RULING AESTHETICS: INTERMEDIALITY, MEDIA MODERNITY AND EARLY THAI CINEMA (1868-1942)

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Palita Chunsaengchan

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Title: “Ruling Aesthetics: Intermediality, Media Modernity and Early Thai Cinema (1868-1942)”

My dissertation investigates the unexplored connections among cinema, prose and poetry in Thai history, extending from the period of the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) through the decade following the Siamese Revolution of 1932. Across the various chapters, I expand the archives both of early Thai cinema and Thai literary history. I draw together readings of *Sanookneuk* (1886), the first fictional work of Thai prose, film reviews written as Thai poetry (1922), governmental letters calling for censorship of the purportedly first Thai film (1923), as well as promotional essays in English on the state-sponsored film, *The King of the White Elephant* (1941). I consider how early cinema not only destabilizes a rigid structure of a national historiography, but also shapes interactions between different social classes. The dissertation traces three pivotal conceptions of cinema: first as a disciplinary technology, then as popular culture, and finally as a nationalized mass medium. My dissertation accounts for cinema’s entanglements with other media, for how these entanglements profess aesthetic instructions that become a *dispositif* of the modernizing Thai state as well as for how cultures of cinema and media in Siam manifest and respond to the national project of modernization. The negotiation between cinema, media and modernity reveals natures of

different sovereign powers as well as complexities of the institutional politics in staging and managing the formation of Thai modernity. I, therefore, deploy the term “media modernity,” in my dissertation to capture such problematics and discussions of the intertwinement of early cinema, media and modernization and, yet, to also complicate some hegemonic accounts in Thai history that often isolate cinema from the epistemological constructions and sensibilities of modernity as well as separate aesthetic regimes from the politics of the nation.

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To mae, yai and pa

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

'We need history, but not the way a spoiled loafer

in the garden of knowledge needs it.'

- Nietzsche, Of the Use and Abuse of History[1]

The opening sequence of *Railway Sleepers* (*Mon Rot Fai*) (2018), a Thai documentary shot over eight years (2008-2016) by Sompot Chidgasornpongse in order to observe daily lives of train passengers in Thailand, begins with King Chulalongkorn's royal order announced in the inauguration of the first railway line in Siam in 1893. The royal order emphasizes his intention to "improve the country and to adapt so that all might prosper." Chulalongkorn further shared his strong commitment to the betterment of his kingdom as he confirmed to his audience that "[…] you will see this country flourish beyond what has come before."

After the citation sequence, the camera, set at the very back of the last compartment of the train, gives us a wide shot of the deep-green forest that embraces the train station—*khun tan* station—and of stray dogs running after the train—all left behind as the train moves forward at its own pace in the opposite direction. The cinematography in this particular moment formally reminds us of conflicts emerging from "going forward but also looking back" on many levels—on the spatio-temporal dislocation, on psychological desires, on conditions of reality and futurity, and most importantly, on the significance of historicism. The camera, which knows that it is moving forward while looking back, corresponds to how Walter Benjamin envisions the Angel of History: "His

[1] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations,* transl. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 260.

face is turned toward the past. […] The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress." In the context of the project of modernization of Siam, "looking back" while "going forward" with the wind of progress blown from the West describes a mode of thinking and a set of practices and strategies that were extremely necessary, if not indispensable, for Siam's anti-colonization and independence. The question that emerges from these two sequences is important to how I politically situate myself in this project: Are we not moving forward with the dilapidated train but also looking back wondering what it means, in the King's words and imagination, to "see this country flourish beyond what has come before"?

Furthermore, one must not overlook the fact that it is because of cinema—through the artistic choices embedded in the film form, especially through cinematography, mise-en-scène and editing—that the royal order and the image of the train could embody Benjamin's Angel of History and generate a possibility of a dialectical critique of the relationship between the past and the teleology of progress in Siam. This potential of cinema underlines my investment in media modernity in this dissertation. I view media modernity neither as a disposable object of studies nor as an instrument that can be deployed to only empirically record sociological or cultural changes.[2] Rather, this dissertation takes media modernity as a critical site that retains the debris of Siamese modernization and from which could emerge an alternative way to understand the past,

[2] See John B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 123; John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 190; Jukka Kortti, "Media, the Elite and Modernity: Defining the Modern among the Finnish Cultural Intelligentsia in the Twentieth Century," *International Journal For History, Culture and Modernity* 2, no. 1 (2014), 3; Britta Ohm, Vibodh Parthasarathi and Per Ståhlberg, "Introduction: Critical Explorations of Media Modernity in India," *Culture Unbound* 10, no. 3 (2018): 324-325.

epistemologies, and different iterations of the sovereign power. Given the intermedial ecology of Siam from 1868 to 1942, which is the focused period of my dissertation, I propose that media modernity and their entanglements with political institutions of Siam and with many agencies of power could broaden the scope of discussions not only in media theory, but more importantly, in the intertwinement between aesthetics, pedagogy and politics in Siam/Thailand.[3] In other words, by deploying the dual force of historiography and media modernity, this dissertation offers a space for dialectical critique necessary to revise the understanding of modernization, mode of coloniality, and agents of power in Siam for "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past," in Benjamin's words.[4]

Apparently, Western colonial threats in the region pushed Siam to rapidly transition into a modern entity with strict borders and administrations[5] as well as to be civilized according to the standards and norms practiced in the Western Empires. The looming threat of coloniality also marks the emerging sense of nationalism framed by the language of opposition and the Other—the harmful invader from the West who threatens to take away the long prestigious heritage of the sacred royal throne. Thus, the national project of modernization in Siam was conditioned and structured by the ghost of coloniality. The construction of the first railway line, which connected provincial areas of Siam to Bangkok and helped the government mobilize troops to defend the territory

[3] Siam was officially renamed in 1939 under the determination of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram. In this dissertation, if the date of any event passes the year of 1939, I will use Thailand instead of Siam.

[4] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 263.

[5] Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1997), 12-19, 152.

against the menacing threats of the French in Indochina, is one of the most tangible examples.

The project of modernization is considered among Thai scholars as being led by the Siamese monarchs under the absolute monarchy, arguably from the reign of Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) to that of Vajiravudh (1910-1925). Unlike the reign of his brother, Prajadhipok's reign (1925-1935) was too short and chaotic to be about national modernization. The reign of Prajadhipok was split into two periods: first, the period of the absolute monarchy from 1925-1932 where Prajadhipok was preoccupied with financial recovery from the aftermath of the World War, and, second, the period after the Siamese Revolution where he granted the first Constitution in 1932.[6]

Of course, a set of narratives that emerged from the history of this period of modernization of Siam revolve around the significance of the great monarchs who gracefully maneuvered Siam from being colonized through a strategy of modernization. Chulalongkorn is considered the most successful monarch compared to his contemporary neighbors such as King Thibaw Min of Konluang dynasty (of modern Myanmar).[7] Thus, given the sense of national pride that emerges from the empirical evidence of the

[6] Prajadhipok granted the first Constitution of Siam on the 10th of December 1932 after the request of the People's Party and later left Siam to stay in England for the rest of his years. He abdicated the throne in 1935 and died in 1941 in England.

[7] The pride in Chulalongkorn and his success in guiding Siam away from Western colonization has become a prominent account for Thai history of this period. The residue of it also takes shape in politically mobilized discourses of exception prevalent among conservatives. Often one can see in political conflicts, arguments that state how unlike others Thailand is and how Thais are not *kheekha farang*" ("slaves to foreigners")—an overstatement of "we survived colonialism." See this resonance in contemporary Thai politics especially after the Siamese Revolution or Coup in 1932 in "Democracy, Thai Style," in Federico Ferrara's *Thailand Unhinged: Unraveling the Myth of a Thai-style Democracy* (Singapore: Equinox Publishing, 2010), 117-140, Pattana Kitiarsa, "In Defense of the Thai-Style Democracy," Presentation at National University of Singapore, 12 December 2006, https://www.scribd.com/doc/258694645/In-Defense-of-the-Thai-Style-Democracy and Kevin Hewison's "'Thai-Style Democracy': A Conservative Struggle for Thailand's Politics," *Prachathai*, July 7, 2019, https://prachatai.com/english/node/1292.

independence of Siam from colonialization, deployment of sovereign figures as saint saviors and mobilization of sentiments around this historical chapter should not be overlooked.

Later in *Railway Sleepers,* the director documents the deteriorating dilapidated look of the trains as well as the passengers who do not seem like they are anywhere near the glamor of the middle class. Some of the heads and engines of the train came to Siam in ships and cargos in the late nineteenth century, and rumor has it that they are still being used in the twenty first century. One cannot eschew this material reality that keeps shrieking along with the chuff-chuff sound of the train—reminding us that many things stay unchanged. I began the introduction to my project with *Railway Sleepers* because I believe that both the director and I see the intricacies and entanglements of the past and the present in the same manner. In order for both of us to make sense of the current conditions of Thailand, let alone to even imagine a slightly different future, we need to question what we have inherited from the past and how we come to make sense of such undisputed inheritance.

But what if the understanding the past has been conditioned by a single totalizing narrative—what if that is all we have and know? Is that not reasonable that Sompot must begin his film about the train with the figure who ordered its construction in the first place? What if the success of Siam in being the only nation-state in Southeast Asia to remain sovereign in the face of Western colonialism cannot be told without the story of the competence of the Thai ruling class and the gratitude expected from the public? Such narratives, sensibilities and worldviews, though ostensibly innocent and harmless, carry

legacies of old power and a particular version of how we understand the past in relation to the present.

What Sompot makes clear, however, is that there can emerge from such hegemonic histories residues of thoughts, affects, and political actions. In this case, the well-known saying of the royal order and the prominent royal inauguration were overridden by the images of the obsolete-looking trains and of sweaty hopeless faces of the poor. Needless to say, riding a train was a reminder of how great Siam was to complete its railway system by hiring *farangs* (foreigners) and not the other way around, and yet, the same train from hundred years ago still leads us nowhere near the promised prosperity. Of importance here is the dialectical potential that emerges from the film's cinematography, mise-en-scène and editing.

Thus, I take this cinematic potential to emphasize that the mode of modernization of Siam relies on a model of state ownership and royal patronage of modern technology. While this could have been the same model of operation for the ruling class to administer new media technologies, they proved more ambivalent than the engineering technology of the train. As this dissertation will demonstrate, this is because new media technologies and epistemologies seem to work, at times, in favor of the sovereign power, for example, if one considers possibilities of representational images used for political propaganda. And yet, just like how *Railway Sleepers* could evoke other narratives apart from the prominent account of state ownership, new media technologies evade authoritarian capture because they always already belong to and consistently evoke the sovereign's imaginary Other, be it the different races of foreigners who brought them to Siam or the

commoners[8] who could revolutionize them for their own future. My archival labor and investment in film and media lie precisely in this political dimension—in the fact that media modernity can and did contest authority in any iteration of the sovereign power.

Furthermore, the relationship between historiography, a collection of narratives about the past, and the way in which one understands one's purpose, duty and sense of belonging in a political regime is a critical one. It is obvious that this particular version of national history constructs a set of commonly shared identities, political viewpoints and a sense of nationalism. I take this as a point of departure to question the hegemonic history of modern Siam and its archives. My dissertation is wary of the fact that the archive is not a neutral site but a site filled with intentions and interventions.[9] So if most of the archives have so far accommodated the success of the Siamese modernization and a particular political authority, I believe that the act of reading along the margins; the hitherto overlooked, hearing the lost and the underrepresented, and then of weaving them together, is not an option but a necessity for the process of political liberation. This project is far from simply endorsing a revisionist perspective. It is rather a reactive method—a political struggle—to impede what Thongchai Winichakul calls, "the royalist historiography."[10]

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[8] The spectrum of classes in Siam under the absolute monarchy is complex and evolves often due to changes in politics. For example, the abolishment of *serf* under the reign of Chulalongkorn has been translated by some scholars as the abolishment of *slave* instead. I translated the term "commoners" from the word *prai* in Thai. They are not *serf* or slave but they are neither bourgeois, at least, not yet. They were common class under the absolute monarchy. The term has a strong political connotation in contemporary Thai politics, especially if placed in class comparison with the term *chao* (royalty). The complexity of class spectrum in Siam and the development of national cinema in the language of "classness" will need more archival research.

[9] For example, one can consider the inauguration of the Thai Film Archive. The separation from National Archive of Thailand did not occur until 1997. I also discuss more in detail in Chapter Three about the belatedness of the found materials in relation to the already written historical accounts of the Thai national cinema.

[10] Thongchai Winichakul, "Nationalism and the Radical Intelligentsia in Thailand," *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2008), 577, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20455058.

While the methodology of this dissertation underlines my investment in expanding the historical narratives about Siamese modernization through a counter-hegemonic political critique, I specifically focus on the evolution of media modernity with particular attention to the advent of fictional prose and cinema from the reigns of Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), Vajiravudh (1910-1925), Prajadhipok (1925-1935) to a decade after the Siamese Revolution in 1932. In particular, I investigate what the reception of new media technologies among different social bodies—the ruling class, the commoners, the revolutionists, the military government, etc.—tells us about conditions of power, nature of sovereignty, disciplinary and regulatory practices, and pedagogies of civilized citizenship that very much delineate modern Thai identity. At the same time, the focus on media modernity affords us to understand the otherwise invisible heterogeneous formations of modernities in Siam such as the commoners' participation in this new media ecology and their vernacular aesthetic creation in response to media modernity.

My dissertation considers media modernity central to how we can reimagine this highly complex period—from decades of royally-led modernization under the absolute monarchy to the emergence of a new political regime in 1932. I argue that the democratizing potential of media modernity is inherently in conflict with the nature of the sovereign and the conditions of its survival. The question of how to deploy media to modernize the nation poses particular challenges to an authoritarian political regime that needs to preempt, control, and curb the democratic desires of its public amidst rapid social, cultural, and technological transformations. Thus, I further argue that this double vision vis-à-vis media modernity—anticipating a successful project of modernization and progress yet being held back by threats of losing sovereign power to a democratized

disenchanted public—led to intervention and control, especially in aesthetic regimes, where certain pedagogies naturalized and, therefore, rendered uncontested ideas and experiences about what is good, beautiful, and appropriate.

The significance of media modernity also lies in its intricate and contingent link between the two distinct components: "media" and "modernity." While the former seems almost like a means to the latter, my dissertation actually invites us to consider the possibility of an alternative to this account—that both of them are the means toward a particular internal goal in Siam. In other words, my dissertation is an invitation to explore the relationship between modern forms and technologies of prose, poetry and cinema in Siam by taking seriously the reception, mediation, institutionalization, and even control of such media as what reveals the conditions of political power as well as various formations of the modern. The culmination of this historiographic project paves way to an emergent critique of the sovereign powers of Siam—be it the monarchic, elitist civilian, or military one—for enacting and sustaining any form of authoritarianism through aestheticized politics.

On the other hand, along with the contention above, media modernity in Siam also reminds us of the historical context that makes Siam a comparable site for reflections on colonialism. In contrast to the historical lineages of British and French colonialisms in mainland Southeast Asia, Siam is the only country in the region to remain free of colonization. Given this so-called "autonomy," one could argue that the history of early Thai cinema is exempt from the narrative of colonization and the structures of colonial modernity that impacted the emergence of other cinemas of Asia including India, China, Japan and South Korea and that cinema in Siam is merely imported as a technology

without the ideological baggage of colonization. Evidently, this premise understands coloniality literally as a form of Western occupation rather than domination. However, I participate in the scholarship which claims that Siam actually underwent internal colonialization in a pattern of crypto-colonialism and semi-colonialism.[11] I see this corpus of scholarship implicating a mode of coloniality engendered by and for the ruling class of Siam. The success of this mode of coloniality relies so much on translation, adaptation, and activation of various colonial technologies and strategies from the West only insofar as they are strictly policed and do not impose any risks to the sovereign.[12]

Scot Barmé's "Early Thai Cinema and Filmmaking: 1897-1922"[13] and his book *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex and Popular Culture in Thailand* (2002) as well as Thak Chaloemtiaran's "Khru Liam's *Khwam mai phayabat* (1915) and the problematics of Thai modernity" [14] explicitly address the complexities in the reception of cinema and the novel in Siam by underlining their origins in the West. What can be observed in these works is that the process of importing these new forms from the West is far from simple and that it puts the elites at the front line of confrontation. In other words, they were the

[11] See Rachel Harrison, "The Allure of Ambiguity: The 'West' and the Making of Thai Identities," 1-36, Peter Jackson, "The Ambiguities of Semicolonial Power in Thailand," 37-56, and Tamara Loos, "Competitive Colonialisms: Siam and the Malay Muslim South," 75-91 in *The Ambiguous Allure of the West*: *Traces of the Colonial in Thailand* (Hong Kong: Hong Kon University Press, 2010).

[12] Thongchai Winichakul' s *Siam Mapped* (1997) is one of the most important scholarship in this regard. His interest in cartographic archive led him to argue that Siam is a conglomeration of various modern material and epistemological constructs, of which its goal is mainly concerned with the survival of the sovereignty, *itsaraaphaap,* of the Chakri Dynasty against the Western imperial threats. With various technology/strategy of cartography and epistemological constructions, a geo-politics—a body with strict borders and embodied and politicized by notions of anti-colonial nationalism—emerges as a result. This technology was claimed to be most needed during the territorial quests between the French and the British Empires.

[13] Scot Barmé, "Early Thai Cinema and Filmmaking: 1897-1922," *Film History* 11, no. 3 (1999): 308-318, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815204.

[14] Thak Chaloemtiarana, "Khru Liam's "Khwam mai phayabat" (1915) and the problematics of Thai modernity," *South East Asia Research* 17, no. 3 (November 2009): 457-488, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23750883.

first to translate these new forms and new knowledges not only into the Thai language but also in the way that is fitting to the traditional Thai epistemologies.

The works that I delineated above becomes a conceptual framework that is pivotal to the ways in which I question the archive and inquire into mediation in aesthetic realm. From Thak's astute analysis of the purportedly first Thai novel, *Khwam Mai Phayabat* (1915) by Khru Liam, I gain insight into nationalist discourses that motivate and urge the author to adapt the imported form by making it viable in vernacular tradition. The novel actually mocks the first translated English text of Marie Corelli's *Vendetta* in Thai by adapting the story that is set in the Western context into Thai Buddhist one. *Khwam Mai Phayabat* or '*Non-Vendetta*' actually tells the opposite story to the story of vengeful characters in Corelli's Victorian novel. The mocking of the Western knowledge comes from the author's uses of Buddhist tropes of forgiving, letting go, and ending all vengeances through a pacifist approach as a means to sublime happiness, claiming superiority of the Thai moral order to that of the West.[15] On the one hand, what Thak's discussion provides is the emergence of a Western form among the Thai public. In this regard, Thanapol Limapichart also adds a detailed overview of how print culture and availability of vernacular texts create "the emergence of the Siamese public sphere," leading to a popular culture of the commoners in reading and publishing, including popularity of critique as a new genre of writing and a mode of self-expression.[16]

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[15] Thak Chaloemtiarana, "Making New Space in the Thai Literary Canon," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, no. 1(February 2009): 100, https:// doi:10.1017/S0022463409000058. and Phrae Chittipalangsri, "The Emerging Literariness: Translation, Dynamic Canonicity and the Problematic Verisimilitude in Early Thai Prose Fictions," *Translation and Global Asia: Relocating Networks of Cultural Production,* eds. Uganda Sze-pui Kwan and Wong Wang-chi (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press of Hong Kong): 207-240.

[16] Thanapol Limapichart, "The Emergence of the Siamese Public Sphere: Colonial Modernity, Print Culture and the Practice of Criticism (1860s–1910s)" in *South East Asia Research* 17, no. 3 (2009): 398-99, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23750880.

On the other hand, with regard to the popular culture that became part of the commoners' lives, there is no way to overlook cinema. In "Early Thai Cinema and Filmmaking: 1897-1922," Barmé suggests that cinema as a prominent form of media modernity arrived in Siam under the reign of Chulalongkorn through independent showmen and promoters and would soon be subsidized by the ruling class as in the case of Momchao Alangkarn[17] theatre in the later years of Chulalongkorn's reign. Here and elsewhere Barmé illustrates a list of activities and events around cinema such as its first screening in the royal palace, public events of free spectacles that include film screenings of the royal visit to Europe, etc. In *Woman, Man, Bangkok,* there are two chapters put together in a subsequent order. One is entitled "Cinema, Film, and the Growth of National Culture under Absolutism" and the other "In and around the Cinema: Romance and Sex in the City." Of importance here is the split within his historical account of cinema between the royal court and the city, apparently outside the king's palace. While the former determines what he calls cinema under the royal patronage, the latter allows him to make an argument on the rising of the commoners' popular culture along with other activities such as writing, cartooning, nightclubbing, etc.

Thak's scholarship opens up for me possibilities to rewrite the modern Thai literary history and to think more thoroughly about the notion of mediation thanks especially to his contention on translational techniques involved in making the novel legible among the Thai public. Barmé's scholarship, on the other hand, reveals the potentials inherent in the archive of early Thai cinema, which is often believed to be either incomplete or lacking due to absences of film footage from this period. Barmé,

[17] Momchao is one of the royal titles in the nuanced system of ranking of the Thai royal family.

however, finds information about the cinema in other print sources such as newspapers, film journals and film magazines. This contribution makes it possible to revisit this obscure period through other means, namely, in his case, through the popular culture paratexts demonstrating the reception of the medium. In combination with the scholarship on film and media historiography in recent years, this method has allowed me to critically think about the ways in which a historiographic project on cinema constrained by a dearth of primary sources, i.e., the filmic texts due to lost celluloids, could be accomplished.

On a broader level, there have been recent studies on the history of cinema that presents the challenges of doing film history in the strictly-policed spaces of colonialism where the archive itself is a reflection of colonial power and self-interest. Among numerous studies on non-Western, non-Hollywood film histories, Dong Hoon Kim's *Eclipsed Cinema: The Film Culture of Colonial Korea,* Weihong Bao's *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945*, and Sudhir Mahadevan's *A Very Old Machine: The Many Origins of the Cinema in India* open up the horizon for the future of the writing of media history in such contexts by looking at non-traditional and fugitive archives and rethinking how film history is to be done in the absence of films and what archivally centered and document dependent film histories fail to register. I share with these scholars their methodological interest in unfurling the historical turn in film theory in the face of such archival challenges as well as their interest in viewing cinema as a site that critiques colonial modernity. Furthermore, beyond a commitment to the historical turn, given the trend in histories of film that rely too heavily on the archive of film texts as a source of knowledge about cinema, these writings also consider a wider

range of "texts"[18] and thus reveal nuances of various problematics and the heterogeneous formations of modernities that are not only bound to colonial forces or the myth of the origin of cinema. In a way, these works venture into the convoluted networks of multi-faceted conceptions, practices, and cultures around cinema in a particular time and historical context. As a result, they also reveal new engagements not only with film history and film theory but also with political history of a nation and various modes of coloniality, emphasizing that all film history is historiography that is obliged to produce an account of power.

By reviewing some of these works, which have motivated my project from its very early stages, I have simultaneously provided underlying questions that conceptually and methodologically guide the overarching arguments of this dissertation. Participating in the conversations around the historical and local turns in film theory, my dissertation analyzes how cultures of film and media manifest and respond to complex constructions of modernities in Siam. I investigate the unexplored connections among cinema, prose and poetry in Thai history, extending from reign of Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) through the decade following the Siamese Revolution of 1932. Across the various chapters, I expand the archives both of early Thai cinema and Thai literary history. I draw together readings of *Sanook neuk* (1886)[19], the first fictional work of Thai prose, film reviews

[18] In the case of *Joseon* cinema, the author refers to the range of 'texts' such as "films, literary works, newspapers, magazines, industrial accounts, promotional materials, and governmental documentation." See Dong Hoon Kim, *Eclipsed Cinema,* 6-7. While this is the case for changing identity of cinema in China, Weihong Bao's consideration of the intertextual coincidence of, for example, "sonic invasions (the bombing of the city and the onrush of foreign sound cinema)" and the reality of the impact of war as part of the way in which film production, film exhibition and "active deliberations on cinematic technology and the specificity of the medium" could significantly contribute to the changes in film discourse, film theory and new film aesthetics. See Weihong Bao, *Fiery Cinema,* 154-156.

[19] The date is quite arguable with the case of *Sanook neuk* since the publication only recorded the year of publication in *jullasakkarach*—an ancient calendar system inherited from the Kingdom of Burma.

written in the shape of traditional Thai poetry (1922), governmental letters calling for censorship of the purportedly first Thai film (1923), as well as promotional essays in English on the state-sponsored film, *The King of the White Elephant* (1941).

My dissertation is elaborated in four chapters according to the archive of the writings—or rather events around media modernity—mentioned above. However, it is important to note that each of these writings encompasses distinct broader implications that touch not only on the cultural aspect of cinema in Siam but also, and perhaps most importantly, on the conscription of an aesthetic pedagogy that underlines the nature, tendency, and conditions of Siamese sovereignty. While Thai politics—from the period of modernization to the post-Revolution—has been widely discussed with reference to the idioms of social science, my project emphasizes the significance of inquiry into aesthetic traditions, transformations, and deployments as what provide an additional yet significant account as to why authoritarianism in Thailand is so durable. I examine cultural and aesthetic resources that precondition and fertilize the vicious cycle of authoritarianism and argue for their continued influence and active contribution to contemporary Thai cultural politics. The dialectic interplay between aesthetics and political history—i.e. a history of the rulers and the ruled—underscored in my project pushes against the advocacy of the insulation of humanistic enquiry, demanding that we examine the dynamic interactions between aesthetics, politics and ethics in literary and cinematic history. Again, very much like the opening sequences of the documentary, *Railway Sleepers,* I connect the discursive to the political landscape, both of which guide us to see both from the past and from the present as we move forward.

Since the function of aesthetics within this system of internal colonization is a crucial one, I begin my dissertation with one of the earliest confrontations of the ruling class within media modernity, which, I contend, would later institute how one should understand and make sense of the mediated worlds of these novel forms. This modern sensibility, I further argue, conforms to the royalist-nationalist media aesthetic and historiography. In Chapter II, I investigate not only the reaction of the ruling class to "verisimilitude" appearing for the first time in the form of fictional prose, *Sanook neuk,* but also the history of modern Thai literature that originates in an unexpectedly controversy around its publication. While most accounts of modern Thai literary history tend to only discern fictional prose and verisimilitude as a Western influence in modern Thai literature, I add to the scholarship an investigation of how they radically destabilize the traditional regime of truth for the ruling class.

In Chapter II, I further elaborate on the complexities of the radically split worldviews between what is real and what is fictional, which had traditionally been attached to two distinct forms, prose and poetry, respectively. I argue that the arrival of fictional prose starts to dismantle this formal and epistemological distinction. In other words, it is the appearance of an ambiguous duality inherent in prose as a capacious form to represent both the fictional and the real that makes the ruling class concerned. This duality embedded in the nature of prose has the potential to corrode the rigid boundary of the absolute truth—and coercive legitimacy—of the sovereign.

In my discussion of the reaction to the publication of *Sanook neuk,* one will also see an important lesson leant by the ruling classes: subtle intervention. This practice of intervention, I argue, not only commands an arrest to the spread and growth of the text

but also dominates the tradition of scholarship from thereafter in terms of how this incident of the publication of the fictional prose has been told in hegemonic history of modern Thai literature. While the first fictional prose allows us to discern a pattern of royalist concerns about the effect of verisimilitude on the realm of the truth, the arrival of cinema with its indexical prowess proves another interesting trajectory of royalist reception.

In the second part of the chapter, I show that the earliest reception of cinema was very positive. This is due to the fact that cinema was first presented to the ruling class with an emphasis on its indexical worth. But as we trace the reactions and responses of the ruling class to this new medium, we see how various factors—including the fact that cinema was also in the hands of foreigners—contribute to the shifting notions of cinema among the ruling class. I will share later in Chapter IV some concrete examples, under the reign of Vajiravudh, of the changed perception of cinema, which also led to the first ban of cinema commanded by the ruling class.

Like *Railway Sleeper* that starts observing the people riding the train after screening the royal order, I also turn to the commoners during Siamese modernization under the absolute monarchy in my Chapter III. This choice to include commoners and their creations was actually not deliberate but incidental and accidental to my archival work. During my archival research in Thailand in the summer of 2017, I came across a rather untimely collection of three strictly archaic poems that were not only about but advocate for the cinema. More importantly, they were published in a vernacular film magazine run by a Chinese-Thai businessman and commoner outside the royal court. In this stunning encounter, what transpired before my eyes was an unlikely convergence of

archaic religious poetic form and cinema as an imported modern technology. This was an instantiation of a pre-modern high art hitherto exclusive to the elites giving itself away in service of a modern medium—to the emergence of cinema in Siam.

Among a great number of studies on Thai modernity, it is quite apparent that, poetry, with its attachment to the sacred, became somewhat overlooked. The form, however, did not disappear entirely from the public sphere. Some literary journals kept publishing traditional poems back in the 1910s' and 1920s'. Yet, poetry, with its proximity to the religious worldview and elitist cultural legacy, did not have prominence in Siam at a time when modern ideas and technology flooded in. It was usually left out from the discussions of Thai modernity both because its form cannot be rendered compatible to secular modern experiences or to the progressive telos of the developmental discourse. I also want to emphasize that the dramatic contrast between the small number of publications on Thai poetry and the increasing number of publishing activities in prose during this period not only underline a trajectory of Thai modernity motivated by the discourse of development but is also indicative of an unchanging discourse over poetry: that poetry belongs to the lost pre-modern past and that it demarcates a uniquely Thai space, uncontaminated by Western knowledge, and should thus be left out from the conversations around the contact between Siam and the West.

Therefore, it is essential that I study these poems to intervene in this tradition and demonstrate that there are heterogeneous formations and narratives of modernities that differ from the one mandated in compliance with the project of modernization and the quest toward *siwilai* (civilized). My argument in this chapter is two-fold. First, I argue that the archive of poetry manifests the understanding of early Thai cinema in the face of

lost film reels, thereby contesting the absence of scholarship on the relationship between poetry and cinema. Secondly, I contend that in the context of modernizing Siam and its absolute monarchy, the audience—commoners—used an archaic ritualized form of poetry to posit not only themselves as emergent modern subjects vernacularizing their participation in this new medium but also their own version of cinema challenging the discourse around cinema as another modern form granted to them from above. One can say that, on the one hand, this chapter takes into account faceless and nameless laborers who participated in the making of Siamese modernization. On the other hand, it makes thinkable a relationship between poetry and cinema, offering a potential conceptual model that participates in the rigorous historical turn in film theory.

While Chapter II and Chapter III focus, more or less, on hybrid epistemologies and sensibilities emanating from confrontations and encounters with media modernity in an intermedial ecology, Chapter IV marks the start of the second thematic emphasis where I reframe the reality of politics and governmentality in Siam through film production, distribution, and exhibition. In Chapter IV, I revisit and reread the official documents, letters, interviews in film magazines that tell us the story about *Miss Suwanna of Siam* (1923), putatively the "first" international co-production in the history of Thai cinema—a partnership of a Hollywood team and local talent—meant to promote film diplomacy and introduce modern Thailand to the world. This film generated intense excitement among the Siamese population about filmmaking and the potential of a national film industry, and yet, we have no record of a U.S. screening. The complete disappearance of this film and dozens of other Thai films from this era makes it impossible for the following generations to engage textually with the early days of Thai

cinema. However, this unfortunate absence of the film paradoxically presents an opportunity to examine its reception and what the contrasting responses of the Thai public and the royalist elites tell us about the status of the moving image in the nation's emerging modern media infrastructure. I compare the public's enthusiastic embrace of the film following two-weeks of free screenings in Bangkok to the government's anxieties about the film's politics of representation and their concomitant appeal to American producers to ban the film from being screened in the US. Focusing on the ambivalent exchanges—both amicable and wary—between the Thai government and the Hollywood team, this chapter traces the emergence of a "double vision" that structures the very foundation of a national cinema and shows how, under conditions of coloniality, film diplomacy is a tricky business requiring careful management and censorship.

Chapter IV ends with a significant inquiry into the elites' understanding of the cinematic images that shifted substantially from the one discussed in Chapter II (in the span of 1895-1910). Indexicality and verisimilitude—two interchangeable concepts to approach what is real and what is fictional—became more troublesome when they embody the cinematic form. Additionally, this chapter also delineates practices of double vision as contradictorily aiming, on the one hand, for international recognition while ambushing, on the other hand, any deviated versions of royalist-nationalist aesthetic.

The term royalist-nationalist aesthetic first appears in Chapter II where I relate it to pedagogy of media modernity of and from the ruling class, which can be found both in the form of standardized literary history and the practice of history writing itself. In a way, my reading of what happened to *Miss Suwanna of Siam* exemplifies an exercise of royalist-nationalist aesthetic in film production and distribution. One of the most

important underlying questions in Chapter V lies in whether or not royalist-nationalist aesthetic ever disappears due to the Siamese Coup or the Siamese Revolution (1932) that overthrew the absolute monarchy and was considered the most important trigger for radical changes in Siam. While this period was thoroughly studied mostly in the language of social science and political theory, I intervene with my analysis of the revolution's intimacies with cinema. I investigate how these intimacies had their roots in the prior era of the absolute monarchy and how cinema was adopted by new poles of political power and new "national icons" in the first purportedly democratic decade after the Revolution. One may see from this brief outline that transition of one political regime to the other also plays a crucial role in the backdrop of my discussions of aesthetic, cinema, and revolution.

Up to this point, the first three chapters already discuss the transformed sensibilities around media modernity and cinema from the reign of Chulalongkorn to the reign of Vajiravudh, alternately attending to the responses of the ruling class and of the commoners. Similarly, in Chapter V, I delineate the bifurcation of cinematic cultures between the court and the masses. I first look at what cinema means under the reign of Vajiravudh and then among the royal family, including his brother, Prajadhipok, a cinephile and a filmmaker himself. Then, I turn to the cinematic culture of the masses through an examination of cinema on the day of the Siamese Revolution, the state-sponsored films, and eventually *The King of the White Elephant*, a film produced to be a national diplomat by Pridi Banomyong.

I demonstrate that the notion that cinema might be nationalized by the people after the Revolution might be too simplistic to denote the complexities of the post-

Revolution period. I argue that cinema becomes a site from which undisrupted royalist-nationalist aesthetic re-emerges, this time disguised as democratic idealism. Tracing cinema from the time when it first lived under the throne through its role on the day of the Revolution and then to its afterlife in the hands of the state and statemen sheds light on the complexities of understandings and deployments of cinema by different agents and political ideologies. In my analysis of *The King of the White Elephant,* I bring back the concept of film diplomacy as a political strategy from Chapter IV and thus offer an alternative critique of the way in which the history of this film was written.

Since Pridi is considered a father to Thai democracy and holds a very prestigious status in the discussions of contemporary Thai politics—especially as the leader of Free Thai Movement and an anti-military politician—the film that he produced ended up occupying the same position and status. My suggestion is that the aura of this stateman might have dominated the way in which the film was written about. Even though my discussion of the film is far from undermining Pridi's intentions, I formally analyze the film and attend to its afterlife in the writings of the history of early Thai cinema as a way to approach the political question I asked earlier. Is it not too ideal to believe that the Revolution was a radical rupture that brought about a radical end? As Arjun Subrahmanyan reminds us: "[…] the changing representations of the 1932 revolution show the politics of history as a continuous problem that still shapes Thai society." I therefore emphasize the significance of recovering the cinematic archive of the period as well as of investigating how this period was reborn in the history of early Thai cinema that one might be familiar with today.

