

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS OF THAI NATIONALISM AS EXPRESSED IN PERIOD FILMS

During the late 1990s many Thai period films were released which clearly demonstrated the theme of Thai nationalism. As Anderson had indicated, it was the importance of the media that played an influential role in the building of a “nation” or an “imagined land.” And it was under the umbrella of Thai history that films have been used as a tool to reflect the sentiments of the Thai people, particularly when Thailand lost a large part of its economic sovereignty after the 1997 economic crisis. The period films chosen to represent this re-emergence of nationalism in the late 1990s are discussed in detail below.

#### 1. Context analysis from selected period films

##### 1.1. Sense of nationalism

Selected period films illustrate ideas of nationalism. Many well-known scholars and influential members of Thai society have made connections among these period films and agree that the films do encourage Thais to share a sense of pride in their past. For example, in *Suriyothai*, both the queen of Thailand, Queen Sirikit, and MC Chatrichalerm Yukol agree that “the film [*Suriyothai*] inspired Thai people to become interested in Thai history.” In *The Siam Renaissance*, both His Excellency Somsak Prisananantakun and Dr. Seree Wongmontha also felt that the film sought to evoke a sense of pride among Thai viewers, as the film illustrated the historical success of their Thai predecessors in protecting Thailand through a combination of compromise and gentleness. *The Overture* is another period film example which sought to inspire Thai people to better appreciate their traditional roots through traditional music and the art of playing the Thai xylophone or “ranad.” Klauspeter Schmallenbach, Head of the EC Delegation in Thailand felt that “this film [*The Overture*] provides a good insight into traditional Thai music.”

##### 1.2 Factors affecting the popularity of nationalistic period films

There were a variety of factors which positively affected the popularity of Thai nationalistic period films. *Suriyothai* stands out as one of the primary examples of one such period film which achieved tremendous levels of popularity as a result of a variety of factors. To begin, *Suriyothai* was by far the largest production the Thai

film industry had every experienced; it had the largest budget, the longest research process, the longest shooting period, and countless professional actors and actresses. As a result *Suriyothai* grossed more than 500 million bath that was the highest income ever in the history of the Thai film industry. And most importantly, the queen of Thailand herself, Queen Sirikit, served as an important special consultant on nearly every aspect of the filming and production process. Her involvement was most apparent in the extravagant and lavish premier she arranged for the film's opening.

*Bangrajan* earned more than 150 million baht. Its popularity is largely attributed to the fact that is aimed to encourage people to use their right to vote in the Thai national elections which were held in January 6, 2001. The film was released to December 29 2000, best facilitate this interest in participating in the upcoming elections.

*The Overture* served to promote and interest in and appreciation of Thai classical music, particularly through Thai xylophone (ranad) performance. As a result of the film's release, interest in studying the Thai xylophone increased exponentially. New Thai xylophone classes were started across the country to meet this new demand and interest in studying the instrument. And as a consequence, the demand for Thai xylophone teachers, as well as sales of the instrument itself, also increased dramatically shortly after the film's release.

## 2. Text analysis

### 2.1. Who best demonstrates Thai nationalism?

#### 2.1.1. Royals and the elite

*Suriyothai* clearly illustrated the contention that members of the royal family and the elite ruling class best demonstrate aspects of Thai nationalism. Although Thailand has been a democratic nation since 1932, the institute of the monarchy and the king is something that all Thai people both respect and revere. This is demonstrated in *Suriyothai* in the main character, Queen Suriyothai, who willingly sacrifices herself to protect the nation she loves above everything else.

In *The Siam Renaissance*, there is a scene in which the heroine of the film, Maneechan, travels to the past to the time of King Rama IV's reign. During this visit

to the past she sees Thai people prostrating themselves before the king as he walked by. In addition, this film describes both King Rama IV and King Rama V as playing the most influential role in successfully protecting Thailand's sovereignty and keeping colonialist powers at bay through creative and effective diplomatic strategies.

Two other characters representing the elite class include Luang Akaradhep Warakorn, the hero from *The Siam Renaissance*, and Baron Muen Rachasineha the high-ranking military officer in *Suriyothai*. Both demonstrated their loyalty for the nation by making the ultimate sacrifice—their lives.

### 2.1.2. Ordinary People

Nationalism is not only illustrated through the role of members of the royal family and elite, but also through that of ordinary people as well. Ordinary characters in both *Bangrajan* and *Young Soldiers* clearly illustrate this point. In *Bangrajan*, the villagers were united and sacrificed themselves to fight to keep the Burmese at bay. In *Young Soldiers*, the high school student devoted themselves to train to become soldiers to fight against invading Japanese troops, even after having lost their leader during the heat of battle.

