

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION



Rationale:

The 1997 economic crisis had wide-reaching effects throughout Thai society. The business and financial sector was seriously affected; 56 large finance companies along with more than 3,000 factories were closed.¹⁻² The crisis also had wide-reaching effects on employment, with unemployment rates rising significantly. According to data from the National Statistics Office (NSO), unemployment during February 1998 (the dry season) was at 1.48 million or 4.6 percent, which was up substantially from just 2.2 percent in February 1997.³

The impact of the economic crisis on long-term unemployment was considerable as this group suffered extensively and in areas beyond employment. Records from 15 psychiatric hospitals indicated that there was an increase in the number of out-patients, from 778,457 in 1997 to 804,906 in 1998. In her research, Dr. Amara Pongsapich, professor of political science at Chulalongkorn University, indicated that the impact from the crisis led many Thai people to feel doubtful and insecure. There are also many cases of suicide and psychological problems among Thais which have been directly linked to the financial crisis. From 1997 – 1998 there were approximately 2,903 cases of suicide, up 378 cases from 1996 – 1997.⁴

In addition, Dr. Kanjana Kaewtape, professor of communication arts at Chulalongkorn University, found in her research that the severity of the financial crisis could be seen in two important developments in Thai society.⁵ The first development was fundamental to the society and its recovery. Those in positions of

¹ Sauwalak Kittiprapas, Social Impacts of Financial and Economic Crisis in Thailand, (East Asian Development Network Regional Coordinator, Thailand Development Research Institute, 2002), pp. 7-8.

² Kirida Bhaopichitr, Thailand's Road to Economic Crisis, Available from <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/54/113.html>

³ Sauwalak Kittiprapas, *Ibid.*

⁴ Amara Pongsapich, Social Capital and the Crisis, (Bangkok: Social Research Institute Chulalongkorn University, 2000). p. 8.

⁵ Kanjana Kaewtape, Reactions of the Thai Community Toward the Economic Crisis: a Socio-Cultural, (Bangkok: Political Economy Study Centre, Chulalongkorn University, 1998), p. 6.

authority who were responsible for leading the nation through this difficult time, most especially in the government sector, chose to agree to all of the terms and conditions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in order to receive loaned funds to be used to help recover from the crisis. However, after agreeing to the IMF's terms and conditions and receiving and applying the funds, there was no substantive improvement in the Thai economic situation.⁶ This, in turn, led to the second development which was for this same group of decision-makers to approach the world economic situation on the late-1990s as Thais had approached its wars with Myanmar which had occurred throughout Thai history. Parallels were drawn between how Thailand had proceeded in recovering from the economic crisis and the approach of Thai military forces to the invading Burmese in the past. In both situations, mistakes were made that led to serious losses which affected everyone throughout Thai society. As a result of the mistakes made during the wars with Myanmar, several different government institutions were established (i.e. the Religious Institute) to strengthen the efforts to liberate Thailand from Burmese oppression.⁷

In addition to Dr. Kaewtape's analysis, there were also several other attempts to interpret and understand the crisis and its effects on Thai society. Prawase Wasi, M.D. a prominent Buddhist scholar has suggested that the crisis was the result of poor development policies which undermined the foundations of Thai society. According to Wasi, these poor policies were derived from Western understandings of capitalism and industry and subsequently destroyed the "foundations of [Thai] society" which included local communities, the natural environment, morality, and social harmony. Wasi suggests that instead of reviving the Western-oriented development path, Thailand should turn away from Western-style capitalism and seek to develop on the basis of its own resources, both cultural and natural, and build a balanced economy which is better suited the needs of its people.⁸ This type of shift in policy would require nothing less than a "a war of national salvation."⁹

⁶ Kanjana Kaewtape, *ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁸ Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand's Crisis* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2000), p. 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.12.