Interestingly, Subrahmanyan further argues that "On the one hand there is a pronounced authoritarianism and rejuvenation of the royalist view […] [and] on the other hand, there has been a revival of the original idealism of the democracy movement that links the 1930s struggle for popular rule to the contemporary fight against dictatorship."[20] With my focus on cinema of the Revolution, its aesthetics, and cinematic cultures of various groups before and after the Revolution, I side with Subrahmanyan's first stance. I propose a model of continuity both on the level of political powers and on the level of aesthetic pedagogies. My interest in media modernity and aesthetic in this dissertation aims to show a strong attachment to and a continuous tradition of dependency on the sovereign powers—be it the monarchic, the military or even the elitist one. I propose in my final chapter an invitation to approach the Revolution and post-Revolution in light of all the inheritances of competitive aesthetic regimes. Just like when Benjamin warns us against the risk of fascism aestheticizing politics,[21] I stress on how important it is that one unpacks the identical fascist tendency of aestheticized politics in Siam, sees the residues of royalist-nationalist aesthetic in its totalizing effort, and eventually politicizes one's way of seeing. Perhaps, that can start with how we see and un-see the past as the following pages unfold.

[20]Arjun Subrahmanyan, "The Unruly Past: History and Historiography of the 1932 Thai Revolution." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 50, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 75. https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2018.1556319.

[21] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 241-242.

CHAPTER II

ROYALIST-NATIONALIST MEDIA AESTHETIC AND HISTORIOGRAPHY: A STUDY OF EARLY FICTIONAL PROSE AND EARLY CINEMA

> *…and* [they] *explained most of the changes under the reign of Chulalongkorn only as for the purpose of safeguarding the national sovereignty* [from colonialism]. *Then they became 'organic intellectuals' reproduced in the tradition of "Royal-Nationalism"— without them even knowing so.*[22]

In *Modern Thai Literature: The Process of Modernization And the Transformation of Values,* Mattani Mojdara Rutnin, a prominent Thai literary scholar, wrote about one of the most controversial literary incidents of modern Siam as following:

> An influential outlet for literary, social, and political criticism of the young scholar élite in this reign [of Chulalongkorn] was the *Wachirayān Wiset*[23], a bi-weekly journal published by the Wachirayān Library from 1884 to 1905 […]. A controversial short story published in this journal, "Sanook Nük," [Quoted from now as *Sanook neuk*][24] written in 1886 by Prince Phichitprīchākōn, created an

[22] The conceptual framework of this chapter owes so much to the lifelong endeavor of Thongchai Winichakul and to his collection of essays critical of ideologies that were leading Thai scholars and the tradition in which scholars must work and reproduce knowledge. This quote was my translation of his recent publication in Thai. See Thongchai Winichakul, "Manutsart nai sangkom thai kub kwamjing song radub kong prawatsatthai," ("Humanities and Two Levels of Truth in Thai History"), *Mua Siam Phlikphan: Waduai Krōop Manothat Phunthan Khong Siam Yuk Mai.* (*When Siam Was Turned Over: Regarding Foundational Mentality of Modern Siam*). Nonthaburi: Fa Dieokan, 2019), 73.

[23] "Wachirayan Wiset" quoted here by Rutnin will be referred in this dissertation and in the bibliographic information as "Vajirayana Viset" according to the new transliteration of the Vajirayana digital library.

[24] Variations of transcription consist of Sanook Nük and *Sanuk neuk* in Thak Chaloemtiarana's writings.

> uproar among the conservative courtiers and infuriated the Abbot of Wat Bowonniwēt. It is a story about four monks of Wat Bowonniwēt discussing their future plans before leaving the monkhood. The abbot took it as a direct insult to his *wat.* He immediately submitted his resignation to the king. The king had to write a personal letter of apology to him and explain that the author was only imitating the *farang* (Westerners) fiction purely for entertainment, and had no intention of writing a true story. The prince was later reprimanded by the king. This work however is now considered by some as the historic origin of Thai fiction,[25] for it is the first piece of fictional prose in a form of a short story with a realistic Thai setting and contemporary Thai characters. (Yet other authorities are not certain of the exact beginning of this new genre in Thai literature for the lack of historical evidence).[26] Nevertheless, the above controversy shows how Thai readers of the time were unaccustomed to realistic fiction. Prior to this, there were only tales and romances.[27]

Mattani Mojdara Rutnin along with so many prominent Thai scholars, such as Wibha Senanan, Sathian Chanthimathon, Thak Chaloemtiarana, Samiddhi Thanomsasana, etc., referred to the incident of the publication of the first fictional prose, *Sanook neuk*, more or less, after this narrative cited above. This narrative underlines the significance of the publication of *Sanook neuk* for being one of the major literary controversies that marked

[25] The author cited in her text with this following item: Wibha Senanan, *The Genesis of the Novel in Thailand* (1975)*;* and Sathian Chanthimākhon, "Khon Khian Nangsü: Wā Dua Kān Plian Plāēng Khōng Khao" ("Writers and their development") (Bangkok: Phikkanēt, 1974): 140-41.

[26] The author paraphrased M. L. Boonlua Debyasuvarn, "Hua Lieo Khōng Wannakhadī Thai" ("The turning-point in Thai literature,"), *Wan Waithayākōn* (Bangkok: Social Science Association of Thailand, Thai Watthanā Panit, 1971): 76.

[27] Mattani Mojdara Rutnin, Modern Thai Literature: The Process of Modernization And the Transformation of Values (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 1988): 20-21.

the first or the origin of the fictional prose. Additionally, the emergence of verisimilitude as literary style in *Sanook neuk* would be adopted later by novelists as the first mark of realism in modern Thai literature. This account has been tremendously prevalent as an origin story of Thai literary history but the furor over the publication of *Sanook Neuk* also shed light on the relationships between literary texts, cultural values and the relevance of such debates to conceptualizing Thai media modernity and modernization under the reign of Chulalongkorn. This discursive reading of the controversy over the publication of *Sanook neuk* also emphasizes one significant key characteristic of the studies of Thai modernity (and modernization)—the influence of the West in the unfolding of the concept of development especially in this period of great instability of Siam.[28]

This chapter does not have any intention to undermine such an accurate historical account and ingenious analyses of those who came before, but rather, to present some new arguments that emerge when we apply a different lens on this incident. I started the chapter with one of the essays on the incident because this tradition of narrative underlines the fashion by which the emergence of the first Thai fictional prose was understood and how it could transform from being merely an incident of a publication to being an accountable origin of the history of modern Thai literature. One can say that it became a master narrative, and yet, this is not to say that it was a wrong account. In other words, this narrative emphasizes how the presence of a literary text occupied such a significant guiding position in the way Thai modernization was understood. Competitive aesthetic regimes were also already brought up in this tradition of studies. To this tradition of literary studies, it was a competition between the emerging literariness, for

[28] See Chaloemtiarana, "Khru Liam's "Khwam mai phayabat (1915) and the problematics of Thai modernity," 458-488.

example, of Western verisimilitude (i.e. “a direct insult to the *wat* (temple) and “unaccustomed to realistic fiction”) in contrast to what was “prior to this.”

However, one can see that the conceptual tool box to understand the controversy that followed the publication of *Sanook neuk* had two distinct characteristics. First, it prioritizes “literature” in a very traditional sense—creating thus a literary discipline that has no involvement with media modernity. Secondly, it argues that Thai modernization was heavily influenced by the West as if there were no other mediating factors. But if we turn to another archive that includes Chulalongkorn’s response to the controversy a very different account of the significance of *Sanook neuk* emerges.

For the structure of arguments in this chapter, it is important to note that literature and modern prose always have a more secure and privileged status in the aesthetic taxonomy of Siam/Thailand. And while fictional prose takes up a privileged status as an exemplary case of the Western influence that got domesticated within Thai literary modernity, another prominent modern import from the West—cinema – is less remarked upon in Thai aesthetic historiography. What about this new medium of the period of modernization and what was being told among the ruling class when it came to early cinema? These questions precisely tackle not only film historiography but politics of the construction of knowledge through these aesthetic divisions and disciplinary understandings. By excavating the residual archive around the incident of the publication of *Sanook neuk* along with records documenting how the ruling class received other forms of media modernity, I investigate how these writings have constructed values and sensibilities around media modernity and delineated how fictional prose and cinema as modern forms should be received. In other words, what this chapter is most interested in

is the operation of the discursive pedagogy of the ruling class that structured a pattern of sensibility, reception, and attitude around media, which eventually became a master hegemonic narrative that could construct a long-lasting discipline of literary studies and structure knowledge formation about competing aesthetic forms.

On another important note, Thongchai Winichakul, a historian and long-time activist, comments on the conditions of Thai historiography that most of the historical knowledge was produced and reproduced by the ruling class from the very beginning of the formation and through the institutionalization of history as a discipline. In essence, the hegemonic history and historiographical ideology were created according to the attitudes and beliefs of the ruling class especially during the period of 1883-1927.[29] Thus, history emerges as a site within which power and thus sovereignty is constituted and reproduced at the hands of the rulers. In relation to this important framework and attention to historicism, I ask: how can we arrest this elitist reproduction of knowledge and history by revising what we have understood about aesthetic forms—their competitive hierarchical taxonomy that seem to be inherent in the interest of the elites in politics and power? Is it possible to interrogate the many ways in which the sovereign operated in relation to the construction of diverse forms of knowledge, such as what is good, beautiful, real and appropriate for the Thai public, especially in relation to making meaning of media modernity and its emergent forms?

Considering these questions around aesthetic formations and taking the path that Caroline Levine's method of strategic formalism has paved, I discern that it is more urgent than ever that Thai studies of modernity attend to media, cinema and literature

[29] See Thongchai, "Historiography in Modern Southeast Asia: A Case of Royalist Nationalism in Thai Historiography," 70.

with an awareness that all of these forms "operate simultaneously but not [always] in concert."[30] This chapter combines formalism and historicism in its methodology to not only account for the interconnection of disparate elements found in the histories of prose and cinema, but also to expand the field of Thai studies vis-à-vis "diversity, marginality and excluded subject-positions,"[31] which is in this case the insular disciplines of history, literature and cinema. By doing this, I seek to allow the archive of seemingly unrelated literature–memoirs, letters, film footages—to unfold the problematic taxonomy of forms usually constrained to the traditional Thai versus modern Other opposition. Instead, by using this archive, this chapter situates the emergent forms of media within a global quest toward modernity enabling a venue in which a new narrative of modernization became possible.

If the studies of the intermedial connection between fictional prose and early cinema might engender a new understanding of modernization in Siam, I also pursue this intermedial connection to question the hegemonic model that has dictated the way Thai modernization was conceptualized and narrated. If the relationship between prose and cinema has hitherto been unexplored as its components have largely been studied individually within the landscape of Thai studies that has long prioritized the conventional idea of "literature" and textual analysis, I bring to fore and explore the historical and formal relationship between prose and cinema for two primary reasons. First, examining the relationship between coevally emerging forms of media—both formally and historically—can become a means to gain insight into an otherwise

[30] Caroline Levine, "Strategic Formalism: Toward a New Method in Cultural Studies," *Victorian Studies* 48, no. 4 (Summer 2006), 633.

[31] Levine, "Strategic Formalism," 634.

indistinct critical attitude of the ruling class' absolutism towards nascent forms of media modernity. Here, I refer to a kind of ambiguity springing from a double vision created by an unremitting tension between the aesthetic notion of verisimilitude and the construction of absolute truth of the sovereign. Secondly, the historical relationship between prose and cinema sheds new light on material consequences of a fledgling media modernity in the public sphere, such as a state-imposed censorship, which attempted to arrest possibilities for ground-level dispersion and transformation of knowledge.[32] Thus, I also argue that this relationship is essentially political and must always be studied through its complicity with power in the socio-political realm.

However, it is important to emphasize that the main goal of this chapter is not at all to write a new history that contests the richness of studies on modern Thai literary history. Rather, it seeks to highlight a formal connection that already exists in the archive and delineates the political legacies of hegemonic cultural productions in later eras of Thai history. I focus, therefore, not so much on textual hermeneutic analyses of representations but rather scrutinize the responses of the ruling class—in letters, memoirs, fragmented writings about the controversial incident of *Sanook neuk* and the exciting arrival of cinema— in order to discern what I call "a double vision." Revisiting the archive of interactions, thoughts and practices of the ruling class under the reign of Chulalongkorn vis-à-vis media modernity allows us to see the arrival of novel and thus unfamiliar formal and stylistic conventions. Such novelties signified modernity and were

[32] This practical dimension will be discussed in depth in Chapter IV.

thus desirable, but they were essentially un-Thai,[33] constituting the ambivalence that very much informs the reaction to these aesthetic objects. Thus, the way in which the elites understood the possibilities of different forms demonstrate a painstakingly strategic labor to re-imagine and situate Siam via the process of modernization and Westernization, on the one hand, and an unprecedented rigorous project of nationalization, on the other.

While many previous studies greatly contributed their analyses of the novelties as part of the influences and adaptations of the Thai elites in dealing with the West following the structure of argument discussed above, I investigate the receptions and reactions of the ruling class and argue that they were not and should not be taken merely as innocent but a strategic way in which the epistemology of each form was constructed by the ruling class for the domestic population. In a way, accepting Western influences was also conditioned by the anti-colonial nationalist rejection of the West and, more importantly, the sustenance of the superiority of the absolute sovereign among its own subjects. Double vision is thus not only the condition of how the ruling class saw the West but how they saw themselves and those underneath their class spectrum. Double vision was thus applicable to many areas of the political life-world under the absolutism, namely how the material progress and rigorous resistance against materialism were both necessary, and yet somehow off-balanced—ambiguously reasonable, yet, exorbitant. Double vision is thus all about layers and layering up—hoarding all the useful materials from the West but ending up with problems of supplying and conflicts, especially about whether or not the Western materials were appropriate for Thais. The formal analysis of

[33] Many scholars have navigated this trope of ambiguities with various focuses and through different means as I already mentioned in the introduction. See *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand*, edited by Rachel V. Harrison and Peter A. Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010).

the archive of intermedial relationship will shed light on the hitherto unexplored connections between all these ambiguities, between the monopoly and manipulation of truth as well as the fragility of the sovereign who constantly suffered the chronic condition of diplopia.

I. Verisimilitude, Pedagogies of Literariness and Mediating *Sanook neuk*

The historiography of Thai literature begins with establishing a distinction between poetry and prose.[34] This formal distinction, though never quite investigated epistemologically, also inherently defines the perceptual difference between what is imaginary and fictional as well as what is factual and actual with the implication that prose is more real in a trustworthy experience-based way than the poetry. Most importantly, because prose assumes the connection with what is factual and actual—of now as well as of the past, that it, as we shall see, becomes *the* form for the historical.

One of the most important examples that suggests how the notion of prose was so tied up with an ideology of historiography and the status of truthfulness of historical writing can be seen in the story of *laksilajareuk porkhun Ramkamhaeng* (the first stone inscription of Ramkamhaeng of Sukhothai). The controversy started off because contemporary historians[35] found that the elitist version of the deployment of the stone inscription as evidence to the common origin of the Kingdom of Siam—a national story that was successful in creating discourses around nationalism[36]—might be fabricated

[34] Senanan, Kamnoet Nawaniyāi Nai Prathēt Thai, 20-23.

[35] See Waritsara Tangkhawanit, Prawattisat "Sukhothai" *Thi Phoeng Sang* (The Recently Constructed History of Sukhothai) **(**Bangkok: Matichon, 2014): 9.

[36] Constituted and deployed mainly by Vajiravudh. This monarch was extremely passionate in the myth of Sukhothai after his visit to the province. He also wrote a speaking play called *Phra Ruang,* of which main character is one of the kings of the kingdom of Sukhothai. Though this character is fictional, it was imagined as a *real* figure of the nation and appears as a prominent righteous king in most historical accounts of Sukhothai.

rather than fact-based. They also criticized that the history written about this stone script was yet again one of the imaginary stocked plots in the methodology of the royal nationalist historiography that sought to create both the conceptual origin of the Thais and the justified genealogy of the sovereign's kingdom.[37] However, what is interesting about this case is that most of the textbooks in Thai literary history also incorporate this royalist nationalist framework. Let us take a look at one of the canonical textbooks which referred to this stone inscription and how it made association with literary history: "*Jareuk porkhun Ramkamhaeng*, which is considered the first Thai literature ever recorded in the form of writing, used prose to present its content. The first part on the first wall was written in a form of an autobiography and the second half until the last line on the fourth wall was written in the form of a chronicle."[38] In a way, I am not interested in whether or not this inscription was fabricated. Rather, I am proposing that there were ramifications as to how one approaches the story of the stone inscription vis-à-vis the construction of the literary discipline and the status of prose in Thai literature. The first palpable characteristic of this version of Thai literary history is that it was composed in the linear fashion of a progressivist narrative—starting from an immemorial past with an eye to development, which in Senanan's case was the ultimate transformation of prose into the form of novel. This mode of writing—finding the common base in the past for the sake of progression—also resembled the way in which a hegemonic version of national history was manufactured for the public. Secondly, to assert that this stone inscription is the first instance of Thai literature—to prioritize the origin—is to overlook a process of mediation that might have already been taking place. Lastly, because this

[37] Tangkhawanit, Prawattisat "Sukhothai" *Thi Phoeng Sang*, 10-15.
[38] Tangkhawanit, Prawattisat "Sukhothai" *Thi Phoeng Sang*, 21.

script was written in prose rather than in verse, it became a more convenient pairing to what could be counted as a historical evidence—that it formally and generically assumes authority and truth value. Of course, this analysis of mine came from a post-modern perspective that is attentive to the constructedness of history itself. But my goal is to demonstrate how the form of prose has a potential to create an illusion of unmediatedness in the way in which truth and history merged as if they were innocent and of the same nature.

Another important aspect that contributes to the epistemological understanding of prose is its constructed distinction to poetry in Thai literature. As Mattani Mojdara Rutnin's *Modern Thai Literature* states that "Prose has always been the medium of communication in official matters, such as in royal decrees, public announcements, laws, historical records, letters and legal or business transactions. However, it was used more as a tool rather than as a creative and artistic means of expression, with the exception of *The three kingdoms* and *Rachathirat.*"[39] The Thainess of these two exceptions is, however, questionable since both of the texts were in fact translations: the first of a Chinese epic and the other of an ancient *Mon* folklore—now, considered an ancestor to Burmese. In addition, while prose in traditional Thai literature was not considered a popular form for a creative leisurely or aesthetic outlet, poetry has for centuries been significant even in the way people interact. The following quote represents how scholars of Thai literary history typically write about this distinction:

[39] Mattani, *Modern Thai Literature*, 10. Note also that *The three kingdoms* and *Rachathirat*, though formatted in prose, are translated texts. *The three kingdoms* is a Chinese epic on the great war of the three kingdoms in China, and *Rachathirat* is an ancient Burmese (mon) hero story on the grace of one of its kings.

> Poetry is still the more natural means of expression for the Thai people. Compared to Western prose writing, which enjoyed a much longer period of development and enrichment, Thai prose in general, except in very few exceptional masterpieces, lacks sophistication, articulateness and clarity of thought and expression. On the other hand, Thai poetry excels in its richness of imagery, depth and sophistication of symbolism, beauty of lyricism, and musicality. H.H. Prince Bidyalankarana affirmed: "The Siamese are a poetically minded people … there is a natural aptitude for poetry which is general not only among the intellectual classes, but among the unlettered peasants themselves."[40]

If this distinction has been prevalent in the traditional way prose was understood, it makes sense that the very first emergence of a *fictional prose* would spark controversy. Simply put, the incident of such an emergence would be an abuse not so much of the form per se but of the "understanding" of the very notion of the form of prose that was so heavily associated with historical truth. I agree with Rutnin that the controversy around the incident of the publication of *Sanook neuk* might be because of the Thai readers' unfamiliarity to "realistic fiction," and I want to expand the scope of this analysis. In the following pages, I want to focus more on the nuanced implications of the way the conflict is resolved once the incident emerged as a problem to the ruling class. I find that the resolution of this incident was directed by Chulalongkorn himself, and I argue that this is a process of mediation that became instructive and extremely important to the way in which media was inscribed into the Thai public sensibilities toward modernity. Now, let me turn to the incident and what happened after.

[40] Mattani, Modern Thai Literature, 10.

In 1886, a letter from King Chulalongkorn was sent to Phra Pawornreswariyalongkorn, the royally assigned highest abbot of the royal temple, *Wat Bavornnivetviharn,* whose position can be compared to that of the Catholic Pope.[41] The King wrote this personal letter to apologize to the most respectable assigned leader of Buddhism of Siam, as we know by now, for the incident of a publication of a short story, *Sanook neuk,* in the royally-owned literary journal, *Wajirayarn viset.* So far, the writings about this incident largely focused on the story in the text and the literary estrangement of the Thai readers, especially of the abbot himself, without having any particular attention to approaching the King's letter as a primary source. One of the textbooks that quotes the King's letter was Senanan's *The Genesis of the Novel in Thailand* in which the author considers the letter as the first written literary criticism and as a key evidence of the significance of Thai readers in the development of prose to novel.[42] But instead of assuming that there were "public readers" in this incident as suggested by many accounts that I have shown, I want to return to the letter of the King and focus on the King's response because he was literally among the very first few readers. In my contention, I consider his reaction to the incident as what triggers an important transformation in the historiography and conditions of modernization in Siam. Let us now read his words.

> That you kindly asked for my forgiveness to be granted to Krom Luang Phichitpreechakorn in the occasion that he published "*Sanook neuk,"* in *Vajirayana* mentioning the name of *Wat Bavornniwet* in his story and have thus dishonored your grace, I have heard.

[41] Phra Pawornreswariyalongkorn is also King Chulalongkorn's uncle. He is therefore a royal member since his father was one of the sons of King Phra Phutthayotfa Chulalok (Rama I), the first king of Chakri dynasty.

[42] Wibha, Kamnoet Nawaniyāi Nai Prathēt Thai, 506-515.

When that issue of *Vajirayana* was published, I was in Bangphra-in dealing with lots of unfinished business. I didn't read the story until I returned to Bangkok. If I had read it before, I would have scolded him [the author] especially when I know that this would upset and worry you a lot. I am very concerned that this frustration would affect your health. That [your health would deteriorate because of this incident] would be a great harm to me since I profoundly respect you, on the one hand, for leading Buddhism [in Siam], and on the other hand, for your grace in our royal family. This causes me to be very upset with Luang Phichit.

I know that Luang Phichit wrote this piece of writing because he aspired for it to be like *farang*'s novel. And there are thousands of such novels. They are stories put together for the purpose of leisurely reading. In fact, authors sometimes need to make some references to people in real life [and in contemporary time]. But not all behaviors of those mentioned people in the stories were to be counted *as real*. Often some stories keep parts that are real, and some distort them. It is a technique that allows readers to reflect more. I believe that Luang Phichit didn't mean any harm when he composed this writing and referred to *Wat Bavornnivet*. I believe that he didn't have any intention to state any *kwam jing* [truth/reality] either as of now or of the past time. Still, even though I do not, by reading this story, doubt the good reputation of the temple, I understand that most of *khon tung puang* [all the people] have never read any *English* novel and that they might think that the newspaper can only publish facts already proved and verified. Or else, they might think that the author has created characters in order to incriminate real people. They might not understand that the author was aware and merely intended to inform others [through

> his writing technique] that the story was fictional—not to be taken as *kwam jing* [as truth]. It was only intended to be a leisure reading (*arn sanook*) … (My emphases).[43]

It is apparently reasonable, for literary discussions, to argue that this event of literary criticism was transformative for it brings to fore how prose was understood before the emergence of *Sanook neuk*, namely how prose was previously detached from the possibilities of fictionality and always assumed an authority for speaking *kwam jing* (truth). The available studies of this incident reveal how the publication of the text transforms the role and status of prose in Thai literature from being for officialdom to being fictional, thus paving the way for the possibilities of Thai novels with social realism and modern subjectivity to emerge.[44] But since there are already a great number of contributions regarding the scope of the Western literary influence on modern Thai literature and since my point of contention does not lie in that area, let me now turn to how this incident might shed light on another important nuance around the reception of the ruling class of media modernity.

The short story *Sanook neuk* can be literally translated into English as *fun to think.*[45] I find the title very ironic regarding what actually happened to its destiny. First, was it *fun to think* that religious figures that really existed in the respectful location of *Wat Bavorn* could imagine a secular life after their monkhood and thus was it

[43] Wibha, Kamnoet Nawaniyai Nai Prathet Thai, 408-410.

[44] Samiddhi Thanomsasana, "Kamnoet reung arn len roykaew samai mai: khwam sampan rawang roopbab lae baribot khwamkid" ("Origin of Thai Modern Fiction: On Relation of Intellectual Context to Form of Fiction"), *Warasarn Songklanakarin chabab sangkomsart lae manootsart* (*Sangklanakarin Journal for Social Science and Humanities)* 21, no. 2 (April 2015): 138, 142-143.

[45] Thak Chaloemtianara translated the title as "Fun-filled thought." However, the term "neuk" is a verb rather than a noun and "sanook" can be both an adjective and an adverb. Sticking to the function of the verb, I emphasize as well the action of "to think" rather than a product as in "thought."

transgressive, and yet, entertaining that there might be such a possibility of secularism in the fictional world? Secondly, was it *fun to think* that prose—a form known to convey non-fictionality, which was often mistaken for truth—can now embody compositional fictional world enhanced by literary techniques, namely, of verisimilitude? Wasn't it therefore *fun to think* that this could be a literary reform that could contribute to the modern subjectivity and the spirit of criticism very much like what happened in the West? My hypothetical questions have nothing to do with the author's intention. Rather, they play with the afterlife of this story and actually mock the reality of its death. In fact, the author was quite hopeful at first and actually wrote at the end of the story that "this story would continue." But as one could have guessed, after the controversy around the reception of this story, noticeably only among the elites, the story was discontinued in *Vajirayana Viset* making it a rather unaccomplished project or, perhaps, a royal warning not to have too much *fun* (to think). Apparently, the irony emerges from the fact that a project of "a leisure reading" was not taken as leisurely in action and that the *fun* fictional world became too threatening. In fact, this incident led to the first case of censorship of a fictional work and was, among many other cases, one of yet another sovereign interventions in the cultural domain.[46]

Even though the intervention of the King to stop this supposedly blasphemous damage might not seem too surprising given the relationship between the King and the religious institutions of Siam, I want to emphasize how this incident of *Sanookneuk* and the King's response actually do more than simply reflect the power of the King and Buddhism as Siam's sacred institutions. I argue that this incident underlines the problems

[46] Also, it is quite rare that a textbook on Thai literary history would refer to this incident in that respect.

inherent in the reception of media modernity in Siam, most notably the problems of mediation and remediation and of intervening to monitor, filter, represent, distinguish and make claims over truth. The case of *Sanook neuk* showcases the complexity or problematics that emerged when fictionality was achieved in a realistic way or in a way that incorporated the literariness of verisimilitude in prose writing. To me, this emerging literariness of verisimilitude can be seen in an alternative light. The underlying concerns that I want to point out in the next pages include the way in which this correspondence demarcates the sovereign power in relation to this modern literary form. I will delineate how this correspondence outlined the way in which fictionality in a modern form –the novel– under the direction of the sovereign must be understood. In my analysis, I suggest that this instruction was arbitrary and was operated top-down. The letter does not simply indicate the emergence of verisimilitude and later realism as literary conventions as argued by most Thai literary scholars. Rather, I argue that it documents a pedagogical instruction of the disciplined use of verisimilitude, leading first to a literary hegemony and then to moral pedagogy prescribed by the royal court through interventions legislating what is aesthetically pleasing and thus socially appropriate for the Siamese people.[47]

First, let me start with the fact that the incident of the publication drew attention both from the highest Buddhist abbot and from Chulalongkorn himself. This should be considered as a collaborative execution of the two most sacred institutions of Siam as seen in the first paragraph of the letter where the King shows deepest concern toward the

[47] This is, of course, not to undermine other socio-political, economic and intellectual contexts that also led to the popularity of the form of fiction in prose. See, for instance, already cited works of Wibha Senanan and Samiddhi Thanomsasana or even Thanapol Limapichart for their scholarly interests in the history of print and its influence in the Siamese society from the reign of King Mongkut onwards.

health and mental state of the supreme religious leader. What is rather apparent in any absolute monarchy is a profound connection between the royal and religious leaders are aligned to secure political authority and leverage. In that regard, Siam is not an exception. Yet, the cause of the King's letter was actually the fact that the abbot "asked for [the King's] forgiveness to be granted to Luang Phiciht—that the abbot pitied and felt sorry for the author. What is interesting and, I argue, would show up again and again as part of the discursive rhetoric of the ruling class is the idea of empathy that seemed to correct the arbitrary act of erasure—to solve all problems. Also, another rhetorical finesse that cannot be overlooked in the correspondence between these two representative figures of the most sacred institutions of Siam is the humble apology of the King. Apparently, two sacred institutions were also bonded over blood and kinship of the same family line. Additionally, if one pays attention to the statement of Chulalongkorn in the first paragraph, one can see that his apology anchored to the past conditional tense: "If I had read it before, I would have scolded him." I contend that this a rhetorical decision that implicates the extent of power of the monarch. That the King should know it all even into the future, should be capable of managing the past by setting up proper measurements for the future, should be a remarkable omnipotent king through this literary incident underline Thongchai's point on elitist historiography—a method of control that is subtle and often goes off the radar.

Also, the remark "I know this would upset you a lot" points to a social context that was led not only by opinions but also by the emotions. Such sentimental politics were deployed as a justificatory ground on which literary conventions were theorized and practices of intervention were developed. This supports my contention that the

publication of *Sanook neuk* was not only about an instance for the modern Thai literary development as claimed by most Thai literary scholars but also a state-imposed pedagogy of how one should understand a new form and eventually the aesthetic inherently developed from it. The public's relationship with the prosaic form in the case of *Sanook neuk* were, first and foremost, distilled through how the sovereign power felt and reacted toward the literary text. This was another incident of the emergence of media modernity as shaped by the sovereignty's paternalistic response to and care for the aesthetic object while the "Thai readers" as claimed by scholars of later generations were actually missing in the formation and unfolding of the incident.

The rhetoric of paternalistic care was also shown in the way in which the King mentioned the health of the abbot: "I am very concerned that this would affect your health." "This" in this case referred to the assumption that this story insulted real figures in *Wat Bavorn* and might have made people lose respect towards the gracious institution. So one might wonder how gravely the public really responded to the incident that could have "affected" the health of the abbot. A simple fact that might indirectly answer the question is that this literary magazine was not mass-produced and could not thus assume any position of affecting the public to begin with. This is precisely because *Vajirayana Viset* was inaugurated by the King's half-brother, Prince Narathipphrapanpong, within the wall of the royal court and was run by a system of membership. The idea of a "literary club" or "membership system" already defines the scope of distribution, which did not seem to reach the general "Thai readers" in that broad democratic sense of the

public anyway.[48] So this rhetoric of care, sympathy and protection toward the traditionally respected religious institution was nothing more than a proactive act of negation of a potential threat to the institution. The noblesse oblige of the King made this an efficient excuse that seemed subtle and gracious, yet remained arbitrary.

Furthermore, it is important to take note of a rhetoric of "speaking on behalf of" in the second paragraph. Though under absolutism, it might sound very natural for the supreme sovereign to assume any voices or positions of others as well as a righteousness in any enunciations or to acquit someone of a charge, in this instance of *Sanook neuk*, there was also a complexity in negotiating a form from the West for his close elitist circle of the royal family. We must thus question the positionality of this rhetoric that might have indicated an intention or reverberated possibilities to go beyond merely acquitting someone of a charge. By believing to embody what Pichit Preechakorn thought of when writing the piece, the King also constituted a discourse—a reasoning toward the emergence of this publication that would be constitutive of the hegemonic narrative about Thai literary development as well as the common pattern of reactions toward media modernity. I am referring to how Chulalongkorn discussed this writing, with his utmost confidence, as a result of an aspiration to be like *farang*—or more accurately an aspiration for this writing to be like *farang's* novel. ("I know that Luang Phichit wrote this piece of writing because he aspired for it to be like *farang's* novel.")

[48] The online archive of these digitized magazines also documents an official announcement that prevented a reprinting of any stories published in the magazine without permission from the editors. It was considered the first instance of copyrights law in Siam. See *Vajirayana Viset lem jet R.S. 110 (Vajirayana Viset No. 7, 1891*) in *Tan khormoon nangseu kao* (*Database of Old Books*): http://www.sac.or.th/databases/siamrarebooks/th/website/oldbook/subbook/268.

Farang is the term used to describe Westerners and is interchangeable with the term *tawan-tok* (the West).[49] Pattana Kitiarasa argues that "the *farang*-ization of Siam/Thailand has often incited uncertainty and anxiety among the Thai about the legitimacy and authenticity of their modernizing project."[50] In her chapter, "An Ambiguous Intimacy: *Farang* as Siamese Occidentalism," she traces a genealogy of *farang* and the attempt within the intellectual enterprise to define it for its own favor. The argument that she makes reveals an important trajectory of the notion of colonialism and modernity of and from Siam. The significance of her contention lies in that *farang* is an image constructed ambiguously by Siam's elites—being both an Other and an active admirable agency in creating changes and progresses among the local intellectual landscape. In a way, this paradigm resembles Edward Said's "Orientalism," but only that it is "Orientalism reversed" into "Occidentalism."

The trend within which Siam's elites defined *farang* as a privileged Other partially comes from one of the diplomatic strategies of Chulalongkorn: sending his children to study abroad and be part of the institutional cultures of the colonial West.[51] Note that they were sent abroad not only to the threatening empires such as the British and the French but also to Russia, Austria, Hungary, Denmark, the Philippines, Penang,

[49] Pattana Kitiarasa, "An Ambiguous Intimacy: *Farang* as Siamese Occidentalism," *Ambiguous Allure of the West,* 57-74

[50] Pattana Kitiarasa, "An Ambiguous Intimacy: *Farang* as Siamese Occidentalism," *Ambiguous Allure of the West,* 60.

[51] Note that Chulalongkorn is known to have many concubines whose conjugal relationships were for the purpose of politics and the expansion of the royal territories. See Leslie Woodhouse, "Concubines with Cameras: Royal Siamese Consorts Picturing Femininity and Ethnic Difference in Early 20th Century Siam." *The Trans-Asia Photography Review* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2012). http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0002.202. Note also that Chulalongkorn had in total 96 children that he officially recognized. These 96 children also form 16 new family lines with different last names. Most of the last names are still being used today.

and Singapore.[52] Even during the reign of King Mongkut (1804-1868), father of Chulalongkorn, most of the male court members including those who have the royal blood and Chulalongkorn himself, were educated in Western languages like English and French and were exposed to literature under the direction of the royally recruited Western travelers and educators.[53] This pedagogical outreach based on the modernization of knowledge and expansion of worldview among the royal family members, therefore, brought to Siam a vision of *farang*-modelled civilization. This "direct experience of the civilized world of the *farang*" as Pattana describes, is consequentially accessible to Thais only through the royal members and some scholarship recipients who would later constitute a group of *hua nok* (a rather pejorative term designating groups of elites whose worldviews were considered too westernized). It is historically apparent that one of the royal court's strategies in adopting Western material cultures started with a group of irrevocable agency and with a particular class culture and consciousness. Therefore, the structural distribution of Western knowledge and possibilities of modernity was inherently transcendental and hierarchical, with very rare opportunities of changes and reforms from outside non-peasant cultures.

I allude to the Thai elite's early interactions with Western education and culture because the letter speaks for the transformation that had since then taken place within the Thai cultural milieu. Apparently, the reasoning that seems to be most appropriate as an

[52] This has been recorded and official acknowledged by the Office of Educational Affairs and Office of the Civil Service Commission, See "Prawat khwampenma kong toon lao rean luang lae toon rattabarn" ("History of Royal Scholarships and Government's Scholarships"), n.d., http://www.oeadc.org/ContactOEA/ScholarHistory. See also Office of Civil Service Commission, *Wiwatthanakarn kong nakrean toon lao rean luang lae nakrean toon rattabarn* (*Evolution of Students Receiving Royal Scholarship and Government's Scholarship*), n.p., 1997.

[53] Such as Anna Leonowens who was hired for King Chulalongkorn's early education during the reign of King Mongkut.

excuse to acquit Chulalongkorn's relative, Phichit, from the accusation of the highly respected religious leader is the one that plays along with the surrounding atmosphere of modernization that was happening in Siam. The king did not hesitate to explain that this writing—*Sanook neuk*—was simply another manifestation of "wanting to be like the West." This indicates a sense of aspiration—a step toward what was practiced in the West—that took place among the elites of Siam during this time.