### 2.1.3. Women

In the past, male characters were often represented as powerful and played a primary role in the protection of the nation. However, in the present-day context, there are more and more powerful female characters emerging in period films. The obvious example is that of Queen Suriyothai, who selflessly sacrificed her life for her husband's so that he could continue to govern the nation. In *Bangrajan*, women villagers picked up swords and went to fight alongside their male counterparts to help in fending off the invading Burmese during the final scene in the film. And Maneechan, the heroine from *The Siam Renaissance*, ultimately chose to remain in the past so that she could use her knowledge to best help and protect the nation she loved so deeply.

## 2.2. Applying nationalism to specific historical backdrops

The selected historical backdrops used in period films are all well-known and unforgettable moments in history, historical times that are known to all Thai people. They are the moments that can invoke feelings of love for the nation just by their mere mention. One classic example of such a historical backdrop is that of the war between Thailand and Burma, wherein Burma invaded Thailand and Thais were forced to protect their country. The war in *Suriyothai* showed that the Burmese king chose to invade at a time when Thailand was in the process of changing monarchs, thinking that Thailand may be weakened during the changeover process. But it was through the deep and profound love for their country that all Thais, even a woman like Queen Suriyothai, were able to come together and sacrifice themselves for their country.

In *Banrajan*, common villagers also came together under the historical backdrop of the war between Thailand and the Burmese. Additionally, the majority of scenes in the film were shot at night to convey the feelings of mournfulness and sorrow they felt at being invaded, with the darkness of night symbolizing these feelings felt by not only the villagers in the film, but all Thai people.

*The Siam Renaissance* historical context of the exploitation of Thailand through land division by Western colonial powers provides a powerful narrative which is understood by all Thais. In addition, viewers are challenged to consider what they would do if they had the opportunity to return that well-known historical period. Would they handle things differently?

Both *The Overture* and *Young Soldiers* were set during the World War II era in Thailand, another period that is well-known to all Thais. These two films showed clearly that Thai people went to great lengths under extraordinary circumstances to preserve their culture and sacrifice their lives in the process. Sorn, the hero from *The Overture*, dared to play the traditional Thai xylophone (ranad), even though such demonstrations of traditional Thai culture had been banned, while the police stood right in front of him with the power to arrest him immediately. During this time, the government had forbidden all types of traditional Thai cultural displays because Field Marshal Phibun, the head of government, wanted to modernize Thailand to become

more Western. In *Young Soldiers* the teenage soldiers picked up their weapons and valiantly fought the invading Japanese during World War II, as they refused to allow their beloved Thailand to be invaded by any outside power.

### 2.3. Nationalistic symbols in selected period films?

A variety of symbols have been used to represent nationalism in period films. A discussion of the use of these symbols follows below.

#### 2.3.1. Scenes in Thailand: the “Imagined Land”

Many films seek to highlight the prosperity, beauty, and fruitfulness of Thailand. For example, *Suriyothai* and *The Siam Renaissance* emphasized the life of royalty by setting the royal palace along the banks of prominent Thai rivers to emphasize the majesty to be found in the Thai geography. In *Suriyothai* the royal palace was encircled by rivers and canals and the geography sought to project a peaceful lifestyle for all Thai people. In *The Siam Renaissance*, similar symbols were used to exemplify Thai geography through royal architecture, most notably the prosperity of Bangkok is evident in the magnificence of the Grand Palace along the Chao Phraya River. Moreover, in films like *Bangrajan* which reflect the more rural folk lifestyle, viewers similarly see symbols of prosperity and beauty through images of golden rice fields being harvested by diligent farmers, and the settings in the local villages of In and Muang where villagers love peacefulness, merit-making, and sharing with each other.

#### 2.3.2. Valuable possessions

Two historical films focusing on the life of royalty chose to further make use of the symbol by employing the use of valuable possessions to express the prosperity of Thailand. For example, in *The Siam Renaissance*, Luang Akaradhep Warakorn took Maneechan to see the Royal Sword Depository where weapons had been kept since the time of their ancestors. While there he said, “We fight for our country in secret, and move by decrees. Secret weapons can defeat the entire world. In this the case you still question the protection of our homeland. This is the power that His Majesty the King has reserved for us. This is the secret weapon of the Royal Palace.” This symbol showed that Thailand had many good and powerful things to fight against with the west. In *Suriyothai*, the prosperity of Thailand has been

expressed through various symbols relating to the palace valuables including images such as the king's crown and throne, dinner utensils made of gold, advanced weapons such as long guns, artilleries, armors, and elephants (the national symbol of Thailand). There are many more valuable possessions stored throughout Thailand, for example, the jewelry which is sold by Queen Suriyothai to take care of people in the camp, or the jewelry brought as a tribute from China for the father of the queen. In *Bangrajan*, where folk lifestyle is expressed, viewers also see swords and gold presented.