Dr. Pasuk Phongpaichit, professor of economics at Chulalongkorn University, proposes in her analysis of the crisis and its aftermath that as a result of the widespread and prolonged unemployment, along with subsequent psychological effects and other related consequences, Thai people began to react more strongly to Western cultural influences and attempted to more consciously reconstruct their own Thai identity. In essence, many Thais sought to create a contemporary sense of “Thai-ness” or “Thai nationalism.” This new sense of Thai-ness or Thai nationalism can be seen in several different aspects of Thai society. For example, Luangta Maha Bua of Udon Thani province started the *pha pa chuay chat* or “donation to help the nation” which encouraged people to donate cash and gold jewelry. Many took part in this and other campaigns designed to help defray the national debt.¹⁰

Feelings of this new Thai nationalism were also visible in the local media as well. Professor Kamjorn Louisyapong of Thammasat University concluded in his research that nationalistic feelings were also evident in the advertising media. One example of this type of nationalistic advertising include were ads to promote energy saving produced by the Petroleum Authority of Thailand (PTT) that encouraged drivers to fill their tanks with 91 octane gasoline (as opposed to the higher 95 octane). In these ads, viewers see images from historic battles between Thailand and Burma followed by images of injured Thai soldiers who are getting into a vehicle. These soldiers ask their driver, “this truck can be filled with 91 octane gasoline, so why don’t you fill it up?” This type of ad was designed to initiate feelings of pride and love for Thailand coupled with the message that it is more cost-efficient to fill up with 91 (as opposed to 95) octane gasoline as a means of doing one’s part to help the economy.¹¹

Another factor which can be used to illustrate this new, emerging nationalism is the return and popularity of Thai period movies; these types of movies often used nationalistic themes as their primary selling points. More than half of all Thai films produced after 1997 were directly related to Thai nationalism; this included four out

¹⁰ Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand Economy and Politics*, (Kuala Lumpur : Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 442.

¹¹ Kamjohn Louiyapong, *Southeast Asian Film: Film Study on Cultural Approach*, (Bangkok: Thammasart University), 2005, p. 71.

of the eight films in 2000, seven of the fifteen in 2001, and seven more in 2002.¹² According to the article *The Thai Movie Revival and Thai National Identity*, “the local [Thai] film industry experienced something of a renaissance in the second half of the 1990s. The film revival began in 1997 with “Dang Bireley's and Young Gangsters” or “Antapaan Khrong Muenang” which was based on the true story of a group of adolescents who reigned over the city from 1956 to 1961; this film became the highest-grossing Thai film to that time, making 75 million baht.”¹³ According to the article *Coming of Age of New Thai Cinema* by Chalida Uabumrungjit, a renowned film critic and director for the Thai Film Foundation, ““Dang Bireley's and Young Gangsters” changed the attitude of audiences toward Thai film and served to bring back faith in the ‘national cinema.’ ... its production was designed to reconstruct the past.”¹⁴

Andrew Higson, professor of film studies at the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom, had conducted extensive research, primarily regarding British cinema, both past and present. He refers to the significance of films, as opposed to other forms of media, when he states that “individual films will often serve to present the nation to itself, as a nation. Inserted into the general framework of the cinematic experience, such films will construct imaginary bonds which work to hold peoples of a nation together as a community by dramatizing their current fears, anxieties, pleasures and aspirations. A diverse and often antagonistic group of peoples are thus invited to recognize themselves to other cultures and communities.”¹⁵

Since film has this ability to inspire feelings and present the nation to itself, period films specifically serve to provide a better understanding of the nation during that period. Examples of Thai period films produced after the 1997 economic crisis include: “Bang Rajan” (2000), a period film that earned 100 million baht and depicted the fighting between Bang Rajan villagers who sacrificed their lives to protect their land from a neighboring enemy; and, “Suriyothai” (2001), a period film earning 500

¹² Anchalee Chaiworaporn, *Nostalgia in Post Crisis Thai Cinema*, Available from: http://www.thaicinema.org/Essays_03Nostalgia.asp

¹³ G. Lewis, *The Thai Movie Revival and Thai National Identity*, *Journal of Media&Cultural Studies*, Vol 17, No. 1, 2003. p. 70

¹⁴ Chalida Uabumrungjit, *Coming of Age of New Thai Cinema*, Available from: http://www.thaifilm.com/articleDetail_en.asp?id=35.

¹⁵ Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie. *Cinema and nation* (London : Routledge, 2000). pp.25-26

million baht which included spectacular sets and costumes and portrayed the historic fight of a Thai queen (who was eventually killed on the battlefield) against a Burmese invader king.

