



CHAPTER III

FILM ANALYSIS

This chapter presents an in-depth analysis of selected films which reflect the emergence of Thai nationalism during the economic crisis. The films include: 1) *Banrajan* (บางระจัน) (2000); 2) *Suriyothai* (สุริโยทัย) (2000); 3) *Young Soldiers* (ยุวชนทหาร เปิดเทอมไปรบ) (2000); 4) *The Overture* (โหมโรง) (2004); and, 5) *The Siam Renaissance* (ทวิภพ) (2004).

These films were chosen because they best represent the crises which have occurred throughout Thai history; they clearly depict nationalist sentiments and have inspired Thais nationalism among viewers. Each movie gradually develops the pressure and suffering Thai people endured from invaders, whether they were Burmese, Japanese or French, with the conflict between the foreign invaders and the Thais leading to the climax of the story. Then, the resolution of each movie is designed to convince the audience that the wisdom and sacrifice of their Thai ancestors was the only way to solve Thailand's problem at that particular time in history, and thus, save Thailand from crises which seemed impossible to overcome.

Banrajan and *Suriyothai* portray the time in Thai history when Thailand was at war with Burma. *The Siam Renaissance* depicts the period when Thailand (previously "Siam") was confronted with colonial powers in the region. *Young Soldiers* and *The Overture* show the period when Thailand transitioned from an absolute monarchy to a democracy. In examining these selected films, it is interesting to note that the preservation of Thai independence is a common theme throughout its history.

As illustrated previously in Chapter 2, scholars agree that nationalism is commonly used as a tool to inspire people both love and be loyal to their country, just as previous generations have done throughout history; this is best accomplished when there is a sense of a common history and a willingness to preserve this nationalist perspective in contemporary times.

In analyzing each film, synopses, contexts and texts were used in conjunction with nationalism theories.

1. *The Siam Renaissance*

Synopsis

This historical drama tells the story of Maneechan, a Thai Ambassador based in Paris who is summoned in the middle of a night to Sorbonne University after a group of academics tell her of an important discovery. Maneechan then returns to Thailand to examine a historical document, and her life is turned upside-down when she suddenly finds herself traveling back and forth through time between the present day and the time of King Rama IV's reign (October 18, 1804 – October 1, 1868). The reign of Rama IV was a crucial period in Thai history as this was when Thailand (as Thailand was known at the time) was struggling with Western occupation in the greater Southeast Asian region. Maneechan discovers a secret about Thailand when she uncovers facts that were distorted through time. She then risks her life to preserve this newly uncovered truth.

Context

The movie creates a strong nationalist sentiment through Maneechan's journey to the past. Surapong Pinitkha, the director of *The Siam Renaissance* said, "*The Siam Renaissance* ' is my version [of events] and is not the same as previous versions. We present the valuable literature of the Tommayantee (the author and famous writer) and this movie was the result of my inspiration after reading this literature. I liked the theme that the main character, Maneechan, has such a special opportunity to cross over time to another world so we began to create *The Siam Renaissance*."

The Siam Renaissance as presented by Surapong tries reflects on the current problems of Thai society after the economic crisis. Prof. Dr. Prawes Wasi, M.D. suggests that this is a kind of self-destruction results from the rapid growth of an industrial society. Thailand is now facing “The Four Crises”¹ caused by social conditions aimed at developing economics to NICs², which has no direct damage. Indirectly, however, this leads to a destruction of the environment and culture through fierce competition and materialism. As a result, people tend to forget and disrespect their own roots. *The Siam Renaissance* attempts to depict the problems of “The Four Crises” which is occurring in Thai society now. This can be seen in the scene where Maneechan was interrogated by Luang Akaradhep Warakorn and she told him that what is happening can be related to present-day Thailand: “*Thailand is so modern; there are many skyscrapers. Everything is changed. We have cars, electricity, movie theaters, and dress in the Western style. However, we accept foreigners more than we accept one another. We have everything Westerners have. We are everything Westerners are, eat everything Westerners eat, and prefer everything Westerners prefer. We accept everything, except ourselves.*”

Although this film was not a box office success, it was a critical success in that most viewers appreciated the film’s attempt to show the character of Thailand through Maneechan’s story when she had to compromise for love and peace in the face of a serious crisis.

According to H.E. Somsak Prisananantakun Deputy House Speaker in this time, the art of compromise and negotiation in Thai society as shown in *The Siam Renaissance* “*It was beneficial to Thai society. Everybody needs to know what our ancestors used to fight in the past. Gentleness, humbleness, and the ability to know how to kindly and friendly talk – these are all the philosophy of life which is beneficial for Thai society. I think ‘The Siam Renaissance’ has reflected all of these qualities completely.*”

¹ Dr. Prawes Wasi identified the following four crises in Thai history: 1) The loss of Ayutthaya to the invading Burmese; 2) The confrontation with colonialism; 3) The confrontation with communist terrorists; and, 4) The loss of Thai identity as a result of the development of Thai society and industry in a more modern, global context

² the economic policy ‘Newly Industrialized Countries

Dr. Seree Wongmontha academic in marketing and public relation has said, “*In watching this movie, the director’s intention is clear, especially through the sentences, ‘Thais are not important to Westerners. We just don’t want any problems.’ Maybe this is the feeling of all Thai people. Sometimes we don’t want to annoy others—not because we are afraid of them, but because we are generous and don’t want to create trouble.*”

Interpretation of the text

The atmosphere throughout *The Siam Renaissance* is reflected in the tension during the Paknam Crisis. This is a mysterious record regarding a crisis between the French and Thai in 1893 (or in year 112 of the Rattanakosin or Bangkok Era). At the time, Thailand was confronted with European colonialists seeking resources in several Southeast Asian countries to supply European manufacturing businesses in the West. Burma was occupied by the United Kingdom, while France moved in to Vietnam and Cambodia. While Thailand was never directly controlled by a foreign power, it was certainly affected by the colonization process in many ways and was forced to make concessions to colonial powers in order to maintain its freedom and independence. After France confiscated Vietnam and Cambodia, the French were eager to cross Mekong River into Northeastern Thailand, claiming that this area had previously belonged to Vietnam. Some of these concessions included the loss of the Western bank of the Mekong River to the French, the loss of the jurisdiction in that area, the requirement to pay millions of francs to the French as compensation, and giving rights to the French to develop harbors and warehouses along the Mekong River as well as a deepening of the canals along the Eastern bank of the river.

The opening scene in *The Siam Renaissance* is a rainy night in Paris. While many French scholars believe the Paknam Crisis or “Yoyageur” to be untrue, Thai historian Maneechan is seeking to prove that it did, in fact, occur. Maneechan claims that in denying the story, foreign scholars are perpetuating their need to maintain superiority and power in colonial lands.

As the movie progresses, Maneechan’s own sense of patriotism grows. She not only conducted lengthy discussions on “Yoyageur” with other academics and her own father, but also discovered that she was able to travel through time to the reign of

King Rama IV, during which Thailand was confronted with Western colonization. While in the past, she was able to see first-hand the enormous pressure exerted by colonizing countries. She also witnessed how this colonization process affected the Thai people at the time and how they were able to maintain their sovereignty.

Through Maneechan's exploration of the past, *The Siam Renaissance* clearly illustrates the deep sacrifice and loyalty of different groups of Thai ancestors to preserve their sovereignty. All of these historical ancestors willingly sacrificed their comfortable lifestyle and even their very lives for the sake of their country.

The first group of historic Thai heroes was the kings. The king played a very important role in helping to maintain Thailand's sovereignty. Many scholars have analyzed the survival of Thailand from European colonization and have concluded that the Thai leadership, most notably King Rama V, played a pivotal role. Prof. Dr. Likhit Thiravekin, fellow of the royal institute, he has suggested that "*the important factors which allowed Thailand to survive in the face of its enemies were both the royalty and the noblemen, most especially King Rama V and his ability, wide-vision, and diplomatic strategies that helped Thailand maintain its independence until today.*"³

In the film, the king of Thailand develops a good rapport with Westerners in hopes of being able to preserve as much of Thailand as possible while keeping the colonizing powers at bay. One example of this outreach strategy to the colonizing powers occurred when King Rama IV conceded his glory and dignity in allowing Sir John Bowring, the British representative, to wear a Western suit and approach the King's throne. According to ancient Thai law, for the King's safety and out of respect for the King, officers were prohibited from wearing suits in the King's presence and had to walk on their knees as they approached the throne. Therefore, Sir John Bowring's actions could be interpreted as very rude and aggressive. Only out of a deep understanding and great love for his country, could this highly respected King allow this to happen. As a result of this and other negotiations with Sir Bowring,

³ Likhit Thiravekin, *Politic and Government*. (Bangkok: Thammasart University), 2002. p.163.

King Rama IV agreed to begin a trade relationship with England. King Rama IV said, *"It is my pleasure to greet an envoy of Her Britannic Majesty the Queen of England. I realize the greatness of your country and the value of mutual goodwill."* King Rama IV then went on to sign a treaty with England which allowed English ships to sail within Thailand's territorial waters and said *"When everything is done, I hope that this goodwill will make us good friends."*

As a result, Thailand is ultimately spared from a colonial takeover. The film also suggests the deep sorrow of King Rama V when he was unable to preserve the land. This scene reflected the deep love of the king for his nation and how he wanted to do everything within his power to save the land which his Thai ancestors had devoted their lives to maintaining for centuries. This is illustrated by the following comments by the narrator in the film, *"His Majesty King Chulalongkorn (King Rama V) fell ill. In the depths of despair, His Majesty refused to bathe and eat."*

The film also addressed aspects of the Thai monarchy as it exists in the modern context. Viewers see that the Thai monarchy, a pillar in Thai society and culture, was able to withstand the pressures and changes due to colonization. Maneechan was used to show this belief of Thai people. When she explained about Thailand in the present time when she first found herself in the past and was suspected of being a foreign spy looking for Thai information. She was detained for investigation because she had no proof of her origin and she was fluent in English and French, languages for only noble and royal men at the time. According to Maneechan, Thailand is so modern—there are many skyscrapers. Everything has changed—we have cars, electricity, movie theaters, and even dress in Western clothes. We accept foreigners more than we accept one another. We have everything Westerners have; we are everything Westerners are; we eat everything Westerners eat; we prefer everything Westerners prefer. *"We accept everything (Western), except ourselves"*. She stated, *"We want to be them, refuse to be ourselves. The only thing to keep us is the king."*

This continuity of Thai culture through the monarchy and its importance in the culture can be seen in the image of Thai people prostrating themselves before the king

as he walked by. This loyalty to the king is and has been an integral part of Thai society and culture for centuries.

The second group was the nobleman who worked for the king. They love their king and their country and did absolutely everything they could to protect the nation's best interests. There is one scene in particular where Sir John Bowring, the English diplomat, came to negotiate the treaty with Thailand in order to reduce taxes and increase trade in teak wood. Somdej Phramahaprayunrawongse, his Thai counterpart, refused to compromise. He violently scolded the English nobleman saying, *"We won't sell our teak. We don't have that much. We won't sell rice, either. Thailand sells it to no one. We keep it to support ourselves. The tariff is to be reduced from 10% to 3%. Let's agree to disagree. With the battleship in our river, what matters is the treaty must not be signed."* Although this action seemed aggressive, it showed that Somdej Phramahaprayunrawongse was provoked and angry because he felt that the British were taking advantage of Thailand, his beloved country.

However, other nobleman on behalf of Thailand did try to pursue peaceful means to negotiate with the French and British. The movie goes on to present plans to divide Thailand and have Thailand sever as a buffer state between the two colonial powers in Southeast Asia, the French and the British. The French cited various reasons for needing to acquire parts Thailand territory in the East. The French claimed that since parts of Thailand had historically been part of Cambodia, Thailand should then give these parts of Thailand to the French who currently controlled Cambodia. In response, Thailand tried to negotiate, saying that if history is to be used in this way, then the French would also need to give up part of its land to the British as well. The French refused to listen to this reasoning and threatened to use warships if Thailand did not give up its land.