### **2.3.3. Other Symbols**

#### **2.3.3.1. Blood**

The selected period films present images of the loss of blood and flesh. Blood represents making the ultimate sacrifice in order to preserve the land. *Bangrajan* provides a clear example of this when images of local villagers fighting and killing the invading Burmese to protect Thailand are presented with the flowing of villagers' blood onto the land from the very first scene to the last serves as a very powerful symbol of Thai nationalism. In *Suriyothai*, images of Queen Suriyothai being cut at the neck and falling from her elephant's back with blood pouring from her body also serve to very powerfully invoke strong feelings of nationalism.

#### **2.3.3.2. Fighting**

The selected films present pictures of brave and determined fighting, to the very final minutes of battle, including images of Queen Suriyothai, Luang Akaradhep Warakorn, the Bangrajan villagers, and the young soldiers all fighting to the bitter end for their country. For Sorn in *The Overture*, although he did not carry an actual gun into battle, he also fought bravely through the outlawed playing of the Thai xylophone in defiance of the ban on aspects of traditional Thai culture.

#### **2.3.3.3. Death**

The selected films use the ultimate sacrifice of one's life to invoke a strong feeling of love for one's country and to further present the great sacrifices that have been made to preserve the land. Examples include Queen Suriyothai, Luang Akaradhep Warakorn, the Bangrajan people, and Captain Thawin (the young soldiers' recruiter, trainer, and leader), all of whom fought to the death for the nation they loved.

### 3. Strategies to express nationalism in selected period films?

#### 3.1. Present Burma as the enemy

The Burmese are often presented as a brutal people, especially in *Bangrajan* when they beheaded Thai war prisoners and killed the elderly and mothers with their small infants. In *Suriyothai*, the Burmese are depicted as invaders who tried to take advantage of the situation in Thailand when the Thai monarchs were in transition.

In these examples and others like them, Burma is used to represent a long-term and fierce enemy of Thailand. Many historical works such as chronicles like Thai chronicle, and even works of fiction like *Bangrajan* depicted Burma as the invader who wreaked havoc throughout the Thai countryside and inflicted acts of horrible violence against the Thai people. In addition to simply asking viewers to recall the long and painful history with the invading Burmese, the use of the Burmese as the enemy also served to easily motivate Thai people to recognize that part of its history and invoke strong sentiments of nationalism.

#### 3.2. Depict the new invaders over the old enemy (Burma)

*The Siam Renaissance* and *Young Soldiers* both effectively used the colonizing Western powers to represent the new enemy and threat to Thai nationalism. In particular of *The Siam Renaissance*, with the dialogues and film technique, it clearly showed that the western exploited Thailand.

*The Siam Renaissance* used the Western powers of France and Britain. In the film, these two countries are compared with previously evil invaders who had stressed and pressured the Thai people. This new enemy forced Thailand to divide its lands, giving large areas over to France, both Annam (Vietnam) and Khmer (Cambodia) had previously been part of the Thai kingdom, but were given to the new enemy to serve as buffer states to avoid an all out war with the colonials.

In *Young Soldiers*, Japan represented the new enemy which invaded Thailand to further expand its power in Southeast Asia. In the film, the brother-in-law of one of the young soldiers, who is a spy for the Japanese, sends information to the Japanese to inform when the best time to invade Thailand is.

Perhaps most interestingly, the new enemy to Thailand in *The Overture* is Thailand. For it is the Thai government and Thai police forces which act as the new enemy against traditional Thai culture through their enforcement of a ban on all things traditional in an attempt to modernize the country. In one heated scene, Thai police officers are shown hitting and abusing other Thais who are playing the banned Thai xylophone, a clear example of Thai on Thai violence. This exemplifies the sentiment that Thais are willing to go so far as to attack one another as a result of outside, Western influences and pressures.

*The Siam Renaissance* dared to depict the new enemy as the West which exerted its economical power over Thailand over a long period of time leading up to the economic crisis. This was shown through a step by step process of how the West essentially exploited Thailand. This was particularly evident in a scene when the division of Thailand was callously compared to cutting a cake.