The Thai public has welcomed these motion pictures as they reflect many of the feelings that contemporary Thai people are seeking. These movies are able to fulfill the public's emotional needs, which many people would be unable to openly express if not for these movies. "Several recent Thai films make a direct connection between elite and popular nationalism that is uniquely strong in Southeast Asia,"¹⁶ and this is how movies have been used as a medium to express a new nationalism for Thai people.

When taken together, this evidence led the researcher to question and seek a further examination of the characteristics of this nationalism, as it is expressed through film. Since movies have changed dramatically to show a more clearly defined sense of Thai nationalism, this shift may indicate and/or reflect a similar shift in the Thai people themselves and how they feel about and are personally affected by Thai nationalism. Subsequently, the researcher selected six period movies which best represent this post-crisis trend in nationalistic film. These films include: 1) *Bang Rajan* (บางระจัน) (2000); 2) *Suriyothai* (สุริโยไท) (2000); 3) *Young Soldiers* (ยุวชนทหาร เปิดเทอมไปรบ) (2000); 4) *The Overture* (โอหมโรง) (2004), and; 5) *The Siam Renaissance* (ทวิภพ) (2004).

Thesis Question

The research aims to explore how and to what extent post-crisis period films (those produced after 1997) express Thai nationalistic ideology.

Objectives

1. To study the emergence of a nationalistic reaction in Thailand after the 1997 economic crisis and subsequent recession; and,
2. To analyze how nationalism has been expressed through Thai period films.

¹⁶ G. Lewis, *ibid*, p. 70.

Hypothesis

The popularity of period movies after the economic bubble burst in 1997 can be attributed to the subsequent increase in a sense of nationalism which originated from the immediate tragic confrontation of the modern, extravagant and economically prosperous lives with the painful reality of economic fluctuation and downfall.

Methodology

This study will primarily use the qualitative approach through:

1. *Documentary research*: analyze available documents and research related to nationalism, identity, and film criticism; and,
2. *Film Analysis*: apply selected theories to the various components of the films including the text, scenes, costumes, and music.

Significance and usefulness of research

1. To provide a clearer understanding of nationalism in contemporary Thailand; and,
2. To provide a clearer understanding of how the past is used to express Thai nationalistic nostalgia.

Framework

The researcher framed this thesis into the following sections.

1. Context

The context of each movie was analyzed examining the historical, social backgrounds from periods prior to, after and during the time in which the movie was set.

Movies and society are often intricately related; meaning society often affects and influences movie production. Once a movie has been shown in public, it is often effective in arousing audiences' thoughts and feelings.

Nationalism is both a concept and social reaction. The images one sees in the selected movies of this study (as well as other nationalistic films) have been

carefully designed to produce reactions to nationalistic movements in society at that time. Period movies thus are often a response to nationalistic actions and sentiments of a particular period. Hence, movies were selected as they serve as a good connection between and representation of nationalistic sentiments in society.

2. Text

The texts of each movie were analyzed through evidential data that consisted of:

- a. Scripts;
- b. Components of movies such as plot, scene, characters, and the like; and,
- c. By-products of the movies such as public relations.

3. Nationalism as depicted in period movies used in this study

The research analyzed how the selected movies presented the nationalistic currents of the studied period, and the how nationalistic features of the studied period differed from previous ones.

Organization

Chapter One

Introduction

1. Rationale
2. Thesis Question
3. Objective
4. Hypothesis
5. Research Methodology
6. Significance and Usefulness of the Research
7. Framework

Chapter Two

Dynamics of Nationalism in Thailand

1. Concept of Nationalism
2. Emergence of nationalism
3. Nationalism and Films
4. Nationalism in Southeast Asia
5. Dynamics of Thai Nationalism
6. Conclusion: Nationalism in Thailand

Chapter Three	Case studies of nationalism reflected in period films
	1. The Siam Renaissance
	2. Suriyothai
	3. Bang Rajan
	4. The Overture
	5. Young Soldier
Chapter Four	Analysis of the “creation of nationalism” hypothesis as seen in post-crisis period films (1997 – 2005)
Chapter Five	Conclusion