Tensions continued to build as the French remained dissatisfied with negotiations with Thailand. As a result, the French issued a letter to the King of Thailand asking for him to step down. Because the French were shouting and demanding an audience with the king but were not showing any respect for the protocol required to do so, they were not allowed to meet with the king. Turbulence erupted and some French delegates were even injured. France then decided to deploy

warships to seize Thailand despite the Thai nobles' apologies and an invitation to the court. The French did not listen and used aggressive manners by pushing the Thai nobles away violently causing them to fall down the stairs.

The third group was not a group, but rather an individual, Akaradhep Warakorn who is the hero in the film. He clearly expressed his love for the nation during a time when Thailand was under pressure from the colonial powers Britain and France to become a buffer state and sign treaties giving extraterritorial rights to Westerners. His readiness to fight and to continue fighting at all costs is illustrated in the following statement, *"If Thailand has to change, I, Akaradhep Warakorn will not change."*

Moreover, he was proud of Thailand and willing to sacrifice his life for the nation as shown from when he let Westerners know the military force of Thailand he said *"Thailand has never feared the might of any country!"* He also said with Maneechan, *"Death is astounding, my Manee. I was born by this river and I'll die by this river."*

In addition, after Thailand made a contract with the United Kingdom, he expressed his further concerns and attempts to protect the land by leading Maneechan to the Royal Weaponry Warehouse, the site where all of the King's weapons are stored. Luang Akaradhep Warakorn said, *"In a country, it is hard to find such a sage in Thailand. That's why I have devoted my life and my heart to His Majesty. This will be the pride of our descendents for generations to come. It's hoped that they too will know this valuable weapon, they'll understand what we are trying to do."*

The last, but certainly not least, important character is Maneechan. She tried her best to save her beloved homeland. She used her historical knowledge to support Akaradhep Warakorn in negotiating, rather than using power which she knew would not work in such a circumstance. She represented present-day Thais and loved her country so much that she was willing to give up her family and friends by permanently going back to the past to help solve a crisis in Thailand's past.

In the film, Maneechan was so impressed with her experiences in the past that she actually wanted to stay there. However, while she was unconscious, she returned to the present. Nevertheless, she packed her luggage and made other preparations to return to the past. She did return to the past world when she was unconscious and Akaradhep Warakorn still doubted whether or not she was telling the truth about not being a spy. He says that “the situation is critical and you are acting mysteriously. That gunboat, *The Rattler* has arrived. Are you involved with them, Maneechan? We will see to which country you are loyal.” The situation in Thailand was critical at the time with Thailand under increasing pressure. The United Kingdom commenced relationships through trade contracts with Thailand when Thailand refused to reduce its import tax rates for fear of losing its privileges and financial advantages.

Maneechan also continued to proclaim her sincerity and readiness to stand shoulder to shoulder in order to help Thailand. For example, when Akaradhep Warakorn referred to England as “the lion” because he knew that Westerners came here to take advantage of Thailand by asking to review the contract and change it. The old East India Rubber Company’s agreement was made before the reign of the first king; the second king overrode that agreement with an agreement with the Captain Henry Agreement. Moreover, Sir John Bowring decided not to remove the royal sword given by the Queen of England while appearing before the King of Thailand, which was against the royal tradition of Thailand. Akaradhep Warakorn said about England, “*Foreigners are like men who prey on animals. When foreigners look at us, they do not see us as human.*”

Thailand was at a disadvantage because of language and speaking skills. “*Not only is our military power at a disadvantage, but also our diplomacy, for we lack experts with an equal command of languages.*” Maneechan tries to explain to those in that past that Phraya Thailand Manukolkij Thailandmitmahayos would soon serve as Thailand’s first ambassador to Europe. Akaradhep Warakorn calmly processed this claim and said, “*We can’t do this man any harm. It will mean giving them a chance for rightful invasion. But this person will be of much benefit to Thailand. If we agree to disadvantages this time, England will protect its interests. This goodwill will protect us. Other countries will be more considerate towards us. All interests can benefit us.*”

Maneechan also reminded Akaradhep Warakorn of the benefits to using negotiations and diplomacy rather than physical power. *"Any might means nothing if we are able to effectively negotiate. You can learn from them. You can know how they think."* When he let Westerners know the military force of Thailand he said *"Thailand has never feared the might of any country!"* He also said, *"Death is astounding, my Manee. I was born by this river and I'll die by this river."* Through the course of the interrogation, Maneechan found herself increasingly impressed by his integrity.

Near the end of the story, Maneechan went to a banquet with Akaradhep Warakorn. There, she met Mrs. Anna Leonnowens, the English teacher in the Thai court. They talked about the U.S., another powerful country wishing to extend its power throughout the world via financial systems such as the IMF or mass media like MTV. Their discussion was troublesome to the French consul who suspected that Maneechan may not be Thai, but rather, may be seeking to damage France. The situation eventually got out of hand; Akaradhep Warakorn came in to help Maneechan and the French consul was fatally stabbed. The situation serves as a symbol of what can happen when a powerful country is confronted.

Maneechan then returned to the present world and found the maids in her home speaking a mix of French and Thai. There was a French Eiffel Tower on the Chao Phraya River, running through Bangkok. France occupied the Thonburi area (East of Bangkok) and the British controlled Bangkok. This showed what would happen if France and Britain had occupied Thailand.

Finally, Maneechan decided to stand shoulder to shoulder with Akaradhep Warakorn in a fight to the death, to prevent any type of Western control in Thailand. The movie concluded with Maneechan sitting in a black dress mourning the death of Akaradhep Warakorn, who died during a bombing in the fight with the colonial powers.

Maneechan represents modern Thai women who step out of their passive lives to contribute intellectually to the country, just like their male counterparts. She emphasized the important role of women in the present day. In the past, women had

limited roles. One feminist scholar said, "In the past Thai women were like dolls kept in the cupboard... cut off from the outside world. They were strictly controlled and not allowed go to anywhere... Nowadays the position of women is greatly improved; they are coming out of the dark."⁴ Maneechan was playing the new role of a woman that could do anything like the man in the present day.

As a result, the history during the Paknam Crisis in 1893 (year 112 of the Rattanakosin Era) in the movie *The Siam Renaissance* shows the love of the Thai people for their country which lost its lands through French exploitation. This is contrasted with the British role in Burma in the following quote: "*The battle of Burma was a battle of sovereigns, but the loss of extraterritorial rights [in Thailand to the French] was a result of oppression... Whereas France lost three soldiers, we lost extraterritorial rights. We lost our territory West of the Mekong River. We had to pay damages of three million francs.*"

Despite the loss of Thai lands to the French, this movie clearly shows Thailand's perseverance despite a very difficult situation as shown from Maneechan's father "*I have always believed that throughout history Thai people have tried their best. If not how could we keep our independence? Look at our neighbors. Are there any countries left? To the East, Laos, Annam [Vietnam], Khmer [Cambodia] [were lost to the French]. To the West, Burma [was lost to the British]. To the South, Malaysia [was also lost to the British]. None of them are left.*"

The main characters of Thailand in this film were portrayed as heroes. Maneechan was glad to carry the burdens of her country and fight together with her countrymen during the colonization crisis. Luang Akaradhep Warakorn was very nationalistic in his beliefs and tried to set up plans and do everything to help Thailand avoid being divided, even going so far as to fight to his death in the battle field. All of these characters were created to inspire Thais today to feel love and devotion for their country.

⁴ Scot Barne. *Women, Men, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2002). p.1.

While the Thai people were created as the patriotic heroes and heroines, *The Siam Renaissance* branded Westerners as a new enemy, with a focus on the French.

Pictures of the Enemy: France and Britain

Many scenes clearly show how Westerners used arrogant and aggressive manners with Thai of all social status. The first is a scene where the French used aggressive manner for Thailand officer who tried to apologize in case of the French representative was not prohibited to meet the king in the night and Thailand officer was pushed to be down the stair.

The second, Sir John Bowring decided not to remove the royal sword given by the Queen of England and walked while appearing before the King of Thailand. This case illustrated that the British had her pride and used more power to do not follow Thailand royal law and do not respect the other's law.

Moreover, they both the French and the British were planning to divide Thailand's territories. They indirectly forced and without asking Thailand to divide the land and become buffer state. The following refers to the division of land between England and France, using Thailand as a bumper state: *"The benefit for France is at risk. We have to occupy the Mekong Delta ... The English should be happy with India, Burma and the Indian Ocean while the South China Sea and the Gulf of Thailand should belong to us... As long as Thailand remains a buffer state and as long as we don't touch anything already owned, there will be no problems."* The situation has also been compared to the cutting of a caked cake: *"The cake has been laid out. Why try to snatch the knife when this will only spill more blood?"*

In response for this case, France referred to evidence that Annam (Nietnam) and Khmer (Cambodia) lands on the left bank of the Mekong River used to belong to Annam in the past. Thus, since Annam had been colonized by France, these previously-owned lands should also be under French control. *"Once we [the French] came to rule Annam in Indochina, we then have authority over the Khmer since Khmer belongs to Annam in the past."* Thailand was very angry but tried to remain calm and reason with the French. The Thailand Defense Minister carefully negotiated

and explained that the Khmer also used to be ruled by Thailand, and it is dangerous to use any historical claim to take over lands. *“Khmer belongs to French? Since when? Honorable Consul, as I remember, Thailand has ruled Khmer for a long time. If I calculate the date correctly, it was well before you were born... Using history to make such a claim is a dangerous excuse. If England used history to make a similar claim, France would need to return Normandy, Gascony and what else? Oh, Guinea to England as well. Let’s be reasonable. Prince Narodom of Khmer was crowned by our King. This means he accepts that his country is under Thailand’s protection. This tradition is much clearer than any modern treaties.”*

However, the negotiation did not work. France gave only some parts of the lands to Thailand and threatened to use gun ships if Thailand refused France’s requests. *“...I shall only allow Pra Tabong, Nakorn Wat and Siem Riep [all in Cambodia] to remain under Thailand’s protection. As for the rest, I will consider this tradition of yours on our gun ships.”*

In analyzing the historical context of this situation, many scholars such as M.L. Manit Chumsai, Suwit Thirasartsawat, Maj. Peerapon Songnui, and other have concluded that France had planned for some time to take possession of the entire region on the left bank of the Mekong River. These scholars claim that the French sent spies disguised as researchers and merchants to the area to study the landscape, history, economics and politics of the region. This team was led by Monsieur Pavi, who had surveyed the region for six years from 1897 – 1885 A.D. Reasons for the loss of Thai land to the French have been attributed to the following aspects:

1. The administration over protectorates of Thailand in the past allowed small towns to have their own administration, which was a weakness in that these small towns could rebel if the king was not strong enough.
2. Thailand had just started to work on producing a map in the region with the support of King Rama V; this project was led by Phra Wipark Phuwadon. France used this as a reason to accuse Thailand of preparing to enhance power to govern lands that France had already claimed.
3. England tried to avoid interfering in the problems between Thailand and France.

According to an historical memo, many kingdoms were not pleased with this loss. King Narodom of Khmer sent a letter to King Rama IV of Thailand in 1863 A.D.: *“Phaya Khmer and I agreed to write about the Admiral who came to make a contract with the Kingdom of Khmer. He seemed so insistent. I said that I wanted to discuss with Bangkok but he did not allow this. If I refused to make the contract right then, a dispute might have occurred. The French Commander of Saigon forced me to make the contract in the Kingdom of Khmer. I had to surrender and make the contract with France, but in my heart, I’m still honest and loyal to His Majesty the King of Thailand.”*¹¹

The movie presents this scene when the French wrote a letter to discharge the Minister of Interior of Thailand from a conflict of interest and invited the King to sign his name even though it was late at night and the King was sick. France used its status as a powerful nation to try and influence Thailand. *“France is a powerful nation to which Thailand must pay attention... French gun ships can seize Thailand within 24 hours.”*

The film compared the westerner as the enemy as shown from Akaradhep Warakorn angrily talks of the colonial French when he says, *“Some were born to search for evil. Some were born with it... The French Consul gave a warning to us that France wants power in Thailand. They have power across Annam [Vietnam], Laos and Khmer [Cambodia] which are Thailand protectorates. They wanted to reduce our power. If it wasn’t also an English interest, they would have already snapped our necks.”* This statement illustrates how serious and stressful the situation was for Thai people at the time.

