflections in Prison, Bangkok, 1956).

Western powers had tried to exploit Thailand, specifically when France and Britain planned to have Thailand serve as a buffer state between British Burma and French Indochina.⁴ These Western powers stressed that Thailand needed to parcel up its land to provide this buffer state. In addition, the French and British were aggressively pushing Thai officers to accept their buffer state proposal; the Thai officers apologized to the French representative, who was not prohibited to meet with the Thai king at night.

As seen in films, Thais felt strongly that they had been exploited as a result of economic policies that had been created by the Western powers, particularly the IMF. In current times, although Thailand was not pressured with gun boats and did not lose any of its land, Thailand felt just as pressured by modern-day economic policies which left many Thai feeling they had become economic slaves to Western policies. Within the global context, it was necessary for Thailand to support the economic policies of other countries, particularly those in the West. Despite this ever-increasing globalization and its affect on Thailand, it is clear that the bravery of the Thais in these films illustrates that the West has been an enemy for quite some time.

3. Discrimination against Thai culture and the loss of Thai identity

In the past, kingdoms and nations have expanded their power by stressing the strength of their armies. A good example of this is when the French used gun boats to pressure Thailand, and kings waged war, backed by their substantial armies (as with the Burmese who have invaded Thailand many times throughout its history). It was the land, and whether territory was gained or lost, which determined the winners and the losers.

Within the modern day global context, the pattern of expansion and colonial takeover has changed from taking over land to taking over the culture. Globalization has seen the influx of many different cultures into mainstream Thailand, and many aspects of these different cultures have been accepted and incorporated into Thai culture, to varying degrees. Examples of outside cultural influences include movies, food, pop stars, models, magazine editors, and showbiz figures, which are all

⁴ French Indochina consisted of present-day Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

widespread in Thailand. Thais have enjoyed aspects of Western lifestyle and culture such as Western music, fast food like McDonald's and KFC, and beverages like Starbucks coffee. This should not be interpreted to mean Thais prefer Western culture to their own, but rather, have incorporated some aspects of Western culture. However, when economic crisis occurred, Thais began to recognize that they were economic slaves to the West and Western culture was subsequently deemed a threat to Thai culture.

Thus, the post-crisis period films portrayed beautiful scenes from Thailand's past which catered to Thais nostalgia for their unique history and culture. Thus, many of these films enjoyed wide popularity and box office success. One good example of this is *The Overture*. This movie brought back traditional Thai music and the popularity of the Thai xylophone soared. Thai music schools were once again busy in teaching traditional Thai music, and sales of Thai instruments, particularly the Thai xylophone, increased exponentially.

4. Teenagers and nationalistic consciousness in a globalized society

The 1997 economic crisis had wide-reaching effects throughout many groups in Thai society. One such group was the teenagers. Many teens' families had been in debt since they were born. Thus, it was everyone's responsibility to work for the betterment of their individual families, as well as their nation, regardless age. Given this context, teenagers were an important group within Thai society.

Historically in Thailand, teenagers played an important role in motivating social change in Thailand. For example, the student movement was led by teens and young adults seeking democracy and freedom from military rule in the mid-1970s (1973-1976). Their bloody confrontations with the military during this time are still well-known during the present time.

However, in the global context, the image of students has gradually changed, particularly in recent years. When Thailand saw rapid development in its economy, industry, technology, and mass media during the 1980s and 1990s, Thais began to prefer a much more extravagant lifestyle, compared with their more traditional roots. Thailand and Thai people were prospering like never before. With this newfound

prosperity, many Thai people now found that competition was the key to getting ahead in an ever-increasing, globally competitive environment. Thus, there was a shift within Thai society from with a community-based society to a much more individual-centered society. This shift influences all sectors of Thai society, including teenagers and young people.

This revolution of sorts within Thai society created many new images of what it meant to be a teenager growing up in modern Thai society. Commercial images of modern teens abounded, as teenagers were an important target in the emerging global market. Mobile phones, contemporary popular music, movies, television programs, video games and clothes were all heavily marketed and often popular among teenagers. In addition, many young people were often easily influenced by their friends, as like teens around the world, they wanted be accepted among their peers. Many teens sought to fit in with their peer group, which meant purchasing expensive, brand name products, which played into the overall extravagance that many Thais were enjoying during this modern, globalized period.

In addition to their newfound purchasing power, many teens and young people also enjoyed an emerging entertainment market, targeting teens in particular. Many teenagers enjoyed frequently pubs at night, which often led to other types of more deviant behavior such as alcohol and drug abuse. In addition, more so than previous generations, modern teens found a big increase in the prevalence of sexualized images, and more and more teens began engaging in sexual behavior at younger ages. It was not uncommon for teens to cut school and go to nearby hotels or theaters to engage in sexual activity. As a result, violence also became more and more common among teenagers. Teens were becoming more involved in killing one another for love or even killing themselves.

All of the aforementioned situations emphasize that teenagers were much more focused on themselves, rather than their families and communities. Despite many of these negative changes, there were also positive advancements among teens. Many teenagers today use their time much more wisely. For example, they work in their free time to gain more life experience, as well as supplement their income. Some teens join civic groups which work together to help develop rural areas by building

schools, teaching, and the like. However, this type of positive contribution to society is not the norm among teens and young adults.

Post-crisis films were an important tool used to portray the power of teens and show that they are a group which loves and is devoted to their country. Films have served as the primary media in encouraging teenagers to recognize their importance in Thai society and their essential role in developing their country. One good example of this is the film *Young Soldiers* which clearly portrayed teenagers' devotion and sacrifice for their nation. The teens in this film were excited and willing to devote their lives in the battlefield for the sake of their country.

5. Historical experiences used to evoke nationalistic sentiments, specifically the war with Burma and the loss of the Thai capital city

The war between Thailand and Burma is an unforgettable story for all Thais. It has been used to create and promote a sense of nationalism for generations. Many Thai historical chronicles use this story to create Thai nationalistic sentiment when the country is facing any sort of crisis. The Thai king plays a central role in the story, as he is seen as the protector of the nation and is bound to protect Thailand from the Burmese invaders. In 1767, Burmese invaders crossed into Thailand and marched to the capital city of Ayutthaya, burning and destroying everything. The re-telling of this story always depicts Thais as the heroes who bravely sacrifice everything to preserve their country. Burma is the violent and ruthless invader. This historical episode has been used many times over the course of history since then to evoke a strong Thai sense of nationalism. At the time, the Burmese hoped that a total destruction of the Thai capital would mean the city and even the Thai kingdom would simply fade into history. However, the exact opposite ended up being true. Thais rallied around their country and the glorious capital city that lay in ruins. Rather than breaking their spirit, the attack served to only strengthen their resolve, not only at the time, but over and over again, even in the present day.