More interestingly, the King provided a reasoning about the commonality of this aesthetic form in the West as he wrote that "there are thousands of such novels [in the West]," indicating the predominance of prose as an aesthetic literary norm. The king further suggested that this commonality of literary practice and reception seemed to be for the purpose of "leisurely reading". This marker of generalization is a means by which the West was approached and by which the King demonstrated both his expansive East-to-West knowledge and his familiarity with the colonizer's culture. Although there was not any proof that the ruling class was familiar with Western literary criticism and although it was not until the reign of his son, Vajiravudh, that we see prominent attention given to modern western literary forms, namely the novel and the reforms of traditional play, the King's letter marks a moment of recognition of literary conflicts already in place, a process in which a new aesthetic form became domesticated into the rubric of literature in Siam.[54] Both the establishment of a Western-educated intelligentsia and the King's familiarity with Western forms of literature do more than indicate the changing intellectual atmosphere; they point to an emerging space of inquiry into the formation of new discourse that has its basis on the changing aesthetic forms. The question that begs

[54]Chittiphalangsri, "The Emerging Literariness," 210.

an answer is how the traditional form of Thai prose, which was strictly constrained to the non-fictional, became a means by which the fictional world emerges?

Dealing with the Western form of prose whose formal versatility allows it to accommodate verisimilitude—the formal construction of truthlike and lifelike fiction—brought about an epistemological crisis that in many ways troubled the regime of truth governed by the absolute power and the sacred genealogy of Buddhist worldview thus required the ruling class to respond to. Furthermore, the arrival of the modern prose entails fictionalization of what was traditionally nonfictional. So, in other words, modernization is anchored to this idea of fictionalization, which means an educated readership that is capable of distinguishing the fictional from the nonfictional—holding in place the latter closer to the regime of truth. Thus, it is my suggestion that the arrival of this versatile form produced an ambivalent attitude among the ruling class in that they wanted, on the one hand, to receive it. And yet, on the other hand, there was a nationalist anti-colonial impulse to domesticate it first so that it could work in their favor. Or in other words, there was also an effort, quite apparent in the King's letter, to prepare a proper code of conduct—even a proper set of attitudes and sensibilities—for an intelligentsia regarding this modern form and its versatility

Let us not forget that traditionally Thai prose was strictly restrained to the telling of facts and history as a "tool of communication." It was used more generally for official communication of governments or for didactic narratives from the important institutions of Siam[55] addressing its people in a way that obscured their agency. In other words, the content of traditional prose was less about the people but more about the lives, laws and

[55] Mongkut's chronicle and the title of Chalalongkorn's few proses i.e. *Klai baan* (*Far from Home*).

orders of the ruling class or the teachings and philosophy of Buddhism—a unidirectional top-down paradigm. The only two exceptions of translated fictional prose, namely *The three kingdoms* and *Rachathirat*, are epics that again tell stories of heroic kings and warriors, philosophy of wars and militarism. However, in the incident of *Sanook neuk*, the story transgressed all these boundaries. The King even mentioned it that the misunderstanding among the public could have been triggered because "*khon tung puang* (all the people) have never read any *English* novel and that they might think that the newspaper can only publish facts already proved and verified." This proleptic concern of the King seems to be framed by the existing intricate relationship between prose, actuality, newspaper and truth assumed by the elites. As I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the problem thus rests upon the understanding of aesthetic forms including but not exclusive to poetry, prose and, as we shall see later, cinema and upon the potentials of each form in imagining, creating and sustaining a particular audience. If the understanding around these aesthetic forms were tied so tightly to the conception of truth or truth making, then the emergence of a fiction that could present some truth or could look truthful then became a question of an encounter with another unfamiliar Other, and thus required new traditions of presentation, sensibilities, practices, habits—or in other words, new socio-political forms.

In the discussions of Thai aesthetic, fictionality and reality were two radically distinctive modes of perception graphed onto clearly bifurcated aesthetic forms: namely, poetry, a form reserved for leisure and beauty, and prose, a form used exclusively in officialdom and bureaucracy.[56] But given this framework, it also means that fictionality

[56] Even in traditional art, the two-dimensionality of, for instance, mural paintings also indicates a form of fictionality—a disenchanted world based on religious Indian-influenced epics.

always inherently implies its dialectical other, reality, and is always deployed as a binary opposite. I want to focus now on the interchangeability of the terms truth and reality in Thai. *Truth* or *jing, reung jing, kwam jing, kwam pen jing* shares the root word *jing* with the word *reality*. Thai lexicons that legibly translate the term reality are *kwam tae jing, kwam pen jing, kwam jing,* all of which draw upon the term *jing.*[57] Reality, as one of the most challenging epistemological concepts in Western philosophy is not quite translatable in Thai and is taken quite lightly in that it aligns comfortably with a much larger concept like truth. What is noticeable in this flexible interchangeability between the term truth and reality also sheds light on the significance of the perceptual senses to the way in which truth/reality is conceptually processed. Here is, for instance, a discussion that seeks to explain this topic in relation both to the significance of the "present" and the "perceptual senses" of the "present."

> Quickly grasped and assumed to be real, the surface is powerful and effective in keeping the truth hidden and unchallenged. The perception of "surface" corresponds with the immediacy of the perception of time and the Thai way of living in the present moment, to "keep up with the times by fulfilling their particular requirements without looking ahead or anticipating consequences." (quotd: Mulder 1996, 137) For the Thais, reality is the situation as it presents itself at any given moment. Therefore, the present as it presents itself is real; it is

[57] Yet there is just one word that does not quite share any compound with truth (*jing*): *sajja-dhama,* a technical Buddhist term sharing origins with both Pali and Sanskrit; it means the law of nature or the ultimate truth. This, of course, underlines the intricate relationship between the epistemology of truth and the religion via our etymological attention.

the only thing to hold on to. "The present is paramount reality and that reality is at the same time its own timeless essence"[58]

What is discernible in this quote is the processing of reality through the surface and the significance of temporal instantaneity in which its perceived surface morphs into a concept of truth for the perceiver. If this is one of the methodologies through which the experienced world transgresses into the realm of epistemology, it is easy to see the larger implications of this process on the level of the making of truth, knowledge and authority.[59] And yet, King Chulalongkorn's letter, while showing an awareness and even an acceptance of one of the aesthetic norms of the West, simultaneously condemns a possibility of a new worldview that could "distort reality," or, at the same time, truth. This condemnation both from the king and the abbot was the product of a traditionally inherited assumption of the real by means of approximating perceptual references—that which is based on proximity and experiences. For instance, *kwam jing* or truth/reality is that the royal temple existed, that the reference in the story about the highest abbot existed, the plausibility of a resignation of a monk existed, and the fear of such plausibility also existed and can be felt closely to what could potentially happen. Yet, the only thing that did not quite exist yet and was not quite imaginable during the time of the *Sanook neuk* incident was the fact that the form of prose long deployed for bureaucratic or didactic means could shift to be more versatile and provide a space of contemporaneous duality between truth and what is fictional. That the elasticity of an

[58] Wankwan Polachan, "Post-modernism and Thai Theatre: Presentational and Representational Approaches in Thai Popular Drama," *Ethical Encounters: Boundaries of Theatre, Performance and Philosophy*, eds. Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe and Daniel Watt (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010): 107.

[59] See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994): xv-xxiv.

established communicative form represents a radical moment has been my point of contention so far. This expansion of prose traditionally reserved for the officialdom and its truth as a capacious form accommodating also the fictional incites an epistemological instability in the truth-making agency of the sovereign.

What I just proposed also has an immensely significant political implication over historiography—over the way in which history was processed, written, believed and reproduced. In other words, an attempt to strictly monitor fictionality as what differs from truth and put the former into the realm of strictly bounded aesthetic form reflects the process of differentiation from the Other, which allows a genre like a national history to advance itself as *truth*—or as what is opposite to a fictional work of imagination.[60] Let me point out to another notable controversy under the reign of Chulalongkorn that could be an example to how prose, historiography, the constructed nature of truth and national history were folded together to form a master narrative that gets repeated discursively as a proper history of Siam.

During the period in which Chulalongkron sought to revise the methodology of historiography—to replace what he believed was myths based on word of mouth or religious beliefs with more empirically proven version of history,[61] a very short prosaic writing was published in *Siam Phraphet* no. 7 vol. 16 on July 20, 1906 by a writer of a peasant background outside of the royal circle of endowment, K.S.R Kularb. The story mentioned the kingdom of Sukhothai and its last king, "Somdej Chulapinkhet" who ruled

[60] See Thongchai Winichakul, *Mua Siam Phlikphan,* 70-74. He provides a critique of the historiographic methodology commonly practiced in Siam and distinguishes the two levels of what "historical truth" mean.

[61] Winichakul, "Prawatsat niphon samai mai nhai asia tawan ork chiangtai" ("Historiography in Southeast Asia"), *Mua Siam Phlikphan,* 83-85.

before the kingdom fell into the hands of the next dynasty, Ayodhaya. The controversy of this incident lies in the fact that, first, elitist historians considered this writing a pseudo-historical work with no empirical bias whatsoever. Secondly, the controversy erupted because Chulalongkorn believed that Kularb wrote the story to mock him. In Chualongkorn's reading of the story, Kularb used the "imagined" Somdej Chulapinkhet as a metaphor of him—allegorically comparing the falling kingdom under the reign of Chulapinkhet to his reign. Chulalongkorn was convinced that by *faking* this story, Kularb predicted that his reign would also be the last one of Chakri Dynasty. Thongchai commented on this incident that gravely unsettled the king as following:

> We could possibly argue that Chulalongkorn read too much beyond the lines. One could argue that because that there was no line in Kularb's work to allow such interpretation. But one could also ask how [Somdej] Chulapinkhet can emerge out of nowhere, yet, took up a very important role in the text as the last king before the fall of the kingdom. We might never know for sure if Kularb only made joke (*lor*) or really refer to his contemporary time or whether he was simply composing (*taeng*) a chronicle, without having any negative discriminating thoughts, just like his contemporary elites who commonly wrote one.[62]

Thongchai read this incident through the lens of a clash of historiographical methodologies—one that relied on traditional myth making and the other that was formulated by empirical evidence as influenced by the historiographical norms of the West. In accordance to his contention, I want to extend the discussion to the form of this alleged pseudo-historical writing—prose. In my reading, it was because prose became a

[62] See Thongchai Winichakul, "Ku Lob Lok Taeng Baeb Prai Prai", *Mua Siam Phlikphan,* 128

form that held ambiguity appropriating both the fictional world and the world of truth/reality. Could we then state that the trigger of the King's frustration was the same trigger that upset the abbot in the case of *Sanook neuk*—that because prose became a new form that became out of control for its democratizing capacity and for its open-endedness and versatility? The struggle to sustain the prosaic form only for factual truth is also present in the King's brief criticism toward Kularb's *Siam Phraphet.* This criticism appeared when the King wrote his comments for *chotmaihetkhwamsongjam kromluangnarintrathewi* ['an epistolary memoir of *kromluangnarintrathewi*']. Winichakul quoted Chulalongkorn's criticism Kularb's *Siam phraphet* as following:[…] traditionally, *jinta kravee* (great poet) often composed in poetry. But recently, it didn't seem so—[they] composed into whatever, no longer restricted to verse (*bot klon*). Sometimes, if crazy thoughts occurred—like in *Siam Phraphet*—they still considered themselves *jinta kravee* too.

Even though this incident occurred years after the controversy of *Sanook neuk,* what emerged again in the King's contention is the aesthetic notion of the bifurcated form. That poetry was still held in the realm of beauty and was thus considered irrelevant in the discussion of factuality or perceived truth makes it clear that prose still remained, for the elites, the "tool of communication," and particularly in this context, the tool to tell a historical past. The telling of the past in prosaic form could also mount to hold the status of truth—holding itself as a "master narrative." This would then become a risk if

what is said does not correspond to the arbitrary direction in safeguarding the supreme sovereignty of the monarch.[63]

Along with the controversy around the allegedly *fictionalized* historical writing of Kularb, what happened with the salient case of *Sanook neuk,* also resolved in the court of Siam under an absolutist regime, raises the question of who had the authority differentiating the fictional from the truth. One can see that the King's primary concern stems from the question of plausibility. With the incident of *Sanook neuk,* Chulalongkorn was unsettled by the plausibility of the story being "too real," while in Kularb's case the frustration came from the plausibility of it being "real." In a way, both cases represent an acknowledgement of the flexibility of prose—the fact that prosaic form can accommodate both fictionality and reality—an acknowledgment gained through the king's encounters with the West. Yet, this acknowledgement was still a concern as we could see from the letter to the abbot where Chulalongkorn confirmed that "some stories keep parts that are real, and some distort them" and that this distortion of reality is a "technique that allows readers to reflect more." While he clearly states his confidence in Luang Phichit that he didn't mean any harm by bringing up *Wat Bavornnivet,* the royal temple, and that he didn't have any goal to state any *kwam jing* (truth/reality), he refrained from giving such a forgiving excuse in the case of Kularb. The latter ended up in a "lunatic asylum" instead.[64]

As I have attempted to demonstrate, the letter of the King actually did more than designating the birth of a modern literary history or a modern form of fictional prose.

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[63] Winichakul, *Mua Siam Phlikphan,* 84-85. See also Craig J. Reynolds. "The Case of K.S.R. Kulap: A Challenge to Royal Historical Writing in Late Ninetenth Century Thailand." *JSS LXI,* pt. 2 (July 1973): 63-90.

[64] Winichakul, *Mua Siam Phlikphan,* 128.

Rather, it implies an epistemological crisis as imagined only among the ruling class of Siam. It underlines the concern that what is fictional should never transgress into the elites' constructed boundary of *kwam jing.* Because the nature of the sovereign and the sacred institutions—pillars that support the sovereign—also relies on the experienced actuality long accounted in the society and not on what can be taken quite lightly like the fictional world. My reading of the letter also discerns the regulatory impulse that emerged precisely from the reception of media modernity—a modern form that was elastic and versatile. The regulatory impulse was translated into practices with consequences. For example, *Sanook neuk* was discontinued and Kularb was hidden away from the eyes of the public and was later labelled a mad man. The first syllable of his name—*ku*—even became a verb; to lie, to fabricate, to fake something. However, beyond these punishments, the subtlety of the regulation also lies in the training of sensibility that would affect the mentality of the Thai public for decades to come. First, it lies in the King's suggestion on how to read a fictional prose and the consequence was obvious as one sees in the myth of the origin in most accounts of modern Thai literary history. Secondly, the letter tells where the trust of the readers should lie—undoubtedly in the King who was omnipotent, knowing into the past and the future as well as being well aware of Western tradition. This intricacy of royal pedagogy also allows us to depict quite clearly the group who has access to designate truth and falsehood. They were those who have long inherited a vast archive of possibilities both in the realm of traditional knowledge—knowing retrospectively—and in the modern pedagogical sense—thinking proleptically. The struggle to control the aesthetic understanding of forms thus provided the ruling class a tool box to also train the modern sensibilities among its own subject

while creating an illusion of the lack of mediation between media modernity and modern subjects.

II. Cinema and the Problem of Indexicality

In the first part, I fleshed out the arguments that the ruling class perceived truth/reality in opposition to the fictional, through an alternative reading of the exemplary incident of regulation vis-à-vis the publication of *Sanook neuk* and Kularb's alleged pseudo-historical writing. The discussion has thus far focused on the problematics of aesthetic forms and the ways they were deployed to demarcate truth/reality and the fictional. This demarcation, as I demonstrated, became incredibly complicated especially with the arrival of the modern prosaic form resulting thus in what I called a royalist aesthetic pedagogy.

One can see that from the discussion thus far that "literary forms are socially and politically forceful but […] they do not derive their power from their fit with existing or emerging patterns of social life," as argued by Caroline Levine in her essay "Strategic Formalism."[65] Instead, literary forms participate in a destabilizing relation to social formations, often colliding with social hierarchies rather than reflecting or foreshadowing them."[66] Levine's account invites us to think of social hierarchies and institutions also as *forms* when she writes that "literary forms and social formations can be grasped as comparable and overlapping patternings operating on a common plane."[67] I am extending the scope of her analysis by attending not specifically to "literary" but to "aesthetic" forms in general. In the following pages, I will explore the reception of another modern

[65] Levine, "Strategic Formalism", 626.
[66] Levine, "Strategic Formalism", 626.
[67] Levine, "Strategic Formalism", 626.

medium—cinema—at the moment of its arrival in Siam and again investigate the reception of the ruling class when encountering this exemplary modern medium. Previously with prose, the challenge of the elites to regulate the realm of truth lies only in managing its verisimilar appearance through interventions as we saw in the case of *Sanook neuk* and *Siam Phraphet*. But cinema is arguably more versatile, democratizing and dispersive due to its mechanically reproducible nature. Also, given its indexicality but also the illusion that could mask its constructedness, cinema might have created another set of concerns and pedagogical instructions. It is therefore instructive to trace the responses of the ruling class toward this arrival of cinema. Again, this explains the significance of the hitherto overlooked archive of letters, memoirs, leaflets of the period of modernization that were actually equally important to film texts.

As discussed elsewhere, modernization in the material sense had long been in effect in Siam through trades outside the court as well as through education and cultural exchanges in the court since the reign of Mongkut, father to Chulalongkorn. In the early stages of this process, modernization was based on a model of reception rather than an exploration or a quest. It was under the reign of Chulalongkorn that modernization was systematized as a project that was fortified with diplomatic royal trips abroad both to Europe and European colonies in Asia. These occasions allowed the sovereign of Siam to not only gain reputation and credibility as one of the very few surviving monarchs of Asia but also made the King and his entourage gain first-hand experiences on modernity materialized in the forms of technology, apparatuses—and among those varieties, in early forms of cinema. Let us now turn to the vast archive of records and literature around the

royal trips that had residual indication of cinema and how this prominent form of media modernity—cinema—was first received among the ruling class.

One of the most indicative accounts that was often used to indicate the first encounter of the Siamese with one of the early forms of cinema can be found in one of Chulalongkorn's letter to one of his queens. The letter was written when he was in Singapore on 3 March 1896, where he tries to remember the word *kinetoscope* through the description of the apparatus as following: "whatever it is called, I cannot recall. There are many photos put together in a roll. They put it in an electric machine and the roll moved. What we saw was as if the images were moving too."[68] He attempted to call what he saw by using the terms *nang* and *nang farang.* The term *nang* refers to the traditional puppet shadow play reflected on a canvas made of cow's skin. Later, on July 14 of the same year, Chulalongkorn was present at the Exhibition of Art and Industry in Stockholm where his royal disembarkation was filmed.[69] More importantly, there was a letter written by Phraya Saritdipojjanakorn stating that "[…] then the king came to a part of the exhibition […] like a theatre where they *choed nai saeng fai fah* (screen it with electric light) called cinematograph. It was the images of them receiving his Majesty at the port in front of their palace in Stockholm."[70] Only one year after the letters, the excitement and wonder around this *nang farang* became even more intensified among the public. An announcement in *Bangkok Times* published on June 9, 1897 stated that there would be *karn lalen* (public entertainment) called "cinematographe"—"images that can move and

[68] Dome Sukkhawong. *Siam Phapphayon* (*Cinema of Siam*) (Nakhǭn Pathom: Hǭphapphayon, 2012): 103.

[69] The footage of the film survived and is now preserved by the Thai Film Archive, Thailand and were published in a digital format on YouTube.

[70] Sukkhawong, *Siam Phappayon,* 29.

act"—to be exhibited for the Siamese public. This first public screening took place in Bangkok and was believed to be brought into Siam by a traveling showman of unknown origin, S.G. Marchovsky.[71] Cost of the exhibition was also informed in this announcement in the most fashionable way of price per "box," varying according to first-class, second-class or third-class seatings.[72]

However, there is an evidence from a memoir that there might be other screenings inside the royal palace *before* this first purportedly public screening of cinematograph. I am referring to a memoir of Nai Hon Huay, a pen name of Silapachai Chanchaloem, an essayist, a cinemagoer and later anti-communist broadcaster, whose account contests the story of the purported first screening of cinematographe in Siam. The author recalled the words of Phraya Dhewathiraj, a royal member who worked for the royal ceremonies under three different reigns, that from 1895 through 1896 he was brought into the inner part of the royal palace—a more exclusive section reserved for high ranked nobility—to see a black and white 35 mm. film. Phraya Dhewathiraj recalled that no one had ever seen such a thing and that everyone "got very excited with *farang'*s intelligence" for being able to play *nang* in a manner that was so similar to "real people."[73] He further stated that the noblemen had to ask *farang* who brought in this *nang farang* (film) to screen it again for another two nights. The ending remarks of this memoir on this topic is what I believe summarize the Siamese sociality vis-à-vis media modernity. It states that it was a shame that the Thai peasants did not have a chance to see it, that they prayed that *farang* would bring more of this to Siam, and that they could potentially see big monetary

[71] Sukkhawong, 23-24.
[72] Sukkhawong, 98-99.
[73] Nai Hon Huay, *Wa duay nang nang nai meung Bangkok* (*Regarding Cinema in Bangkok*) (Bangkok: Lincoln Promotion, 2012): 16.

gains from *karn len nang* (film screening).[74] For a fact, under the absolutism of the monarchy, the audience that was prioritized for what is new, good, and exciting is not the commoners. The market under the absolutism was somehow limited and seemed to operate in ways that made some wait for modernity while those on top could afford it.

Apart from this archival anecdote that backdates cinema's advent in Siam as a royalist entertainment in the palace, the author also provides an account of wonder around the cinematograph's predecessor, the magic lantern, that some unknown Western merchants had brought to the royal court of Siam, to certain noble families and to some affluent Chinese and Sino-Thai merchants. Hon Huay describes that while the Siamese court enjoyed the mirror screening of the magic lantern, they heard rumors that those European *farang* were then able to invent *nang*,"something that would look like *nang talung* (Thai puppet shadow play originated in the South of Siam), […] which could magically move without the manipulation of human beings."[75] He even suggests that the court members were so impatient and kept complaining for years. Yet, they could not do anything since the foreigners all agreed that this time it would be more difficult with cinema as the cinematic technology required expertise in engineering and electricity. This account of waiting patiently depicts a set of expectations around modern technological materiality—a mode of thinking that looks into futurity. Yet, the unfulfilled expectation also underlines the condition of media modernity in Siam, characterized by belatedness of the arrival of modern objects, underlining their distant relationship from the colonial center as well as by an aspiration to always keep up regardless of their lack of direct colonial relationship with the colonizers.

[74] Hon Huay, *Wa duay nang nang nai meung Bangkok*, 17-18.
[75] Hon Huay, *Wa duay nang nang nai meung Bangkok*, 18.

But finally, around 1895-1896, they managed to bring cinema to the royal court at the Concordia Club, known today as *sala sahathai samakhom*. This history reaffirms that within the walls of the royal palace, cinema, first understood through its predecessor, had instituted a sense of imaginary connection between Siam and the West. Through this new medium, it is possible to observe the lack of Western coloniality under Chulalongkorn's absolutist sovereignty as media modernity arrived in Siam not through colonial rule or order. On the very opposite, it was *granted* by the ruling class of Siam to be there, once mediated behind the royal wall where it was experienced away from the eyes of the public. Hon Huay writes that the Western foreigners knew too well that anything with a lucrative potentials must be approved first by the king in Siam. Though Siam endorsed the free-market economy since the Bowring Treaty in 1855, *farang* traders chose the court as their patron. Not different from other infrastructures of modernity in Siam, media was subject to the royal patronage. This legacy inevitably defined the reception, perception, understanding and practices of the aesthetic form.

Furthermore, Hon Huay's memoir sheds light on the affective reception and conceptual understanding of early cinema in Siam. He refers to the sensation of wonder around *nang* or "moving images" as following: [it was] what tremendously excited the court members (*fai nai*) and [it was] what created admiration for *farang* for they play cinema (literally from '*len nang*') in a way that 'really looked like real people.'"[76] This statement makes it explicit that the earliest reception of cinema in Siam was based on the notion of verisimilitude of the cinematic images and the preconceived notion of cinema shaped by its assumed similarities to existing traditional puppet show *nang talung.* While

[76] Hon Huay, *Wa duay nang nang nai meung Bangkok*, 16.

this automatic assimilation of cinema to *nang talung* might not assert any epistemological accuracy, it nonetheless structures affective responses both among the court members who got excited with *nang* at the time and among those who would still use the term *nang* (skin) when referring to cinema in Thai. This is of course not the first time a connection between cinema and stage performance was made. Film historians and theorists have long been driven by the kinship between stage and early cinema as embodied, for instance, by the similarities between light and shadow in puppet plays and the cinematograph.[77] But what is quite interesting is that such comparisons in the West usually center on the experience of film screening. It is important to observe that, unlike most contexts, the audience related to cinema—in an uncolonized nation with an intensified urge to modernize—by drawing instinctively from what was already available to them as a form of public entertainment. In other words, epistemologically, the imaginary of the cinematic process and materiality comprising light and shadow took place within the available idioms of the tradition of *nang talung.*

However, this association seemed to be entirely absent among the public after the official arrival of cinema in Siam. The understanding of cinema with respect to the traditional form of *nang talung* would be displaced with an increasing emphasis on verisimilitude (*kwam som jing*) and the aspect of acting in drama instead. When *farang* finally brought cinema to the court of Siam, the public was able to experience both the indexicality of the cinematic image as well as the ambiguity with which the fictional and

[77] See Gonda Yasunosuke, "The Principles and Applications of the Moving Pictures (excerpts)," translated by Aaron Gerow, *Review of Japanese Culture and Society 22*, no. "Decentering Theory: Reconsidering the History of Japanese Film Theory" (December 2010): 24-36. https://www.jstor.org/stable/42800637. For an example of an attempt of a Western scholar to understand the relationship between the arrival of cinema and the traditional system of language and representation, see Noel Burch, *To The Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in Japanese Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Berkeley Press, 1979).

the actual simultaneously operated in this new medium. The films first shown in the court of Siam were mostly newsreel but, according to Hon Huay, the simple "actual scenario of their countries" was enough to thrill the audience.[78] Yet, the author further comments that "but those in *nang* dressed exactly like the ones who brought them," that "they walked exactly like *khon jing jing* (real people)," and that "they could also really smile, laugh and cry." Hon Huay writes that most of the viewers who were fortunate enough to watch cinema with the court members that night enjoyed it so much that they left the venue very late.[79]

Based on Hon Huay's account, I discern that there was a rupture that distinguished two ways in which the medium was understood. First, before the arrival of the cinematic images, the expectation of these *nang* or "moving images" relied so much on its kinship to *nang talung,* yet also on its excess in relation to *nang talung* as they "look [more] like real people"— thus exceeding the limitations of traditional materiality of *nang talung* and staging a proleptic wonder based on what was already familiar to their experiences. After the screening, the comments no longer focused on the purported connection between cinema and *nang talung.* Rather, comments from Hon Huay's and some other later accounts underlined the appreciation of cinematic images based on the veracity of the images in relation to the real world. I would argue that the earliest experience of cinema in Siam highlights the interest in what "looks real" and the status of both verisimilitude and indexicality of the cinematic images, both of which were then quite interchangeable and became more relevant and ubiquitous to modern sensibilities.

[78] Hon Huay, *Wa duay nang nang nai meung Bangkok,* 16.
[79] Hon Huay, *Wa duay nang nang nai meung Bangkok,* 16.

The new stature of modern aesthetic forms—both prose and cinema—thus created possibilities in thinking beyond the boundaries of the tradition. They can accommodate representations that are both fictional and actual.

Outside the royal palace, there were records of screenings of the Kinetograph in May 1898, of Talbot's Cinematograph in June 1898, of British Cinematograph recording Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee (1897), which was exhibited in Siam in June in 1899.[80] And around 1904-1906, a troop of Japanese promoters came to Siam with their first exhibition entitled "The Grand Cinematographic Exhibition of Russo-Japanese War" and later built the very first permanent theatre in Siam in the neighborhood of *Nakhonkasem.* The growing number of cinematic activities affirms another important aspect of cinema as a reproducible technology that could easily approach the masses. In this respect, all these screenings were not directly instigated by the royal palace although *farang* sought some support and permission in terms of location of their theatres from the ruling class as seen in the case of Momchao Alangkarn's theatre. Furthermore, these cinematic activities showcased traces of monetary relationships between the latent Thai film market and the international market, underlining also the nature of cinema's mechanical reproduction and, to some, the commodity of the masses.[81]

Amidst these screenings and the increasing popularity of cinema among the commoners of Siam, there were also records of films made by the royal members as well as many screenings of royal films focusing on the trips and works of Chulalongkorn. On

[80] Sukkhawong, *Siam Phappayon,* 106. See also the digitized footage of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. BFI. "Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee (1897) - extract," uploaded May 13, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnip7RRc3Q4.

[81] In Chapter Three, I will explore how cinema took hold in the people's sensibility and imagination in a particularly indigenous way.

27 November 1903, for instance, a column in *Bangkok Times* made the following announcement:

> The Edison Cinematograph Co. will give their two last exhibitions at the ORIENTAL HOTEL Sunday 29th and Monday 30th November at 9 p.m. H.R.H Prince Sanbassatra has graciously lent us some of the excellent moving pictures which His Highness himself has taken and developed showing in detail many of the events in connection with the late CORONATION FESTIVITIES.[82]

As far as my archival research goes, it would not be an overstatement to designate this advertisement as marking the first exhibition of a royalist film shot by the members of the royal family themselves. On 9 May 1908, there was another advertisement indicating a screening of "the Royal Pictures," which consisted of the recorded events of Chulalongkorn giving gifts to priests, attending a religious ceremony at *Wat Pra Keo* (the Royal Emerald Buddha Temple), and arriving in Germany and Denmark respectively.[83] Both of these records set up another way in which to approach the receptions and practices of the ruling class when it came to cinema.

Furthermore, film magazines, newspapers, flyers and leaflets in print from the period following the reign of Chulalongkorn, which ended in 1910, kept announcing screenings of royal pictures in public theatres. These films would slip in between the reels of imported commercial films or they could be screened stand-alone in the context of an official gathering. This type of screening seemed to help the Siamese public under the absolutism to gain political updates, specifically to remind them that the actuality of the political regime in which they inhabited was governed by the omnipotence of the

[82] *Bangkok Times,* 27 November 1903.
[83] *Bangkok Time,* 9 May 1908.

quasi-saint-savior king whose trips to the West was genuinely welcomed and praised by the colonial West. Such deployment of mechanically reproducible cinematic images of the royal family calls to mind the way in which photography was used among the elites.[84]

In *A Vision of the Past: a History of Early Photography in Singapore and Malaya, The Photographs of G.R. Lambert & Co., 1880-1910,* John Falconer comments on the status of the technologically reproducible images of the period: "appointed court photographer was a very particular honour bestowed by King Chulalongkorn mainly on men of merit. It was a special distinction which was not awarded to just anybody who was in the position to take a picture of the king of Siam."[85] As one can see from this citation, the reproducible images of the sovereign were not to be taken lightly. Following Walter Benjamin's argument,[86] there is no doubt that the indexicality of the reproducible images of the monarch also reproduces the auratic presence of the sovereign to larger audience, bringing the reality of the absolute sovereign even closer to the people. The claims about how exceptionally unique the king of Siam was among the Asian monarchs, for example, for being the first to "stay[ed] at the Buckingham palace,"[87] and about the "aura" that emanated from his diplomatic presence as the greatest protector of the kingdom of Siam, especially against European colonialism, were reinforced first by photography. But even more so, these claims were further buttressed by the cinematic technology, especially with the very first film of King Chulalongkorn depicting the royal disembarkation at a pier in Stockholm and *L'arrivée du roi du Siam au Berne* (*The*

[84] Woodhouse, "Concubines with Camera," https://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tap/7977573.0002.202/--concubines-with-cameras-royal-siamese-consorts-picturing?rgn=main;view=fulltext

[85] Falconer, 12.

[86] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 222-223.

[87] Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace* (New York: Random House, 2002): 75.

Arrival of the King of Siam in Bern). On the one hand, then, these archival records worked their magic on the level of technological advances and on political claims as I discussed. On the other hand, they also became the foundational cinematic texts that truthfully "indexed" the important historical events –especially of royal duties, responsibilities and graces– as well as the unquestionable presence of the monarch of Siam—almost like Roland Barthes' *noeme,* the *'that-has been'* which cannot be counterfeited or even subverted. [88]

Very much like the case of the hegemonic history of modern Thai literature that I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the version of history of Thai cinema that was most prominent also starts with the ruling class of Siam and their reception. Starting with the traditional figures authority might not be much of a problem if one could argue that Siam was successful in liberating itself from the monarchs. Unfortunately, I do not see any liberation in this long genealogy of authoritarian perspective in the production of knowledge. I thus share the same concern with Thongchai that we might have just reproduced the same master narratives over and over. Thus, in order to avoid subscribing a royalist nationalist reading of the archive—a method of reading that was made too natural for the Thai natives—I instead analyze the early receptions of media modernity through their disparate forms, namely, verisimilitude in fictional prose and indexicality in cinema. I have investigated how these encounters instigated anxiety over the hitherto overlooked potential fragility of the sovereign and even conditioned a pattern of authoritative reactions of the ruling class as seen, for example, in their interventions to censor or create the illusion that these modern forms were unmediated.

[88] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage Books, 2000): 77.

I have also procured an analysis arguing that the royal task to oversee the reception of media modernity was far from being uncomplicated. The controversial case of *Sanook neuk* should not be taken merely as emergent literariness reserved only for the conversations about Thai literary history. Rather, it should be introduced as an example of a disruptive encounter that accelerated the course of action around royalist pedagogy vis-à-vis media modernity. As seen in my discussion of *Sanook neuk*, I have contended that the complex process through which truth/reality and fictional became at stake to the sovereign was because the sovereign's hold over the ground of truth was shaken. With the arrival of modern aesthetic forms, what was conveniently long governed by traditional formal conventions and by the authority of the sacred institutions became too versatile, disenchanted, and available to be adopted by literally anyone. Additionally, with the arrival of cinema, the complexity was even doubled since this modern form was ontologically and technologically novel and seemed incommensurable with any traditional aesthetic regimes. It was thus not surprising that the very early responses of the elites to cinema was framed more or less around the sense of wonder and expectation rather than anxiety. And most importantly, the early production of reproducible cinematic images were not yet fictional; fictional representation were out of the elitist control as in the cases of *Sanook neuk* and *Siam Phraphet* or by any other equally powerful parties.[89] Because the early cinematic images at least worked in favor of the dissemination of the monarchical aura, a direct intervention was thus not necessary until much later when the

[89] The economic infrastructure of Siam under the absolute monarchy definitely plays a crucial role in the affordability of most of the modern technologies as well as who would have access to them. Since importing films from the West or producing a film would cost a lot, it was natural that cinema was more or less under the royal patronage in the beginning. Also, the local film production did not occur until much later—in 1920's.

indexical cinematic images began to show “too much truth,” almost too menacingly to sabotage the law and order of the absolute sovereign.[90]

[90] This particular aspect will be discussed in detail in Chapter IV with the case of *Miss Suwanna of Siam*.