2. Suriyothai

Synopsis

This film describes the historical events surrounding the life of the heroine, Suriyothai. In the film, the Thai kingdom of Ayutthaya is enjoying a period of peace and prosperity, but the country's stability is soon threatened by corruption and civil war. Suriyothai was a young princess in love with Piren who is her same dynasty “Sukhothai Dynasty” and regarded her brother even though they were not related.

However, Suriyothai comes to the realization that her duty to the people of Ayutthaya outweighs her personal needs and she is later married to Prince Tien who came from the other strong dynasty that the basis power of Ayutthaya, if she did not marry Prince Tien, it may have the conflict between the two strong dynasties: “Suphannaphumi Dynasty” and “Sukhothai Dynasty”

As the film moves along, a series of royal deaths from disease, disaster, and assassination bring about a dynastic struggle in which Suriyothai organizes a rebellion against a usurper that brings Prince Tien her husband to the throne. When the principal king dies, Tien's father inherits the throne; he has a young son whose mother is the principle consort. A few years later, small pox makes its first appearance in Thailand and the king is stricken with the disease. On his deathbed he extracts a promise of support for his young son from his nephew Chai Raja and his son Tien, who was born to a concubine. However, because of political corruption, civil war plunged the kingdom into chaos and the king is still a young boy. So, Chai Raja assumes the throne in order to protect Thailand. Chai Raja then goes so far as to execute the child king. Tien protests this execution, but on Suriyothai's advice accepts his cousin as ruler.

Chai Raja's wife, Queen Jitravadee, dies shortly after giving birth to the heir Yodfa. The king takes a new consort, Srisudachan, and has another son by her. After several years of peace, Chai Raja leaves the capital of Ayutthaya for a military campaign in the north. Soon after, Srisudachan who is descended from the deposed U-Tong dynasty, takes Worawongsa, another U-Tong descendant, as a lover and starts plotting to take over the throne.

The king is wounded in battle and comes back to the capital to recuperate when Srisudachan poisons him and attempts to blame the deed on Tien. Tien is able to save his life by becoming a Buddhist monk. Srisudachan proceeds by naming Worawongsa as regent and promptly poisoning young Yodfa, thereby assuming power. Suriyothai then summons her old friend Piren, who was Chai Raja's troop commander, to help set things right. His troops ambush and killed Worawongsa and Srisudachan, and Tien the accepts the throne despite his monkhood.

Upon hearing this, Burmese King Hongsa invades again and lays siege to Ayutthaya . In a desperate attempt to boost the morale of their troops, both the unwarlike King Tien and Queen Suriyothai join the battle. The queen is slain, falling in slow motion from an elephant in full uniform with her throat cut.

Context

Suriyothai is the most ambitious Thai-language film ever made⁵-- production costs were highest and it also took the longest time to research and shoot. In addition, many professional actors and actresses were also cast in the film. The phenomena of *Suriyothai*'s popularity was evidenced in that tickets sold out in advance when the film was initially released and the film was also featured in many product promotions at the time as well. Most importantly, Her Majesty the Queen of Thailand, Queen Sirikit, was behind the idea of making the film.

1. The role of Queen Sirikit
2. Production background
3. The stream of popularity
4. Nationalism view
5. Feminism Nationalism

1. The role of Queen Sirikit

Queen Sirikit sponsored the entire film production and played an active role in many aspects of the film-making process.⁶ Khuying Busaya, who has been in royal service to the queen for the past twenty years, stated quite emphatically that the queen's purpose was to cultivate national pride. "Her Majesty the queen," according to Busaya, "wants Thais to feel proud of themselves. She wants people to honor each other and respect themselves. She wants them to appreciate the historical events of the past that have seen the creation of the Thai State and the avoidance of colonialism."⁷ The queen maintained close contact with MC Chatrichalerm Yukol throughout the production and presided over the first day of shooting in April 1999, as well as the closing day of shooting.

⁵ Amporn Jiratikorn, *Suriyothai : Hybridizing Thai National Identity through Film*, Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, Volume 4, Number 2, 2003. p. 296-308

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

Queen Sirikit was also involved in casting and chose Piyapas Bhirombhakdi as Suriyothai. Piyapas is royal descendant, carrying the title M.L., or Mom Luang. MC Chatrichalerm Yukol has said that Queen Sirikit was involved in all steps of the casting process, "that is, we discussed every step of production, like who was going to star in the film. The queen chose Khun Ton (Piyaphat Phirōmphakdee) and chose Khun Mai (Mai Charoenpura). Queen Sirikit also chose Khun Toa (Saranyu Wongkrajang) and I chose Khun Chatchai (Plengphanit). We discussed on and on."⁸

The film opened at the Sala Chalermkrung Theater in Thailand with their Majesties the King and Queen of Thailand as guests of honor. Many royal family members were also in attendance. This event was widely covered in the local media.

- *The long wait has finally come to an end. Tonight Her Majesty the Queen will be offered a very special birthday gift indeed... Their Majesties the King and Queen will preside over the film's gala premiere. The preview at the Sala Chalerm Krung theatre will also be attended by foreign dignitaries and top brass from the military.*⁹
- *Their Majesties the King and Queen were quests of honour at yesterday evening's world premiere of the long-anticipated cinema epic "Suriyothai" at Sala Chalerm Krung theatre... The 68 year old theatre was crowded with 600 VIP guests and army from the media.*¹⁰

The film also attracted attention abroad. The Queen presided over the opening of *The Legend of Suriyothai* at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington on October 7, 2002. She was welcomed by Mr. Larson from the U.S. Embassy in Thailand who stated, "I rise today to welcome Her Majesty Queen Sirikit of Thailand on her visit to the United States from October 4 to 16, 2002.... One of the highlights of the Queen's visit will be to preside over the premiere of the Thai film *The Legend of Suriyothai* at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts here in Washington."¹¹

⁸ Sarakadee Magazine, *Suriyothai in Maya history*, 198, August 2544., p. 109

⁹ Feast for the eyes. *Bangkok Post* (August 12 2001).

¹⁰ An epic story - fit for a King and Queen. *The Nation*. (August 13 2001).

¹¹ Feast for the eyes. Ibid

2. Production Background

The movie *Suriyothai* was not only a long-awaited birthday gift for Her Majesty the Queen, it was also Thailand's biggest, most-expensive and most heavily researched movie ever.¹²

It cost 400 million baht (US\$9 million), involved five years of research and took two-and-a-half years to shoot.¹³ For research, historians, university professors and archaeologists provided advice on all aspects of the film.¹⁴ In addition, the major cast members included more than 50 leading actors and actresses, including professional Thai actors and actresses such as Sarunyoo Wongkrachang, Pongpat Wachirabunchong, Chatchai Plengpanich, Mai Charoenpura, and Sinjai Plengpanich.¹⁵ The lead role of Suriyothai went to Piyapas Bhirombhakdi who was hand-picked by Her Majesty the Queen.¹⁶

In order to give *Suriyothai* an international flavor, MC Chatrichalerm Yukol brought in professional technicians from aboard, notably the German Igor Luther as director of photography, and veteran British composer Richard Harvey for the score. Additionally, Francis Ford Coppola who created the "Godfather" trilogy re-edited "*Suriyothai*" for foreign audiences.¹⁷ All of the foreign professionals were impressed by the film. For example, Francis Ford Coppola said that the main themes of *Suriyothai* are succession and achievement of a nation and "it will be good for the cinema if people can make films in French, Italian or Thai, as it should be, and share it with audiences around the world including the U.S."¹⁸

Richard Harvey, the composer of the movie's accepted the job because it was the biggest project he had been involved with. "This is my epic. Before this I did *Arabian Nights* for Hallmark, and that had maybe 200 or 300 hundred soldiers and the

¹² Ibid

¹³ Amporn Jiratikorn. Ibid, p. 296-308

¹⁴ Feast for the eyes. Ibid

¹⁵ Feast for the eyes. Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Suriyothai sets box office record as sales hit 500 million baht. [Terror] Attacks [abroad] mar hopes of distribution abroad. *Bangkok Post* (September 18 2001).

odd camel. It might have one elephant, but they did the rest with computers. Up till then that was the biggest project I had worked on.¹⁹

3. The Stream of Popularity

In Thailand, *Suriyothai* set box office records as sales hit the 500-million-baht mark which was the highest ever in Thailand's film industry. An executive at Sahamongkol Film Company, the distributor of *Suriyothai*, says that ticket sales had been 293 million baht in Bangkok alone. In just three days on the opening weekend from Friday to Sunday in Bangkok, the movie earned 15 million baht in ticket sales. Six branches of Major Cineplex theaters offered 48 screenings a day Monday to Friday.²⁰ MC Chatrichalerm Yukol said more than 100,000 tickets for *Suriyothai* had been sold in advance.²¹ "It's never happened upcountry," said Kom Acadet, chairman of the Thai Film Association.²²

Many sponsors also cashed in on the movie's popularity. For example, Thailand Commercial Bank introduced a *Suriyothai*-themed bank account, check book and ATM card, while Boon Rawd Brewery displayed 14 major characters from the film on its beer cans.²³ Chutchai Wiratyosin, Boon Rawn's public relations manager said at the time that "The film is the biggest movie in the history of Thailand and we want to be part of it. It also has a big chance to be nominated for an Academy Award so we want to use the opportunity to promote our product worldwide. This is not mainly to make money but also to take our name to the world market."²⁴ Moreover, this film attracted a market aboard. "*Film director MC Chatrichalerm Yukol flew to New York... He held talks with Warner Brothers, as well as Sony Pictures Classics, and Miramax, which were interested in buying the 400-million-baht*

¹⁹ Andrew Hiransomboon. The soundtrack composer of the score for 'Suriyothai' talks about his latest achievement. *Bangkok Post* (September 9 2001).

²⁰ *Suriyothai* sets box office record as sales hit 500 millionbaht. [Terror] attacks [abroad] mar hopes of distribution abroad. *Bangkok Post* (September 18 2001).

²¹ Bamrung Amnatcharoenrit. Strong ticket sales overseas anticipated: production company doubles its price. *Bangkok Post* (August 17 2001).

²² Epic set to create cinematic history: theatres sold out in bumper weekend. *Bangkok Post* (August 20 2001).

²³ Feast for the eyes. *Bangkok Post* (August 12 2001).

²⁴ Amporn Jiratikorn, *Ibid*, p. 305

epic..."²⁵ In this context, the commercial promotion of the film means that "Thainess" can, in a sense, be bought and sold both locally and globally.²⁶

4. Nationalistic View

Queen Sirikit was not alone in her desire to inspire a revival of interest in Thai history. There were many others who were interested in undertaking the project. The first is MC Chatrichalerm Yukol, a veteran filmmaker (also known as Than Mui, himself a descendent of the Thai royal family). MC Chatrichalerm Yukol was personally asked by Queen Sirikit to be the director. He thought that: 1. *Suriyothai* is a great cultural movie which rivals those produced abroad; and, 2. *Suriyothai* provides a great account of an important part of Thai history. This is especially timely now as many contemporary Thai people have forgotten or never knew their history. MC Chatrichalerm Yukol says, "Thai history is rather distant from our contemporary lives, especially since there has been less of an emphasis on history in Thai schools which has led to a decrease in Thai identity..."²⁷

In addition, the reputation of the Thai movies on the world stage was also affected by the movie. MC Chatrichalerm Yukol saw that "we [Thailand] have been accepting a huge number of foreign movies without any foreign nations broadcast ours. Let us take Hong Kong as an example. Lots of Chinese movies have been showed on Hong Kong televisions but there is not any Thai movie on. Do the Thai people not have any meaning in the world communities' eyes?"²⁷. In this context, this film represents a great leap forward for the local film industry, which has long been overshadowed by Hollywood blockbusters.²⁸

MC Chatrichalerm Yukol thought that *Suriyothai* illustrated her glory in history and that she was a great model for Thais. He stated, "... in my opinion, *Suriyothai's* going to war together with her husband is a heroic action. Sacrificing her life to assist her husband should have made her a heroic lady. I myself think that it is

²⁵ *Suriyothai* sets box office record as sales hit 500 million baht. [Terror] attacks [abroad] mar hopes of distribution abroad. *Bangkok Post* (September 18 2001).