### **3.3. Depiction of Thailand as the hero**

All selected films portray Thai characters with heroic qualities. When the enemy invaded, everybody stood up to fight and protect the land. They emphasized their love for the nation and expressed it tangibly by sacrificing their own lives.

#### **3.3.1. Love for the nation**

All of the heroic characters possessed a deep love for the nation and were ready to die to protect the land. For example, Luang Akaradhep Warakorn clearly illustrates this in *The Siam Renaissance* when he said, "Death is not astounding, my Manee. I was born by this river and I'll die by this river." And Queen Suriyothai obviously was emphasizing the same point when she went to fight in the battle to protect her husband. She said, "Can you live with that responsibility? You must love yourself more than the nation?"

#### **3.3.2. Courage**

All period films in this study presented the courage of their heroic characters. For example, the villagers of Bangrajan took their knives and swords, and even made their own artillery, to fight the Burmese until the very last moments of battle. Queen Suriyothai is also depicted as a courageous warrior who did not fear



death. The motivation for these actions was to fight, to the death if necessary, to protect the land.

### 3.3.3. Sacrifice

All period films present the sacrifice of heroic characters. For example, Maneechan in *The Siam Renaissance* was willing to leave her era and family and go back to the past to help Luang Akaradhep Warakorn fight the encroaching colonial powers. Sa, one of the Bangrajan villagers, did not tell her husband that she was pregnant so that he would fight to protect the land with his full intention and not be distracted by his family responsibilities. She said, "I haven't told my husband [that I'm pregnant]. I saw Mali's family [the family who evacuated]. I don't want to be like that. I don't want In [her husband] to be distracted because of me."

## 4. Characteristics of nationalism in selected period films?

The selected period films present a variety of characteristics of nationalism. Some examples are highlighted below.

### 4.1. Sense of "Unity"

The sense of unity communicated through these period films is an unconditional unity. Everyone is ready to maintain unity at any cost, even when under extreme pressure and limitations. Characters all of the selected films were under pressure, whether from invading forces or idealistic conflicts, and they all had their own perspectives from which they cooperated with their fellow Thai compatriots to stand united against their foes.

### 4.2. "Us" and "Them"

All of the selected films express a clear division between "us" and "them." In fact, it is often this divide between "us" and "them" which leads people to come together and create a nation.

### 4.3. Proud of Thailand

All of the selected films present pride in Thailand. It is presented as a prosperous land where its people live peacefully in comfort. For example, *Suriyothai* and *The Siam Renaissance* showed the life of royalty by setting the royal palace along

the banks of prominent Thai rivers *Bangrajan* which reflect the more rural folk lifestyle through images of golden rice fields being harvested and villagers love peacefulness, merit-making, and sharing with each other.

#### **4.4. Fighting Thailand's enemies**

All of the selected films present the image of heroes and heroines fighting against the enemy until the very end. These heroes and heroines depict the epitome of courage, endurance and sacrifice, regardless of age, gender, or era, for they are all Thai.

### **5. Conclusion**

Using the previous examples as a basis for analysis, all of selected period films were used effectively as tools for reproduction of a nationalistic ideology during a time when Thailand felt it had lost its economic sovereignty to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Royal family members and the elite were the ones who served in the primary role of saving the nation. However, the economic crisis was not limited to this small group, but rather, it was also the responsibility of ordinary people as well; all are Thai and all are willing to go to any lengths to protect their country. Thailand's perceived glorious past was used to motivate Thai people to be proud and unite as a single people for a single cause—their country. Thai people are encouraged to follow the examples set by their predecessors who did everything they could to preserve the sovereignty of Thailand by fighting the enemy. The films selected specific historical periods from times of crisis which are unforgettable and known by all Thai people. Choosing this type of historical backdrop allows the films to easily show the brave story of Thailand's heroes and heroines. There were also examples where the enemy is much interesting because both the West and Thailand herself were used to portray the enemy.

Through these views of expressing nationalism, many symbols such as blood, fighting and sacrificing were used to capture the audience and invoke strong sentiments of Thai nationalism. The views were expressed through the nationalistic opinions of famous people: Royal family, elite, scholars etc. who were involved in producing the selected periodic films. And it is clearly evidenced in the overwhelmingly positive response of viewers, along with endorsements from the

royal family, that these films were not only immensely popular, but also served to create a deep sense of Thai nationalism.