CHAPTER III

CHANGING TRADITIONS: A CINE-AESTHETIC OF THE COMMONERS

On March 11, 1925, speaking to an audience of academics gathered for the Siam Society meeting in Bangkok, H.H. Prince Bidyalongkorn—one of the cousins of King Chulalongkorn— referenced a "natural aptitude for poetry" among both intellectuals and peasants:

> At the outset, I should like you to accept the assumption, by way of a premise, that the Siamese are a poetically-minded people. You will probably admit that much without hesitation. But I will go further, and state that there is a natural aptitude for poetry which is general, not only among the intellectual classes, but among the unlettered peasants themselves. We have an abundance of poetic literature which merits the attention of foreign scholars and students of our language: but although many books have been written by foreign authors on this country, Siamese poetry is a subject which has been left practically untouched. […] Fewer still know anything of the different kinds of Siamese poetry and can recognize Chan from *Kloang*, *Kloang* from *Glon*, *Glon* from *Rai*, and *Rai* from mere prose. The same remark applies to a large number of our own people, and to not a few of modern educated Siamese. This last fact, I maintain, is not consistent with the assertion that the Siamese are a poetically-minded people. If proof were needed of this point it would be found in the existence of numerous illiterate rhymesters among our rural population, and in the crowd which gather around

> them with obvious enjoyment as they extemporized songs well into the small hours of the morning.[91]

And, extending further, in remarks entitled "A National Heritage," he draws an even more explicit connection between Thai poetry to the nation itself:

> Poetry is an important part of our culture; it is a national heritage of great value. Among the Thai people generally, poetry-mindedness, or the poetic instinct remains to-day much as it was. But in the higher social order, we have to deplore the decline of intelligent appreciation of the value of poetry or of our poetic literature. The spread of Western education has, in a measure, contributed to this. But it must be remembered that in the West the rapid progress of modern forms of education has not caused the decline of poetry as an important factor in the cultural life of their people.[92]

Bidyalongkorn's remarks on the long genealogy of Thai poetry connect this literary form to the Siamese mind and regret the apparent lack of study of and an insufficient scholarly appreciation for this uniquely Thai national treasure. We might be led to wonder why, if there was "an abundance of poetic literature which merits the attention," so many scholars overlook this rich tradition. Against the backdrop of "the spread of Western education" during this period of Siamese modernization[93], how was poetry not among national priorities in the reign of King Chulalongkorn or even the deeply nationalistic

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[91] H.H. Prince Bidyalongkorn, "The Pastime of Rhyme Making and Singing in Rural Siam," in H.H. Prince Bidyalongkorn and M.C. Chand Chirayu Rajini, *Essays on Thai Poetry* (Bangkok: Office of the National Culture Commission, 1981), 1-2.

[92] Bidyalongkorn, "A National Heritage," 44.

[93] This does not mean that poetic production was not composed or practiced during the two reigns. On the contrary, Vajiravudh, for instance, inaugurated a few literary magazines and composed some *Klong* and dramatic pieces himself. There were a large number of studies that indicated a vibrant culture of publishing both in prose and in poetry.

reign of Vajiravudh? I share with Bidyalongkorn the struggle to locate scholarly writings that relate poetry and modernity in the vast archive of research on Thai modernity more generally. While significant attention is paid to the emergence of prose writings in newspaper and literary magazines[94], how might we understand poetry's role in the modernization project given the scholarly disinterest in the poetic form in the field of Thai modernity? There was, it seems, a hierarchy of aesthetic forms in which prose was understood to be modern whereas Thai poetry bore the weight of tradition.[95] In what follows, I will contest this hierarchy, by turning to a set of *chan*—an archaic poetic form—that I chanced upon in a film magazine—the 1922 issues of *Phappayon Siam,* (*Siam's Cinema*), the first Thai film magazine published in Siam. What is rather extraordinary is that these early discussions of modern cinema—the new media of that era—take place in the ritualized elevated forms of archaic traditional poetry, and that these poems were written by *anonymous* poets outside the royal court of Siam during the period of modernization under the reign of Vajiravudh (Rama VI) of the Chakri Dynasty.

This archive of poetry-cinema is interesting to me for multiple reasons. It makes poetry visible in studies of Thai modernity but also helps address the absence of scholarship on the relationship between poetry and cinema. Thus, the primary goal of this article is to provide a more comprehensive account of Thai modernity attentive to both the emerging and older cultural forms and their encounter. A turn to this encounter encourages us to expand the peripheries of the experience of media modernity in the early

[94] See Thanapol Limapichart, "The Emergence of the Siamese Public Sphere" 361–99.

[95] Wibha Senanan Kongkanan commented that "…in this era, literary prose writing style has developed in a dramatic way exceeding the tradition of writing in poetry […] poetry doesn't seem to be the modern author's choice." See Wibha Senanan Khongkanan, *Kamnoet Nawaniyāi Nai Prathēt Thai*), 136.

twentieth century and understand its participants as active agents in an ongoing process of negotiations. Another goal of this chapter is to analyze how this recently found archive could offer us a way to revisit the role of the commoners and their vernacular engagements in media modernity as well as to challenge the assumption that Thai poetry is self-contained within a particular social class, homogeneous, and resistant to changes caused by modernization. It demonstrates that poetry was not superseded by prose but rather retooled itself as a medium of modernity.

It is obvious that my analysis of the relationship between poetry and cinema as well as the ideologically-infused implications on social classes that come with such an aesthetic hierarchy (i.e. "not only among the intellectual classes, but among the unlettered peasants") offers a new set of problems around the hierarchy of forms and their circulation in the social world. It further complicates what we have been told about the experiences and studies of Thai modernity by adding the underrepresented classes—peasants, unintellectual, illiterate as the prince suggested in the first excerpt—to the conversation around whose labors contribute to the project of modernization. In the context of modernizing Siam with its absolute monarchy, a new audience—Siamese commoners—used an archaic form of poetry that had long been associated with elevated art of a religious nature used by the upper classes. In so doing, the commoners were able to posit themselves as emergent modern subjects and elaborate on their own version of cinema challenging the discourse around cinema as another modern form granted to them from above. By making this claim, I argue that the emerging hierarchy of competitive aesthetic forms—prose, poetry and cinema—also maps out issues of class division in Siam and points to an indigenous way in which poetry and cinema merge and become

aesthetic objects of the *demos* in the time when modernity was more or less dictated from above and in accordance with the vision of the kind.

Since I am concerned here not only with the aesthetic competition between prose and poetry but also with the interactions between poetry and cinema, the other question that becomes relevant here is the constitution of what we call a national cinema. Specifically, in the context of Siam/Thailand, how can one rely on the hegemonic history of early Thai cinema when the emergence of the nation roughly corresponds to the development of new media infrastructures and when the emergence of found materials on early cinema from the national film archive was also belated in relation to a history of Thai cinema that has already been written?[96] Additionally, it is important to note that unlike many non-western contexts, cinema did not arrive in Siam with colonial rule, but rather, was imported along with other Western genres like the novel and non-fiction prose as part of strategic modernization—making Siam *siwilai* (civilized)— project undertaken by the monarch.[97] How then can we account for an anti-colonial historiography that seeks to nationalize cinema, yet, falls into the trap of nationalistic essentialism or even for a discourse of the advent of cinema that thrives on royal patronage? What I want to suggest

[96] Dome Sukkhawong, the first and now former director of the Thai Film Archive (as of June 2019), explains that the most important incident that led scholars to become more interested in and be able to write about early Thai cinema is when they found perishing film reels at a "train cemetery" and repair station in Makkasan, Bangkok in 1981. This incident led to an urgent awareness in restoration and preservation. Sukkhawong states that after this incident, they found more perishing films in the secretary storage room of the national Railway department. This was not a surprise because early Thai cinema was known to be part of the Royal Siamese Railway Unit (or later, "The Government Public Relations Department") run by the Royal Siamese Railway Department of Siam and by one of the brothers of Vajiravudh himself. The official conglomeration of archival materials led to more scholarly publications on early Thai cinema but the belatedness of scholarly publications indicates that the version of history of early Thai cinema has not been concomitant to the early development of cinematic culture in Siam or even to the advent of early Thai cinema. See "*Koot kru nang kao kong grom rotfai"* ("Excavating old films in hidden chamber of the Royal Siamese Railway Department"), *Siam Phappayon* (Bangkok: National Thai Film Archive Press, 2012): 185-208.

[97] Scot Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, 1-4.

in this essay through my reading of this newly found archive of poetry on cinema is that, by the end of the analysis, we might be able to find more nuance in how the early cinema interacts with other aesthetic forms and how elaborating on this intermedial exchange might contribute to understanding this national cinema in a new critical light—at least, in light of a version of history that is more inclusive of the commoners and more intermedially connected to the aesthetic form that had long been confined to an elitist class.

Upon this unexpected discovery, I had to re-engage the concept of "cinepoetry" that emerged in early twentieth century French cinema where poets are inspired by filmic images or scripts and their ekphrastic possibilities or even in the European-American avant-gardist context in which philosophy of visuality and language is exercised in experimental cinematic traditions.[98] Even though I am tremendously interested in "cinepoetry," as well as the visualization of linguistic and poetic dispositions in film texts, this article is not led by such theoretical discussions. The goal is to pursue a rather understudied path where epistemic worldviews embedded in the seemingly bifurcated forms—poetry and cinema—converge, particularly in the colonial context of Siam, and where cinema, alongside prose, was associated with European progress and civilization while poetry was conceived of as uniquely Thai. Thus, just as the entanglement of cinema and poetry was unexpected when cinema started to capture public attention in the first

[98] Christophe Wall-Romana traces French poetry in the late 19th century to the first half of the 20th century for its connection to cinema. He argues that "cinepoetry is a writing practice whose basic process is homological: it consists of envisioning a specific component or aspect of poetry as if it were a specific component of cinema, or vice versa, but always in writing." See Christophe Wall-Romana, *Cinepoetry: Imaginary Cinema in French Poetry* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013): 1-52. Also, see Adams Sitney, *Cinema of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015): 16-17, 67-68.

decade of the 20th century, so too poetry has fallen out of the radar of Thai studies and Thai literary history. Especially when cinema and fictional prose are foreign forms compared to the indigenous labor and investment in Thai poetry, studies seem to focus more, in hindsight, on some art forms over others. In what follows, I examine the possible connections with and imaginations of cinema in the archaic form of poetry, *chan,* and their vernacular expressions that offer an alternative way to engage with the studies of Thai modernity both from the unusual connection between cinema and poetry and from the perspectives of the new stakeholders of modernity—the Siamese commoners.

I. Poeticized Thai Cinema: Discussion on Archaic Poetic Form

In the series of early issues of *Phappayon Siam,* two-page spreads were exclusively reserved for a publication of a traditional poem in each issue (respectively in the issue of July 3, 10, 17 in 1922). Amidst local advertisements, show time information, complaint letters about moviegoers' behaviors and translated synopses of contemporaneous Hollywood films shown in different theaters in Bangkok, the textual arrangement generic to poetry inevitably stood out at first glance. Though easily noticed as a poem, it was impossible to tell from the title that the poem was about Thai cinema. This is because the first poem in the series was entitled *Phushongkapayatra chan* specifically indicating a type of traditional Thai poetry with a strict metric rule and strong reference to religious rites, which I will discuss more in detail later, while none of these notions could signify at first glance any connection to cinema. The only clue that might allow us to assume the poem's relationship to cinema

can be drawn from the fact that this poem was published in a film magazine. In this case, the unusual textual location of poetry challenges existing accounts of the social life and circulation of Thai poetry in general. Further, it poses an important question as to how to approach the relationship between poetry and cinema in a way that does not merely reduce the messages in the poem to historical events or anecdotes the same way prose writings do. Are there any alternative ways to treat each line of the poem not only as a historically informative entity but as a form of experience that reflects on cinema?

In a way, the question I raise is pertinent to how one intervenes in the class-infused hierarchical separation of forms, and consequentially, of social classes. Rather than interpreting the poem verse by verse, I suggest that poetry exerts its positionality in the world, first, through the immediacy of its aural affects rather than in the linearity of meaning-making such as we witness in prose. For instance, in the moment of the discovery of the first poem, I remembered reciting it aloud and stuttering in the process, because rhymed words were unfamiliar and difficult to pronounce. I thus found myself more or less in the performative moment of recitation in which translation was also suspended. To continue further with the arguments, let us recite these verses.

สำรวมเริงสำเริงรื่น สำราญชื่นสำรวมชม

รำพึงสรรรำพันสม ฤดีเพ่งนิพนธ์สภร

ณ กรุงเทพมหาธา นิกอปภาพยนตร์การ

บำรุงเปรมบำเรอปราณ จรุงจิตร์เจริญใจ

(*Sam-ruam-reung/sam-reung-reun* *sam-rarn-cheun/sam-ruam-chom*

Ram-peung-san/ ram-pan-som *rue-dee-peng/ni-phon-porn*

Na-khrung-thep/mahata *ni-korp-phap/pa-yon-korn*

Bam-rung-prem/bam-roe-pron *ja-roong-jit/ ja-roen-jai*)

As one may have caught on, there is a circular rhythm here made possible not only by assonance and alliteration but also by the arrangement of stressed and de-stressed syllables. If I translate this poem into English, the translation will keep repeating the same ideas around joy and modesty with different words. But in Thai, there is a lot of play on words through neologisms that have always been part of the metric rules of such types of traditional poetry. For instance, the poet separates one syllable from a complete word and tags it to a new syllable to form a new word; *sam ruam* is one complete word which means "being modest," but then the poet detaches the first syllable, *sam*, and attaches it to *reung*, producing a new word, "being joyful". In the next two lines the poet starts off with a preposition, *na* (at) marking a spatial indicator—at *Khrungthep mahata* (Bangkok). *Khrungthep* means city of angels while *mahatanee* means great capital city. Another interesting element from this line is the fact that the poet detached a syllable, *ni,* that forms one complete word, *mahatanee,* and attached it to another verse as well as transforming the actual long sound of *nee* to *ni.* The last line, *Bam-rung-prem/ bam-roe-pron/ ja-roong-jit/ ja-roen-jai,* repeats the same alliterative structure while offering a message that can be translated as "[cinema] that enriches the level of pleasure, of merit, very refreshing to the soul, very charming to the heart."

Apparently, the first poem of the series was composed in a way that is semantically comprehensible. However, even for a native speaker, it is difficult to engage with such linguistic plays and poetic word formations that are quite alien in the quotidian use of the Thai language. In fact, I would argue that we would miss something significant if the attention was devoted entirely to deciphering the content or to attending to the translatability of the text both on an inter and intra-lingual level. To any native Thai speaker, I believe, a challenging act of translation is involved in finding correlates for words that we barely use or never use, and this sets up a temporal belatedness in our comprehension of certain parts of the poem.

Arguably, what is more immediate in poetry, though, is an aural affect. In this case, it is the assonant and alliterative sounds conditioned by the traditional poetic form and metric rule that captivates us more instantaneously than the gradual unfolding of a semantic palimpsest. The aural effect of the poem created by separations of words and rhyming is extremely significant in Thai poetry, and thus shifts the attention from the meaning or overall message to the immediacy of sound and its affect. From the little scholarship that one can find on Thai poetry, *The Essays on Thai Poetry* describes the nature of aural rhymes in Thai poetry as following:

> The vocabulary of English prosody is a large one, but, in trying to give a description of a section of Siamese poetry, one finds that only a few words out of that vocabulary fit in which the meaning which he wishes to convey. The fact is that, with one exception, there is no affinity between Siamese poetry and English poetry. […] The very word 'poetry' itself is one which we can only use in a wide

> sense. Our rhymes have little, if anything, to do with rhythm, and are therefore not poetry in the strict sense of the English term. Rhyming is the chief essential feature of our poetry: with us, in fact, nothing is poetry unless it rhymes. Divide your words into a given number of syllables, usually six or eight, put in rhyming where Siamese prosody prescribes it, and if your words make sense, you have produced Siamese *Glon.* Add extra assonance and alliteration, and you probably improve it.[99]

That the meanings of words in the poet's vocabulary might not fit in with the prosodic pattern of rhyming in Thai poetry makes it clear that the formal aural structure of Thai poetry is not quite concerned with meaning making. Thus, it would be a mistake to pursue a reading practice of Thai poetry that focuses on the hermeneutic and representational aspects of the text. This is not to refute that an *explication du texte*, for instance, can definitely provide historical anecdotes to the establishment of new theatres, cinematic social life in Bangkok in the 1920's, and there is certainly no doubt that the poems will greatly contribute to historical speculation and cultural mapping. However, the choice of poetry over prose should not be undermined by the poem's value as historical document.

My point here is that these poetic conditions and their generic reception on the affective level interrupt the conventional method of narrativizing the history of national cinema and media modernity, both of which are generally expected to make sense. As opposed to prose writings, poetry's primary function is not just to communicate but *to*

[99] Bidyalongkorn, *Essays on Thai Poetry*, 2-3.

be—both aesthetically and temporally. Each syllable of a word is a fragment that, once tied together, forms a rhythm, rhyme and continuity notwithstanding the comprehensibility or rationality of the message. As opposed to the legible historical data that can be gleaned from prose writings, the relation between poetry and history or indeed the historical efficacy of poetry must be discerned in the moment of recitation, in between each fragmented syllable, in the struggle to pronounce unfamiliar neologisms, in the pre-determined pauses and formally structured arrests of time between verses and lines. As we encounter the aural effect of poetic rhyming structure, an interest in meaning or how poetry informs becomes secondary, or perhaps is only of secondary importance. By shifting our primary attention to other elements beyond the meanings of the poem, I also consider this act a shifting of method in historiography that emerges in the shadows of how early Thai cinema and media modernity have been accounted for in nationalist histories. This historiography asks that we glean another history by paying careful attention to its affective miscellanea.

If such a method of reading allows us to discover and affectively connect with small historical details in the shadows of the semantic import of the poem, I then want to draw our attention to the alliterative title of the first poem, *phushongka payatra chan*. The title designates right away a poetic genre and type of poetry, *chan*. This is one of the most respected poetic forms in traditional Thai literature. The origin of *chan* can be traced back to ancient Pali-Sanskrit literature and the Buddhist script. There is an assumption that *chan* first appeared in Thai in the early seventeenth century and was dominated by an

ancient Pali-Buddhist scripture entitled *kam phee wuttothai*.[100] *Chan* has approximately 108 variable types, all of which are dictated by a strict arrangement of stressed and de-stressed syllables. *Phushongka payatra chan* is one among them and has its own metric rules that demarcates it from other types of *chan*. By choosing the form of *chan*, the poet evokes a long lineage of what is considered traditional high art in Thai literary culture. The *chan* was used historically for religious subjects and was usually reserved as praise and eulogy of something or someone highly honorable, elegant and sacred.[101] Yet, this archive of *phushongka payatra chan* focused on cinema suggests that there is a new lineage of this aesthetic object and we witness, in essence, a convergence of old and new media.

When we take a closer look at the meaning of each term of the title, we can detect some references to Buddhism. *Phushong* in Pali, the ancient language spoken in the time of Gautama Buddha, means a giant snake and *yatra* means going forward. The idea of the giant snake, especially as it appears in the language used by the Buddha and his disciples two thousand years ago, already alludes to Buddhism—or more particularly, in this case, to a mythical snake lord, *nāga,* that represents piety and strong religious faith in Buddhism.[102] This *phushongka phrayatra chan*, the one that I found in the film archive and that specifically discussed Thai cinema, always already includes and inherits from

[100] See Yada Arunaveja, "Pattanakarn kong chan nhai wannakam kham chan" ("Development of Chan in Chan Literary Works") (PhD diss., Chulalongkorn University, 1996), 3-4 and note number 4.

[101] Most of the *phushongka payatra chan* were composed by royal members or the upper-class elites. See, for example, H.H. Prapaiphanpilat, "Phushongka Payatra Chan," in *Chumnoom phraraja niphon ratchakarnteeha* (*The Royal Anthology of King Chulalongkorn's Composition*) (Bangkok: n.p., 1950), pp ก-ค. http://www.car.chula.ac.th/rarebook/book2/clra60_0068/mobile/index.html#p=13

[102] See Donald K. Swearer, "The Ritual" and "The Body of the Buddha: Popular Buddhism and Buddhological Theory," *Becoming the Buddha: The Ritual of Image Consecration in Thailand* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 97-99 and 194.

thousands other *phushongka phrayatra chan* in the long history of Thai literature. The *chan* carries within it 2,000 years of the evolution of Buddhism and its sacred forms. While this discussion enables an encounter with the immemorial religious past, *phushongka phrayatra chan*, in the case of this film magazine, connects such traditional ritualized encounters to the modern time of early Thai cinema. The decision to use *chan* and to signal the type of *chan* through the title of the poem with a novel content performs a historiographic function. The use of this archaic literary form aligns cinema—the new medium from and, purportedly, of the West—with the historical unfolding of imagined Thainess as encoded in a traditional form such as *chan*.

While I have pointed out the medial appropriation (or domestication) into "Thainess" made possible by the archaic form, it is worth nothing that this choice of poetic form and the figure of time it unfurls resonates with the temporality of cinema. In addition to the mythological visual image of *pushong* or *nagā*, which I already discussed as referring to sacredness of the pious lord snake, it is interesting to focus on the word *payatra*—"moving forward elegantly." The formal structure of the poem through alliteration and assonance produces an aurally circular effect that enacts a graceful movement. I argue that the notions of motion and time generically inscribed in the *phushongka payatra chan* (*chan* that moves forward elegantly like the lord snake, *nagā*) echoes a kinetic and temporal relation to the motion of film reels. The poem thus conceives the progression of the film whose basis is the circular movement of the reels in more familiar, albeit mythological terms, with reference to the serpentine motion of the lord snake.

My reading of the form of the poem offers a potential for the marriage of two possible worlds—one of the cinema and modernity and the other of the archaic Pali-Sanskrit aesthetics that were later appropriated by Thais. Arguably, what we observe here is the poet's desire to reconcile this new medium with the past and render modernity intelligible by archaic traditional means—a gesture that is most evident in the title and the structural composition of the poem. I have argued that the archive of these archaic poems about cinema should be taken seriously as raising political questions around hierarchies of aesthetic forms. This material challenges us to revisit the entire discourse on early Thai cinema and its interconnectedness to what existed prior to cinema or conditioned this public association between poetic tradition and cinema. In the next section I will examine the archive in relation to the modernizing context of Siam in which it first emerged. This moves us more toward an analysis of Siam's strategic Westernization which was defined by cultural, aesthetic and epistemic reforms on diverse cultural materials including cinema, prose and poetry. In this context, cinema became, as we will see, a dialectic potential that is not only amenable to influences from other art forms and institutional manipulation but it also facilitates new practices by the commoners and thus challenges a restricted framework of traditional class-divided aesthetics and politics.

II. Prose, Poetry and Cinema: Network of Competition and Nationalist Aesthetic

On the fifth line of the third poem published on July 17, 1922, the anonymous poet used a term, *prachachon*—the people—for the first time. Within the scope of my exposure to Thai literature and to my knowledge thus far, I would argue that the term *prachachon* was under-deployed especially in elevated poetry that predated the Siamese

Revolution in 1932.[103] The term appeared quite scarcely in some more simplified forms and genres of poetry and was deployed more as a backdrop environment of a scene or in the sense of a subject of the kings.[104] As such it was surely disconnected from the political systems of the time. *Pracha* is a prefix that can be attached to other relevant words denoting a relation to the people or of the people. A prime example is *prachadhipadhai*—democracy, a term that signifies a political attitude that, though used or existing under the absolute monarchy, had no institutional space or material consequence. Regarding the etymology and the location of traditional poetry in which it appears, I want to pursue some of the questions that are concerned with social classes and aesthetic forms as well as political contexts that render possible an epistemic transformation around the use of the word and where it emerges. How were the commoners situated in relation to the emergence of the cinema, and especially when cinema was made viable thanks to the monarchs and the noble elites? How might cinema as adopted by the people's poetry allow us to reinvestigate a pre-existing epistemic hierarchy of traditional and modern art forms and their complicity in the way in which the history of Thai modernity and the history of early Thai cinema were written and reinforced? These are some of the questions with which this section seeks to engage.

In light of such a complicated intermedial investigation and of arguably existing peripherality of Thai studies on the interdisciplinary stage, I proceed by outlining some contexts. I will begin by first revisiting some narratives and discourses around

[103] This has been based on the research I have done up until August of 2019.

[104] Vajirayana Viset, "Lilit Suphap Palotok Chadok Naitooknibat" *Kavee niphon bang reung kong Chit Burathat* (*Anthology of Chit Burathat's Poetry*), Accessed on June 22, 2019, https://vajirayana.org/กวีนิพนธ์บางเรื่องของชิต-บุรทัต/ลิลิตสุภาพ-พาโลทก-ชาดก-ในทุกนิบาต.

nationalism and anti-colonization in Siam, which were pervasive during the time of the publication of this poetic archive. It is my goal to spend the next section discussing these poems about cinema as a liberatory literary space of the commoners in the time of state-mandated modernity and nationalist discourse around national development and progress.

In contrast to the historical lineages of British and French colonialisms in mainland Southeast Asia, Siam is the only country in the region to remain independent during the Western colonial period. There is a great number of extant scholarship in Thai studies that examine this period of colonization in the region in relation to Siam's anti-colonial strategy as what conditioned Thai modernity.[105] One of the most power-related and overly repeated discourses that is the outcome of Siam's independence is that we owe this success to the immeasurable grace and countless contributions of the monarchs of the Chakri dynasty in their skillful mobilization of national, political and cultural reforms and in their smart strategies of making Siam at par with the West. Siam's period of modernization has always been associated with the reign of Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) and of his heir, Vajiravudh (1910-1925).[106] During this period, there was an urgent demand for the quest of *siwilai*—a transliteration of civilized. In other words, to survive

[105] For examples, see Benedict Anderson, "Studies of the Thai State: the State of Thai Studies," *Prospects in Anthropology, Art History, Economics, History and Political Sciences,* ed. Eliezer B. Ayal (Athens: Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 1979): 193-247; Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, Law, and Colonial Modernity in Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 2; Thongchai Winichakul, "The Quest for 'Siwilai': A Geographical Discourse of Civilizational Thinking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Siam." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 59, no. 3 (2000): 528–549; Michael Herzfeld, "The Absent Presence: Discourses of crypto-colonialism," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2003): 899-926; Peter Jackson, "The Ambiguities of Semicolonial Power in Thailand" in *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand,* eds. Rachel Harrison and Peter Jackson (Cornell University Press, 2013).

[106] See Irene Stengs, *Worshipping the Great Moderniser: King Chulalongkorn, Patron Saint of the Thai Middle Class* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2009) and Walter F. Vella and Dorothy B. Vella, *Chaiyo!, King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1978).

external colonization, it was important to know the Western way of being civilized as well as to be uniquely Thai. Most national policies and material changes were implemented for the sake of development and progress and the *Western* way of doing things. These would include the official declaration of abolishment of slavery in 1905, the reform of *chaturaban* or the provincial system of governments that functioned as local representatives of the King, the construction of modern infrastructure like railways, European-style boulevards and the tram system in Bangkok, urban city planning, etc. Apart from the technological infrastructures that represent modernity, there were also concerns around cultural reforms and the transformation of worldviews in aesthetic cultural production. Cases of state-mandated censorship, for example, increased in number and under diverse circumstances. Particularly, the reason for censorship was framed around the logic of prevention: to suppress any activity that would challenge the supreme monarchical sovereignty.[107]

While the material changes both on the corporeal and governmental infrastructures were easily noticeable and are quite representative of discourses of national progress and development, epistemic changes that emerged from these convoluted networks of cultural, literary and discursive productions need to be discerned while keeping in view the socio-political context. I want to emphasize how the status of archaic poetry was adjusted according to the narrative of progress and modernization.

[107] A prominent case includes a censorship on the first fictional prose *sanookneuk* in 1886 as I already discussed in Chapter Two. See Chaloemtiarana "Making New Space in the Thai Literary Canon," 87–110. Another case that challenged the authority more directly is the case of an attempt to massively reproduce *Kotmai tra sam duang* (the Three Seals Law,) the most important legal text before a revision of the Criminal Act. See Thanapol Limapichart, "The Emergence of the Siamese Public Sphere: Colonial Modernity, Print Culture and the Practice of Criticism (1860s–1910s)", 370-371.

Take, for example, one of the very rare prose works that reflects on the changing tradition of composition, both in prose and in poetry, "Composition in the Contemporary Time," written by H.H. Narathipphrapanphong:

> We all know that composition is divided into two principle genres: one is *niphontakarn* (prose) and the other *kaaveekan* (poetry). One of the mistakes that shames our poets, belittles them when compared to other national poets is that we only tie our poetry either to the most elegant and complex elements of poetry in Pali tradition or, on the radically opposite side, to English compositional rule. Regardless of how great a Thai poet is, we cannot afford that elegance and complexity because of the limitation our language and syntax. Their languages can be adapted—played into many forms. But for our language, we only have *sathana* [a form of Pali syntax]. […] It all sounds unpleasant—either too *farang-ja* (too Western) or too archaic. If we are going to survive this change, our language must only go toward *charoen* (civilized). We need to tolerate all these strange idioms and familiarize ourselves with them. This will allow the previous generation to become accustomed to them as well."[108]

Traces of a struggle to locate Thainess in the Thai language is noticeable in this excerpt. The two bifurcated traditions that we find in Narathipphrapanphong's statement are, the archaic elegance as represented by the Pali language and the new elegance as represented by the English language. The author describes how the adjustment into these two

[108] H.H. Narathipphrapanphong. "Karn taeng nang seu nai samai patjuban" ("Composition in the Contemporary Time"), *Dusit Smith: Chabubphiset tawaiphrapornchaimongkol* (*Dusit Smith: Special Edition, Blessing to the King*) (n.p., 1920), 5. http://www.car.chula.ac.th/rarebook/book2/Clra54_0001/mobile/index.html.

traditions all result in some "unpleasant sound" of the Thai language and that we should aspire for the Thai language to go toward *kwam charoen*—a term that has been widely used in the studies of Thai modernity as what represents a strategic modernization and the image-making process of being *siwilai.*

The article was written during the reign of Vajiravudh noted for the rise of nationalism and the development of modern Thai literature. Siam witnessed an unprecedented increase of prose publications, both fictional and non-fictional. Even though poetry—or good poetry—as composed by the ruling class did not circulate widely during this period, prose genres thrived. There was a growing number of literary journals, film magazines, journalistic writings and translation of Western texts. The majority of writings found in *Phappayon Siam,* the film magazine central to our discussion, were written in prose, representing the dominant trend of the era. Prose emerged as the medium of communication and reason, that which transmits Western knowledge into Thai[109] and makes us modern. Most importantly, prose carried the imprimatur of the ruling elite classes as a proper medium of modern knowledge.

[109] King Chulalongkorn stated his will in one of the letters sent abroad to one of his sons: "What I anticipate from your studies is that you are capable of translating foreign languages texts into Thai and vice versa. With this ability, I will consider your studies beneficial." See Anthology of His Majesty the King Chulalongkorn's royal speeches, laws and regulations for Thai Royal Students Studying in Europe." See Chulalongkorn, *Phrabaromrachowat phrabatsomdej phrachaoyuhua ratchakarn tee ha kub kodmai khorbangkub samrab nakrean Siam tee rean wicha yoo na prathet Europe* (*The Royal Words of His Majesty the King Chulalongkorn: Laws and Regulations for Siamese Students Studying Oversea in Europe*), n.p., n.d., 29, http://www.car.chula.ac.th/rarebook/book2/clra53_0094/mobile/index.html

Poetry, with its outlook and attachment to the pre-modern religious era, was consequently overshadowed and overlooked in accounts of Thai modernity.[110] However it did not entirely disappear. Some literary journals kept publishing traditional poems back in the 1910s',1920s'. The kings themselves were considered great poets of Siam composing a large number of all types of Thai poetry. Outside the royal court, emerging novelists and writers still submitted some short poems in vernacular genres to literary journals including the film journal, *Phappayon Siam.*[111] Yet, in terms of Thai historiography there are very few studies that connect poetry to Thai modernity. Perhaps, poetry with its claim over a long cultural lineage, its proximity to a religious worldview and elitist cultural legacy did not quite align with the secularized and Westernized Siam at a time when modernity was overdetermined by technological innovations. In hindsight, it is not an overstatement to argue that the fact that poetry was usually left out from the discussions of Thai modernity was owing to the fact that its historical associations and formal affordances were not compatible with secular modernity or the telos of the developmental discourse. The dramatic contrast between the disinterest in publishing Thai poetry as I have shown earlier as well as the small number of scholarly studies on poetry and the noticeably increasing number of publishing activities in prose not only underlines a trajectory of Thai modernity motivated by the discourse of development but is also indicative of an unchanging discourse over poetry. A discourse that seems to

[110] Studies and academic publications on Thai poetry during the modernizing epoch were significantly limited especially in comparison to interests in the emergence of the modern Thai novel, prose and short stories. For one of the very few studies on poetry, see Suchitra Chongstitvatana, *The Nature of Modern Thai Poetry Considered with Reference to the Works of 'Angkhān Kanlayānaphong, Naowarat Phongphaibūn and Sučhit Wōngthēt,* (Ph.D Diss, University of London, 1984).

[111] Kulāp Sāipradit, one of the most important modern Thai writers, started building his career by submitting amateurish writings to *Phappayon Siam* magazine. See Kulāp Sāipradit, *Reung Kong Kao* (*His Stories*) (Bangkok: Dokya, 1986).

circulate the notion that poetry emanates first from the lost pre-modern past of the Kingdom—that it is a uniquely Thai. An untranslatable space that is uncontaminated by the Western knowledge and that needs to conserved.

Traditional Thai poetry also evolves around class division and social hierarchy in Siam. On the one hand, traditional Thai poetry shares a perennial and intact relationship with sacred institutions such as Brahmanism, Hinduism and Theravadin Buddhism, all of which condition a healthy sustenance of the powerful political institution of the monarchy. Note, for example, that all the intellectual reflections that I quoted thus far only come from the highest rankings of royal membership like His Royal Highness. This signifies a class-based privileged access to knowledge about poetry. The following statement written by Narathipphraphanphong would help emphasize the unbreakable bond between poetry—its long lineage that continues to connect poetry to the immemorial past of the royal kingdom—and its attachment to the continuity of the sacred institution of the monarchs: "*karn kavee* (poetry) will thrive only out of the royal patronage. Royal patronage only and more importantly than anything else. Because Thais—the Thai nationality—worship *chao* as our own lives."[112]

What I find extremely interesting here is the use of word *chao* to represent not only the kings but the whole royal bloodline. *Chao* is a term that continues to be used even after the Siamese Revolution in 1932, which overthrew the absolute monarchy, in order to refer to someone with a blood-related association with the Chakri Dynasty. *Chao* is also a word that can be combined with other words in order to signify superiority, for example, *chao klong,* which means possession or *chao cheevit,* which means the owner of

[112] Narathipphrapanphong, "Karn taeng nang seu nai samai patjuban" ("Composition in the Contemporary Time"), 22.

one's life. The dogmatism that lies in between the two sentences that I quoted above suggests an illogic between aesthetics, patronage, distribution and nationalism. In a way, *chao* is the owner of *karn kavee* (the making of poetry) as well as of one's life suggesting thus it is an absolute superior power. This association between poetry, wellness of one's life and the sacredness and patronage of *chao* can be found even today in Thai society where there is a strict tradition of composing elegant verses to humbly salute and give blessings on the occasion of any royal member's birthday.

The sacredness of the royal lives that are inaccessible to the commoners, yet, engrained in their lives through the availability of poetic traditions keeps the hierarchal classes intact through the very form of poetry. For example, it is very rare, as I mentioned, to see the form of *phushonkaprayatra chan* discuss anything other than the greatness of the kings or the enchanted world in the religiously inherited poetic tradition of Pali-Sanskrit. The auratic life of these sacred worlds reinforces not only an attachment to sacred, yet, tangible institutions like the monarchy but is also complicit in demarcating classes and in sustaining a strong hierarchical class division based on claims over legibility and accessibility, both of which come from merits done in previous lives—a belief that is translated from Buddhist karma-based belief and logic.[113] On the other hand, poetry that the commoners outside the royal court practiced was mostly lyric poetry or in *klong* and *glon* in Thai poetic tradition, both of which usually depict not only emotions but also their myriad activities and perceptions of the world. Content of *klong and glon* can greatly vary from agricultural activities, flirtatious romance between men and women to didactic lessons for women. Words used in this popular tradition are more vernacular

[113] See Vella, "The Past as Model," *Chaiyo*, 214-230.

while their formal structures are also less complex. The bifurcated tradition of these poetic practices always already underline a pedagogy that reinforces class division and would, as a result, address different groups, social capital and class involvement. A preference for one form or genre over the other foreshadows not only problems of hierarchy in the material reality of class division but also, I would argue, a form of discursive recreation and sustenance of power structure in Siam through literary and cultural forms and taxonomies.