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Sarakadee, *Suriyothai* in Maya history, 198, August 2544., p. 109

²⁸ *Suriyothai* leads the way. *Bangkok Post* (August 22 2001).



not important whether or not *Suriyothai* existed, but rather it is the story of sacrificing oneself to protect others that we have learned is a good issue to be respected and serve as a righteous model."²⁹ This is seen most clearly in the scene where she took the elephant to protect her husband, not just in devotion to her husband but also for her country as well. This shows that "the royal wife can be a heroic lady if she sacrifices herself and adheres to her beliefs. *Suriyothai's* bestowing her life for her husband is an indirect sacrifice to save the country from war."³⁰

Niwat Kongpien, a well-known Thai film critic further elaborated on this when he said, "I hope *Suriyothai*, as a defender of our culture, will pave the way for others to follow. We are being colonized by Hollywood movies and Chinese movies. We are losing our cultural identity"³¹

5. Feminist Nationalism

Economic crisis led to the new role of woman as leader to survive the nation. In this context, female icons as historical warrior heroines such as Queen Suriyothai and Princess Suphankalaya became popular and new royal cult. As Princess Suphankalaya's sacrifice for Ayutthaya became the new royal cult and introduced the different of woman for Thailand.

"After Burma's subjugation of Ayutthaya in 1569, Princess Suphankalaya and her two brothers—Naresuan and Ekkarat—were taken to the kingdom of Hanthawaddy (Hongsawadi in Thai located in modern day Pegu) by conquering King Bayinnaung (Burengnong in Thai) to ensure the good behavior of their father King Thammaraacha, the new Thai regent for Burma. It is unclear if they went to Burma together or at different times, but according to legend Suphankalaya agrees to stay remain in Burma, so that her younger brother Naresuan may return to Ayutthaya. After Bayinnaung's death, his son Nanda Bayin (Nanthabureng in Thai) inherits his father's kingdom and harem, including Suphankalaya, and attempts to reassert Hanthawaddy's dominance over Ayutthaya. But Naresuan defeats the invading Burmese army and kills the leader of the Burmese army's, who is Nanda Bayin son.

²⁹ Sarakadee, Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Amporn Jiratikorn, Ibid, p. 299

Upon hearing this news, Nanda Bayin takes revenge and slays Suphankalaya and her child by sword. Accounts vary on whether she was pregnant or holding the child."³²

In 1997 crisis, Princess Suphankalaya became a popular goddess. Her face could be found in everywhere, on painting, posters and medallions, hanging in supermarkets and go-go bars, and dangling from taxi-drivers' rearview mirrors.³³

The example of business sector as Dr. Naline Paiboon, she lost her cosmetic business to bankruptcy and her husband to divorce. However, when she worshipped the princess, she became successful in her business. She convinced that the life of the princess was the lesson for modern Thais:

"At these times we have to be brave patient and strong to pass these political and economic hurdles. Most importantly, we should do something for our nation as the Princess did for us"³⁴

This phenomenon explains that Thais in this period needed guidance and emotional support from the leaders regardless of their gender.

Interpretation of the Text

Thailand used to be a golden land, for both its geography and economy. Many Thais felt that the economic crisis was a result of the colonization by the West via economic policies. Despite the economic difficulties, the film motivated Thai people to be proud of their country.

In the opening scene, the film shows the peace and abundance of the kingdom of Ayutthaya which is near canals and rivers, and the people lived happily in this kingdom. The people worked easily by selling products in both local markets and floating markets. People from many backgrounds and races lived together in peace. This is shown in the following quote from this scene: *"1528 was the year of the rat. Thailand was made up of small kingdoms. The most powerful of Ayutthaya was in the south and was ruled by the king of kings, Ramathibodi II. His cousin Arthittaya,*

³² Moe Gyo, "An Invented History." *The Irrawaddy Magazine*, http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=1559 (2008, March 10).

³³ Amporn Jiratikorn, *Ibid*, p. 301

³⁴ *Ibid*

second king of Thailand, ruled Pitsanulok in the north. There were many lords, princes, and princesses, high and low, and most were related by family ties. Though Burma, a great enemy, lay to the north, it was a time of peace.

The film sought to motivate Thai viewers to be proud of their country. In the past, Thailand had fertile resources and Thais lived happily together. Moreover, Thailand had good kings who ruled the country well. These were “the good old days” of peace under good kings. These pictures like many scholars have indicated that Ayutthaya's geographic position was perfectly situated to be the commercial and political center of the region, as well as strategically located to effectively defend from invaders. Ayutthaya was founded in the central river basin of Thailand which is an enormous lowland area rich in both rice and fish, giving it the ability to support a large population. In addition to the three major rivers, Ayutthaya Island also had an elaborate network of canals, both natural as well as artificial which has been coined the “Venice of the East.”³⁵

Ferdinand Mendez Pinto, a Portuguese soldier who visited Ayutthaya wrote that “this city has an income of 12 million baht in form of gold.”³⁶ During these “good old days,” the film showed the lives of Suriyothai and many other people, both high royals and officers, who passed through the time of peace into one of political crisis.

Different aspects of patriotism were shown throughout the film using a variety of characters. The first one was Baron Muen Rachasineha demonstrated his loyalty for the kingdom and Suriyothai from the very beginning. His blindness and other battle scars were clear indicators that he had fought in many wars. He showed his sacrifice and bravery in a scene where he fought with the soldiers of Lord Chan who was the brother of Worawongsa had tried to kill Prince Tien when the palace was on fire. Moreover, when the Burmese king brought 100,000 troops to invade Thailand sooner than Prince Tien expected, Tien had enough time to create his army. He gathered his officers to find a way to respond to the Burmese king. It was then that

³⁵ Khomkhan Diwongsa, *Domestic Trade during the Late Ayutthaya Period*, *Muang Boran Journal*, 10.2 (April-June 1984), p 75.

³⁶ Sarakadee Magazine, *Suriyothai in Maya history*, 198, August 2544

Baron Muen Rachasineha volunteered to stay at Kanchanaburi camp along the Burmese border where there were two large rivers which slowed the advancing Burmese enough for Prince Tien to gather his troops and prepare for the assault. *"I will take the honor of cutting off the troops of Hongsavadi at Kanchanaburi right now...I may be able to withstand the troops of Burma until you finish preparing the troops in the city."* In the film, the face of Baron Muen Rachasineha made it clear that he was aware he was likely volunteering to fight and die. Prince Tien said, *"You talk like you're not coming back."* Baron Muen Rachasineha tried his best to fight and was eventually gunned down by the Burmese army.

The other interesting character was Lord Mahasena the high ranking officer and served Chai Raja. He was so close and loyal to Chai Raja as shown from the scene that he stand beside the throne when Chai Raja just rebel. He complained himself that he couldn't protect the child king who was Chai Raja 's son and so angry about dishonest of Srisudachan.

"I can not tolerate it any longer. Never before has the regime been so disreputable. Worawongsa has been in power for a short time and there are riots everywhere. The northern provinces are definitely vying for independence. The southern provinces are all under the sway of the treacherous second King Chan... My heart aches for I am Mahasena, a military commander, yet I was unable to protect the young king and worse I cannot even arrest the assassins and punish them for their heinous crimes even though I know who they are."

Mahasena not only blamed Srisudachan for the prevailing unrest, but he also helped to arm Suriyothai with many secrets and information which she was able to use to help save the kingdom.

Suriyothai herself is perhaps the most vivid example of sacrifice and courage in the film. She sacrificed herself personally by marrying Prince Tien for the sake of peace in the kingdom, instead of marrying the man she loved. Throughout her life, Ayutthaya faced a variety of political crises, as there were many changes of kings. However, she was loyal and devoted to the kingdom at all costs, without thinking of herself. Ultimately, she sacrificed her own life to protect the kingdom.

In the early part of the film, although she was in love with Piren, she decided to marry Prince Tien for the good of the country. She was challenged when King Ramathibodi II asked her, *“Can you live with that responsibility?... You will love yourself more than the kingdom?”* If she did not marry Prince Tien, it may have disrupted the harmony between the two dynasties, which is the basis of the power changing in Ayutthaya (i.e. Sri Ayutthaya and Pitsanulok).³⁷ King Ramathibodi II goes on to say, *“You must consider this-- if you marry Lord Piren, it would cause a rift between the kingdoms of Pitsanulok and Ayutthaya which may have serious consequences.”*

At that time, Suriyothai was just 19 years old and chose to reject her own desire and not marry Piren, the person she loved. Adhering to the country's benefits as a priority, she went ahead and married Prince Tien. It was a very difficult decision for her in terms of her personal feelings and young age. She manifested the role of a good Thai woman by being a beloved, honest wife who was supportive of her husband and gave strong, moral support to Prince Tien throughout their marriage.

³⁷(Interview with Director, Thai and Southeast Asian Studies Center, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Ph.D. Sunait Chutintaranond)

Ayutthaya was established from 4 dynasties that located in the valley of Chao Phraya River: U Thong, Sukhothai, Suphannabhumhi and Nakhonsrithammarat. U Thong and Suphannabhumhi had economic power in the background and possessive power over the Chao Phraya River so they built the city as the center of Chao Phraya River Basin and accompanied to establish Ayutthaya Kingdom. These two dynasties competed and swapped to colonized Ayutthaya many times. However, U Thong was get out from the power in the later time and only Suphannaphumi had the most power to colonize Ayutthaya. Nevertheless, she wanted to take her power in Ayutthaya again. The center of taking power back from Suphannabhumhi was Srisudachan and Worawongsa. When Ssisudachan and Worawongsa who came from U thong dynasty could success to take power, Suphannabhumhi dynasty led Sukhothai dynasty to help for taking back power. The representative of Sukhothai was Piren. When he could be success to kill Srisudachan and Worawongsa and get power to Suphannabhumhi again, he got the reward by going to colonize Pitsanulok where was important city to protect Ayutthaya and had more power as the second from Ayutthaya. However, the king who came from Suphannabhumhi dynasty careful plan and wanted to protect Piren was not loyal and used power to invade Ayutthaya by gave his daughter to marry with Piren. In case of Suriyothai, the refuse to marry may make the conflict between the two prominent dynasties that established Ayutthaya Kingdom.

The last scene when Suriyothai joined the battle was the highlight of the movie. The film showed her servants crying while they were dressing her and preparing her armor for battle. She walked slowly to her husband with strong determination and said, "*Our children and I have discussed it at length. This battle is the most difficult one. The countries and soldiers, both male and female, all need to devote their lives to defend Ayutthaya.*" Although Prince Tien disagreed with her, Suriyothai stood her ground. She said, "*This Burmese war is dangerous with all of King Hongsa's men, horses and elephants storming over us like a flood. Should anything happen to you (Prince Tien) Ayutthaya will lose its crown and be no more. Our children and I are ready to fight beside you in every battlefield.*" Ultimately, the queen was killed and fell from her elephant.

Actually, battle was traditionally reserved for only the men. When Suriyothai volunteered for battle, Prince Tien said, "*...but it [the battle] is a man's job to defend the country. Leave it to me and my brave men.*" Suriyothai's sacrifice of her life introduced the new role of women in Thai history which emphasized feminist nationalism. There were also many other ways that she showed her nationalism through her new feminist role.