Thus, the appearance of a *chan* in film magazine mostly in prose is certainly an attempt to undo these hierarchies and signals an epistemic shift in aesthetic practices. If prose writing and cinema were generally adopted and even promoted for modern sensibilities as opposed to Thai poetry's distance from the modern, then how can we make sense of the poetic choice of supposedly commoners outside royal court who decided to express their views of cinema via the high archaic form of poetry? How could we place this uncommon convergence between poetry and cinema in the convoluted web of cultural reforms and in the way film historians previously wrote about early Thai cinema? I ask whether this discovery—or rather, my interest in these three poems—can be read in terms of what Weihong Bao calls "competing moderns"?[114] I propose that a convergence between poetry and cinema is definitely not about right-wing nationalists pitched against the radical cinema of the left as in Bao's case. Rather, it is a battle of the commoner—an outsider to the elevated form reserved for the sacred institution—against the hierarchy of poetic forms. The convergence disrupts what the elevated form of poetry represents—an entire political class. Most importantly, in the aesthetic realm, it

[114] See Bao, *Fiery Cinema*, 156, 176.

modernizes the high poetic art of the upper class and suggests that it can also be conflated with cinema, an Other that needed to be domesticated and nationalized.

After a period of the royal elitist patronage of cinema[115], cinema during the 1910-1920s' gradually became part of the urban modern sentiment.[116] *Phappayon Siam* was, for example, owned by a Chinese-Thai merchant, and operated with a call-for-submission system open to the Thai public[117], Siaw-song-euan Sriboonreung[118]. This public ownership is an important case that demonstrates not only the public's interest in cinema but also an expansive nexus of spectatorial engagements that was expressed via literary devices and that started to shift away from the dominant epistemic worldview and aesthetic practices of the ruling class.[119]

If cinema gradually became popularized in the language of prose, in the experience of modernity and urbanization, and through the import of a great number of Hollywood films, the collection of these archaic form of poems in *Phappayon Siam* poses an important question: what do we, especially both film historians and Thai historians,

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[115] Boonrak Boonyaketmala, "The Rise and Fall of the Film Industry in Thailand 1897-1992," *East-West Film Journal* 6, no. 2 (1992), 62-98.

[116] Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, 44-45 and 51-52.

[117] In *Phappayon Siam* no.1, vol 15 published on 10 July 1922, the magazine published an advertisement for public submissions to a new column, "Siam Parliament," which was intended to discuss matters about cinema and/or receive the public's complaint regarding spectatorial behaviors at theatres.

[118] The three syllables of his first name explicitly indicates the typical composition of a Chinese surname and family name. Yet, the last name, Sriboonreung—a set of compound Thai words that mean "more good merits," complies with the Family Name Act imposed by the government of Vajiravudh in 1913. This minor detail about the name of the owner of the magazine allows me to delineate a shifting phrase that differs from Boonyaketmala's paradigm of cinema and the royal patronage.

[119] I follow the ideologically censoring standards posited by Karl Marx in a famous passage: "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, *i.e.*, the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual force*. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it." In the case of Siam, the ruling class does not only connote the bourgeoisie but also the elites of the old regime. As I flesh out this project into a manuscript, I hope to engage more directly with the implication of "classness" in the formation of early national cinema in Siam/Thailand. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German Ideology," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 172.

gain from such unusual convergence? I see this aesthetic convergence as a domain in which negotiation between aesthetics and politics could be investigated in order to reveal the imbalanced power relationship among different social classes. Apart from the unusual appearance of the term, *pracha* (the people) in the space of high form of poetry, cinema as the newness that occupied the entirety of the poems conceptually breaks the long lineage of traditional poetry that had its claim over certain modes of thinking and operations of power in the Thai society. In other words, not only does the form of *chan* adhere to the cinematic motion but the messages about cinema in these poems also makes cinema a new poetic object that is quite unconventional both to the modernizing epoch of Siam and to our notion of early cinema. What we see is not the emergence of the democratizing potential of cinema on its own but rather the adoption of this potential within a formerly unique Thai space of poetry. This is an instance of intermedial relationship that revises not only the way we look at early cinema in general but also at the way in which we can form a critique of certain hegemonic narratives about contemporary Thai history.

Apart from *phushongka phayatra chan,* the rest of the collection consists of another two issues of archaic *chan*-structured poems. The entirety of the three poems unmistakably constitutes the holy number of the Three Jewels of Buddhism and each of them also follows the tradition of the composition of *chan* in a strict manner. The first *chan, phushongka payatra chan,* not only represents cinema with its formal structure as I discussed in the first section but also narrates how cinema became a popular "club," how it showed moving images and even became a "museum" (*pipittapan*) of directed moving images. The second *chan, wasandhadhilok chan,* with a different format and metric rule,

enumerates the interior of an unspecified theatre—giving descriptive ekphrastic details on the ceiling, lamps, chairs, the screen and even the projecting room. A very interesting literary device appears on the last line where the poet put *phappayon* (cinema) next to *tiwa* (a formal poetic word for "daytime"). The word cinema replaces the term *ratree* (night time) in a common poetic idiom, *tiwa and ratree* (day and night), which is often used to describe an everlasting bond of two objects of two different natures. That cinema replaces the night and exists in parallel to the daytime creates a new unconventional imagery in Thai poetic tradition wherein cinema not only holds its poetic figurative potential but also operates *literally* in darkness—as in the nighttime. This is a case where the unconscious reflexivity of the poet/cinemagoer over the material reality of modern media leaps into a fictional poetic space, which has long held its force against the new waves of modernity. In return, the figurative creation in the poem emanates a new possibility for historians—revealing dynamics of imaginations around early Thai cinema that can thus become a new way to approach the historiography of modern Thai history, early Thai cinema and early cinema in general.

While I have carefully attended to the convergence of the religious and the modern worlds in the formal structure of *chan,* to the liberation of cinema from the royal patronage and to the increasing number of prose publications under the modernizing period of Siam, I have not yet sufficiently explored an important subject—the agency of the people, or rather, commoners especially under the constraints of social status in the absolute monarchy. I found the commoners as playing a crucial role both as a repeated topic throughout the three poems and as an active part in establishing Thai cinema as a new business industry. As we have discussed, during the last two decades before the turn

of the century, cinema lived its social life in the royal court rather than in the streets of Bangkok. Though there were incidents of public screenings, they were more or less part of the royal ceremony sponsored by the royal government themselves.[120] But after the arrival of Watanabe Tomoyori, the Japanese showman in 1904, cinema became a new trendy business for both Thais (mostly Sino-Thai) and foreigners.[121] There were a lot of new theatres being enthusiastically built across Bangkok.[122] This helps decentralize the distribution of cinema that was previously in the hands of the upper classes and allows cinema to become a new entertainment of and for the public outside the royal court. However, due to the limited archive of cinematic activity on the grass-root level as opposed to the rich archive of cinema being a gift granted by the monarch and later a commodity, scholars have long struggled to approach early Thai cinema in significant ways that engage with the commoners. Film magazines, promotional prose writings and even film screening advertisements became valuable materials in reimagining the cinematic life in Siam and to some degree in Southeast Asia. As this essay has demonstrated thus far, the history of early Thai cinema can be reimagined and rewritten beyond the project of modernization that prioritizes a rational worldview via prose form. It is also in the poetic imagination and formal construction of poetry that the notion of

[120] Royal news about a prince filming moving pictures and would exhibit them to the public for the first time in *Bangkok Times,* 27 November 1903, Royal announcement about an exhibition of royal pictures on royal births, King Chulalongkorn's trips to Europe in *Bangkok Times,* 9 May 1908.

[121] See Yoneo Ishii and Toshiharu Yoshikawa, *Khwam samphan thai-yipun 600 pi* (*600 Years of Thai-Japanese Relations*) (Bangkok: Mulanithi khrong-kan tam-ra sangkhomsat lae manusat, 1987), 186-88.

[122] In 1906, there was, for instance, one new theatre owned by *Nai* Seng Huat, a Chinese merchant from Singapore. This was a due to a regional expansion plan of the Pathé Company that had a branch office established in Singapore. See *Chum-num phapphayon,* 9 October 1941. In the following year, there were a couple more theatres that opened for the Siamese public, including the Khrung Thep Cinematograph, renamed from The Royal Vitascope, and the Bangrak Cinema. See *Bangkok Times,* 18 December 1907 and *Bangkok Times,* 14 February 1908.

popular cinema or the commoners' emerging vernacular modern form as well as the shapes and contours of the hitherto overshadowed social life of the commoners take place.

The last poem of the collection published on July 17, 1922—the one that consists the term *prachachon*—was composed and entitled *karb chabang 16.* Another section that was put adjacent and as part of the whole poem was entitled *intarawichien chan.* Combined together, these two separated poetic forms, *karb,* on the one hand, and *chan,* on the other, follow a tradition of *kam chan.* This poetic tradition is usually reserved for chanting verses either for religious ceremonies or celebrations of royal births. In a long articulation of the poem (42 lines in total), the poet referred to *prachachon* in their content, "*leng-lao-prachachon-chom tarng-nom-niyom darn-duang-reudee-preda,"* in their rushing toward a showtime, in their noisy talks, "*eeu-eeung-ard-jae-jan,*" that proved their excitement. The poet's observation also touches on the colorful clothing, *"ngarm-kreung-taeng-kai-tra-karn pis-peng-leng-lan lee-sri-la-yarng-tarng-pan,"* and on the diversity of people who came to the theatre. In this poem, a new poetic focus is on the people and their mediascape, which, is extremely new and surprising as a setting of this poetic tradition. For those who have been in the tradition of Thai literary studies, this piece of literary work sheds light on the way in which we can understand the dispersion of high art form among the less privileged public, and introduces us to some new inquiries in the politics of modernization and intervention from the below.

As a film historian, I consider this poem and its emphasis on the people-scape as proffering the contested site of Siamese modernization a new character and a more

nuanced complexity. I propose that amidst the convoluted networks of cultural and aesthetic creations and political agenda of different classes, the people's poems emerge as part of these competitive aesthetic regimes. That *karb chabang 16* referred to a new social life and culture of the Bangkok population that occurred in association to the democratized space of the theatre is perhaps not quite surprising to film historians. However, what I found extremely interesting lies in *intrawichien chan,* the last poem of the collection that was attached to *karb chabang 16* as part of the tradition of *kam chan.* The oeuvre began with a prayer to the Three Jewels of Buddhism as seen in these following verses:

ขอคุณพระทรงพุท	ธวรุตมาจารย์
ทั้งธรรมะไพศาล	นฤโฆษคุณากร
อีกส่ำพระสงฆ์สา	วกอาริยาธร
แห่งองค์พระชินวร	ธประสิทธิ์พระศาสนา
(*khor-khun-phra-song-Bud*	*dha-warut-ma-jarn*
tang-Dhamma-phai-sarn	*na-reu-kosa-kunakorn*
eak-sam-phra-Sankha-sa	*waka-ariyathorn*
haeng-ong-phra-chinnaworn	*dha-phra-sit-phra-sassana*)

In the great merits of Buddha, Dhamma, Sangkha, the poet demanded that this theatre be blessed. The poet also introduced all guardians in *jatulokkabarn*—a heaven stage closest to the secular world of human beings in the Buddhist cosmology—to land on this theatre and to protect it from all sorts of danger and decay. In addition, all past Rama kings, the notion which automatically alludes to the Chakri Dynasty whose claims to the throne lie in the embodiment of Rama, the most respected and well-known heroic protagonist in the Indian epic *Ramayana*, were mentioned for having a lineage of *baramee.* This attribute is usually translated as charisma yet implies a profound belief in "an accumulation of merits from past lives, secured in this one by good deeds and righteous rule."[123]

The incorporation of both sacred religious institution and the disenchanted masses in *kam chan* significantly complicates any claims that formerly consider Thai cinema only as a commodity or a granted gift. On the one hand, the poems are concerned with the infrastructure aspect of the new media of the time period while treating it as an opportunity and a proof not only of urbanization and modernization but also of collaborative labor of the commoners that thus created a new social public site and figure for cinema. On the other hand, by adopting the archaic traditional form of *chan* and by maintaining a close tie to the religious sacred institutions that have long claimed their authority and validity over the politics of the nation, the poet managed to introduce, and further integrate, cinema to the realm of what is uniquely Thai. This instance of convergence between cinema and elevated art form of poetry can thus be read as another

[123] See David Teh, "Baramee: The Relational Art and the Ethics of Withdrawal," *Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 130-133.

attribute of the nationalistic sentiment and of the possessiveness over what is Thai—a commonly pervasive discourse in the anti-colonial era of Chulalongkorn and Vajiravudh.

III. Vernacular Cine-lyrical Poetry

I have thus far demonstrated an intimate association between cinema and Thai poetry that raises not only aesthetic questions on the hierarchical taxonomy of art forms but also political ones concerning Siam's strategic anti-colonial nationalism. On that note, archaic elevated form of poetry, *chan* in the previous section operates in a way that modulates the class-divided boundary between cinema as an Other and poetry as what is superior and uniquely Thai. The result was the archive of three elevated poems written by an anonymous commoner in a public space of a modern film magazine. It is thus not an overstatement that the marriage of two forms occasioned both a desire and an emergence of word plays, for example, as seen in instances of neologisms and new poetic objects, as well as of hitherto buried spectatorial reflections on cinema.

To further elaborate and insist on spectatorial engagement as a significant part of cinematic life in the historiography of early Thai cinema, I want to draw attention to two more poems found in later issues of *Phappayon Siam.* One was published in the issue of July 31, and the other in the issue of August 14 of 1922. These two poems differ drastically from the series of elevated *chan* discussed previously. First they differ because of their forms, which also define their differences in generic themes and focuses. The first poem that I will discuss here was written in *niras* and the other follows the structure of syllable numbers of *glon*. *Niras* has two varieties, one that is drawn from *glon,* the other from *klong.* The one that we will analyze is a *glon niras. Glon* is generally known to be

less complex, more loosely structured and vernacular in their traditional practices.[124] What is unusual about these poems is the fact that they grasped cinema as what is central to their composition. The first one published on July 31 offers a very interesting way in which an urban space of Bangkok in 1922 operated as well as a reconstruction of a poetic genre, *niras,* a type of romantic travelogue poetry that has long been part of the popular poetic expression in the Rattanakosin era of the Chakri Dynasty. The other one is also thrillingly inventive since it was probably the first Thai *glon* to review something quite foreign to itself—a Hollywood film, *The Three Musketeers* (1921). Even though my archival research has so far only led me to encounter a very small number of poems written about cinema,[125] I contend that such emergence of unusual poetic traditions contributes enormously to the historiography concerning both early Thai cinema and Thai literary history and that such discoveries emphasize the significance of intermedial inquiries and of theoretical revisions with regard to the methodological approaches to Thai studies.

In contemporary Thai literary history, it is mandatory to mention *niras,* a rather romantic genre of poetry and an individual diary recording things encountered during a trip in poetic form. As I mentioned, *niras* as a variety of *glon* is known to be quite popular and less complex in its linguistic choices and in their rhyming structure. *Niras* is practiced very commonly across different social classes. One of the most famous poets of *niras*, Sunthorn Phu, had his life background outside the royal court in Rayong implying

[124] "The Glon is of indigenous origin. It prescribes no rhythm, but consists simply of a number of syllables in each line, usually six or eight, rhyming according to a system [..]" See Bidyalongkorn, *Essays on Thai Poetry*, 37.

[125] I refer to the archival research I have done in the summer term of 2017 and 2018. As of May 2020, I have gained more valuable archival materials that I will investigate further.

that he and his family belonged to the commoner class. It was not until later when he had produced many literary works that he then became the royal court poet in the early period of the Ratnakosin era ruled by the Chakri dynasty. Sunthorn Phu was taught as part of mandatory Thai literary canon and most of his important works that are taught and remembered are his *niras*—his recollections, lyrical contemplations and romantic expressions during his trips from one province to another.[126] Sunthon Phu became the one who popularized *niras* and defined the genre with the sentimental lyricism and myriad descriptive details about things, places as well as people encountered, affective reactions of the poets and their romances, mostly with women. Apart from *niras* being popular among poets across classes and social backgrounds, some elites were also fond of this poetic genre. Chulalongkorn, for example, also composed one of the most well-known *niras* when he, the first Asian monarch, was on his journey to Europe.[127]

Some of the characteristics of *niras* that I brought up clearly demonstrate how this poetic form is closely associated with departure, journey, observation on new surroundings and emotional lyrical expressivity of poets. In "*Niras Phappayon*" ("*Niras* of Cinema") published in *Phappayon Siam* of the first year in the 18th issue on July 31, 1922, the poet also mentioned the experiences of being away from home and having to

[126] See Sapanayok Hor Phra Samoot Vajirayana (Council of Royal Library of Vajirayana), "Arthibai niras" ("Explaining Niras"), n.p., 1922: https://vajirayana.org/ประชุมกลอนนิราศต่างๆ-ภาคที่-๑-นิราศสุนทรภู่-๔-เรื่อง/อธิบายนิราศ.

[127] A *niras* composed by Chulalongkorn is "*Niras ratana*" ("*niras* of *the precious beloved*"). It was placed in one of the letters of the King's famous epistolary diary, *Klai Baan* (*Far from Home*) during his royal trip to Europe. See Chulalongkorn King, *Niras ratana*. (Bangkok: Sophonphiphattanakorn, 1927), http://adminebook.car.chula.ac.th/viewer/service/10588978788811207310412112079107501061128610084119776561613/4/0/viewer.html. Also, for further comprehensive study of *niras* compositions from the reign of King Chulalongkorn to the reign of King Bhumibhol Aduljadej, see Ratana Oseyimpry, "Niras Khamklon in the Ratanakosin period from the reign of King Rama V to the Present King : an analytical study," M.A. Thesis. (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1985), 1-2, 6.

travel. Surprisingly, in this case, it was not a journey across provinces or continents—it was simply a travel from one pier to another pier within Bangkok, or rather in the proximity of *phra nakhon*—an area in which royal residents were located. Quite intriguingly, the purpose of the travel was not for work or responsibility-related issues as in the cases of Sunthorn Phu or Chulalongkorn. This departure from home, on the contrary, was for a recreational purpose. More specifically, it was an excuse of the poet to leave home for a new movie that just arrived at a theatre.

นิราศรักจากเมียไปดูหนัง ในอกเกรียมกรองแทบพองพัง
สุดประหังความโศกวิโยกครวญ ตั้งแต่เย็นมิได้เว้นความโศกเศร้า
เพื่อนเขาเร้าเร่งไปใจโหยหวน เกือบทุ่มแล้วแก้วตาขอลานวล
ไม่กล้าชวนก็เพราะน้องท้องแก่เกิน จะลำบากมากทุกข์ยามลุกนั่ง
กระทบกระทั่งระวังอกระหกระเหิน จะถ่วงท้องเมื่อยเท้าเมื่อก้าวเดิน
แสนขัดเขินสุดระอาเจ้าคลาไคล ออกประตูดูเรือนฟั่นเฟือนจิต
เพื่อนสะกิดจวนเวลาช้าไม่ได้ ถึงแสนรักก็ต้องหักอาลัยไป
เพราะหนังใหม่เรื่องสนุกกว่าทุกที […]

This *niras* is about me leaving my wife to see a movie. My heart is burning down into ashes. I cannot bear the amount of sorrow and grief that I have been feeling from the evening. But my friend keeps nudging me even though I am still in grief. It is almost 7 p.m. now so I have to leave, my fair lady. I do not bother inviting you because you are in your late pregnancy now. You will have so much difficulty when you walk or sit. I cannot let you be bothered by discomfort or be overly cautious. I am afraid of your exhaustion and your embarrassment. I am

> now leaving and at the doorstep I already go mad. My friend pokes at me and says it is almost time—we can no longer delay the departure. I love you so, my love, but I need to go. You know it is because this new movie is promised to be greater than others.[128]

That the poet mourned over how sad and sorry he felt to leave his pregnant wife at home for this movie captures something very significant both about the tradition of *niras* composition and the cinematic culture that surrounded the poet at the time. There were very few studies that look at the popular culture, let alone cinematic social life, in Siam during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Most of them made claims over Siamese popular culture via prose literature, newspaper, magazines and content that were associated with gender and identity and social events.[129] This poem, on the one hand, opens up a venue in which poetry was associated with the popular culture during the increase in number of non-traditional works and the increase in demand and supply of Western concepts, materials and lifestyle. On the other hand, the fact that the poet sticks with the number of syllables proper for *niras* (noticeably obvious if one were to recite the poem), yet, twisting its content from conventional responsibility or work-related journey to a deliberately desired trip for a movie enables us to see how *niras* as a vernacular converges the locally extant forms to the new mediatic experience of cinema.

ถึงถนนพ้นเคหานัยน์ตาฝาด มองฟุตบาธเป็นที่นอนสมรพี่

[128] My translation seeks to deliver the messages of the poem in a comprehensible way. But it is important to acknowledge that the poetic form and complexities of word choices and rhyming structure from the Thai language are quite untranslatable, or, find no equivalence in the English language.

[129] See Barmé, "Visually Challenged: Graphic Critiques of the Royal-Noble Elite," 97-132 and "Evocations of Equality: Female Education and Employment," *Woman, Man, Bangkok,* 133-155.

เห็นขอทานปวดท้องป้องนาภี นึกแก้วพี่ปวดท้องร้องครวญคราง

(When I left the house, my vision got blurry. I saw the footpath as our bed, my lady. I saw a starving beggar stoking his stomach and I thought of you feeling pain from the pregnancy.)

Niras is known to operate within the logics of conflicts—internal personal desire versus external socially-imposed responsibility and the sense of being in relation to work/labor that one might contribute to the world. Even though not many scholars have touched on this conflict in detail, I want to propose that the façade of this logic of operation—leaving what, or rather whom, one loves to indulge in the greater environment that surrounds oneself on a journey—should be examined along with asceticism—the notion of abstinence from sensual pleasure in search for higher spiritual liberation. During the journey, especially as the poet experiences the sublimity of nature or the excitement of new surroundings, the poet often gives up on the overwhelming emotional grief and relates such impermanence and change to nature—that it is natural to part and to deal with grief. Yet, *niras* is different from such tradition of ascetic thought and practice because the abstinence in *niras* is rather a contingent condition forced upon the subject than deliberately chosen and because the descriptive narration of the experienced, and often visually seen, environments or surroundings always recurs and thus repeatedly evokes what or whom the poet departed from in a highly emotional way. What intrigues me is a modular pattern of affective experiences that starts with grief and with reasoning to mourn over unavoidable departure and then continues to either meditate on inevitable changes or to comment on the excitement over new scenarios, objects or surroundings during the journey. However, there are always returns of grief that resurface during the

process of identification, or rather, assimilation of new scenarios, objects or surroundings to the object of grief—the one from which the poet departed.[130] A cyclical pattern is remarkable in *niras'* logic of operation. As seen in the excerpt of the poem I quoted above when the poet assimilates a supposedly flat stomach of a beggar to the supposedly fullness of his wife's late stage pregnancy, I argue that *niras* operate to bind the departed object of grief to the new excitement via assimilative poeticization of the newly experienced—creating and claiming thus the discrete sameness out of dual polarized objects of differentiated natures. The poetic experience that *niras* creates can therefore be grasped as a failed attempt of ascetic life due to the recurring of newness and endless possibilities of being re-inscribed into pleasures—in this case visual, modern and urban pleasures—that are different, yet, made similar to the life before such encounter with these experiences.

What has been discussed above allows me to theorize some possible tendencies of popular social life in Siam that seemed to be characterized, on the one hand, by traditional vernacularism and, on the other, by surges of newness inscribed in the material reality of the period. This *niras* was entitled *niras phappayon* (*niras of cinema*) and the first verse specifies that it was a departure from the poet's wife for a movie. In a way, the observation that was made in this *niras* underlines the conflict between the dual inner desires—one, wanting to be domestic (taking care of a pregnant wife, being around the beloved one) and the other, desiring the public and what the public experiences (of cinema, more particularly) might entail. Additionally, this *niras phappayon* abstains from

[130] See Ratana Oseyimpry, "Niras Khamklon in the Ratanakosin period from the reign of King Rama V to the Present King : an analytical study," 2-5.

the narrative of asceticism, which is conventionally emphasized in the poetic narrative as a consequence of departure and as part of the struggle of the journey—by presenting another conflicting pleasure right from the moment and the reasoning of the departure. By announcing two conflicting pleasures from the beginning of the narrative of the poem, the poet underscores how one overcomes the other—that this was not a non-zero sum game. In this case, the domestic life was defeated by the decision to go out for a newly arrived movie. The resolute choice of cinema over domestic life had already been desired by the subject (the poet) from the beginning and not at all forced upon him. The mourning for the wife and domestic life appears antiphrasis and clearly emphasizes the victory of the new entertainment—cinema—even more. Consequentially, the assimilative process that conventionally renders grief of departure or of longing of a beloved one more sorrowful and that usually underlines the ascetic lifestyle and inner turbulence becomes almost like an outright sarcasm in *niras phappayon.* Thus, asceticism and its consequential spiritual redemption therefore do not have a logical position in this case of modern experiences. There is only a rush and aspiration toward new experiences of modern entertainment that has already been assimilated into the way in which one expresses inner sentiments or even lived one's domestic life.

As I mentioned, a large number of *niras* were conventionally about departures and long journeys away from home. In *niras phappayon,* what happened on the level of proximity and distance was quite opposite to the convention. If we follow the clues of location in the poetic narrative, we can see that the poet only walked briefly to reach a pier (arguably either from the same side of the river Chaophraya or from the different side), took a boat and disembarked at another pier, *Tha Chang,* which still exists today.

The poet briefly mentioned the fact that this pier was known formerly to be the location where elephants from outside of Bangkok disembarked for the city's use. It informs us that the practice was no longer available since it became a pier for public transportation. In the same lyrical manner, the poet identifies the boat flowing obstructively to the stream of water to the unconstructive distressing temperament of his wife. He then arrived at *Tha Chang* and saw lots of rickshaws that resembled how his wife would pull him to certain direction out of her anger. The chaotic scene of an urban space was made analogous to the chaotic scene of a gendered domestic interpersonal realm. It is also very interesting to think about the cinematic and urban space and pregnancy together as the poet suggested in his *niras.* One thing that becomes clear about this unusual association between this poetic form and cinema is that it thrives on the experiences of a new urban space and an assimilative process of the external modern experiences into a private one. In a way, my analysis emphasizes that the process of understanding of this urban cinematic culture among the city habitants is a two-way process, formally identical to the generic convention of assimilation in *niras*—that the cinema or modern urban space out there also requires both a personal internalization into a private space of thoughts and sentiments as well as an externalization of thoughts, sentiments and processed experiences into an aesthetic work like that of a poem—of *niras*.

The last contour of the poem that I want to touch on is a possible mapping and cartography that can be made out of this cine-lyrical *niras* poetry. It is extremely difficult for Thai film historians to locate the physical space of cinema when most of the face and façades of the city have dramatically transformed throughout the twentieth century and thus left no trace to where movie theatres of the first era were located, let alone to how

moviegoers might commute. In this poem, however, the poet referred to specific important locations that can still be found today in Bangkok. The poem referred to three significant locations: *Tha Chang*, *Wat Mahatat*, a respected temple in the area of *Phra Nakhon* and is part of the touristic area near the Royal palace today, and the Ministry of Defense. The poet first disembarked at *Tha Chang*, then mentioned the chaotic scene at the pier where elephants were found there and where rickshaws men were busy dealing with the traffic ("ถึงท่าช้างที่ช้างเคยลงท่า ช้างเป็นบ้าหน้าหนาวเกรียวกราวไล่ ทั้งรถคนฉุดชักหักเบ่งไป เหมือนสายใจไล่พี่ตีตะบิน"). He then decided to use a shortcut into the temple, *Wat Mahatat*, and referred to the calmness of the temple as opposed to the temperament of his wife. Finally, he walked to the Ministry of Defense. All these three locations were found right at the same place as in 1922. With help of today's map-visualizing technology, I decide to recreate a possible itinerary from these poetic clues in the attempt to find an unknown movie theatre (see fig. 1).

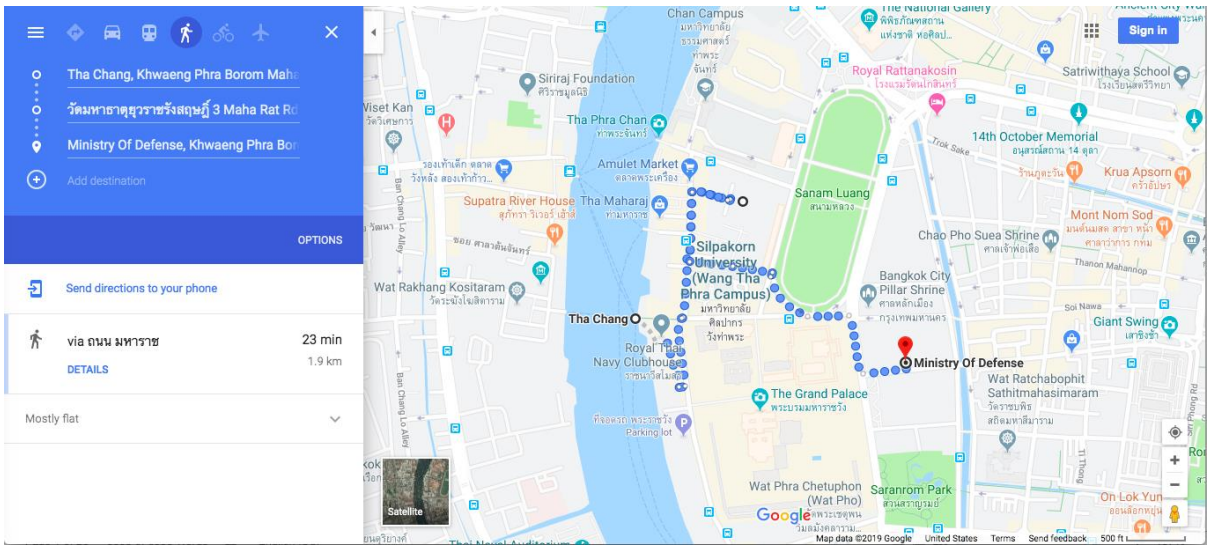

Figure 1. Google Map, from Tha Chang to Wat Mahathat to Ministry of Defense. Created in June, 2019.

We can see that these three locations are within walking distance and is in the area of the Royal Grand Palace—a royal residential area during the reign of Chulalongkorn and Vajiravudh. Since the poet did not mention which movie theatre he was going to, I had to rely on these three locations and on one last clue: a tram at the Ministry of Defense that the poet hopped on and wrote about at the ending of this cine-lyrical poem. Interestingly, this seemingly unusual cine-lyrical journey becomes accurate historical evidence since it matches the existence of the first tramline located on *Lak Muang* road right next to the Ministry of Defense. Today, we can still see some of the traces of the tramline that the poet traveled with—the one that took him to the unknown theatre (see fig. 2 and fig. 3).

Figure 2 The green line shows the location of the first tramline on *Lak Muang* Road. The square white building is the Ministry of Defense, Courtesy of the author of the blog. See Memoirs of a Oxide Catalyst Research Group, "Rotrang sai bangkhorlhaem memoir no. 52" ("Bangkhorlhaem Tramline: memoir no. 52"), http://tamagozzilla.blogspot.com/2014/01/mo-memoir-thursday-2-january-2557.html.

Figure 3 A trace of the possible tramline that the poet might have taken to go to the theatre. This trace of the demolished tramline can still be seen today on the street next to the Ministry of Defense. Courtesy of the author of the blog. See Memoirs of Metal Oxide Catalyst Research Group, "Rotrang sai bangkhorlhaem memoir no. 52" ("Bangkhorlhaem Tramline: memoir no. 52"), http://tamagozzilla.blogspot.com/2014/01/mo-memoir-thursday-2-january-2557.html.

An important clue that this tramline offers is that it is the starting point of *Bangkholaem* line of which its first stop is the station on *Charoenkrung* road. This road is known to be the area of most pioneer movie theatres during the 1920's including *Siam Phappayon,* a theatre that was owned by Siaw Sriboonreung, the owner of the film magazine *Phappayon Siam.* Even though we can only make a speculative guess about the destination of the poet, what is more important is the fact that this hitherto overlooked poem that was written probably by an amateurish poet and was left in the most obscure place in the National Archive could potentially enable a historical version of visualized urban space of Bangkok. More importantly, it offers a way in which a vernacular expression was then associated quite closely to the experiences, material reality and

mobilization via modern transportation occurring in the urban space of Bangkok. The experiences narrated in this *niras* in return reshape the aesthetic and literary convention of *niras* allowing us to see a possibility of convergence of experiences in an alternative light—at the very least, in light of this commoner, moviegoer, poet's eyes and experiences. Eventually, a cine-lyrical *niras* written in 1922 just became a popular entertainment for the local also works as an evidence of a fan culture that seemed to be growing in urban areas of Siam.

This led me to the last poem found in the 20th issue of *Phappayon Siam* of August 14, 1922—the one that surprisingly sought to review a Hollywood movie, *The Three Musketeers* (1921). The poem was entitled *glon chom glaew tahan sam gloe* (*poem praising the Three Musketeers).* As this chapter has emphasized so far, in the popular tradition of Thai poetry, *glon* is placed more as what is common and accessible in the hierarchy of aesthetic realm and is also practiced more pervasively among different classes. For example, *glon* can be religious Buddhist verse used among monks or be part of an athletic sport like traditional long-boat paddling competition. Perhaps because of how common and omnipresent in various types of activity this type of poetry is, *glon* is almost a metonymy of Thai poetry as a whole. This can be understood with a popular idiom, *jao bot jao glon,* which is often used to refer to either someone who is poetic or knows how to use rhetorical words for their own service. In other words, *glon* plays a more quotidian role in the life-world of the Thai language than other types of poetry such as *chan* or *lilit,* which have a more complex composition and hold a rather sacred status.

For many possible reasons, varying from the degree of familiarity with such poetic type, availability of such poetic verse in the discursive linguistic notion or even for

its social omnipresent life, it might not be surprising that the poet selected *glon* as a poetic form proper for their film review. Yet, the fact that the tradition of early film reviews in Thai was usually in prose and not in verse evokes a new set of questions around the aesthetic reform during the period of Siamese modernization. If we usually rely on early film reviews in prose for our notion of cinematic social life and spectatorial engagement with the movies, now in the case of this *glon* praising *The Three Musketeers,* what are some of the theoretical concepts that emerge and that are similar or different from film reviews in prose? I also question the purpose of the poem and I ask whether it sought to promote any type of media literacy among the public. What are some of the issues it informs readers of —if it does at all? And if so, did it rely on any aesthetic notions in order to align its informative aspect or its legibility about the movie to the readers?

It is not uncommon to notice that film review is a genre of writing that has its own specific goal and formal construction. One can say that this genre of writing contributes to film studies in a dual way: it focuses on film texts while emphasizing the mutual relationship between the spectator and cinema. This poetic film review, however, focuses not on giving accurate information about the film text (the movie, *The Three Musketeers*) but rather on the spectatorial reactions and miscellaneous parts of social life that form a scene of a film screening and even a structure of cinematic industry of the period. The poem started with a feet describing the sound of the drum and the leaflets flowing onto the street. On my first read, I thought that the first few feet referred to the first scene of *The Three Musketeers.* After having seen the first scene of the film and reread the whole poem multiple times, I realized that the first feet and the rest of the first section of the

octameter did not reference the film text at all. On the contrary, they depicted a culture of local film promotion in Siam mentioning the drumming sound that grabbed people's attention, the way they disseminated the film's leaflets into the air and the convivial atmosphere of the public when hearing the news about the new movie coming to theatre.

What we also learn from this poetic film review is how the early Thai cinephiles reacted toward this public promotion. The poet referred to them as *nak leng,* of which the closest literal translation must be 'hooligan' in English. Yet, *nak leng* in this case does not depict any pejorative connotation since it was combined with an act of *doo nang* (watching a movie). *Nak leng doo nang* together has become a popular idiom that refers to cinephiles in Thailand even until today. After deploying this word, the poet curated a set of phrases that demonstrated loud reactions, lively anticipation and anxious impatience of the cinephiles while they waited for Sunday, which was the day of the first screening, to arrive. Once Sunday finally came, the poet mentioned the fact that they had to wait until nighttime, which gave clues to how screening times were run in 1922. The poet referred to everyone as rushing in and trying their best to seat themselves to wherever they used to sit. This implicates a sense of habit that was formed as part of the social cinematic life in Bangkok in 1922. Within the first 10 lines out of 28 lines of the poem, to which I will from now refer as the first part of the poem, we were informed about the social life with regard to early Thai cinema and could now visualize a spectatorial scene that surrounded the screening of a Hollywood movie in poetry—the most unusual writing format for typical film reviews.