Suriyothai practiced to use the gun and shoot the gun for protect Prince Tien from the enemy. In the scene that after having established Worawongsa as king, Srisudachan built up her comprehensive power by starting from luring the ladies in waiting who were alleged of having poisoned Chai Raja to point the finger to Prince Tien as the mastermind. Before Prince Tien was captured, his loyal nobles like Baron Muen Rachasineha urgently told him of the matter. Suriyothai, who was loyal to the country and her husband, managed for her husband to be ordained as monk for his safety and set the stage for his subsequent return to rule the country.

Attempts to assassinate Prince Tien had earlier existed because of his status as a younger brother of Chai Raja and the crown prince and the possibility to rule in place of his older brother. Srisudachan hence did everything to remove the threat of Prince Tien coming to power. For example, when Chai Raja led the army to war, Srisudachan planned for a fire razing over the library to bring most forces out to fight the fire and would thus give her an opportunity to assassinate Prince Tien. However,

Suriyothai was careful enough to arrange some military troops to protect Prince Tien and despite being a lady, she herself also protected her husband as she had been trained to use weapons during the long-term crisis in Ayutthaya .

In the film progress that the death of King Ramathibodi II, his brother Arthittaya who was the governor of Pitsanuloke, ascended to the throne and was crowned Arthittaya. He granted the position of royal wife to the daughter of a noble. This set the stage for the beginning of a crisis in Ayutthaya . The crisis began when Arthittaya died of disease and his young 5-year-old son, born from his consort, was crowned king. This was contradictory to the fact that Chai Raja, the crown prince, should have ascended to the throne. Thailand was subsequently in turmoil because of corruptive administrative nobles. One vivid example was seen in Phraya Yum Ma Rat, the father of the late King's consort, then the queen mother. His close aids carried out the collection of a huge tax on products, thereby raising the prices of goods.

In addition to training and fighting like the men, Suriyothai also practiced the traditional woman's role which was to honor her husband. Suriyothai showed her honor for her husband when she commanded her servants to take her jewelry to be sold because the price of commodities was too high. This money was necessary to purchase weapons for Prince Tien's soldiers. Suriyothai was not concerned with her own treasures, but was more concerned with her husband's honor. This is clear when she says, "*Worldly treasure is nothing compared to the honor of my husband*".

On the other hand, Srisudachan chose the benefits for her family over the benefits to her nation. This was made clear in the scene where she poisoned her husband, Chai Raja, who came from different with her dynasty and promoted Worawongsa as king.

As shown from this scene step by step, when Chai Raja accepted Srisudachan of the U-thong Dynasty as his royal wife in place of the dead Queen Jitravadee. Srisudachan clearly illustrated that she thought of her desire and the benefits for her race before the benefits of the nation. She committed adultery with Worawongsa and promoted him to be the king. As seen in the film, she hid to secretly meet

Worawongsa at night when she told him about a dream in which she saw him sitting on the throne and beside with her.

“For many nights, I have had strange dreams and hope you can tell me what they mean. I dreamt of you seated resplendently on a throne of gold beneath the royal tiered umbrella of Ayutthaya and she who was seated beside you was me. I could behold the truth buried deep in your eyes when you throw me a glance as you play music for the king. I know clearly what lies in your heart because your thoughts and mine are one and the same. Utterly, totally, one and the same.”

She desired her dynasty, the U-thong dynasty, to rule Ayutthaya again. To achieve this, she poisoned Chai Raja and said clearly many times that her race would return to the throne again.

“Ayutthaya must be ruled by U-thong forever and ever. Now the end of the Suphannaphumi Dynasty is at hand. The next king must be the child in my womb. Those from the U-thong Dynasty, whose father is also of the U-Thong Dynasty.”

Moreover, she established her own power through her race by poisoning Phra Yod Fa, the son of Queen Jitravadee. His death was not much different from that of his father, Chai Raja.

However, Srisudachan did not come upon her power easily as some nobles did not agree that she be allowed to have such power and did not want her to establish Worawongsa as the king. There were many officers who loyal with Chai Raja. All of these situations encouraged the nationalist people who disagreed with Sri Sudajan's actions to conspire a plan to eventually kill Srisudachan and Worawongsa. While Suriyothai died in glory on the battlefield, Srisudachan died without respect.

To sum up, nationalism was portrayed in the volunteerism by Thai people to protect the nation. As the kingdom was confronting the crisis and the encroaching Burmese, volunteering to fight played an important factor in saving Ayutthaya .

Pictures of the Enemy: Burma

Unlike other Thai films, the Burmese army in *Suriyothai* was not presented as rough. They were introduced as a kingdom that simply took advantage of its enemy, Thailand, when Thailand was weak.

Following the death of Srisudachan and Worrawongsa, the nobles invited Prince Tien to be king. But during this transitional period, Burma, then ruled by Tabinshawehti, took advantage of the weak monarchy in Thailand and invaded Ayutthaya. The film showed Burma's careful planning to invade Ayutthaya. King Tabinshawehti wanted to bring the army to Ayutthaya, since Arthitaya was died from small pox and the current Thai power structure was severely weakened. However, he was advised by his advisor Lord Minyesihatu to wait because Chai Raja was a fearless warrior and would likely be the next king. Moreover, Burma was also portrayed to be united in battle when they fought against Ayutthaya. All of the Burmese leaders, the King of Prae, Lord Buyinnaung, and Lord Sihatu, tried their best to fight for the Burmese.

Despite these depictions of the Burmese, Thai nationalism still prevailed. This is clear in that Burmese characters were given white faces and red lips. The director gave Burmese characters white faces and red lips, to clearly distinguish them as the "others." His interpretations come, in part, from a Portuguese historical record from Pinto wherein the Burmese king is depicted as a sexual deviant who enjoyed exploiting women. As a result, the director portrayed Tabinshwethi as a warrior who reveled in violence and was also sexually deviant, much like the Burmese king in the Portuguese record. The type of strategy was used to create characters like the nationalistic Japanese soldier to make them more appealing.³⁸

³⁸ Interview with Director, Thai and Southeast Asian Studies Center, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Ph.D. Sunait Chutintaranond

3. *Bangrajan*

Synopsis

Bangrajan is the legendary story of 11 villagers who took up arms in a futile battle against the overwhelming Burmese army. In 1763 A.D. King Mangra ascended to the Burmese throne. He began his reign by suppressing rebellions within Burma. Then, however, Burmese provincial chiefs began to flout the King's authority. For this reason, King Mangra was forced to invade his rival, the Ayutthaya Kingdom in Thailand, to diminish its authority. En route to Ayutthaya, King Mangra's troops are ambushed and defeated by a group of villagers from Bangrajan. News of the Burmese defeat spread quickly, rousing villagers kingdom-wide to take up arms and fight against the invading Burmese.

Context

History has been used as a tool to evoke Thai nationalism for a long time. One of the popular stories which has been reproduced many times throughout history is that of the fall of the Ayutthaya Kingdom to the invading Burmese army. After the Burmese successfully took over Ayutthaya, they sought to assimilate the Thais into the Burmese culture and way of life. It was during this process of assimilation that Thai heroes emerged in defiance to the Burmese and as a means of protecting their Thai national roots and sacrificing themselves for their country. The Burmese, on the other hand, are often viewed as the violent, invading enemy seeking to take over Thai lands and the Thai people. Thus, the fall of Ayutthaya to the Burmese in 1767 has been a classic example of the Thai fight against the outsiders who were seeking to take away Thai sovereignty. And this type of re-telling of historical events has been used to evoke nationalistic sentiments in Thais again and again through literary works, novels, dramatic plays, movies, and songs.

Bangrajan uses this type of strategy to evoke Thai nationalism many times. When the economic crisis had wide-reaching effects throughout Thai society, Thais felt that they had once again lost some degree of sovereignty and became economic slaves. Thus, *Bangrajan* was used as a tool to once again remind the Thai people of how this type of struggle against the evil outsider is something that they have successfully fought against for generations.

Bangrajan seeks to make this point in showing the importance of historical events on the Bangrajan people, which is when the door is opened and residents are encouraged to join in and become a part of history and the ongoing struggle against outsiders. This was an important motivation for writers to create several nationalistic works about the Bangrajan villagers.

The dissemination of *Bangrajan* stories was essential in helping to create a sense of nationalism and nation state, a sense of national protection and possessiveness, and the concept that national protection is not only the responsibility of the ruling class. Moreover, the “historical space for common people” created by the stories of the Bangrajan villagers has been used to help build the nation and contribute to the nationalistic trend, helping to ensure it is carried over to successive generations. And in reality, the story has inspired and impacted people from generation to generation.

Interpretation of the Text

The opening scene of *Bangrajan* gives viewers some background to the story regarding the ongoing conflict between Ayutthaya and Burma. Despite having a significantly larger army, the Burmese were unable to successfully overtake Ayutthaya. The following excerpt is taken from this introduction to the story of *Bangrajan*:

In the year 1763, King Mangra ascended to the throne in Burma. His first task was to suppress dissenting states within the Burmese empire. But Ayutthaya provided aid to these city-states, further fanning their rebellion. Thus, King Mangra decided he must strike at Ayutthaya, the very heart of Thailand.

The 1765, King Mangra sent a vast army to attack Ayutthaya via two different routes. 100,000 troops marched into Thailand from the west while another 100,000 troops under Commander Nanmeo marched down from the north. The troops attacking from the north did not make it to Ayutthaya in time to assist the others.

They were held up at one small rural village. Waves of Burmese soldiers attacked these villagers. But against all odds the villagers repelled them again and again. The legendary courage of those Thai villagers spread through the Empire. This is their story—Bangrajan.”

This opening to the story very dramatically illustrates the courage of the Bangrajan villagers. In addition to flaming images of the battle between the villagers, the introduction also clearly depicts their bravery and courage of this small group of villagers in the face of their Burmese attackers despite overwhelming odds. The following passage illustrates this point:

They [the Burmese army] were held up at one small rural village [Bang rajan]. Waves of Burmese soldiers attacked these villagers. But against all odds the villagers repelled them again and again.

Throughout the story, the courage and perseverance of the Bangrajan people is clearly evident. This begins with the initial scenes in which the villagers ambushed the advancing Burmese. The movie revealed their courage through encouraging statements such as, “What are you afraid for...we can win no matter how many times we fight.” Moreover, the movie reveals the cleverness and bravery of the Bangrajan people in a scene in which “Than” the village leader, told one villager to secretly attack Burma with rifles to force the Burmese troops to divide after which another group of villagers then lures the divides Burmese to the mud to be attacked by another group of villagers waiting for them there in the mud. Burmese soldiers sustained heavy casualties, including the loss of their commander-in-chief.

The villagers also suffered serious losses including Than who was shot and injured. Phra Ajarn Dhammachote, the only Buddhist monk in the village, then suggested that Chan the Fang Moustache, a man from a nearby village that also hated the Burmese, step up to take the place of Than in leading the villagers. Chan’s animosity toward the Burmese came from a very personal place in that his wife had been brutally murdered by the Burmese troops. Chan attacked and killed the Burmese with no fear of death. This is clearly seen in the following quote from Phra Ajarn Dhammachote: “*There is one man. He hates the Burmese so much and has no fear.*”

This comment is then followed by images of Chan using his sword to kill Burmese soldiers with determination and no fear.

It was not only Chan, but also every other resident in the Bangrajan village who hated the Burmese. They gathered in this particular village because they had all experienced the brutality of the Burmese first-hand. Examples include In and Muang, two villagers who came to Ayutthaya to obtain ammunitions. One man was going to ordain his son as a Buddhist monk, but this revered ceremony was interrupted when the Burmese attacked, killing and raping the villagers. However, they were saved by the people from Bangrajan so they then decided to gather at Bangrajan to help protecting the land. Moreover, even the monks decided to leave the monkhood and go to Bangrajan to help fight the invading Burmese.

“...the love of Bangrajan villagers for their country when coupled with the atrocities inflicted on people throughout the area by the Burmese led to a gathering of villagers committed to fighting and obliterating the oppressive and invading Burmese army.”

Under pressure that all residents be prepared for the impending battle, villagers relied heavily on Phra Ajarn Dhammachote for spiritual support as he served as the moral center of the village being the only monk in the area. This is a clear picture of the central role that Buddhism plays in Thai society, as it is the religion of the state with monks serving as the moral center. This is seen in an opening scene where viewers see Phra Ajarn Dhammachote praying for the villagers going into battle. When Than was injured, they then obeyed Phra Ajarn Dhammachote when he suggested appointing Chan the Fang Moustache as the village head of the village to replace the injured Than. Moreover, in the battle, they relied on the protection of holy amulets from Phra Ajarn Dhammachote which were believed to bring good luck and protect those who wear them from danger.

The battle continued and some villagers got sick while others went mad after seeing their friends die. Because of these growing losses, some of the remaining villagers decided to relocate. While this discouraged the remaining Bangrajan fighters, they did continue to battle the Burmese. Some of the women, including Sa

and Tang, supported those who relocated by providing them with necessary provisions.

Moreover, rice supplies were running dangerously low because the fighting began during the rice harvest many farmers were unable to gather the entire rice crop. Villagers also made many other sacrifices for the sake of their nation. Sa, In's wife, did not tell her husband that she was pregnant because she did not want him to be deterred in his fervor in fighting the Burmese. After nearly fainting while harvesting rice, Sa told her friend Tang, *"I haven't told him [about my pregnancy]. I saw what happened to Mali's family [they relocated because the wife became pregnant]. I don't want to be like that. I don't want him to worry about me."*

The movie also illustrates the role of women at the time as one of much more than housework. Than says to Tang while she was practicing fencing with a coconut tree, *"I was practicing to use the sword for survival."* The movies showed that these women also had a strong love for the nation as well, and while their roles were often in the background, they were no less vital. If Sa had told her husband about the pregnancy, he may have chosen to look after his family rather than pursuing the battle with the Burmese. In addition to their sacrifice and support of the men in the village, the women also displayed a very deep love of their nation in that they dared to pick up the sword and fight shoulder to shoulder with the men until the very end, even willing to give their lives for the cause. This type of sacrifice and involvement by the women in the village is a good example of "Feminist Nationalism" as seen throughout the story of the Bangrajan villagers.

The use of modern weapons was also important in the fight and played an important role in the ultimate victory of the Bangrajan villagers. All of the villagers agreed to ask for the artillery and munitions from Ayutthaya with In and Muang assigned to carry a letter to the palace in Ayutthaya requesting the artillery. This scene takes place during a rain storm and this dreariness helps to illustrate the sense of profound disappointment of the villagers when their request was denied. As a result, the villagers decided to make their own artillery after melting down various tools and

other metal objects. Thongmen even donated Burmese armor taken from previous battles to be cast as artillery as well.

Because of the ongoing losses at the hands of the Bangrajan villagers, the King of Burma decided to set up a reward for any army leader who could defeat the villagers. In addition, any troops willing to take on the Bangrajan villagers would receive special troops and weapons. With these new incentives, it was simply a matter of time before the Bangrajan fighters could be crushed. The small contingent with their crude and often inefficient handmade artillery was simply no match for the now fully-supported Burmese.

In addition to the clear theme of love for nation, another strong theme throughout *Bangrajan* is that of the “us” (the villagers of Bang Rajan) versus “them” (the Burmese troops).

The Thai “Us”

The illustration of Thai heroes and heroines was clearly depicted. Everyone, both women and men, was united in their action and the spirit of sacrifice in their fight with Burma until the very end.

The Burmese “Them”

The Burmese were clearly depicted as a brutal and ruthless force from beginning to end in this film, beginning with an initial scene in which invading Burmese killed and raped Thai people, including children the elderly. In other scenes, Burmese troops were seen herding, fettering, hurting and even killing Thai war prisoners, with no exceptions for mothers holding small babies. The brutality of Burma was also depicted when Burmese soldiers were seen forcing Thai war prisoners to harvest rice, brutalizing those who refused to work

4. *The Overture*

Synopsis

Sorn (Anuchit Saphanphong) is born to play. He comes from a family of musicians and his natural talent requires little training. He understands the harmony of leaves, water and wind and can transfer it naturally to the fluid movements of his hands over the xylophone, from which he coaxes celestial rhythms. While Sorn is still a child, his older brother is beaten to death by rival musicians and the xylophone is forbidden in his family. Still, Sorn disobeys his father's orders and plays at night in secret in an abandoned temple. When, as a young adult, Sorn is humbled after losing a spontaneous music contest with a rival, he reigns in his arrogant pride and becomes a famous musician at the royal court. His restless genius accompanies him into old age, engaging him in a fight against the obtuse Thai government when, during World War II, all forms of autochthonous artistic traditions are banned and Thai music is outlawed in the name of Western civilization.

During this time, Sorn became a respected teacher. One day Sorn's son has a piano moved into his father's studio. The expectation is that his father will be furious at having a newfangled Western instrument brought into his house. But instead of being mad, he instructs his son to play a tune on the piano. The elder Sorn then takes up his ranad-ek mallets and improvises with his son, blending Thai and Western music.

However, the government called for the accelerated modernization of Thailand. As a result, performances of traditional Thai music, dance and theatre were frowned upon. The police forced and made violence to Thais who were playing Thai music in the first time and the performers who prepared to play *lykae* (a type of classical dance play) in the second time. In this case, Sorn's grandson quarreled with the police officers. The police officers who led by Lieutenant-Colonel Veera went to Sorn's house, tried to seek and arrest Sorn's Grandson. However, Sorn still stood in his point to conserve Thai tradition, and in defiance of Veera's orders, plays his ranad-ek. Finally, Veera listened the sound of ranad-ek after he went out from Sorn's home. He did not decide to arrest him.

Context

Initially, “*The Overture*” was shown six times per day per location compared with as many as 20 screenings per day per location for some Hollywood films.³⁹ Because of this poor showing at the box office during its opening weekend, it was subsequently pulled from many theaters.⁴⁰

As shown from Itthisoontorn Vichailak, the director said “In the first week, I faced some very serious problems. I'm curious about the theatre's film screening system. I don't know how they justify which movies will be become a box office success. And what I have realized is that they [theaters] decide which films will make money, and not the moviegoers.”⁴¹ In pointing out that local film productions receive unfair treatment from theater operators he went on to say, “If my films are screened far less frequently than other films, how can I compete?”⁴²

However, after word of mouth spread and discussions flourished on Internet forums like www.pantip.com, “*The Overture*” was eventually brought back and did become a sensation which won numerous awards and sparked renewed interest in Thai classical music. Captivated by the film's nationalistic, historical and cultural themes, it was embraced by the Thai royal family and the Thai government, which used it as a promotional tool. Ultimately, “*The Overture*” was one of the most popular Thai films of 2004.⁴³

The rekindling of interest in Thai classical music

Before “*The Overture*,” Thai classical music was seen as unpopular in comparison with popular music. After the film, however, music school were busy once again and the demand for musical instruments, especially the Thai xylophone, soared. One music instructor from the Chitlada Music School said, “The film has become a hit, and so has ranad [Thai xylophone] playing. Demand for teachers is increasing.” In response to this demand, we had to open weekend classes for young

³⁹ Promotion, not censorship is the key. *The Nation* (February 28 2004).

⁴⁰ History of Thailand. (September 2007). http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Thailand

⁴¹ Promotion, not censorship is the key. *The Nation* (February 28 2004).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ History of Thailand, Available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Thailand (2007, September 5).

enthusiasts at the residence of the late prime minister M.R. (Mom Rajawongse, the name that in front of upper class in Thailand) Kukrit Pramoj, a staunch supporter of Thai arts and culture.

Sa-mer Champalee, owner of a factory which produces traditional Thai instruments, said that retail sales of the Thai xylophone picked up after the release of *The Overture*. According to Champalee, "Normally, we get wholesale orders from schools and universities, while retail sales come from parents who want to purchase instruments for their children to practice at home." The boom was no surprise to Champalee. She said, "This [type of enthusiasm also] happened when the TV movie, "Ranad Ek," was on air more than a decade ago. But this time [with *The Overture*] the sentiment is even stronger."⁴⁴

In addition to the Thai xylophone itself, xylophone experts like Norongrit Tosa-nga also became popular. Response to his portrayal as the devilish Khun In has been overwhelming. "I'm glad to be part of a film that has stirred up the popularity of Thai classical music," Narongrit said. "Many parents have tried to send their children to learn the Thai xylophone with me."⁴⁵

Endorsements

Several banks gave their support to "The Overture." Ayutthaya Bank was the first to come on board when it distributed free tickets to customers. This was followed by Mr. Banthoon Lamsam, Executive President of Kasikorn Thai Bank, who then jumped in to provide full support for classical Thai musicians. He was always asking everyone he knew whether they watched the movie. And more recently, Mr. Chartsiri Sophonphanich, Managing Director of Bangkok Bank, and Mr. Piti Sitthiamnuay, Vice Executive President, joined in to conduct a press conference in support of the movie and to give free tickets to customers by mail.⁴⁶ In addition, Total Access Communication Plc., or DTAC, held a marketing promotion activity wherein 3,000 tickets were given to customers who were then able to view "The

⁴⁴ Preeyanat Phanayanggoor. "Fans set up special show of Thai film: 1,100 computer users to view Hom Rong," *Bangkok Post* (February 29, 2004).

⁴⁵ "In tune with the times," *Bangkok Post* (April 14, 2004).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Overture" free of charge on February 28 in the "Thais Watch Thai Movies" Project.⁴⁷

Nationalistic Sentiments

Many well-known people weighed in on the popularity of *The Overture*. Following are some of the reviews the movie received from well-known people in Thai society at the time.

*"I found the movie very touching and beautifully done. It provides a good insight into traditional Thai music," said Ambassador Klauspeter Schmallenbach, head of the European Commission's delegation to Thailand.*⁴⁸

*"A strong tree can resist the strongest wind as long as it has deep roots... and the movie presents the kind of unity among people against anything that breaks into their lives," Buyi M. Pheto, South Africa's Ambassador to Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Burma and Cambodia said.*⁴⁹

*"The Ministry of Culture is very brave to allow a film that attacks it," veteran director Chatrichalerm Yukol said before the screening.*⁵⁰

*The film is a "political statement", taking place during a dark period when the fight for cultural existence was at its height, Chatrichalerm Yukol said.*⁵¹

In the current social context, Thais have already been transformed by globalization and a modern lifestyle which includes things like the Internet and cable television. As a result, pop stars, nude models, magazine editors, and showbiz figures have found themselves on the receiving end of state-sanctioned moral indignation for behavior that has been deemed a threat to Thai culture.⁵² In reaction to this modernization away from traditional Thai values, "The Overture" and other films like it serve as a good example of ways in which film is used to help Thai people better appreciate their traditional roots. Thus, it is vital that Thais, and particularly young

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Amporn Chakkaphak. "A perfect 'Overture' to beautiful music," *The Nation* (February 22, 2004).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "Promotion, not censorship is the key," *The Nation* (February 28, 2004).

Thais, are taught why it is important to stay in touch with their cultural roots despite being surrounded with all that the world has to offer. In order to successfully stand strong in the face of the ravaging forces of globalization, societies like Thailand much stand on their own, unique and traditional cultural foundations.