The last part of the poem approaches both the film text and the reaction of the spectators to the moment when the film started. The poet describes that,

“ทันใดฉายเรื่องสามเกลอ ต่างคนต่างซะเง้อคอยหา” (“once the story of the three Musketeers started, everyone busily looked up at the screen.”) Then, the poet also discussed their reactions to the cinematic images and the quality of verisimilitude, for instance in this verse: “ยิ่งดูยิ่งได้เห็นจริง” (“the more we watch the more we see the real.”) The last four lines of the poem provide something quite intriguing. They do not discuss the film but narrated how the poet returned home and still pondered upon the cinematic images that he saw earlier that night. Even though these lines seem banal and might be taken as unimportant, especially since they do not seem to contribute to any conventional aesthetic value, I want my next point of inquiry to focus on this lyrical lines and the attitude toward and contemplation on the experience of the cinematic image and its relation to the *real.* Conventionally, in verse as opposed to Thai prose before the arrival of fictional prose in the 1887 and the first novel in 1915, the space of imagination and, one could say, fictional as opposed to actual or indexical reality is clear and quite respected. Incorporating the actual experiences of what looks real into the fictional poeticized space is an intriguing operation that allows this poetic film review to become a threshold of both forms and genres, crossing boundary between a film review—a writing that is usually consumed for both actual and opinioned information from the domain of what is fictional and creative. Thus, I find it very important to question how the tradition of composing a *glon* and of aesthetic possibilities that were strictly associated with this poetic form or were integrated into this lyrical review can also operate almost like a diary. If a film review in prose always works in relation to the promotion of a film, how do we place a film review in verse? If it is not informative, how would we theorize its functionality? Can we consider this poetry as a diary of the collective of spectatorial

engagement of the period? How would it promote media literacy or increase interest in the film? How could such promotion or lack of promotion along with the interest in verisimilitude of the image get played out, discussed and become inflated ? into the spectator's reality?

I would argue in response to the previous questions that we can also consider this poetic piece as a film diary, which is not atypical for film reviews. However, in opposition to film reviews in prose writings, *glon* is generically not designated for much information or criticism as part of the film reviewing process. What it does is that it performs the metric regulations, especially when alliterative and assonant sounds are very important, in order to describe the affective experiences of the spectators and to elucidate the lively reactions among the crowd. The message that we receive from this poetic film review is thus entirely different from conventional ones we read in prose—at least, because this film review was designed to be poetic and thus needs to limit itself to its generic conventions of primarily being descriptive rather than informative. While there was a lack of informative account of the movie, we learn much about those days of anticipation of the poet, film promotion culture before the movie arrived as well as how the poet was fascinated by the images even after he got back to his residence. Furthermore, the question of verisimilitude that I asked previously seems to complement the interest in recording the affective experiences toward a film in this case. That the question of looking real is not driven by any interest in unresolved philosophical questions—and that it stays quite mundane and worldly, at least as to how it adds up to the commoner poet's experiences of urban and film culture in this case of *glon* film review.

This sense of generic lack of belonging comes from the fact that the poet chose *glon* to review or praise the movie. In other words, the commoner chose traditional vernacular poetry to represent their cinematic experiences and culture. On the one hand, the choice of form is personal, yet, allows us to see a different scenario of vernacular expressions in relation to the experiences that cinema had provided. On the other hand, the relationship between cinematic images, experiences and tendency to relate them to their personal lived reality marks an interesting intimacy of the commoners toward cinematic culture and their persistence on the early forms of literature that could express their lyrical experiences. The combination of a modern subject matter and the way in which a Hollywood film was domesticated into the local expressions introduce us to a new scenario of the commoners where they were the main actors at making changes and producing hybridity of modern forms. Even though this poetic film diary may not make it to the archive of modern Thai literature, it stands as a proof that not only interrupts the tradition of prose writing, which has always been considered as part of the pillar of modernity in Thai studies and modern Thai literary history, but also provides a space in which Thai modernity can be examined from the ground below and in how it becomes available on the horizontal ground among the people. What these Thai traditional poems provide exceeds the discussions of early Thai cinema. It captures the possibilities of how poetry and cinema were mediated under a specific political context, and thus on a larger scale, manages to question our methodological approaches to the historiography concerning both Siam's anti-colonial modernization and early Thai cinema.

One of the pressing questions that this chapter has so far inquired into is how we can execute a reading of an archive that is not only unconventional for the

methodology but also underrepresented in the aesthetic realm of representation. While in the first section of the chapter, *chan* seems to challenge the separation of classes divided and reflected in the realm of aesthetic practices, this section with the focus on *niras* and *glon* negotiates the overlooked dispossessed sphere of the commoners and their vernacular expressions arguing for their contribution to how we could revise the history of early Thai cinema and their critique of aesthetic hierarchy that has long constituted the studies of Thai modernity. With help from these poems, I provided an inquiry into some possible intermedial relationships within vernacular expressions and translation of cinematic experiences that rely on some pre-established aesthetic notions already available in the language and its poetic traditions.

As a nation and a culture that was evolving under anti-colonial tension and in the interest of modernization, progress seems to be tantamount in the logics of Siam's protection of its sovereignty. I have sketched out in Chapter II how prose, and more importantly fictional prose, were part of the demonstration of such hypothesis. Yet, in return, poetry, its status and social interactions were quite overlooked in Thai studies and in Thai modernity so far. This chapter delves into the archive of Thai poetry about cinema for their potential contribution and for methods of reading and writing history that are more liberated. Since the ontological status of poetry lies not in knowledge but affects—in pathos, which is undermined in the quest for progress and national stability, what poetry offers is thus fixed in an affective trope and unaccountable imaginary world rather than in a reality simulated by a discourse of progress. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, social classes are intrinsically involved in this aesthetic taxonomy of poetry. For commoners, poetry lends itself toward form, functionality and temporality that are

entirely different from that of the elites and the monarchs. Among commoners, poetry lives a more performative transient life. And this has been proved by the two vernacular poems that I discussed above.

One thing that is quite certain in Thai studies is that very little about poetry has been mentioned in the landscape of Thai modernity. Another thing we can be sure of is that early Thai cinema has been termed with the association with the West and has been considered new and exciting. But now that we have added new materials to the archive, what cinema and poetry could do to the revision of the historiography concerning early Thai cinema has exceeded our expectations. Now that these two forms converged, we are signaled to a pivotal moment in the political realm of the pursuit of modernity—a moment of an emerging aesthetic of the modernizing nation of which many layers of the new and the old, of the high and low, of the legitimate and disenfranchised merge, collide and transpose onto one another and thus allow a space in which the enchanted world and the process of disenchantment in modernity get rearticulated.

In light of the fascinating archive of archaic traditional Thai poetry about cinema in *Phappayon Siam*, I have inquired both into the formal poetic aspect and the socio-political context around modernization, cultural competitive sentiment of Siam toward the West and inevitably hierarchical division in aesthetic practices as informed by different classes and their strict social responsibilities and constraints. My reading of the first poem of the collection, *phushongkapayatra chan,* challenges not only the historiography concerning early Thai cinema and its long kinship with prose writings in Thai literary history, but also it introduces a theoretical framework in which cinema and poetry are converged in novel ways that trouble the separation between secular

disenchanted cinematic experiences and the vernacular religious way of recording such experiences. The second section of this chapter expands on the latter to capture how the convergence between high traditional Thai poetry and the "imported" cinema might actually supply new conversations to the complex dynamics of Siam's anti-colonial modernization and its implication on cultural aesthetic practices of the commoners during the reigns of Chulalongkorn to Vajiravudh. On the one hand, this chapter showcases my attempt to partake in the current historiography of Siam's modernity and history of early Thai cinema as I see how such intervention might contribute to the larger scope of interest in the Southeast Asian cinemas and Southeast Asian studies in general. It is apparent, on the other hand, that I follow the path of many inventive contemporary film historians to provide alternative ways in negotiating some constraints that come from limited resources in early film archives in some national cinemas' contexts by closely examining both affective and formal aspects of the materials. In this account of poetry about early Thai cinema, I share with them a strong commitment to and a wishful future of many more archaeological and methodological endeavors in early cinema and film theory at large.

CHAPTER IV

CENSORING *MISS SUWANNA OF SIAM:*

FILM DIPLOMACY AND THE RULING CLASS' DOUBLE VISION

The experience of media modernity in Siam among the elites was framed both by anxiety and excitement; both by negative repulse to be like the colonial Other and by positive approval of the Other as a model for being *civilized* and technologically advanced. Adding to the extant scholarship in Thai modernity (and modernization), I have so far focused on media modernity and the shifts and turns in the formation of aesthetic and responses both of the ruling class and of the commoners. Given the project of modernization that characterized the Fifth and the Sixth reigns of the Chakri Dynasty of Siam (1868-1910 and 1910-1925), I have shown in the first two chapters that media modernity amplified both the strengths and the fears of an absolute sovereign power that strived to pass as a modern civilization for the approval of the world and simultaneously ruled its own subjects with an iron fist. On the socio-political level, this is unmistakably an anti-colonial, yet, royalist nationalist prototype. But on the epistemological and aesthetic levels especially vis-à-vis the arrival of media modernity such as fictional prose and cinema, I consider this condition a double vision of the ruling class which manages to mandate and filter how media modernity is supposed to be received as well as what should be considered good and appropriate for the Thai subject.

Let me first emphasize the relationship between the first half of this dissertation as we transition to this chapter. The analysis in this chapter builds on the previous discussions of epistemological construction of cinema among the elites but examines further how those concepts transformed into practices with real consequences both then

and beyond in the historiography of early Thai cinema. I have discussed in Chapter II how verisimilar prose as well as cinema and its capacity to index, both of which entailed a strong democratizing capacity, had enticed and yet unleashed the ruling class' anxiety emanating from the destabilized regime of truth that they held in control, and how this anxiety thus led to practices of interventions. My discussion on the case of *Sanook neuk* revealed that for the absolute sovereign to remain almighty and relevant, and yet, to achieve the goal of modernizing its subject, which inevitably entails risks of disenchanting them from their former epistemological worldview, a carefully crafted royally-mandated pedagogy, for example, with regard to fictional prose and a proper training of modern sensibilities were absolutely necessary. However, there was not yet any strategic control over cinema.

In 1910's, the period which coincided with the last years of Chulalongkorn's reign, private theatres and commercial film screenings by independent promoters increased in number in Bangkok. This new popular entertainment would later start flourishing in other provinces of Siam in 1920's onwards. However, private-owned theatres outside the royal court were operated only either by some noblemen, most notably by Momchao Alangkarn, or foreign promoters such as Watanabe Tomoyori that would be followed by European and Chinese merchants. The latter became one of the most important groups in the many decades to come with the establishment of the Phathanakorn Film Company in 1910. This also means that most of the films screened in Siam at the turn of the century up until twenty years later were mainly imported firstly from Europe and Japan until American and Chinese films took over the majority of the imports. The archive of film magazines from this period suggests that there was not yet

any local film production on a giant commercial scale but a large number of imports and influences from American Hollywood cinema.[131] So if we consider the growing global and domestic popularity of cinema, the monetary investments in movie theatres of Chinese-Thai and *farang* promoters in Siam and the rising number of imported Hollywood films per annum, it is not impossible to see why it was difficult for the elites to homogenize the understanding of cinema, nor could they monopolize the industry. Due to the democratizing multi-faceted versatile nature of cinema, it easily transitions into the imaginary of popular culture of the masses and began to take hold of Siam's market and public sphere. While the concerns of the ruling class seem to pry into the regime of truth and truth making, in Chapter Three, I argue that the commoners' traditional verses demonstrated how their reception of media modernity did not depart from the ruling class' problematics and problems with media modernity. I contended that in order for the commoners to take hold of a growing industry of a new medium of the era even without having their direct hands on the production, they domesticated the notion of cinema into their own language and aesthetic regime by adopting the archaic poetic form. In other words, media modernity was not primarily understood among the commoners for its indexical potential but rather for its creative fictional force that resembled their language of expression as well as their traditional aesthetic regime.

While previously I brought up the epistemological discussions of media modernity which differed between social classes and their discursive cultural trainings,

[131] See Scot Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, 312-313. There is also a record of the presence of a foreign office of the Universal Studio in Bangkok. See *The 1922-1923 Film Daily Year Book of Motion Pictures*, 409. Accessed on 1 March 2020, https://archive.org/stream/filmyearb1922192223newy#page/408/mode/2up/search/siam. In another American film journal, it even records the amount of exports to the Kingdom of Siam. See *The Film Daily (Jan-Jun 1924).* Online. 1 March 2020, https://archive.org/stream/filmdaily2728newy#page/884/mode/2up/search/siam.

this chapter focuses more specifically on the moment when cinema became extremely popular among the Thai public and on the coincidental contemporaneous event where the first royal collaboration in film production occurred. This chapter analyzes film production and distribution under the royal patronage of Vajiravudh as well as discourses of the ruling class around cinematic images. As we shall see in this chapter, I investigate the different receptions between two social classes: the Siamese people as audience of the film and the elites, who had direct involvement with the court and with the film production.

To be specific, this chapter revolves around arguably one of the most exciting and pivotal moments of film production and distribution in the history of early Thai cinema—that of the first feature film, *Miss Suwanna of Siam* (1923).[132] In most of the historical accounts of the early Thai history, *Miss Suwanna of Siam* was considered the very first Thai film. Yet, I want to discuss another story about the film—its being the first co-production of a filmmaking team from Universal Studio and local Thai talent mostly drawn from the royal court. I take this important event of production and distribution not only as part of the history of Thai cinema but rather as what reveals, yet again, a form of modern conflicts among the ruling elite class of Siam and particularly of the fragility of the sovereign under the absolutism and in the face of modernization. The argument that the possibility of owning or instigating national cinema could mobilize the people and their democratic sensibility is of course not new. However, what is quite interesting in the production, distribution and exhibition of *Miss Suwanna of Siam* lies in the radically different reception between social classes. *Miss Suwanna of Siam* not only exemplifies

[132] Year of production started in 1921 while records show that year of distribution including promotions, interviews and exhibition in theatres in Siam was happened in 1922.

the concerns over the potentials of cinema but also highlights the split of aesthetic sensibilities and cinematic cultures.

By ways of exploring the archive around the censoring of the *Miss Suwanna of Siam*, which stays up until today quite obscure, I contend that media modernity in Siam was conceptually developed out of a condition of double vision—a split of vision that simultaneously looked outward for progress and yet was also directed inward by the discourse of the superiority of Thainess—also, not to mention the top-down state-imposed pattern of distribution and reproduction of knowledge. In this contention, media modernity of Siam thrived under conditions of coloniality.

By coloniality, I refer to Anibal Quijano's argument about colonial Eurocentric legacies in the knowledge production—in his case—in Latin America.[133] But for Siam's case—though technically independent from the Western Empires—Siam always turns towards the West for modernization and yet applies colonial logics to the king's subjects through various means. I will argue that coloniality as a mode conditioned the production and circulation of early Thai cinema and incited a competitive relationship between cinema and existing aesthetic forms such as poetic drama. Again, this participates in the contention and main stake of this chapter in which I consider how competing modes of verisimilitude across prose, cinema and traditional theatre as well as an elite historiography structured the emergence of a royalist-nationalist media aesthetic and the initial reception of cinema in Thailand. *Miss Suwanna of Siam* and its afterlives presents an exemplary case in which film diplomacy and censorship both represent and yet deflate the sovereign power of Siam. I organize the analysis around three main phases in the life

[133] Anibal Quijano and Michael Ennis, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533-580. Project MUSE muse.jhu.edu/article/23906.

of *Miss Suwanna*—pre-production, production and reception—and I will end the chapter with some remarks on what resonance this case study of early Thai cinema has for the writing of film histories and, most importantly, for the claim over royalist-nationalist aesthetic that would continue to shape the form and genre of cinema in Siam for many decades later.

As seen in an imposed order to ban the film from being screened abroad, the discussion about *Miss Suwanna of Siam* also informs how, even decades later, the archive of early Thai cinema remains a site of *arkhē*—both a commencement and commandment, both a shelter of itself and a shelter from which, in this case, the memory of the violence of erasure, shelters.[134] On the methodological level, while reading my account of *Miss Suwanna of Siam*, one shall see that I propose an archival reading from the place of absence of a film text—resisting the notion that a history can only take shape from a hermeneutical approach to an existing object or that it needs an authority of a text to be activated. As discussed in Chapter II, one of the problematics that led me to this historiographical project lies in the hegemonic method of making a national history and in the figure of authority that long had access to the regime of history/truth. By reading both the absence and the presences of paratextual materials around the construction of the film text, I recreate not so much a completely new history of *Miss Suwanna of Siam.* Rather, I propose a version of *Miss Suwanna* that is more expansive, that holds accountable political forces and complexities around the fragility of the sovereign power, both of which played a crucial role in the co-production, distribution, and the afterlife of

[134] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008): 9.

the film. Let us start with one of the incidents that marked the film's afterlife to its contemporary audience.

On April 5th 1925—about 2 years after the first public screening of *Miss Suwanna of Siam,* the owner of the most popular theatre chain in Siam launched a line of women's perfume—"Suwanna's perfume" —named after the eponymous protagonist of what is putatively the first international co-production of Siam and Hollywood. In an advertisement this theatre-owner turned perfumier claims: "I am positive that we could never really forget about this film. And here is the souvenir from Miss Suwanna of Siam."[135] Despite this nostalgic material reminder, the film has unfortunately disappeared and so many decades later scholars and cinephiles are still rooting around lost reels and traces of this object of national cinematic pride.

This anecdote about *Miss Suwanna of Siam*'s perfume line, of which 400 bottles were sold in less than a week, illustrates the Siamese public's enthusiasm for this film. This popular frenzy was owing perhaps to an all Thai cast and the pleasure of viewing onscreen local attraction sites and customs. But, as I will show, this public response was partly orchestrated by the King's royalist government who hoped that Thai films might displace the growing market for Hollywood films in Siam, and yet the sovereign asked to ban the film from being screened abroad. What does the initial openness to co-production and bifurcated response to who might view tell us about the attitude toward cinema and media infrastructure in an uncolonized, yet, extremely class-stratified kingdom where the democratizing potential of modern media must be carefully managed? Secondly, this anecdote underscores how cinema, despite royalist efforts to the contrary, forges a

[135] 'Nang Sao Suvarna,' *Srikrung Daily* 10, no. 960 (3 June 1929): 58.

relationship with commodity culture. Furthermore, the perfume line evokes the ephemeral afterlife in other forms—in this case, it reemerged in the vaporizing form of an eau de toilette. Significantly, this perfume was not created by or named after a star but after a film title and its protagonist. Thus, this olfactory souvenir is not linked to the star as commodity but rather the way its history of production and exhibition passes into public memory. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, this anecdote lets the film reemerge regardless of its material absence. While a textual engagement with a lost film is impossible, this anecdote reminds that an archive is much more than a collection of film product but rather a space of multiple openings.

I take this invitation from the archive to focus on the official letters that track the complex negotiations entailed in this co-production and what they reveal of attitudes and understandings about cinema among the King, Thai royalist elites and the state. First, it is important to recall that the project of Thai modernization was not a result of Western colonialism but rather royally-mandated. This might account for the contrast between the government's promotion of the film and its enthusiastic reception among Siamese public and the anxiety among elites over the circulation of certain images outside Siam. While such co-productions are but another royally-mandated project of modernization; the technological veracity and promiscuous circulation of cinematic images put the sovereignty of the monarch at risk. I argue that this co-production of *Miss Suwanna of Siam* puts in place "a double vision" among the ruling class—which I define as an attitude towards and practice of diplomacy anxiously split by an ever-present awareness of bifurcated audiences—one was the domestic Thai audience who needed to be modernized, and the other was the international audience—an embodiment of threat to

the Thai monarchs, who needs prove of technological advancement of Siam namely via cinema.

On March 8th 1922, Prince Dewawongse, the King's chancellor at the Ministry of Foreign Affair, wrote his nephew, Prince Kamphangphet, the head of the Railway Department that a foreign team with full cinematographic equipment weighing around 24,000 lbs. has just arrived in Siam. The prince recalled that such teams had arrived before but "not a single one looked this well prepared."[136] The prince specified that the purpose of this missive was to inform his nephew, about these foreigners' intention. "They want to shoot moving images in Siam as much as we would allow. They want all the rest to see how Siam really is. Siam has so many admirable things to show."[137] Five days later, Kamphangphet writes back offering to facilitate this production, especially its search for film locations.[138] Heading the Railway Department, which would soon run a sub-department called Information and Film Unit, Kamphangphet was one of the few experts in Siam who had all the capital—knowledge, access, status—to sponsor this production. In a letter on March 13th he avers that Henry McRae —the lead filmmaker of this unit—seemed like an expert and a professional.

Since we have no record from McRae's team, we can infer along with the release date of the film in Siam, June 1923, that they reached an agreement and that the collaboration between Siam and Hollywood started sometime in 1922 after Kamphangphet's bill of approval. If we consider the history of motion pictures outside

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[136] Ministry of Foreign Affair, "*Reung Nai Henry McRae Ja Chai Roop Samrab Len Nang Nhai Krung Siam Teung Phubanchakarn Krom Rot Fai*" ('To Commander in Chief of Railway Department Regarding Henry McRae Wanted to Film a Movie in Siam", Volume 20/2120, 8 March 1922.

[137] Ibid.

[138] Ministry of Foreign Affair, "Reung Nai Henry McRae to Senabordee Kratuang Karn Tang Pratet" ("Regarding Mr. Henry McRae to Minister of Foreign Affair"), Document number 21419, 13 March 1922.

the West, this co-production represents an early instance of co-production and suggests that a national cinema is from the start a transnational cinema. Further, since the U.S. had no direct colonial interest in Siam that would account for such cultural exchanges, this co-production furnishes us with a history that has not yet been thoroughly explored. In contrast to contexts such as the Indian subcontinent or Korea where the dynamics of co-production are structured by colonial logics that favor the colonizer, co-production in the Thai context provides an opportunity for film to emerge as an instrument of diplomacy allowing this uncolonized nation and yet modernizing nation to gain an international cultural profile.

After the prince reassured his uncle of McRae's expertise, he mentioned that McRae was interested in filming the story of *Phra Ruang*—a local myth about a pre-modern King in the dynasty of Sukhothai that is considered the first reign and ancestry of Siam. This myth imagines a story of liberation of the Thai people from the Ancient Khmer occupation.[139] The prince specified that McRae did not want to just film any of the extant indigenous versions of *Phra Ruang* but rather he wanted to film the version he which "is currently under the King's patronage and is arranged to be played very soon." The prince is referring here to his half-brother, Vajiravudh, widely considered as a paradoxical figure—very westernized yet extremely nationalistic, very literary-minded and yet extremely militant. McRae wanted to film the King's adaptation of *Phra Ruang* from vernacular folklore to a Royal stage play in rhythmic poetic verse or *lakorn pood*. The play was intended to arouse national pride among the King's personal military troop and even became a standard text in secondary school. Evidence shows that

[139] Vajiravudh himself is one of the leading pioneers in creating and reproducing the heroic narrative about *Phra Ruang*. See Vella, *Chaiyo*, 209-213.

the King himself played the role of a loyal servant to the king, *Phra Ruang*. However, such a cinematic adaptation did not transpire. On the contrary, there is no evidence so far that any monarchs, not even the prolific King Vajiravudh, ever used film to record their theatrical creations.

Instead of *Phra Ruang*—an immemorial heroic myth—as the source for Thai film diplomacy on the international stage, we have (and of course in the material sense no longer have) *Miss Suwanna of Siam.* But before they settled on the story of *Miss Suwanna of Siam,* there were further twists in the story that have been overlooked in the past. On March 24th, another letter from the King's secretary to Kamphangphet states that "His Majesty the King had no availability to help Mr. McRae in any significant way. His Majesty also mentioned that *karn chai nang* (filmmaking)[140] involved different techniques from *lakorn pood* (a speaking play) with which His Majesty was most familiar and referred the U.S. team back to Kamphangphet for no other person has "better expertise in cinematography."[141] Though the letter seems to indicate a lack of time on the King's part, it must also be read as a rejection of the offer to collaborate as well as an acknowledgement of differences between the King's favored traditional aesthetic mode—*lakorn*—versus the foreign object—cinematography. This message is delivered with grace and generosity since the King also a patron of this production. The strategy of co-

[140] What is quite interesting is that the term *karn chai nang* actually means screening a film since *chai* means projecting. But the idiom *karn chai nang* used by Vajiravudh in this context and even in the letter from the Minister of Foreign Affair which referred to McRae's request for film production in Siam seems to give a definition of filmmaking rather than film screening. I am speculating that the changes in etymology around cinema also came with the development of the cinematic industry in Siam. At this point in 1922, since the word "filmmaking" and "film production" or *tam nang* and *palit nang* were not yet a possibility, it might not have occurred to the native speakers to distinguish between film production, filmmaking and film screening.

[141] Ministry of Foreign Affair, "Reung Nai Henry McRae to Senabordee Kratuang Karn Tang Pratet" ("Regarding Mr. Henry McRae to Minister of Foreign Affair"), Document number 21419, 24 March 1922.

production in this early period of cinema in Siam thus presents not only a process of request and permission necessary to the emerging infrastructure of cinema in Siam but also an opportunity of the elites to exercise patronage and power over this new medium—another foreign object—that has entered Siam during this period of westernization. At the same time, we note of process of aesthetic differentiation.

I want to draw attention to the rhetoric in these exchanges. The King's stance of "not knowing" is an admission of ignorance but rather quite the opposite. The fact that the King assigned his half-brother, Kamphangphet, to facilitate this production indicates that Siam was already ready and well-prepared for this technological advancement of cinema for an expert like Kamphangphet attested to the fact that the royal circle was westernized, well-educated and well-equipped with Western technology. This decision of the King to preserve the play originated within the cosmology and lineage of kingship in its original form and to reject an occasion of technological reproduction through cinema could be read as a subtle mode of resistance against Westernization—a nationalist statement on the cultural greatness of Siam.

As Vella suggested in their work, *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai nationalism,* "A vital element in Siamese nationalism under Vajiravudh was an emphasis on tradition, the cultural inheritance of history. Siam needed to be proud of its Western-style progress; it needed also to be proud of the values of its own culture and its own past."[142] Given the vulnerable nature of sovereignty in Siam, this tendency dictated an exertion of authority over what may be filmed very early on in the pre-production process. This sentiment and how it was engrained in most policies of the King including

[142] Vella, *Chaiyo*, 202.

this co-production not only asserts a resisting gaze back at the West but also includes and presumes the American team as the King's subject—under his assertion of sovereign power. The co-production was partially run by the King through this monitoring so that the production—though made by foreigner could not and would not assume any authority over the King's property or deviate from the King's intentions. From the early days of cinema in Siam, there was an interest in projecting the superiority of tradition and policing the crossroads where the Western Other meets its subject.

If the West was imagined to hold so much authority especially over and through its technological advancement to capture or reproduce an ethnographic Other, Siam as imagined by the King preserved its authenticity and sovereignty by only allowing reproducible technology and its technological advancement in the material sense in Siam, yet restricting any efforts to reproduce Siam as exotic or unauthentic. In other words, all instruments of diplomacy must project the idealized and respectful image of the King—for the sovereignty of Siam inhered directly in the King' image. This is, of course, a political concern on how to represent a state that thirty years from then would be widely discussed among many new nation-states which gained their independences from the Empires.

From what I mentioned earlier, the King already rejected the opportunity to include his theatrical oeuvre in the film production. But of note is a letter submitted by a Senior Adviser in the Office of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Eldon R. James, to the King. Here, Dr. James advised the King that "it seemed to me that a play which will represent Siam to

the world at large, ought to be carefully criticized and controlled."[143] Yet, he did not forget to praise the King stating that "[In] view of His Majesty's great knowledge, not merely of Siam, but of dramatic technique, it seemed to me that if His Majesty were willing, here was an opportunity to put it to a most beneficial use." In response to this foreigner's advice, the King's secretary reaffirmed the King's opinion that, "There is no need to find experts in *lakorn* (play) for this matter of cinema. McRae can simply compose a new story and submit it to His Majesty so that His Majesty could just supervise it.*"*

It is important to note that even though the King refused to film the royal stage play—*Phra Ruan*g, he still aligned cinema to *lakorn*. This demonstrates how he initially understood cinema by aligning it to the aesthetic regime that he was most familiar with. There was an apparent concern about the power of narrative, and that, I argue, reflects an early understanding of cinema and of how to monitor it. That being said, cinema for Vajiravudh was not radically different from play and poem—both of which in Thai traditional aesthetics must be crafted with careful attention to narrative and with a very good command of the poetic rules of composition. To the King's "limited" knowledge of cinema as claimed in the previous letter, cinema was considered to share characteristics with *lakorn* especially with regard to its narrative world and its proximity toward the public as a popular entertainment and should thus be supervised and, if need be, censored. Missing in Vajiravudh's account of the relationship between *lakorn* and cinema was an understanding of cinema as a reproducible technology. Thus there is little

[143] Ministry of Foreign Affair, "Reung Nai Henry McRae to Senabordee Kratuang Karn Tang Pratet" ("Regarding Mr. Henry McRae to Minister of Foreign Affair"), Document number 21419, 24 March 1922.

awareness during this pre-production phase about the power of images—their indexicality and their relationship to reality – though upon the film's release this situation would quickly alter.

So far I have demonstrated how the exercise of supreme sovereignty as a mode of coloniality in Siam affected the pre-production phase of *Miss Suwanna of Siam*. I will move on to discuss the production and reception of the film in which the double visions of the Siam's ruling class continued to define and delimit the potential for film diplomacy. Even though there are scant records from the American team about the production phase, I found a memoir of a Thai moviegoer who watched the film when he was very young, a couple of interviews of the two protagonists and some photographs from the film shooting in the archive. As you will see, these records reveal that Royalist nationalism was deeply engrained among the elites of Siam, that the traditional *lakorn* remains significant when dealing with this film as diplomacy, and the question of audience—who would see this film—comes to fore.

In a memoir on early cinema in Bangkok, Nai Hon Huay, a pen name of an anti-communist state-employed radio broadcaster, has this to say about *Miss Suwanna of Siam*: "An anonymous writer then composed a story in our *Thai* style and called it *Nang Sao Suwanna* [Miss Suwanna] (How lucky that we didn't have a law for family name back then. It could have been a ridiculously long title for a film with her last name."[144] This memoir shows that McRae was successful in finding a new story. But we are not sure if it was supervised by the King as he initially intended in the letter above. This memoir calls the film "a story in our *Thai* style" and concludes that this is the first

[144] Hon Huay, *Wa Duay Nang Nang Nai Bangkok*, 55.

Thai film. The quest to make Siam visible or to represent Siam on the international stage was still a crucial goal during production. The initial title also alerts us to the modification of the film title from simply *Nang Sao Suwanna* to *Miss Suwanna of Siam.* This addition of—of Siam—as a modifier emphasizes the film's address to an international audience. An interview published in the June 29, 1923 issue of *Phappayon Siam,*[145] the earliest and perhaps only film magazine at the time, focused on the actress, Sangiam Naweesatien, who played the titular role of Miss Suwanna. Asked if she had received any wage or reward from acting in this film, Naweesatine decorously replied that she could not care less about material compensation and that she was wholeheartedly willing to be in this film for it would showcase Siam to the world. An interview with Khun Ramaphromsart, the actor playing the male lead and Miss Suwanna's lover, also registers his pride in an identical manner, "I do the acting to spread *kwam siwilai* of our country to the foreigners. We are spreading our dignity. In the occasion of mistakes, I no longer felt embarrassed. The pride overcame the embarrassment and I was able to act naturally."[146]

In various discussions of Thai studies that focus on the era of modernization of Siam, the quest for *siwilai*—a transliteration of the term "civilized" – captures the political climate and the cultural organization of Siam in this period. Since Siam was the only nation in Southeast Asia to escape Western colonization in the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, scholars have attempted to pinpoint what strategies and policies emerging mostly from the ruling class enabled Siam to colonial capture. It is suggested

[145] Plaingarm, "Sontana kub Nangsao Sangiam Naweesatien" ("Conversation with Miss Sangiam Naweesatien"), *Phappayon Siam* 2, no. 15 (15 January 1923): 38.

[146] Kaew Kanchana [Thongkam Rongkasuwanna], "Sontana kub Khun Ramaphromsart" ("Conversation with Khun Ramaphromsart"), *Phappayon Siam* 2, no. 13 (13 July 1923): 20.

that Siam resists colonization by selectively adopting the Western way of being civilized—as practiced in many other non-Western nations—but also by inventing a national character that was uniquely Thai. Most national policies and material changes were implemented for the sake of development and progress and the Western way of doing things. Take, for example, the official declaration of abolishment of slavery in 1905, the revision of the Penal Code for Criminal Responsibilities in 1908, the construction of modern infrastructure like railways, European-style boulevards and the tram system in Bangkok, etc. Apart from the technological infrastructures that represent modernity, there were also concerns around cultural reforms and the transformation of worldviews that had hitherto inhabited and circulated in aesthetic cultural production.

If this is the concept of being *siwilai* to which Khun Ramaphromsart refers to. This co-production and the opportunities that came with it, allowed the actor to realize that *kwam siwilai* of Siam was no longer an ideal but an already accomplished project. In his words, "to spread *kwam siwilai* of our nation to foreigners" defined a stage of presentation and exhibition—a new phrase of Siam with regard to its progress towards modernity, but this time, more in relation to the rest of the world. Both these responses are intensely aware of the film as an object of international diplomacy – a calling card for Siamese modernity and technological prowess that was simultaneously uniquely Thai.

Some photographs of the shoot also index Miss Suwanna's potential for film diplomacy. One of these is a photograph of McRae and his team at the Royal Emerald Buddha Temple, a royal temple that attracts a million visitors a year. In the background, are some *kharajakarn* or officers in royal services – quite noticeable in their uniform (see

fig. 4). The next one shows a mid-shot of Miss Suwanna (see fig. 5). A prominent prop is probably the pin on her hat. I put next to the photograph of Miss Suwanna another photograph of a contemporary Siamese court lady, whose identical pin to that is Miss Suwanna can be read as "Maha Vajiravudh" – or "the great Vajiravudh" (see fig. 6). A search on fashion among nobility revealed that the pin was given by the King to *kharajchakarn* – those who work for the King's government as well as to the aristocrats. This detail allows us to see the film marks Miss Suwanna as a royalist loyalist, and a conceit for the monarch's blessings for this coproduction. Finally let us look at this one with a Royal aircraft in the background that sums up the film's plot involving Miss Suwanna asks for help from the Royal Air Force to fly her to Chiangmai, a popular province in the North of Thailand (see fig. 7). This photograph is a bold visual statement of strength on national security and military advances. Again, the production team took great care to use the film as a platform for imaging modernizing Siam and its benevolent monarch—a key to its future use as film diplomacy.

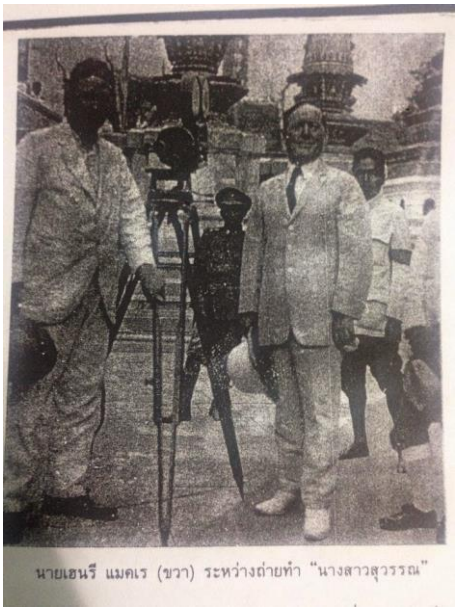

Figure 4 The caption in Thai states: "Henry McRae (right) while filming *Nangsao Suwan,"* n.p.,n.d.