Text

The Overture clearly illustrates Thai cultural nationalism and helped to bring about a new respect for Thai instrumental classical music, as seen through the life and times of Sorn, a Thai man born into a musical family known for their expertise with the Thai xylophone (*ranad ek*). The movie follows the golden age of Thai classical music from its peak through to its decline. The decline occurred during the reign of the Field Marshall Phiboon Songkhram who was the prime minister and a military dictator of Thailand from 1938 to 1944 and 1948 to 1957. During his administration it was standard policy to “civilize the nation,” or to make Thailand acceptable by powerful Western countries. Such policy affected the long-practiced and traditional Thai culture and lifestyle by severely restricting them based on the reasoning that the traditional ways were “old-fashion.” Restricting the “old ways” included the prohibition of playing Thai classical music. The movie not only depicts Sorn’s love of the Thai xylophone and the important role of music throughout his life, but also his fight to preserve Thai classical music throughout its prohibition.

The respect and deep love for the instrumental classical music was not dependent on the political era. The bond between Sorn and his Thai xylophone is clear from the very first scene in which viewers see him on his death bed talking to Thiew, his childhood friend who had been with him throughout his life. In talking to Thiew, Sorn says, “*The sound of the Thai xylophone is still echoing in my mind. Please don’t let it die.*” The movie then goes on to follow Sorn throughout his life as he develops his deep love for Thai classical music and recognize its important place in Thai culture.

The respect and deep love for instrumental classical music was not something that could easily be stifled by a political crisis. Sorn had been interested in the Thai xylophone since his childhood. He was self-taught and his ability to play bewildered everyone including his father, who was the head of a Thai classical band, and his

older brother, who also played the Thai xylophone and was later killed by a rival after defeating him in a music competition. The death of his older brother seriously hurt his family and led his father to ban any playing of the Thai xylophone. Sorn, however, continued to secretly practice playing using an improvised xylophone made from coconut shells. Sorn also practiced using a Thai xylophone which he had stolen from his father at a deserted temple on the outskirts of the village, for fear that his father would hear him playing anywhere else. A local monk told his father that, "*Your son will not die because of music but because of his unawareness of musical value.*" The monk then asked his father to encourage Sorn to keep on playing the Thai xylophone to continue living his life and follow the right path.

Sorn's education in and later popularity as a Thai xylophone player grew throughout the golden age of Thai classical music. He began by listening to other players at temple fairs and various community functions where people would gather to enjoy the musicians. The Thai xylophone duet competition is a provincial level contest which is very popular. During the competition, two Thai xylophone players alternated playing increasingly difficult passages of music, with the winner being the one who is able to outplay his opponent. In the movie, Sorn takes part in his first Thai xylophone competition at a temple fair to a crowd of local revelers and families. During his first competition, he played with a player from a local leader and Sorn won, much to the delight of his audience, and his reputation and popularity began to grow. This scene not only showed Sorn's love of Thai xylophone, but also illustrated the Thai people enjoying musical performance and competition. This is evident in that present day audiences thoroughly enjoyed the film. It was a love for classical Thai music that had previously fallen to the wayside in the face of popular music from other countries like Western and Korean music. One of the achievements of *The Overture* is that it was able to remind Thai people of the vast richness and culture to be found in the uniqueness and beauty of classical Thai music.

As the film moves along, Sorn later finds himself in a more urban area where he is also well received by the audience. However, it was at this fair that he first meets Khun In, who not only outplayed Sorn, but also left him bewildered and unsure of how to continue in his own practicing routine. After hearing Khun In play, Sorn began to practice almost violently every day and became so distressed that he finally

was ready to give up, fearing he would never be as good as Khun In and others.

It was because of his deep love for Thai xylophone that Sorn was encouraged to continue playing and training. So with the support of his good friend Thiew he was able to finally understand that it was acceptable for Sorn to continue. Thiew did this by challenging Sorn to a fishing competition saying that both Sorn and Khun In would never be able to be him at fishing because Thiew was the indisputable fishing champion. Thiew goes on to say that "*we all differ because of our different skills and paths.*" After this encounter, Sorn takes time to reflect on this and eventually decides to continue.

Sorn's popularity and proficiency as a Thai xylophone player led a local court noble, named Prince Bhanurangsi Savangwongse Wangbhurabhirom, to begin sponsoring Sorn. As a part of his training under the local court noble's sponsorship, Sorn was able to meet Khun In once again. During this re-match, Sorn's ability led to his eventual success after a lengthy and tense competition with Khun In.

Despite these successes in his professional life as a classical musician, Sorn was unable to have much influence or luck in affecting the shift in the Thai world around him as they experienced the big changes in policy which affected Thai culture and traditions during the Phiboon Songkhram Administration. In 1932, the Thai absolute monarchy was replaced with a constitutional monarchy. In this context of the new, culturally oppressive government, Phibul in particular began increasing the pace of modernisation in Thailand. By manipulating the mass media, Phiboon was able to fashion a semi-fascist regime with ultra-nationalism as its central theme. Together with Luang Wichitwathakan, the Minister of Propaganda, Phiboon built a leadership cult throughout 1939 and thereafter. Photographs of Phiboon were to be found everywhere while those of the abdicated King Prajadhipok were banned. Phiboon's slogans appeared in newspapers, were plastered on billboards and continuously broadcast over the radio.

"Aimed to uplifting the national spirit and moral code of the nation and instilling progressive tendencies and a newness into Thai life," a series of Cultural Mandates were issued by the government. These mandates required that all Thais

salute the flag, learn a new national anthem written by Wichitwathakarn, and use the national (i.e. Bangkok) language, as opposed to local dialects. People were encouraged to adopt western attire as opposed to the traditional topless style of the traditional men and women. According to Phiboon Songkram, these drastic changes were necessary for Thailand to counter the Western understanding that Thailand was undeveloped and barbaric. Thus, in the interest of progression, Thailand needed to be recognized by foreigners as equals.⁵³

Therefore, the traditional Thai lifestyle was regarded as old fashioned, whereas the Western lifestyle was deemed as modern. This is illustrated in one scene where a soldier corrected a woman pouring liquor for a colonel. The woman was filling the glass when the soldier said, "*You can't pour like that. Just pour the brandy slightly [above the bottom of the glass] so that it can warm the hand when lifting the glass and has good smell.*" His subordinates laughed and added, "This is foreign liquor, not SaTho [a local liquor]." The scene also depicted the perspective that the classical Thai was seen as old fashioned and Western culture was modern by portraying the colonel's appreciation of the Western music and hostility when he heard Sorn's grandchildren playing classical Thai music. The following excerpt is taken from the film when the officer goes to Sorn's house to confront the grandchildren who were playing Thai classical music.

Police: Could you stop playing that music? It is rather loud up the road there.

Male Musician: Is it that noisy? Ok, we'll play more softly

Police: Can you all stop playing? Do you have a musician card (The card for playing Thai musician legally)?

Male Musician: We're just playing for fun in the house. There is no need for us to have a card. By the way, you haven't come here to arrest us, have you?

Police: You're talking like a lawyer. The government has banned the playing of this kind of *sor* [an instrument similar to a violin]. Are you obeying the law? (The policeman then violently throws the *sor*.) This is a good warning. Don't make problems!

⁵³ History of Thailand, Available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Thailand (2007, September 5).

This scene not only portrayed the vanishing of traditional Thai values but also showed the change in regulations for musicians who were no longer asked to simply show their musician cards but also ordered to permanently stop playing Thai classical instruments altogether. To make the point, violence was used when the police officer threw the *sor* and pointed his finger at Sorn's grandson with the intent to upset and intimidate him.

The discrimination against Thai music was even more evident in the following scene where the police used violence in front of many bystanders. In addition to banning the playing of Thai classical music at local fairs and other gatherings, all other outdoor long-standing artistic performances like *lykae* (a type of classical dance play) were also banned. The scripts and musician cards for such performances had to be examined before they could be performed for the public. In one scene, the police are seen using increasing force toward a group of *lykae* musicians, verbally assaulting them and then pushing and physically assaulting the performers as well. This is an excerpt from that scene:

Police: Are you the band leader? Let me see your performance permit. And did you send the script to the Fine Arts Department for their approval?

Male Musician: Yes. But the story is rather local. There is nothing bad in it. Local people just want to have a little fun. Don't make it a big story.

Police: Your singing was rather satirical. Can I arrest you now? The musicians are playing on the floor too. Let me see your musician cards.

Male Musician: Do you think we are thieves? Why do you have to be strict? We are honest musicians. Can you let us do our work? Your action is too much for us now.

Police: And then what will you do? (He then violently pushes the musician causing a table to overturn and a 'Hua Po Kae or Nath Ruesi Mask' to fall off one of the musicians.) What are you looking at? Clear the space. (The headdress rolled to the feet of Sorn's grandson and the police officer ordered him to collect it.) What are you looking at? Pick it up. (Sorn's grandson then tightened his fist and hit the police officer.)

Nationalist View

Sorn's nationalist views were clear throughout the movies, most notable in the scene where the colonel came to pick up his grandson who had assaulted the police officer. Sorn's explanation to the colonel was slow and deliberate. Through this explanation, viewers are able to clearly see how it would be possible for traditional Thai values to survive despite the spread of the Western power throughout the region. The following excerpt illustrates this:

Police: The regulation was issued because the leader [of Thailand] wanted to civilize the country to be like [the Western] others.

Male Musician: Being civilized by making assaulting our roots, Colonel?

Police: The government just put out-dated items [and values] into good frames. Everything needs regulations for control.

Male Musician: I believe the colonel can control ten or even a hundred thousand soldiers and the soldier formations will be beautiful, as they are kept under control. But music and the arts are a different issue. When regulations are issued by people without a correct artistic understanding, it will only cause harm.

Police: Are you blaming our country's leader? Our country is fighting against various [Western] powers, so we have to believe in our leader for survival.

Male Musician: Which kind of survival can we have, colonel? A large tree can stand defiantly even against an elephant only by having a long deep root for strength. Without care for others, how can we survive?

Police: I don't have to make any further explanation. A regulation is a rule and once issued, it must be obeyed by everyone, regardless of being a noble or a great teacher like you. Is that clear?

5. *Young Soldiers (Boys Will be Boys, Boys Will be Men)*

Synopsis

In 1941, a group of eight students from Sri Ya Phai School formed a group as they were all young and full of dreams and imagination, but they were also all ready to volunteer to fight for their nation against the invading Japanese during World War II. The group included Maryut (Rungreung Anantaya), Prayut (Vorayos Panichtripop), Banjong (Nuttapol Leeyawanich), Sanan (Pongchatree Kograbin),

Sangwan (Pitan Kaniwichaporn), Sangwien (Banha Boonsanong), Prachum (Prin Yenbumrung), and Wattana (Krit Kulpiran). When Captain Thawin (Ron Banjongsrang), Sergeant Samran (Kajornsak Ruttananisai) and their subordinates came to Chumphorn Province to recruit and train young soldiers to support the insufficient Thai military should the encroaching Japanese actually invade. As a result of this recruitment process, the group of eight enlisted along with many of their classmates.

The young soldier training process was just as difficult as that of the regular soldiers. Training during this time was difficult due to a lack of weapons to train on. At the time, this was not a big concern as no one actually expected war to break out, and as a result there was no public support for the military training programs. Captain Thawin and a group of young soldiers arranged a military sports league to collect money for weapons. He was a ferocious coach and watched over every aspect of the process. This in turn caused the young soldiers to both love and fear him. In addition to their professional training, the young boys also struggled through many of the personal difficulties of growing up. During their training, Marut and Prayut fell in love with the same girl, Chid Chong (Teya Roger). Since this meant they were competing with each other during their studies and training, and now also for love, they eventually had a falling out.

Finally on December 8, 1941, Japanese troops landed in Chumphorn province. All of young soldiers were ready to go to war to protect their nation. Captain Thawin was in command in the fight to combat the invading Japanese, and the newly trained young soldiers played an important role in the fighting. Although the weapons for the defending Thais were insufficient, everyone fought proudly and bravely for their nation. Despite their differences, Marut and Prayut battled shoulder to shoulder with other young soldiers.