Figure 5 Sangiam Naweesatien in the role of *Miss Suwanna of Siam* wearing a cap with a royal pin from King Vajiravudh. n.p.,n.d.

Figure 6 A court lady wearing a royal hair pin from Vajiravudh. n.p.,n.d.

Figure 7 The original printed caption states that this picture was from the film, "Nang Sao Suwanna," n.p., n.d.

These records allow us to glimpse how the film targeted a particular audience–the international one. In the quest of "spreading *kwam siwilai* to foreigners," the domestic Siamese audience was less relevant since though this audience had to undergo the process of *siwilai*, it did not need to be convinced about Siam's greatness. This production history of *Miss Suwanna of Siam* could potentially shift the understanding of cinema as solely determined by the nation to the one formulated by the hope and dream of internationalism—a dream which reemerged and was fully actualized in the model of the post-war co-productions and international film festivals.

Archival evidence about the production of the film also suggests a social entanglement between cinema and traditional *lakorn* of Siam. In the same interview with Sangiam, she told the columnist that her main career before becoming part of this production was a royal dancer and performer of royal plays under the operation

of *Mahorasop* Unit (the official Entertainment Unit of Siam). We learn from a letter published on July 13th of the same year, that the male protagonist was also a royal stage play actor. It is important to note here that both of them as well as the two other important characters – the father of Miss Suwanna and the villain – all came from *Mahorasop* Unit and were considered *kharajchakan*. In this sense, although this co-production was not an adaptation of the King's *lakorn, Phra Ruang,* it still drew heavily on the theatrical resources that Siam had before cinema arrived. The protagonists also claimed that they were recruited precisely owing to their acting skill in *lakorn.* Khun Ramaphromsart stated that although he made certain mistakes while shooting, McRae was still very grateful their experiences in *lakorn* for it had trained them well for cinema and that the American team did not have to waste much time in preparation.

From the picture that I attached here of Sangiam Naweesatien (see fig. 8) as well as her biography later on as a court Lady, show that her main career remained royal traditional dancer and performer. None of the acting crew starred in any other Thai films that came out less than 5 years after, and unlike Hollywood actors and actresses, they were not promoted as stars. The only film magazine of the time published only two interviews on the co-stars in consecutive weekly issues as I already discussed. And only one film company, two years after the film was realized, sought to revive the film through its release of "Suwanna's [perfume] Scent."

Figure 8 On the left, the caption states that it is Miss Sangiam Naweesatien. She was dressed in traditional Thai costume for traditional stage performance. n.p.,n.d.

I was curious about this lack of attention, let alone attachment, to the stars. Why was fandom not part of the narrative of this amazingly thrilling occasion of the first Thai film? While the culture of moviegoer in Siam during this period of 1920's evolved quite largely around stars and fandom due to the number of Hollywood films imported to Siam as I described elsewhere in one of my chapters, why wasn't there the same investment in creating a Thai cinema industry based on star and fan relationships? The story of them professing in *lakorn* or gracefully making their living as the King's servants was quite overlooked by the public. I was thus led to question whether or not this lack of star culture was precisely due to the fact this acting crew belonged to another world apart from the modern world of popular commercialized entertainment. Was it because the aristocrats and the sacred creations of the monarchs fully embodied the images of the stars? This leads me to suggest that perhaps the actors persona was entirely determined by the burden of this diplomatic mission and of the film being claimed for a charity-based cause—another anecdote around the film to which I now want to turn to.

In *Phappayon Siam* published on June 29, 1923, there were two editorial columns announcing the arrival of *Miss Suwanna of Siam* in theatres. The first one mentioned that the screening of *Miss Suwanna of Siam* was graciously granted by Kamphangphet, the Head of the Railway Department, for the purpose of public charity. The term "public charity" ("satarana kusol") made it quite questionable whether or not this film was distributed as a free screening. It can be assumed that the private sector like the main film distributor—*Siam Phappayon Company*—might not have had to purchase the film. The editorial suggests that the company managed to screen the film in three different theatres on Saturday night, the appropriate day for *mahorasop* (entertainment). It also specified that the company later submitted 1,552 baht from three different theatres to Siam's Red Cross. However, from the textual evidence available at hand thus far, it is impossible for me to assume where that money came from—usual admission fees or voluntary donations.[147]

The idea of mahorasop, being an occasion for public charity, or for Buddhist merit-making ceremony ("ngarn boon") was not new. The most intriguing fact is that even the emerging modern medium—cinema—was included into such a practice and the screening of co-production became a way to unite the public in a moral cause. The relationship between the audience and the cinema in this case was thus neither fully commodified nor colonial. The relationship that the Siamese public shared with their first Thai film was that it did not belong to them—in the sense that the modern form of exchange—money—cannot purchase it and therefore the public was unable to possess the film. I argue that this is the typical relationship between the ruling class and the

[147]Kularb Namngern (Blue Rose) and Wangderm (Old Palace), "Nangsao Suwanna," *Phappayon Siam* 2, no. 13 (29 June 1923): 175.

people—the relationship of gift granting that becomes a mode of coloniality in Siam. Rosalind Morris wrote about this relationship of a gift giving in her anthropological account, *In the Places of Origin: Modernity and Its Medium in Northern Thailand*, and I found that this gift-giving has become for me a critical tool to read this philanthropy of the ruling class. Morris says: "[there is always] a dubiousness of the gift's freedom, and hence to its generosity."[148] This first Thai film and how it was distributed embodied the dubious double visions of the ruling class as they sponsored and promoted media modernity but still remained despotic in the way they administrated, granted and claimed gratitude as repayment and in that way they became patrons—owning, dictating and overseeing this emerging media infrastructure. The audience had no rights to exhibition beyond what was granted from above. The spectator was thus a subject and not a citizen. And in the same manner with the stars, they were thus deprived of the autonomy of being a commodity. Instead, the economy of gift-giving is never only about giving something but more about a sense of indebtedness—"a dubiousness of the gift's freedom." That all citizens owed a debt to repay is an economy that worked perfectly for the supreme sovereign and for royalist-nationalist patriotism.

I have arrived now at the last portion of my discussion of *Miss Suwanna of Siam* in which I want to focus on the conflicting reactions of the governments toward the screenings of the film. In the same editorial column, there was a significant opinion on the film as cultural diplomacy. The film was declared excellent, the acting accomplished despite being film rookies, they were comparable to American actors. Most importantly, the author stated that "no doubt that when the world got to see it, not only that they will

[148] Morris, *In the Places of Origin*, 6.

learn who we are but they will also see that we have precious gems very much like other countries in the world."[149] It stated that Prince Kamphangphet already set up a Committee to examine the images and the film passed the test for the public. The writing from the private sector that was distributed among the Thai public of course did not acknowledge the grim destiny of *Miss Suwanna of Siam* nor did they know that the Royals were looking to "retire" this diplomat.

On May 28th 1923, the prince stated that he overheard from newspapers that McRae might have shot a scene of an execution. One might assume that the King was repelled by the verisimilitude of violence of such a scene. Yet, I found in Hon Huay's memoir a statement that acknowledged a sequence of sword dancing ceremony before the beheading and even commented that "the public were so pleased they went to see the film again for so many times without thinking."[150] I thus went back to reread the letter more attentively that the matters were more complex than a simple wish to not show violence onscreen. In fact, the prince wrote "McRae seemed to shoot the execution scene with some members of the royalty and some *kharajchakarn* (those in royal services) in it. He claimed that this used to be done in England and in America—those countries allowed it." As I analyze this cryptic statement, I want to refer back to Sangiam's interview. She told her interviewer that this film was shot in ways that were so unpredictable to everyone except McRae himself—that everything depended on the decision and execution of the director. She said: "Who know which part is the beginning, the middle

[149] Tuan Yawaprapas, "Nangsao Suwanna keu Suwanna of Siam" ("Miss Suwanna is Suwanna of Siam"), *Phappayon Siam* 2, no. 13 (29 June 1923): 3.

[150] Hon Huay, *Wa duay nang nang nai Bangkok,* 55.

or the end."[151] We learn from evidence that during the production, royal administrators like Kamphangphet probably did not pay close attention to the process of filming and that there might have been a lack of oversight. The letter reveals the same rhetorically side-stepping as the earlier one I analyzed where Vajiravudh declined to film his play. The prince was not worried about fact of execution onscreen but rather that there was an image indexing the royalty—the metonymy of Thainess—witnessed this presumably barbaric act. In the letter, the prince also suggested that Dr. Eldon James should be able to assist the Minister set up a committee of image examination "before it was c*ommercially* distributed in America."[152]

So if the American or the ethnographic Other to Siam in this case had to see the film, they will see the Siamese in modern-day democratic environment—as represented by the female commoner *Miss Suwanna* who falls in love with strength and dignity with a very virtuous man or the mesmerizing traditional stages of *lakorn* in America as the troops traveled to New York in 1922. But they would definitely not see the mixing of Siamese aristocrats with any barbarism committed by commoners. Siam succeeded in revising the Penal Code for criminal responsibility in 1908 and managed to end the tradition of beheading as the death penalty since 1919 in order to meet the Western standard of being *siwilai.* The technological reproduction of such "pre-modern past" definitely played into the establishment of committee of image examination. But I also

[151] Plaingarm, "Sontana kub Nangsao Sangiam Naweesatien" ("Conversation with Miss Sangiam Naweesatien"), *Phappayon Siam* 2, no. 15 (15 January 1923): 36.

[152] Ministry of Foreign Affair, "Reung McRae Chai Roop Len Nang Hen Somkuan Hai Mee Kammakarn Truad Phap" ("Regarding Henry McRae's Film Exhibition and Committee of Image Examination to Minister of Foreign Affair"), Document number unknown, 28 May 1923.

want to propose that this anxiety over the beheading was motivated by a fear of who would be watching the film when it was no longer in the Prince's control or reach.

In the archive where very little of *Miss Suwanna of Siam* has survived, I found a very brief statement written in English in the file cabinet at the Thai Film Archive. It has a "confidential" stamp on it. And to me, this was probably the last indication of censorship that I can bring in to our conversation today. The statement is as following:

> Your Royal Highness Prince Svasti Vatanavisishta, Referring to conversation regarding the film showing the Opium Factory etc., I have now found out that the execution film stopped (and later on never released) was taken by Henry Mac Rae, New York. The film was forbidden by the State Department upon request from H.S. Ms. Foreign Office at the time Dr. James was adviser. I have the honor to remain Your Royal Highness' Obedient Servant[153]

This exchange was surprisingly between Mr. Hayes, official film censors in New York[154], and Prince Svasti Vatanavisishta, a controller of the privy purse from 1925 to 1933. There was no evidence that could suggest other attempts from McRae to film anything other than *Miss Suwanna of Siam* and he left the country with a copy right on June 25th of 1923. So this letter must refer to *Miss Suwanna of Siam* and how it landed in America a couple years after the year of production. This exchange also adds a nuance to what was missing in the Thai history about this film—another manifestation of international embarrassment due to the image of an Opium Factory in Siam.

[153] The copy I saw was indexed into the collection of letters found in the temporary reading room (as of 2017) at the Thai Film Archive. The letter is about the production of *Miss Suwanna of Siam.* The date of this letter was listed as 23 June 1926.

[154] I am still trying to find more evidences to confirm whether or not this is the same Mr. Hays as in the Hays Code.

This embarrassment was not an issue when the film was shown in Siam, perhaps because it matched the reality of opium being legal and systematically taxed during the reign of Vajiravudh. But this became an embarrassment and discredited the attempt to bring *siwilai* of Siam to the world when it would be seen outside Siam—out of the reach and control of Siamese government. While *Miss Suwanna* as film diplomacy had failed miserably, bilateral diplomacy between America and Siam thrived. This sort of pattern of diplomatic benefits gained from showing respect, compliance and collaboration to the monarchy of Siam still run deeply even long after the period of the absolute monarchy—I am referring, for instance, to the collaboration that took place during the anti-communism in the 60's and 70's in the region including the apparent support from both sides in the Vietnam war. On the one hand, I argue for the revision of the history of media modernity in Siam—specifically the history of early Thai cinema—as being concerned primarily with the bifurcated audience and diplomacy as well as the awareness of the presence of the Other within this diplomatic film act. But, on the other hand, the excavation of *Miss Suwanna of Siam* and my analysis in this chapter echo the impact of cinematic production both on the mode of coloniality of Siam and its foreign policy—the policy that was top-down by nature because it was exercised for the interest of the aristocratic ruling class and more particularly the grace of the monarchs.

And what is left are questions: where are the commoners—like the domestic audience, Sangiam and Khun Ramphromsat? Did they disappear because of this transcendental royally-mandated censorship? Two years after the first screening of the

film in Siam[155], a rumor broke off in one of the local newspapers as following: "Some said that *Nang Sao Suwan* (*Miss Suwanna of Siam*) made by Mr. Henry McRae right in Siam was screened in America with a name "*Kingdom of Heaven*." They said the cheapest price for a ticket costed them $5 each. (heavy-handedly we go!)"[156] The rumor doesn't seem to acknowledge the unfortunate fate of *Miss Suwanna of Siam*—the representative of their popular opinion—in America. Apparently, the confidential letter of the royal government and the request to ban the film might not have been made public at that time. The ramification of this rumor lies in the fact that, when paired with the arbitrary command from behind the royal wall, the people stayed uninformed and their popular opinion negated. A possibility for them to be acknowledged and emerge as part of the industry or even of the latent community that partook in the project of modernization was canceled.[157] And their pride in being able to participate in the currency and language of the new popular medium was nullified. We will soon see another case of film diplomacy with the film, *The King of the White Elephant*, produced by one of the most important statement and one of the leaders of the Siamese Revolution.

[155] The first screening was on Saturday 23 June 1923 at Phattanakorn Theatre, Banglumpu Theatre and Hongkong Theatre. See *Phappayon Siam* 13, no. 2 (29 June 1923), 4.

[156] "Bedtaled Phappayon," ("Miscellaneous News on Cinema"), *Nangseupim Khao Phappayon* (*Cinema Newspaper*), 26 August 1925, 3.

[157] There was a record and also a photograph of a scene that depicted the crowd of commoners (residents of Chiangmai, a province in the North of Thailand) gathering at the scene of execution. It was recorded that the crowd came precisely because they believed that a *real* execution was taking place. And this is precisely the scene that purportedly led to the ban of the film.

But with the case of *Miss Suwanna of Siam* and the context of nationalism under Vajiravudh's reign, an intervention from above that entails concerns about the royal images and stability of the absolute power dictated how Siam must be perceived outside.

One might comfortably claims the success of *Miss Suwanna of Siam* in strengthening the sense of nationalism in Siam as it bound together a community of people whose common pride lied in the cinematic replica of the civilized nation. Nonetheless, I want to emphasize that it is also precisely because of the quality and nature of cinematic image in indexing reality of Siam that guided the ruling class to ban the film. Because the cinematic images in *Miss Suwanna of Siam* said "too much" without withholding, or rather, without taking seriously the grace of the sovereign, we can clearly see the return of the same problematics discussed in Chapter Two—the problem of the ruling class vis-à-vis the regime of truth. Furthermore, with the requested ban resulting, perhaps, in the absence of the celluloid film of *Miss Suwanna of Siam*, we can discern a radical split of sensibilities, affects, tastes and even visions for the future of Siam between those of the ruling class and those of the commoners.

Three years ago, the rumors about *Miss Suwanna of Siam* making it to the U.S. was still haunting me. Of course, I always looked for its traces, always typed down the title in different variation—almost every time I did my search on various databases and digital archives. One day, I stumbled upon the Margaret Herrick Library's special collection where it collects production files of Henry McRae from his working period

with the Universal Studio. Without really thinking or hoping to find anything, I typed once again “Miss Suwanna of Siam” and the search result thrilled me. The database showed one item—a clipping file—as the search result. This costed me a trip to Los Angeles right after. I still remembered those shaking hands of mine when I held a very thin envelope that contained the *Miss Suwanna of Siam* documents. In that prestigious archival institution—in a land to and from which Henry McRae might have carried the dream of *Miss Suwanna of Siam*, this is what I found (see fig. 9):

> Date: 5/27/2005 11:54:13 AM
>
> Subject: [AMIA-L] Seeking Miss Suwanna of Siam
>
> I'm looking for ANYTHING related to the film "Miss Suwanna of Siam"--print, neg, production stills, script, notes, production credits, etc. Any help would be greatly appreciated. […]
>
> Thanks,
>
> Ron Rice

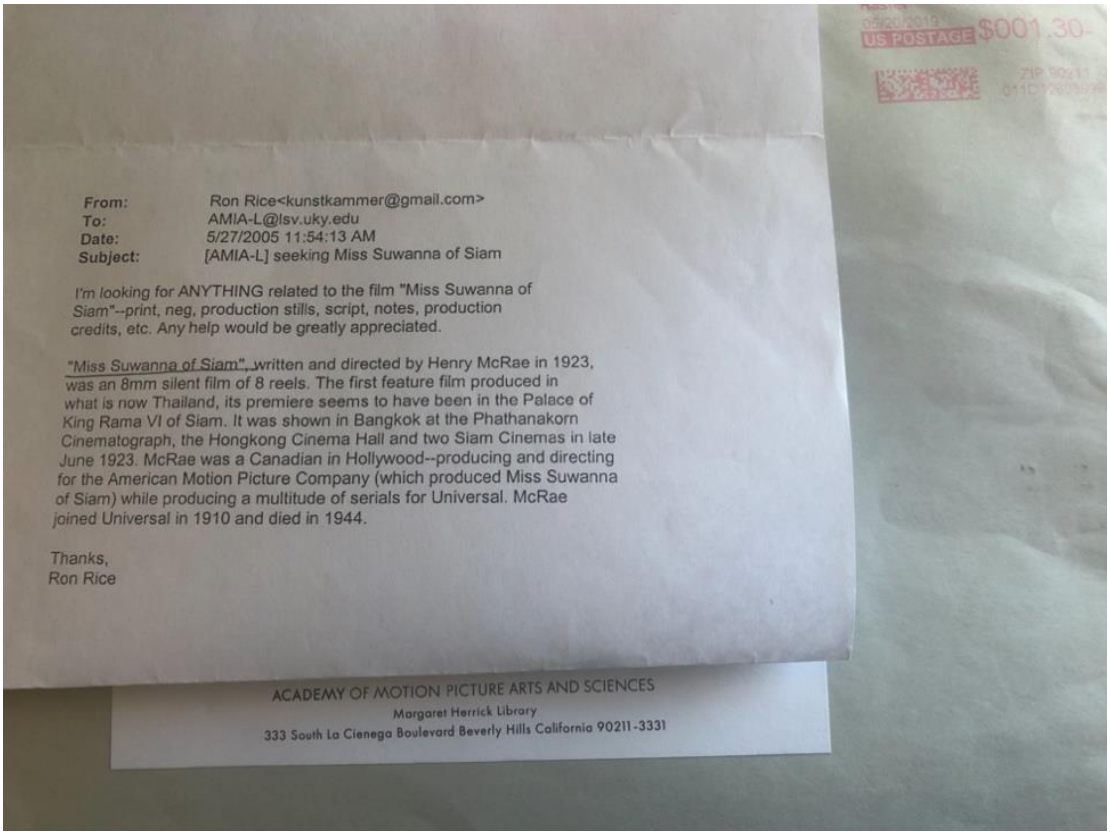

Figure 9 A copy of the only piece of evidence of *Miss Suwanna of Siam* in the U.S. archive. The copy was made and mailed to me by Margaret Herrick Library in May 2019.

No one knows the extent to which *Miss Suwanna of Siam* offended the ruling class of Siam, but the consequences of its afterlife are prominent. The afterlife of *Miss Suwanna of Siam* is defined by the desperate searches—of Ron Rice and me, for instance, of the archive of what went missing, and the many layers of subtle power relationships that wait to be exposed. This seemingly banal email of Ron Rice that managed to be registered into the archive of *Miss Suwanna of Siam* by Henry McRae in the American institution yet again emphasizes the concern that sets this project into motion: the long-lasting indestructible echo of the royalist nationalist aesthetic and historiography.

CHAPTER V

HEIR TO THE LONG TRADITION: REEMERGENCE OF FILM DIPLOMACY AND EMERGENCE OF NATIONAL AND GENRE CINEMA

The story has it that the prince was in his pajamas when the revolutionaries entered his palace on the bank of Chaophraya river during the June 24 Revolution in 1932.[158] Understandably, this was scandalous enough to be recalled by the royalists as one of the revolutionists' most audacious offenses, the politically-divisive ramifications of which we shall later see in the story of the pro-monarchy riot of *boworadet*. The story continues with the encounter between one of the leading revolutionists, Lieutenant Prayoon Bhamornmontri, and the prince, the Minister of Interior Field Marshall His Royal Highness Prince Boribhat of Nakornsawan, one of the most important figures in Thai politics and one of the closest siblings of the King. In his pajamas, the prince spoke his mind in a way that would voice all the concerns of the People's party in the years to come: "The Chakri Dynasty had ruled [Siam] for 150 years…We know well how to govern the Thais but 'do you'?"

I begin with this rather lighthearted scene, though it may as well be an imagined one, as it perfectly captures, in the Prince's words, the challenges any revolution, especially one without substantial base, is likely bound to face. Indeed, the idea of a revolution signifies rupture, but the continuity of a revolution and its ideas depends on the notion of governmentality, and any revolution promising democracy has to succeed in knowing and addressing the demands and desires of the people. In other words, then, to echo the crux of the Prince's question, knowing how to govern a people requires knowing

[158] Vichitvong Na Pombhejara, *Pridi Banomyong And the Making of Thailand's Modern History* (Bangkok: Ruankaew Printing House, 1983), 3.

"the people," and a failure in this domain may very well lead to the failure of the revolution.

Overall, what this prelude points to is the question of the materialization of the revolution, and I propose that cinema emerged as a site from which to view the revolution as an ongoing lived relationship where its agents and its polity meet. Indeed, many successful scholarly accounts of the Revolution have been provided from various angles, and I expand on this scholarship by exploring the workings of the revolution in the field of the aesthetics. For, even if this was a failed revolution, the uproar it caused in the aesthetic regime was longstanding, structuring a new aesthetic of the post-Revolution. This chapter is, then, not interested in providing a definitive answer to the prince's question about the challenges awaiting the revolutionaries but instead in reposing his question to think through the redistribution of a new sensibility of the revolution through and around cinema. It is thus the task of this chapter to study the period before and after the Revolution—from the reign of King Vajiravudh (1910-1925) and King Prajadhipok (1925-1935) to the decade after the Revolution of Siam in 1932 of both civilian and military governments under the Constitutional Monarchy. The analysis in this chapter will not be done directly through policies or through activities taking place within political institutions, but will attentively turn to how film form was understood as well as deployed to sustain, evoke and legitimize the new political regime. I am very well aware that this time period is politically significant to many, yet, also a very controversial one. It is not my intention to undervalue or disregard the deeds of the revolutionary group. After all, I view my work here is comparable to "the task of the translator," which, according to Walter Benjamin, is not found at the moment of origin, in this case of the

Revolution, but always in its afterlife. And I hope that "a specific significance inherent in the original [of the Revolution] manifests itself in its translatability."[159]

I will first frame the chapter with a historical background of the revolution, one that is anchored in another personal account that reveals the revolution's intimacies with film. Then, I will investigate the transformed sensibilities around media modernity and cinema before the Revolution to better outline what needs to change and what needs to be sustained in the new regime of power. In order to construct a new critique that deals directly with this processing of changes in politics, media and modernity, I am bringing in the discussions around cinematic cultures, first under the Sixth Reign of Vajiravudh and then among the elites and the royal family members including Prajathipok's interest in cinematography, then the commercial cinematic culture of the masses, cinema on the day of the Siamese Coup and eventually the state-sponsored films, focusing heavily on Pridi Banomyong's production of *The King of the White Elephant* (1941).

I. The Revolution and the Cinema:

The history of June 24 Revolution, which is also known as the Siamese Revolution and the Siamese Coup D'état, staged a radical political change in the history of modern Thailand in 1932. The revolution overthrew the absolute monarchy of the Chakri Dynasty and thus subjected the supreme monarch, King Prajadhipok, to the nation's first constitution. It is not overstating to say that the coup transformed all aspects of the social lives of the people in Siam (and later Thailand) and gave rise to new understandings and operationalizations of political regime, authority, and governmentality, upending the history *and* historiography of modern Thailand.

[159] Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" *Illuminations*, 71.

The Revolution was carried out by the People's Party (*Khana ratsadon*), which was initially formed by graduate student recipients of the royal government's scholarships who studied in Paris in 1927.[160] The operation to topple power on June 24 started at 4 a.m. and was carried out by high ranking military officers. The tactics deployed in the carrying out of the revolution were strategic: On the day that Prajadhiphok and his closest entourage went on vacation to *Klai Kangwon* Palace [Far From Worries Palace] in the seaside city of Hua Hin, the officers first cut off the telephone line and then tricked the military troops to mobilize as if there had been riots in the city only to use them as crowd witnesses when the party proclaimed its rule over the nation. The series of events that took place on June 24 were rehearsed in advance among the progressively minded , if considered from the royalist point of view, "rebels" in the military.[161] The justification of the revolutionists in operating this way came from their good intention, so they claimed, to avoid bloodshed of the Thai people, making it an exceptional "bloodless revolution/coup d'état." Yet, one important fact still remains: the people of Siam were still in bed when one of the most radical political changes that would affect the rest of their lives had already occurred. They would find out that the King agreed to submit his absolute sovereignty to the Constitution of the Kingdom of Siam a couple days later perhaps through the announcements of local officials, newspapers, or word of mouth.

[160] Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, "Introduction: Life," *Pridi By Pridi: Selected Writings on Life, Politics and Economy*, transl and eds. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit. (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books: 2000), 63

[161] Pridi Banomyong, "Some Aspects of the Establishment of the People's Party," *Pridi by Pridi,* transl and eds. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, 134-139.

Or, alternatively, they would have learnt about the Revolution in even more detail in a week or so if they had gone to a local theatre. For, the famous and influential Wasuwat Brothers of the Srikrung Sound Film Company filmed the Revolution on about 3,000 feet of celluloid right as it was happening. What follows is an anecdotal reference about the production of this film by Khun Vijitmatra, a screenwriter, producer, director and even editor who worked both for the Srikrung Sound Film Company and later for another film company, Hassadin Phappayon[162]:

> In the afternoon of 24 June 1932, a car from Srikrung Sound Film Company came to pick me [the author] up. They told me to go help with the film shooting. I asked for Luang Kol (Luang Kolkarnjit or Pao Wasuwat). [The driver] said that he was already in Ananda Palace while Krasien was shooting outside. In the car, Mr. Krasae handed me an armband to use as a pass permission. On the street of Rajadamnoen, there were troops of soldiers; royal army, navy, as well as civilians who gathered in groups. […] I arrived at *Sapan khao* [White bridge] Studio. We saw a car that we used for shooting in the front. Mitchell camera was still in the car. In the office though, films were scattered everywhere…everything looked extremely fussy. With the regard to the "camera man," he sat lifeless on a couch, looking extremely exhausted. When I asked, he reported that he shot silent films with Michell camera, Bell and Howell camera, and some with Eyemo. He shot many miscellaneous things and together he used about 2,000 feet of films already. Luang Kol was still filming with his Eyemo and asserted that we should continue

[162] Khun Vijitmatra is actually a title since he also served in his Majesty's services. His real name is Sanga Karnchanhakphan. See Khun Vijitmatra, *Lak Nang Thai* (*Principles of Thai Cinema*) (Nakhon Pathom: Thai Film Archive), 3-5.

> filming, he said. I, myself, saw that we already had a lot, so I sat down to develop all these negatives. […]
>
> In the evening, we got a telegraph from two American film companies. They wrote long letters, but the messages were all the same. They wanted films about this "coup d'état" in Siam. They wanted all of what we had, and they would give us extra prices. They said: "please send all of them via express air mail." We looked at one another, smiled, and we drank to celebrate.[163]

As a matter of fact, I am withholding the most important bit of information—the *fate* of this extremely important film reels—for a later in-depth analysis. But for now, what must not be missed from this first-account memoir is the relationship between cinema and the Revolution of June 24 which was crystallized in the tradition of early newsreel par excellence.

This significant piece of evidence of an attempt to "film the Revolution," purportedly "of the people," in the genre of marks the most pivotal moment of filmmaking and cinema in Siam. As one may remember from Chapter Two, cinema was taken up by the royal court to document the royal duties, trips and the omnipotent presences of the monarchs and the royal family. Radically different to that tradition, the live mode of filmmaking right when the Revolution was taking place and the genre of newsreel depicted the fall of the monarch by way of replacing the representational images of the King with the images of the masses. The liveness in the moment of filmmaking could be seen as getting rid of the old power who used to mediate the images for the masses. In that sense, it was a brief moment where interventionism, which was long

[163] Vijitmatra, *Lak Nang Thai*, 104-105.

practiced by those who held authority under the absolutism, was absent. Thus, I argue that the act of filming the Revolution opens up new possibilities for an aesthetics of disruption. Such aesthetics emerging from cinema is by every means political. On this occasion, cinema did not have to embody the imposed statist or public epistemologies: it did not have to be either made about, for or by a royal member "or " to be consumed merely a mass entertainment. That is to say, first, cinema abandons the imposed task of indexing royal duties as a novelty to summon gratitude from the people by way of visualizing "what has *really* been." Second, it ceases being, though temporarily as one might argue, part of the industry that sought profit and operated on the basis of monetary exchanges or royal patronage or both. Cinema on the day of the Revolution embodied not so much the ideology of the masses, especially not in this case when the class consciousness of and from the people was missing from the picture. Rather, it indexed, for the first time, the masses—how they stood there dumbfounded and confused vis-à-vis what was to come—wondering as well, perhaps, what would be granted from above this time. Cinema, as is the case in the previous chapters, provides a break-in into the secure boundaries of the traditional elitist aesthetic. Stripped of the concerns for the demarcation of the factual from the fictional and for the royalist productions and their travels, cinema now mediates the known and the unknown, the certain that became uncertain. Most of all, for the very first time, cinema witnessed the presence of the people—making them the main actor in the film while also corresponding to the principle of "democracy" that the Revolution set forth.

Some might argue that the radical change on June 24 confirmed how things were always done, that the Revolution seemed to unravel from top to down, first addressing the

educated elites and instigating change from above, thereby simply transferring the power owned by one group to a different one. I believe that it is always better to be especially cynical about the workings of power, yet it is equally important not to overly focus on a single moment but the process itself. In this respect, I propose that the revolution does not happen as a singular radical break and unfold in a linear temporality, but it should rather be regarded as fragmented, omnipresent and asynchronous. This contention is also crystallized in the structure of this chapter and in how I underline the significance of the pre-Revolution period of the absolute monarchy and how cinema emerged as a site both of breaks and continuities. In other words, the sensibilities of the Revolution might not come out of only because the Revolution took place or because one got to see the film of the Revolution. Rather, what I am suggesting is that the infrastructure of thoughts and practices that governed the sense-making of media modernity, film industry and genres of the people in Siam before the Revolution contributed to how one might come to understand the Revolution and how cinema took on a new role for the people. Therefore, let us step back to the days of the absolutism.

II. Nationalization of Cinema and State Propaganda

While the cinematic culture thrived so significantly via commercial private theatres and increasing numbers of promoters under the reign of King Vajiravudh (1910-1925), it is known to most scholars that Vajiravudh's interest laid elsewhere. He was the literary-minded king while his brother and successor, King Prajadhipok, was more of a true cinephile. Let me cite, for instance, the letter from King Vajiravudh written to Prince Kamphangphet with regard to the co-production of *Miss Suwanna of Siam*: "….no one knows [about cinema] better than Prince Kamphangphet." Additionally, he even wrote

with one of his anonymous pen names, *Ramajitti* (Incarnated as Rama) commenting on cinema as following:

> Advantages of cinema are:
>
> 1. *Phappayon* [cinema] proceeds quite fast with its story.
> 2. Chances to see many people – of various types and backgrounds.
> 3. The dark period where they turn off the light is long enough for the opportunity to caress.
> 4. Showtime does not run until too late. Chances to go eat *khao tom rajchawong* (Rice Porridge with Chinese-style side dishes) after.[164]

One can read this simply as a generalized comment on activities around cinema that might even be used to illustrate a new urban culture in Bangkok in the 1920's.[165] I would suggest, that this statement alludes to the king's well-known obsession in promoting and maintaining the sense of "Thainess," a sentiment that was really strong in him and that I will discuss below. In my reading, this comment has a cynical and even a sarcastic tone around the cinematic culture in Bangkok. Though he did not say it directly, it seems that Vajiravudh was implying that cinema belonged to a "different" culture (arguably "lower" than his) and apparently to the growing sphere of the middle-class. The latter group became a prominent controversial topic and kept coming up in most of the literary texts of the period. There was also a racial aspect to the growing number of the middle-classes in Bangkok since the majority of the group was either Chinese-Thai businessmen as opposed to *kharajjakarn*—officials in royal services—who were mostly of Thai origin.

[164] Wirayut Pisali, *Krungthep yam ratri,* (*Bangkok at Night*) (Bangkok: Matichon, 2014), 91.
[165] Wirayut Pisali, *Krungthep yam ratri,* 91.

Not to mention that the focus on *khaotom rajchawong* was a racialized statement because *khaotom* came with Chinese immigrants and became part of the popular late dining culture among the middle-classes. Also, it was obvious that the comment was picking on a potential "scandal" that could easily happen in the darkness of theatres. The king's trivial statement on the inevitable nature of screening and cinema theatre that could lead to opportunities for people "to caress in the dark" cannot really be taken as a compliment or praise toward this new public culture.

This rather negative attitude can also be found in Vajiravudh's adaptation of a canonic traditional poem, *klong lokkanit*, a didactic poem first written by Somdet Phra Chao Borommawong Thoe Phra Ong Chao Mang Krom Phra Ya Dechadison in 1831. Vajiravudh named his version *klong lokkanit jamlaeng* (*klong lokkanit in disguise*):

๖๑. ๏ เอาลาเทียมอูฐโอ้ เป็นมูล
เก็บปัดเทียมแก้วปูน ค่าไว้
สื่อเรื่องภาพยนตร์พูน เพิ่มมาก
แทนกวีนิพนธ์ได้ ดั่งนี้น่าระอา ฯ

([They] replaced a camel with a donkey and thought that it was worthy. [They] used beads instead of precious gems and thought that they were valuable. Now the number of cinema has increased. Replacing *kavee niphon* [poetic composition], that is shameless.)[166]

Since there were not many writings about cinema by Vajiravudh, this very brief, and yet apparently acidic verse on cinema became very important. In a way, this comment

[166] Note that it is quite difficult to translate Thai poetry—even to get equivalent message. Ellipsis, for example, of subjects and verbs, is one of the hinders in translation. The periodical was first published in 1920.

supports my presumption about the King's attitude toward cinema, which was already discussed as per his indifference and inactive engagement in the co-production of *Miss Suwanna of Siam* in 1922. I want to emphasize Vajiravudh's disinterest in cinema not only as a personal preference, which can never be undermined when discussing traditional aesthetics, but also as an ideological residue which can be understood along with Vajiravudh's consistent anxiety over Thainess and the existence of the Other. In many of his writings, such as *klong lokkanit jamlang,* he criticized the pro-Western sentiment and urged a preservation of Thai culture and tradition by all means. In the brief period he reigned, Vajiravudh is remembered not so much for his social reforms or impact on the administration and economy—unlike his father Chulalongkorn—as for his literary talents and finesse. He was especially well-known for his literary enforcement of the language of binary opposition—designating the enemy and the Other—in public spheres, such as his scandalous labeling of the Chinese as the "Oriental Jews" or his condemnation of progressive writers and free speech in his famous essay, *Klon tid law* (Mud Under Wheels).