As a result of the fighting, Captain Thawin was killed and Sergeant Samran was shot, leaving Marut in command. At this point, the young soldiers were battling the Japanese on their own without their Captain or Sergeant. Finally, the young soldiers tried their best to fight against with Japan till Thai government in Bangkok sent an order permitting the Japanese troops to officially enter Thailand.

Interpretation

Young Soldiers portrayed nationalism among a different group—the young. Although they were secondary students, these young soldiers showed their admirable sacrifice and love for their nation. They sacrificed the joys of being young for the difficult soldier training and the strains of battle.

The movie *Young Soldiers* is based on a true story from the World War II era in Thailand, during the period of Field Marshall Phiboon Songkhram. Thailand was encountering a Greater East Asian War which was part of the global World War at the time. World War II started in Europe when Germany army invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. This was followed by a subsequent German attacks on the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union; the United States was neutral at the time.

On September 1, 1938, Japan commenced its nationalistic policy in Asia under the slogan “Asia for Asiatic.” The policy declared a “new order in East Asia and the Greater East Asia co-prosperity sphere.” In addition, Japan made a pact with Germany and Italy on September 27, 1940. The ultimate goal was for Japan to occupy Asia; China and other nations in Asia had been colonized and highly influence by France, the Netherlands, and England.

The atmosphere throughout *Young Soldiers* depicts the deep love and level of sacrifice the young Thai soldiers had for their country during the Japanese invasion during World War II. During the Second World War, Japan invaded Thailand and demanded it serve as a military base for Japan’s further seizure of neighboring countries throughout Southeast Asia.

By the end of 1939, war had broken out throughout Europe and spread to Africa and Asia. At that time, the Thai government under Prime Minister Field Marshall Phiboon Songkhram declared its neutrality and began to develop its military. One part of this development process was the founding of the Department of Young Soldiers.

Thailand maintained its neutrality and worked hard to continue its positive relationship with all countries in the region through the signing of the “No Invasion

Treaty” in Bangkok on June 12, 1940. In addition, on the same day in Tokyo, Thailand also signed a treaty agreeing not only to friendly relations, but also a respect for the completeness of the territory of Japan.

Young Soldiers begins with a presentation of the nationalistic attitudes of various characters in the film. There is one scene in particular where Captain Thawin arrives in Chumphorn Province in Southern Thailand to recruit the young soldiers who will later serve as reserve troops to be called upon in the case of war (the Thai military was lacking sufficient soldiers at the time). The depth of his commitment to his mission is clearly illustrated in the following excerpt, Captain [Thawin] didn't want to relax for a minute, even after a long trip, but instead he went immediately to begin recruiting the young soldiers.

This profound “love of country” feeling was not only evident in the troops, but also in the educational system. In a later scene, teenage boys in grade 11 at Sri Ya Phai School, which was to later be visited by Captain Thawin, were reading a Thai nationalistic poem in their classroom which included the following passage:

“... therefore we will be loyal to the King, the nation and our religion....”

In the film this sense of nationalism as seen through the students is clearly reflected in their eagerness to become soldiers and defenders of the country they love so deeply. When Captain Thawin's car arrived at Sri Ya Phai School, all of students were excited for the impending recruitment process. Even though the need for these soldiers arose from the possibility of a future attack, the teacher simply replied that if that would happen, then *“Great! We were soldiers!”* In addition, Marut's deep love for his country is reflected in the following exchange—the teacher asked which country Thailand should ally itself with, and Marut responded that *“Thailand should take the side of any country which has not invaded it.”*

After being recruited, these new young soldiers were so excited and eager to take on the Japanese that they eagerly learned the art of war and how to manage a battlefield situation, particularly if that battlefield should happen to be in Chumphorn Province. Students demonstrated their readiness to serve as soldiers when they said, *“Chaiyo, I am a soldier.”* The love for their country is illustrated in a scene in this

scene.

A further example in the film occurs when, during a young soldier recruitment speech, Captain Thawin encouraged all the students to be patriotic and enlist to be young soldiers.

“Thailand has existed as an independent country for a long time and might always keep this status. Therefore, all young Thais must be prepared to face the possibility of war by applying to be trained as soldiers so that they can be an important force of the nation in peace and war time... Despite the desire for peace, we must be ready for war... I will accept volunteers and want to tell you that the training will be conducted very strictly and heavily to build up brave, durable soldiers who can fight till the death in the battlefields.”

Thai sovereignty had come under serious threat many times, and yet Thailand had overcome every time. For example, the Burmese invaded and occupied Thai territory. In the end, however, the Burmese were expelled by King Narasuaen. Another example is that of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1868-1910), who is credited with saving Thailand from the powerful tides of Western colonialism through adroit diplomacy and selective modernization. With this long history of sovereignty despite oppression from all sides, Thailand had no intention of seceding anything this time around without a tremendous fight.

This sense of nationalism was used to help persuade teenage students to agree to the very daunting and important task of defending their country. Moreover, none of the students knew Captain Thawin, after this speech, they all applied and were selected to be young soldiers. There were many reasons for their excitement. One student explained how he felt after the young soldier recruitment when he said, *“the commander is so smart today. When he was talking, I could feel the patriotism flowing through my veins.”* Many students also sang songs such as this one: *“We will die for Thailand and confront any who dare to invade. Young soldiers will die for our nation.”*

Nationalism could be seen through flag. In the film, Some teachers disagreed with the recruitment of these young soldiers saying, *“Their white clothes will be*



bloodied, Captain.” To which the captain replied, “*It’s a must... It [white] is one color of our national flag.*” This meant that while white is one of three colors of the Thai flag (the other two are red and blue), so too the young soldiers are one of many who make up the Thai nation. Symbols like flags are often used to inspire the feeling of being part of something bigger, an unseen whole while not knowing most of the rest of that whole. Benedict Anderson and Michael Geisler has characterized flags as “metaphors to die for... and large numbers of people have indeed done so over the past century. It is precisely that status that makes disrespect - a contemporary iconoclasm - such a potent form of protest and resistance.”⁵⁴

Not only Captain Thawin, but also all of the boys showed time and time again their deep devotion and love for their country. In the film, there were many people throughout the country who were keeping a close watch over this group of young soldiers, eager to see whether or not these high school students had what it took to succeed as true soldiers. Captain Thawin and other trainers did everything possible to coach them and help them to become the absolute best they could be.

Sergeant Samran: Captain, Sir, will it work? I think they’re all kids.

Captain Thawin: Many people are watching us, so we’ve got to work hard and train them a lot.

Thus the young soldiers training was like that of every other soldier. It included things like standing upright, turning in unison, obeying order while in line, carrying rifles, crawling under barbed wire, rolling in mud, carrying friends across a log bridge, and the like. Those who faltered in the training process were rebuked and sometimes even beaten, a punishment which some teachers were simply unable to understand. Despite this difficult training process, all young soldiers had to be ready for battle and the realities of war. Captain Thawin told his young soldiers during training, “*This is serious training because war is serious too.*”

Nationalism was clearly shown in the rhetoric wherein primary importance was given to saving the nation, which was also the young soldiers’ duty. As in

⁵⁴ Carolyn Marvin, David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag*, Available from <http://books.google.co.th/books> [2007, October 30]

addition to the rigorous training, Captain Thawin continued to inspire his young recruits with his soaring rhetoric. One example of this was a rousing speech he has on Thai National Day, June 24, 1941 in which he said, *"It was two years ago today when we changed the name of our nation from Thailand to Thailand. And so it is today that the nation of Thailand has been entrusted to you to protect and defend, so that we may continue to celebrate Thai National Day in the years to come."*

The film showed that protecting the nation was not just the duty of soldiers, but a duty for every citizen. Captain Thawin also had to deal with the young soldiers' parents, many of whom had difficulty understanding the necessity of the rigors and difficulties of training. He also was confronted with a lack of weapons and financial support, to which he responded by arranging a military sports league with the young soldiers. As the coach for the league, Captain Thawin and the young soldiers arranged the military sports events to collect money to provide the financial support to purchase weapons and other much-needed equipment. This military sports league brought people together in such a way that in addition to supporting the young soldiers, others were also inspired to do what they could to support and defend their country. *"Nowadays fighting doesn't belong to only soldiers, but it belongs to all people in the nation and they must understand that reality."*

The boys developed nationalistic attitudes through their shared experiences, experiences filled with both happiness and hardship. Later there was the news that the British army had entered Kraburi District near the Thai-Burma border. As a result, young soldiers were deployed and able to experience the realities of the battlefield firsthand to patrol and seek information about the enemy. Although no information was obtained, Captain Thawin encouraged his men when he said,

"Although we didn't find any news, I hope all of you were paying attention to the ways of the military—sharing happiness and troubles, coming together... even together in death. Being a soldier means be united until death, so I have to train you hard and give you the readiness that will help you survive. I'm so proud because I know you are still alive like brave ones and those who realize sacrifice needed."

The training process helped the young soldiers to develop in many areas, the first of which is unity. They were worked very hard to ensure they were just as ready for battle as any other group of soldiers, young or not. The second area in which these young men excelled during their training was discipline. The training process cultivated a discipline in the young soldiers which best prepared them to take on a powerful enemy.

It was clear that the young soldiers not only practiced hard but were also united and willing to sacrifice their very lives for their country. *Young Soldiers* portrayed this concept vividly via Marut and Prayut, the two young soldiers who fell in love with the same woman, ChidChong. Initially, both competed to satisfy ChidChong, Later however, as they were teamed up to patrol together and seek information regarding the enemy. It was at this point that they realized the important of the nation and the triviality of competing for a woman. Marut said that if ChidChong truly loved Prayut, then he [Marut] would be happy for them. The image of their friendship was most vivid when they clasped one another around the neck while taking photos with their classmates. And when war later erupted, they again joined hands to fight for the nation.

For each Thai student depicted in this film, nationalism meant one was willing to leave everything behind, his personal relationships and troubles, to pursue the best interests of his country. Marut, particularly, was not only willing to give the woman he loved to his friend but was also strong enough to relinquish his feelings of attachment for the invading Japanese. Marut had learned that his Japanese brother-in-law was a spy for Japan. He continuously struggled with questions like: Will Japan will invade Thailand? What should he do? At times he is torn between his patriotism for his country and his wealthy Japanese brother-in-law who has taken care of his sister and also Marut himself.

Marut: If Japan invaded Thailand, what would we do?

Marut's sister: Kawakami(Marut's brother-in-law)is not a soldier.

Marut: But I am, what do you want me to do.

Marut's sister: I don't know because I chose my way.

Marut: You got married for me so someone would take care of me since our parents died.

Marut's sister: I was happy to do it for someone I love..

In the final scene, each young soldier goes forth into the battle of their lives, even though Captain Thawin had been killed and Sergeant Samran was injured. This did not deter the boys; they went ahead because of their strong sense of duty and bravely fought the invading Japanese army. In the film, at 2:40 a.m. in the very early morning hours of Monday, December 8, 1941, the Japanese army invaded Thailand. Young soldiers showed their willingness to sacrifice all that they had during the invasion. They were all ready, willing, and prepared to fight. Although Marut was deeply saddened that his Japanese brother-in-law was a spy for Japan, Marut decided to join the fighting in full force with his Captain and friends to prevent the Japanese from occupying Thailand.

The adolescent soldiers were increasingly challenged, not only because of their young age (all were between 14 and 18 years old), but also their small number as there were only about 30 young soldiers. They did not have any combat experience and the weaponry provided was not sufficient. To make matters worse, Captain Thawin, their trainer and leader, was shot dead on the battlefield. Sergeant Samran Kuanphan then went on to lead the troops in his place but he also suffered from a broken right arm after being shot. Despite all of these difficulties, the young soldiers continued to fight and did not even consider retreat. They tried to help and encourage together as the scene that Marut encouraged Prayut "*We will die together*". To protect Thailand, the young soldiers fought against Japanese troops for more than eight hours until the Thai government in Bangkok sent an order permitting the Japanese troops to officially enter Thailand.