Scholars have argued that Vajiravudh's activities both in the administrative, military and literary spheres as well as his attitudes and orders cultivated a sensibility that they called "*sakdina* nationalism"—a stronger sense of hierarchy the base line of which was all about Thainess.[167] Especially given that Siam in the hands of the Chakri Dynasty's monarch never had to face any struggle for political independence, Thai nationalism was less about overcoming the Other and gaining independence but more

[167] Benjamin A. Batson, *The End of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984),15. See more in Chatthip Nartsupha, Suthy Prasartset, and Montri Chenvidyakarn, eds. *The Political Economy of Siam 1910-1932* (Bangkok, 1978), 24.

about sustaining an enemy—an anonymous threat to the collective unity of the Thais—at all costs. This, as we shall see, became a prototype and was implemented even among the revolutionaries.

This is a version of nationalism that was ultimately "conservative and hierarchical," with an emphasis on a racialized and classist discourse between high and low, and that, I would argue, attempted to structure from above a consensus over the homogenized collective perception of media modernity. On the very contrary to the high court culture led, for instance, by Vajiravudh's interests in dramatic art, the commoners started to get their first-hand experience on technology—modernity in the most material sense—at the free-market of Siam. Continuing from the reign of Chulalongkorn, Siam was considered more or less comfortable with trade and exchange with foreign countries and, most importantly, enjoyed the pride of being the only Southeast Asian nation to maintain its independence. And as I already mentioned in Chapter III, cinema was a main popular entertainments, and popular demand of the masses for this entertainment led to the rise in the number of theatres throughout Siam. So, it is not overstating for film historians to call this period the "birth of the Thai film industry."

While Vajiravudh was personally uninterested in cinema and filmmaking, it is not to say that the royal family disinvested in cinema completely. By contrast, Vajiravudh's brother, Prajadhipok, who would later succeed his throne, and his half sibling, Kamphangphet, were cinephile. The latter was very active in film production and the distribution alike. This engagement in cinema, though not a direct royal ownership, became an official model of state-sponsored film unit in Siam and, I argue, constructed a

network of elites monopolizing the film industry for decades to come.[168] Additionally, if one recalls the discussion of *Miss Suwanna of Siam,* Kamphangphet was appointed as the Head of the Railway Department and was also responsible for the co-production as the consultant of *Miss Suwanna of Siam*. In 1921, *Bangkok Times,* one of the leading newspapers written in English, reported on 10 October that Kamphangphet went down south to Pattani province (now a province next to Malaysia) to observe the railroad construction site. The prince was reportedly bringing films with him to screen for the people of Pattani. Films ranged from different scenes involving the provincial areas of Siam, the urban setting of Bangkok, and the military parade of the royal trip of his majesty the king to the royal temple.[169] In 1922, newspapers published some film programs, known later to be made by "Topical Film Service, State Railway of Siam," for example, *Thong chang peuk* (*The White Elephant Militant*) at private-owned Phattanakorn theatre on 12 April, *Wat Arun* (Bangkok the Royal City) at Hong Kong theatre on 26 April, and *Wat phrasrirattanasassadaram lae karn tawai tra Rama* (H.M. King Rama VI at the Royal Temple) at Hong Kong theatre on 26 April.[170]

But, apart from films produced for the public, very few might know that the Thai Film Archive holds a private collection of films made by Kamphangphet. Most of the films I had a chance to see at the Archive did not list the years of production and were travelogues—typical genre of film records and common use of film in the tradition of the ruling class. However, I unexpectedly stumbled upon a feature film that is quite unique in

[168] This network can be seen, for instance, in the cases of the Wasuwat Family who established Srikrung Sound Film Company and Khun Vijitmatra, film editor of the film of the Revolution. All of them served under the royal services from the reign of Vajiravudh and played crucial role in supporting the Film Unit.

[169] *Bangkok Times*, 10 October 1921.

[170] Sukkhawong, *Siam phappayon*, 231-232.

its style and convention. It was produced and filmed by Kamphangphet himself, but the year of production is to this date unknown. Given the limitation of a written dissertation, what I can do to recap my encounter with the film in the archive room can only be done in a written form and through the reproduction of my own memory. And since no one ever wrote about this film—so far that I have acknowledged, please allow my memory and diary to capture it.

> Archive Log (1): 17 September 2017
>
> Thai Film Archive (temporary reading room in a container), Nakhonpathom
>
> Among a relatively small pile of CDs that contain Kamphangphet's cinematic works, most of which are travelogues and his amateurish uses of camera to record what he experienced, I stumbled upon a CD with no title but only an image capture of a very strange-looking black and white figure. I thought it was a child—a naked one. There was no date, no further description listed anywhere. I went to ask the librarian (who, by the way, has always been of great help). He said he was not a specialist. I asked him whom then I should talk to. He advised that I should ask *Khun Dome,* Dome Sukkhawong. I remembered him from my interview with the associate director of the archive last year that he was the connoisseur of early Thai cinema, and most importantly, the founder and director of the Thai Film Archive. He was also the one who found the abandoned perished film reels in the train cemetery in the area of Makkasan. "He must know something about the Prince. "He knows everything about the early Thai cinema," the librarian insisted. I agreed with him, said thank you and went back to the computer station. I inserted the CD expecting probably another travelogue film

record but what I saw was nothing like what I have seen before in the early Thai film archive.

If I had to quickly describe it in one word, "an experimental film" would be the right word. The film does not seem to have a plot. Just a fixed camera on a background that seems to represent an underwater world. A couple of goldfish swam in from opposite sides of the *stage*, then a naked girl *acting* like a fish swam in. It took me a while to process what I was seeing. I then realized that it was actually a superimposition, a double-exposure type of filming and editing. Prince Kamphangphet (or others—we cannot be sure just yet or, perhaps, will never be) must have either used the already-shot film to shoot the same setting or placed one shot film over the other later to create this effect.

After about a five-minute sequence of the floating goldfish and naked mermaid girl, there was a cut shifting to another unrelated sequence. This time it was a chess game. A camera was fixed at a side angle of a beheaded male body dressed in Thai-style male fashion sitting across his own head. A genius instance of a trick film, I thought. What is intriguing is the fact that the prince explored other possibilities of cinema via camera and editing.

First, because of this dissertation, I finally had an opportunity to index this film text into the early Thai film archive, which also means new opportunities concerning historiography of early Thai cinema. One of the objectives that I have in mind when considering my archive diary—my own experiences of the archive—as part of the format of scholarly work is to emphasize the underlining force in the ruling class' taste, style and preference that would finally find their way to become aesthetic conventions, canons, and

genres. I used the diary intentionally, being fully aware of its subjective personal dimension. But this is a call to not overlook the influence of such personal decisions that go into the way in which the history of early Thai cinema was written. It is important to highlight the arbitrariness with which the story of media modernity in Siam has been told and to acknowledge the many latent possibilities in the vast archive of cinema that continues to be kept at bay due to this arbitrariness.

It this arbitrariness in the taste and preference of the ruling class was the case, how can we make sense of the lack of feature films from the royal production? Eventually, Kamphangphet's experimental—almost fantastical—feature films stays 'private' while others were used as state-approved films. My discovery of this neglected film in the official archives of Thai cinema raise an important question that goes beyond the distribution of state-sponsored, but not necessarily factual films of royal duties. What was the criteria for what should be produced by the royal court and could be distributed in the circuit of the commercial cinema and could not be sanctioned? Was there an assumption about what popular entertainment meant and an appropriate aesthetics for the masses? The distribution of films on royal duties may have been pushed for obvious reasons, but how can we make sense of the absence of other genres of films made by the ruling class, especially when the absence was not caused by any lack of resources? I ask these questions not at all to suggest that the royal court disinvested in cinema and film industry in Siam. Actually, on the very contrary, I argue that, during the last two decades of the absolute monarchy (from the start of Vajiravudh's reign in 1910 to the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932), there was an attempt from the royal court to nationalize cinema but particularly through the industry-oriented approach. As a result, this project of

nationalization inevitably affected the distribution of genres as one can see from the focus and substantial number of royal newsreel and the apparent lack of investment in the distribution of feature films. One may remember from the case of *Miss Suwanna of Siam* that the ruling class already experienced challenges to the stability of the sovereign caused by the democratized space of feature films and their realist images.

In the same spirit, I will introduce another unpopular story that complements my argument on the nationalization of cinema that focused heavily on the industrial aspect. Dome Sukkhawong, founder of the Thai Film Archive, interviewed Manit Wasuwat, one of the most important figures from the Wasuwat family, and learnt about this following initiative of King Vajiravudh:

> […] in 1922, King Vajiravudh wanted *Phraya Ramrakop* to establish a theatre for "Thais." Because *Siam Phappayon*—this giant film company—had long monopolized the film industry in Siam for years. The company also belonged to Chinese merchants. The other one, *Nakornkasem*, was also a collaboration of both Chinese and *farang* merchants. […] King Vajiravudh was really upset when *Siam Phappayon* brought an Indian film, *Sakuntala*, to Siam. The King also wrote the Thai version of *Sakuntala* for his poeticized drama. The company would screen it for the public in June, so the King wanted to see it first. Somehow, the company made an uncommon mistake and could not screen it for his majesty's personal interest. This was part of the reasons why the King wanted his own film company. At the same time, there were policies for Thais to compete in business with

> foreigners, especially with Chinese merchants. This goes along with his articles on the "Jews of the East."[171]

The King's desire to establish the very first "Thai-owned" film company was successful. *Siam Niramai* was born according to the wish and was run partially by the Wasuwat Brothers. Later, there was no evidence that Vajiravudh ever played part in the business after the establishment. *Siam Niramai'*s business did not seem to do well in comparison to the already huge market of *Siam Phappayon* owned by Sribunreung, the affluent Chinese-Thai businessman. At some point, there were only three theatres running under *Siam Niramai* in Bangkok and none in other provinces. Eventually it had to close down in 1923. In this regard, one can say that the royal will to compete with the Chinese-Thai monopoly of film industry in Siam appeared to be of a failure.

Remarkably, the initiative to found a truly "Thai-owned" film company was motivated by Vajiravudh's personal take on the nature of the market—on the fact that the film industry was already monopolized by Chinese businessmen—as well as on his personal literary taste in *Sakuntala*, one of the most beloved Indian epics of the King.[172] Given the cause of this initiative, it is thus impossible not to discern a racialized discourse and an aesthetic taxonomy between the high and the low cultures inherited in the King's attitude toward film industry. This royal intervention, though a failed one, into the incipient Thai film industry emphasized how the structure of power and mentality of the absolutism worked in contestation with the economic logics of the free market. Against the determination of the royal court to deploy cinema in their favor, Thai film industry

[171] Sukkhawong, *Siam phappayon*, 223.
[172] Vajiravudh also translated this literary text into Thai verse.

thrived on the imported films, especially from Hollywood and Shanghai.[173] Just like how the people appreciated the late Chinese dining culture right in the heart of Siam as in the example of *khaotom rajawong* and in the way they conceive of *ngiw* (Chinese opera), ballroom dance and clubbing as their own entertainment[174], their preferences and tastes over film genres and their sensibilities toward media modernity became more cosmopolitan, democratized and liberated from the royal-imposed will.

III. Cinema, the People and an Awakening of an Alternative Model of Thai Nationalism

On the streets of Bangkok and major cities, film magazines and newspapers published hundreds of articles, reviews, advertisements and programs pertaining to daily cinematic exhibitions in various different theatres. No one could deny the impact of cinema among the commoners starting from the 1920's, especially after *Miss Suwanna of Siam* made a huge impact in the nation in 1923. Cinema's growing popularity resulted in a hyperactivity in the business side of things behind the scene. Having helped Henry McRae and his Hollywood team during the filming of *Miss Suwanna of Siam,* the Wasuwat Brothers along with the famous cameraman, Luang Kolkarnjenjit, for instance, established the Srikrung Film Company that produced the very first Thai film, *Choke Song Chan* (Double Luck) in 1927, the year the other company, *Phappayon Thai Film Company,* produced *Mai Kid Loey* (No Idea).[175] This is not to mention the merger of two

[173] I mentioned this in Chapter Three according to the archive of film magazines like *Phappayon Siam, Khao Phappayon* and newspaper like *Bangkok Times.* There were a lot of programs of Hollywood and Chinese films and most essays were about film synopses, Hollywood stars and international news. See also Eugene Irving Way, *Motion Pictures in Japan, Philippine Islands, Netherlands East Indies, Siam, British Malaya, and French Indo-China* (Washington: US Government Print, 1929), 21-25, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112104076143.

[174] Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, 86-88.

[175] Sukkhawong, *Siam Phappayon*, 258-261.

biggest film companies, *Khrung Thep Phappayon* and *Phattanakorn,* into *Siam Phappayon*— the company that also owned and printed the popular film magazine, *Phappayon Siam*. This was in order to compete with the increasing popularity of a new film company, *Nakornkasem,* which later went bankrupt and was taken over by *Siam Niramai.*

It is now commonly agreed among Thai film historians that the period following the exhibitions of these two earliest Thai feature films was the start of the golden studio-era in Siam. In order for me to portray how cinema started to thrive without support from the court and developed into distinct genres, it might be helpful to revisit the archive and take a look at some responses written about cinema and its impact. An account from a newspaper from the period, for instance, reads as follows:

> […] *Phappayon* came to Siam about 20 years ago and started to thrive until today. One can see the rising popularity in every municipal and community—basically everywhere. These are cinema theatres for *mahachon* (the masses). […] Most people felt alleviated after watching a film. They enjoyed it more than any other *mahorasop* [public entertainment]. Cinema does not create any ennui. Funny images, courageous images—we can see all of these for real. […] Cinema accompanies lives of the people in ways that soothe their suffering. Let us categorize cinema as a guide—leading men to *kwam charoen* [progress] and pleasures, yet never failing to offer men advantageous knowledge. But one thing we need to be aware of: cinema still lacks something that could be beneficial to the global masses. This is because filmmakers focused too much on making money instead of recovering the masses from suffering and giving them

knowledge. If they start acknowledging this deficit and improve their filmmaking, all benefits will not only be doubled for the audience but also for them as well.[176] This writing was published in 1924 and not even in a film periodical or magazine. This essay indicates that cinema became part of the mainstream culture and embodied a way of life and literate culture.[177] That cinema was perceived as belonging to the people and for the people's progress underlines my argument about the detachment of sensibility from the mandated protocol of the royal court. As this literature demonstrates, cinema, then, was in demand such that it was also worthy of a conversation that provided a corpus of knowledge informing the people about this new technology and the arguments around it.[178] What's more is that cinema opened a window into other worlds since the list of films that were screened in commercial theatres were largely Hollywood and later Chinese films, especially from Shanghai, as already mentioned. All in all, away from the questions of illiteracy and lack of mass involvement, cinema and its universal language opened a new venue for possibilities allowing the people to take part and thus be visible in the public life and gradually develop their own choice of aesthetics.

The popularity of cinema and the growing investment in film imports were on the par with the global and regional markets and continued to be dominant in Siam up until

[176] "Aumnard kong Phappayon nai anakot" ("The Future Power of Cinema"), *Pim Thai*, 19 November 1924, 8.

[177] Most historians explained this quite often through the popular novelists and authors such as Chit Burathat or Dok Mai Sod (Bupha Nimmanhemin), who incorporated stories about cinema, moviegoing as activity of the middle class into their novels. While these accounts also implied the co-development between the novel and cinema, I focus on anonymous writings on cinema itself. The primary reason to this selection of sources is also part of my goal to revive and make visible what was kept and was hitherto overlooked in the archive of early Thai cinema.

[178] There was no evidence if there was any attempt to translate Western film theory texts. Most of the informational texts I found, for example in some columns in *Phappayon Siam,* were more about technical issues around filmmaking, such as how to film a twin, how to manage an acting in Hollywood manner. This reliance on Hollywood style is also very important to the discussion around diplomacy and censorship in early Thai cinema.

the reigning days of Prajadhipok, whose ascent to the throne after his brother was in 1925. The involvement of cinema in the history of this monarchical reign is mesmerizing. One can tell from the archive that this is the period in which most films from the royal court were still well preserved.[179] This, of course, is due to the King's personal investment in cinema, his connection to the elites in the industry, and the fact that he himself was a photographer and film director. From my archival trip to the University of Southern California, I learned that Prajadhipok and his entourage also visited Hollywood while being on his royal visits to America. The King was also a member of the American Society of Cinematographers along with others who worked at Phattanakorn's Asiatic Film Distributors.[180] But all of these exclusive memberships or the non-commercial films did not seem to be the topics raised among the commoners.

However, this only emphasized the drastic difference between what one can learn from the archive around royal activities and the archive of the commoners. As one can see from the article quoted above, the commoners of Siam began to clearly understand how the sociological and economic structure of cinema operated and particularly *for* them. From the literature cited above, there was even a part where a proposal toward a "better" cinema was stated. Even though it is not quite clear what the idea of what could be "beneficial" to the people could mean in practices, one can see an attempt to be critical of the state with the implication of cinema's soothing of the sufferings of the masses.

[179] For example, Thai Film Archive uploaded the digitized version of the original nitrate films of the day of the royal funeral of Vajiravudh and of Prajadipok's coronation not long after.

[180] A copy of a receipt for membership fee was made by the Margaret Herrick Library on my request in May 2019.

It is not overstating to say that by the transition to the reign of Prajadhipok (1925)—not too long before the Revolution (1932)—the commoners began to grow some sensibility around freedom and develop the understanding of democratic media modernity. This also coincided with a rather negative political atmosphere under the Sixth Reign of Vajiravudh. The latter could be explained as following:

> In the last several years of the Sixth Reign the political controversies surrounding the king and the court circle were complicated by the development of a severe crisis in state finances. From 1922/3 onward there were growing deficits in the budget, and early in 1924 a commission of three high princes was appointed to study corrective measures. But to the end of the reign the financial situation continued to worsen, and many placed the major part of the blame on excessive royal expenditures.[181]

Even though Vajiravudh "skillfully manoeuvred Siam into World War I on the side of the Allies, despite the traditional anti-French bias of Thai policy,"[182] the railed against the excessive expenditure of Vajiravudh's court, further fueled by rumors about unapologetic additions of royal expenditure into the national regular budget.[183] In a way, Prajadhipok had to face lots of financial difficulties that were due to internal malfunctioning and global effects of the post-war recession and the Great Depression, not to mention the challenges posed by the questions around his creditability after inheriting the throne from his brother who did not have a son or a crown prince. The widespread criticism was even acknowledged by Prajadhipok himself, and to some degree, set forth a new sentiment of

[181] Batson, *The End of the Absolute Monarchy*, 16.
[182] Ibid, 19.
[183] Ibid, 17-18.

the public toward the monarchy. The following quote came from Prajadhipok as he clearly acknowledged his loss of stature in the eyes of the public.

> That the existence of the Supreme Council lessens the prestige of the King. I admit that this is true, but I consider the prestige of Kingship in this country can hardly be lower than at this moment. I have already explained the causes [why] I doubt very much whether the old prestige could ever be regained. I think that the evolution of the public opinion in Bangkok and [the] educated class has already gone too far and that it would be a wild goose chase to try and get back any of the old glory.[184]

Here Prajadhipok refers to the crisis engendered by the changes in the structure of his government. But as I mentioned earlier, my field of scholarship is not so much about revealing the political history of this period but more about the formation of aesthetics, pedagogies of sensibilities, and the redistribution of the sensible, which, according to Jacques Rancière, always pertains to the political.[185] Seen in this light, we can view the state-produced cinema of the Film Unit under the direction of Kamphangphet and with the support of Prajadhipok as part of the crisis management tool. Because Prajadhipok and Kamphangphet were both cinephiles and photographers, they were able to identify and easily make use of the political potentialities of mechanical reproduction and mass communication.

Along the same line of the claim above, one of the examples of the last stretch in a production of a royal-sponsored newsreel can be seen in the film, "The Celebrations of

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[184] Batson, *The End of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam,* 37-38 and 154 note number 7.

[185] Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 5.

the 150th Anniversary of the Founding of Bangkok." It was a film which was co-produced by Srikrung Sound Film Company. The first intertitle, "The Celebrations of the 150th Anniversary of the Founding of Bangkok," appeared on the screen in three different languages: Thai, English and Mandarin. The next title card states that "His Royal Highness the Prince of Kambaengbejra is the patron of this production." The celebration took place from the 4th through the 6th of April 1932, only *three months* before the revolution.[186] The film portrays King Prajadhipok performing a religious rite and paying tribute to his predecessors, the royal military parade and a ceremony of military ranking presentation. Apparently, the exhibition of this celebration of the founding of Bangkok, which also means the beginning of the Chakri Dynasty, felt almost like an omen. Especially when only three months after, the images of the King would be replaced by the masses on the day of the Revolution.

It is now a good time to return to the day of the Revolution as briefly discussed in the beginning of the chapter. According to the cited memoir of Khun Vijitmatra, film developer and editor of Srikrung Sound Film Company, the masses gathered around on the day of the coup d'état. And one might wonder from the beginning of this chapter what bit of information about this film that I withheld. The answer is: unlike many well-preserved royal images, this film of the Revolution—along with the images of the people who, on that day of the Revolution, no longer lived in the royal shadows—were considered lost.

This unfortunate event of loss, of course, hindered the way the film of the Revolution could be understood. However, what is known for sure after Srikrung Sound

[186] Film Archive Thailand, "Bangkok's 150th Anniversary, April 1932," last modified April 5, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cntA1JYSnXA.

Film Company received a telegram from two unknown American film companies is that the company developed film negatives and submitted them via airmail to America. The following is another excerpt from the memoir that I introduced at the beginning of this chapter.

> At night, we got the positives and screened them without editing them. After the screening, Mr. Krasien and I worked together in the editing room. We made a final selection of scenes that would work for *our* story. We cut long scenes and chose similar scenes to make another final set. This one would be submitted to *farang*'s companies. I checked the final positive films with our *Moviola*[187] and prepared the intertitles in English. When I was done with the work, I rushed to send these films to both American companies via airmail. When I was done with the issue with *farang* (after making both the title and the intertitles explaining all the events), I turned to the domestic production of the film. In fact, during that time, Srikrung Sound Film Company was already able to make sound films. But it was sudden—we didn't have time to prepare for a production of a sound film. That's why we got a silent film instead. I put in the title and did the final editing. We had the complete positive copy—that was the newsreel of the Revolution of Siam of 24 June 1932.[188]

According to this memoir, one can see that Srikrung Sound Film Company was quite prepared in terms of both technological and human resources such that the film was processed for bifurcated publics. One was a copy that was supposed to be "our story"—to be exhibited in Siam—while the other was prepared to be submitted elsewhere away

[187] "A Moviola" is a device that allows a film editor to view a film while editing.
[188] Vijitmatra, *Lak Nang Thai*, 106.

from the eyes of the domestic audience. The author, Khun Vijitmatra, continues, recalling the fate of the films of the Revolution Day that were sent to America as following:

> Three days later, Srikrung Sound Film Company received a telegram from America. It was from one of the companies to which we submitted our film. They stated in the telegram that coup d'état in Siam did not have any bloodshed moment. They didn't want the film then. At the end of the telegram, they even had the audacity to say that if we wanted our film back, we needed to send them mailing fees. We turned to one another, nodded and just continued drinking in silence.[189]

This statement referred to the fact that unknown American film companies rejected to buy the film reels given that the Siamese Coup was bloodless. In the case of *Miss Suwanna of Siam,* the request to ban the film was originated by the Thai royal government. But in this case, the failure of international film exhibition did not come from the intention of those who produced the film but was rather commissioned by the Hollywood expectation—by a logic of monetary-based film industry.

If one wonders what happened then with the copy *for* the domestic audience, the answer is also not pleasing, especially not to the pro-democratic party. Dome Sukkhawong, founder of Thai Film Archive, interviewed Vijitmatra, and the latter vaguely remembered that the film was screened in Siam during the years after the Revolution. It was even called the film of "the day when the sky and the land were flipped over."[190] A historian, Sakdina Chatrakul na Ayuddhaya, further commented that

[189] Vijitmatra, *Lak Nang Thai,* 106.

[190] Sakdina Chattakul na Ayuddhaya, "24 mituna 2475 songkram bon pan film" ("24 June 1935: A War on Celluloid"), Online. 11 February 2020. https://prachatai.com/journal/2012/06/41129.

the film grew a new seed of hope into the people. What happened that was not pleasing was that, unfortunately, but not at all surprisingly, the film was banned from being screened. This command was ordered by the first Thai prime minister (1932-33), Phraya Manopakornnithitada, who was also a leading royalist figure in the parliament, on account of it being "another unnecessary coup de force of a hammer on a nail—creating an unnecessary pain and discomfort to the royal family members."[191] I want to point out that this metaphor reflects not merely a conservative pro-monarchic attitude but a rhetorical resuscitation of the right and "more ethical" way of sensemaking in the new supposedly democratic regime of the people. Regarding the material reality of the new political context, in a way, one can say that the people of Siam already acknowledged what was going on with the toppling of the absolute monarchy. Yet, the goal of the censorship in this case did not seem to really constrain people once again from understanding this new political regime, nor did it seem to discourage or undermine democracy of the people. Rather, it was just another authoritarian move disguised in care and empathy—asking the new subject under democracy to again be humble and to remain respectful of the old power—the ancestor of Siam.

One can see from the pattern of interruption from the state, or rather from the conservative party, that it resembles the pattern of all royal interventions.[192] One might also infer that another kind of political training also takes place via censorship. As amplified by Manopakorn's rhetoric, the banning of the film in fact emphasizes the impact of cinema on the people. No one can deny any longer that in Siam during this

[191] Charnwit Kasetsiri, Phappayon kub Karn Meung ['Cinema and Politics'] , 28

[192] Especially the one I referred to in Chapter Two when Chulalongkorn manage to intervene the continuity of *Sanook neuk* through the language of care.

period, both elites and citizens from other classes took cinema for guaranteed for the power of its mechanical reproduction—its capacity to reach out to masses—and its status as a popular medium. So, in a way, cinema witnesses and makes witnesses quite infinitely as long as the materiality of celluloid exists. This can become both enticing and dangerous, depending on who looks at it or makes uses of it. It is thus not surprising that the film was ordered to be screened for the public again, this time during the leadership of Field Marshall Phibunsongkram. Khun Vijitmatra recalled that the film was then screened along with a film about how Field Marshall Phibunsongkram defeated a counter-Revolution rebel known as *kabot boworadet* in a counter-insurgent operation that occurred in October 1933.[193] The screening of these two films, this time, played a very obvious role in ideology making. But even with such a pivotal task in political pedagogy and training, at least for the new military ruler, the reels of both films disappeared.

IV. Film Diplomacy and National Cinema: The Case of *The King of the White Elephant* (1941)

Let us go back to Prince Borihat's prominent question—but do [you] know how to govern the Thais? According to the account of the ban of the film and the re-exhibition of the film for ideological purpose, both the first prime minister, Manopakorn, and the military prime minister, Phibunsongkram made clear that they were concerned with Boriphat's question. Once again, aesthetics emerges as a productive site to track the continuities and breaks within this area of power making and sustenance.

[193] Autcharaporn Kamookpisai and Soontri Arsawai, *Lumdub hetkarn tarng karnmeung karnpokkrong thai 2475-2535* (*Chronological Order of Political Events in Thailand 1932-1992*) (Bangkok: Thammasat University, 1992), 1-3.

While the Revolution ended the absolute monarchy, there is no point in rejecting the residues of authoritarian top-down structure of power in Siam. Peculiarly characterized by the absence of participation of the people of Siam, the Revolution was nonetheless successful in claiming and pushing forward many new relationships and policies. Even though one could argue that the new regime of power was motivated by the "democratic" causes and principles by simply looking at the general election of 1933, I am quite reserved vis-à-vis this narrative that singularly idolizes this very moment of democratic progression. This celebratory idolization of a particular group often has an exclusively resolute focus overshadowing simultaneous developments contesting this narrative for progression. After pulling together both the pre-Revolution and post-Revolution archive, I am suggesting that the Revolution was not revolutionary but titular, especially when we look at this history that I have discussed of its media objects. If the Revolution was revolutionary in the sense that it planted a new sensibility among the people, would there be so much attempt to control the pedagogy around media—or in other words, to keep the status quo intact?

It is at this juncture that I propose we turn to cinema as a fraught site to examine the failed potentialities of the revolution. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the Revolution has been undertaken largely in the studies of politics and has never been seriously considered alongside the history of early Thai cinema. Additionally, the method in which cinema has been studied seems to only focus on film texts and, of course, only that they are not absent, prioritizing the authority of the text even in its criticism. On the one hand, I turn instead to what happened to media and discourses around media aesthetics to suggest that we can study from there the efficacy—or not—of the

revolution. On the other hand, by resisting the impulse to prioritize film texts—mainly produced, as already discussed, by those who had capital, means, resources and networks from the old regime of power—my focus turns to the absence of the masses' participation (in the purported democratic process). This is because it is important not to neglect political activities and social tendencies, or the lack thereof, that have led to, for instance, undisputable censorship of films, on the one hand, and fixed unswerving admiration and even canonization of films, on the other. To my contention, cinema then advances itself as a site where the democratic ideals entangle with the authoritarian impulses of the revolution.

The first decade after the Revolution of 1932 witnessed, thanks to vicissitudes of history, an intensification of nationalism under the military rule that delineates the contextual framework to examine cinema. This period was extremely chaotic, due first to the domestic conflicts of interest and secondly to the developments towards another Great War and finally to the end of the French rule in Indochina. The instability and lack of integrity of the members of the Parliament also led to events of resignation and arbitrary designations of positions in the government body. One of the prominent cases that led the members of the Parliament to one of the greatest divides concerned Pridi Banomyong, the intellectual icon of the Revolution. This was about Pridi proposing the "Yellow Cover Book" [*samoot pok leung*], an economic reform that was harshly criticized and demonized by his opponents for reproducing communist ideology in Siam.[194] Let me quote some of the statements in this extremely controversial *samoot pok leung:* "Chapter 4 Equality: Equality—let me ask how can we own it? Especially while some *kharajakarn*

[194] "Kam nam," ("Preface"), Praditmanootham (Pridi Banomyong), *Kraokrongkarn setthakit,* (*Economic Plan*), http://www.openbase.in.th/files/puey014.pdf.

[officers in the royal services] have to work like slaves, and other with higher ranks—quoting themselves as experts—only wave their fingers."[195]

As one can see, Pridi's statement suggests a radical eradication of the root of feudalism. This criticism along with other policies faced an aggressive backlash not only from the royalist opponents but also from some of the founders of the military members of the People's Party themselves. One of the most problematic issues in Thai politics from the period of the Revolution up until today has been the involvement of the military in civil politics. After the decrease of trust in and popularity of Pridi for his inclination toward a communist model of economy, there run many terms of military prime ministers and pro-military administrative governments. The international context, especially the sentiment of hostility against the French in Indochina and territorial conflict between Siam and France in 1940,[196] led the military government to strengthen its nationalist discourse and to seek allies in other military nations such as Japan and Germany. The government led by Prime Minister Field Marshal Phibunsongkram increased the public support for the Axis Powers, and in 1939 Phibunsongkram officially began a policy called *rat niyom*, literally translated as "state conventions," starting, first and foremost, with the official change of the name of the nation from Siam to Thailand. This is to emphasize the ethnicity of "Thai" that was claimed to make up the majority of the population of the nation—a racialized practice that would become the blueprint for the first state-imposed nationalist policy under the new regime of power.

[195] Pridi Banomyong, *Kraokrongkarn setthakit,* (*Economic Plan*), 91.

[196] Autcharaporn Kamookpisai and Soontri Arsawai, *Lumdub hetkarn tarng karnmeung karnpokkrong thai 2475-2535* (*Chronological Order of Political Events in Thailand 1932-1992*), 6.

In this political climate, it is of course not surprising that film productions supported by the military government during the leadership of Phibunsongkram would be about the military. In 1934, only 6 months after the riot of *boworadet*—the one that sought to bring back the absolute monarchy, the Secretariat of the Prime Minister sent out letter to the Ministry of Defense asking for the Propaganda Office (*sam nak ngarn kosanakarn*) to produce a film that could make *ratsadorn* (the people) admire the military.[197] The result was the production of *Leud Taharn Thai* (Undaunted Sons of Siam) in 1934. The film is a romantic drama against the backdrop of war and military victory. The film production team consulted with the three main generals of the Royal General Thai Army, Royal Thai Air Force and Royal Thai Navy. According to memories of those who were involved in the production, the film illustrated quite straightforwardly the strength of the military power of Siam and rigorous awareness of the military's responsibility for the nation.[198] The film reels were all destroyed in an incident of arson, and the film is now considered lost to the public.

I refer to the film only to underline Phibunsongkram's commitment to using film for militarist and pro-war propaganda, but it is also instructive of Siam's unstable politics after the Revolution. Nationalism around this time operated under the leadership of a military pro-war ruler, no longer under the direction of a monarch. As a result of this transformation, film is deployed as a means of reconstructing the novel ethos of nationalism to convince and include the people. Instead of discussing a straightforwardly

[197] Government Cabinet, "Raingarn karn prachoom kana rattamontri krungtri 7/2477 wan angkarn tee 22 preutsapakhom 2477 na wang paroosk" ("Governmental meeting report, no.7/1934, on Tuesday 22 May 1934").

[198] Charnvit Kasetsiri, *Phappayon kub karn meung* (*Cinema and Politics*) (Bangkok: Phūmpanyā, 1999), 31-38.

statist pro-military propaganda film, however, what I propose to look at instead is its very opposite—a film that claims to counter-argue the military genre and to promote peace and global connection without war. This is precisely because I see the prototype of royalist nationalist aesthetic that operates quite subtly within the production of this film regardless of its claim for peace and safety of the nation, especially from the warmonger military government. I am referring to the film that now wears the crown of prestige among other early Thai films for being the most complete early feature film, one that was made by the most respected intellectual mind and instigator of the Revolution of Siam, Pridi Banomyong.[199]

Any Thai film historian must know about Pridi's *The King of the White Elephant.* There are so many reasons for that, and I will discuss the socio-political significance of the film soon. But before I participate in the stories already told and repeated many times, I want to share the story of my own encounter with the film in hopes that it would shed new light on the ways we question or study the archive. Strangely enough, my first encounter with *The King of the White Elephant* was not in Thailand but surprisingly in Eugene, Oregon. This happened when I first found out the database of film magazines in the U.S.[200] My first encounter with the film was thus not really with the film text but with, what I would call, "the noise" around the film. It is indeed important to experience the film text, an experience which came to me after, but one cannot contest the potential power and allure of the noise around the film text either. Thus, my interest in the film

[199] From now, I will refer to him by his first name since it is more common for Thais to be called by their first name instead of their family name.

[200] I want to thank Elizabeth Peterson, film and media archive specialist at the University of Oregon for her astute knowledge. This archival consultation took place at the Knight Library at the University of Oregon in 2016.

was instigated by what I overheard before my formal experience of the film text itself. Here, I attach a glimpse of my very first encounter with *The King of the White Elephant*. The text below came from a review of the film in an American newspaper:

> *King of the White Elephant*
>
> Pridi Productions Period Drama 66 mins.
>
> AUDIENCE SLANT: (Family) Average patrons will find it somewhat slow.
>
> BOX OFFICE SLANT: Good exploitation possibilities in big city transient situations.
>
> Cast: Renu Kritayakorn, Suvat and Pairin Nisen, Luang Srisurang, Pradab Rabilvongse, Vaivit V. Pitaks, Luang Smak. Credits: Directed by Sunh Vasudhara. Art direction by M. C. Yachai Chitrabongse.
>
> Plot: Drawing a parallel between the Thailand (Siam) of King Chakra, whose homeland is overrun by the King of Honsa's alliance with the Mogul, with present-day world conditions, the film points a moral in showing how courage and loyalty can rout the aggressors. Aided by a sacred white elephant, King Chakra's legions put the invader to flight and he marries the Lord Chamberlain's daughter at the end.
>
> Comment: Due to the fact that the actors, all native Thailanders where the 16th Century costume picture was made, had to be taught English before shooting began, the dialogue is difficult to understand. Most of the picture is told in narrative form complicating matters. The outdoor scenes showing the elephant hunt are interesting but the rest of picture from a technical standpoint cannot be rated with the average American production.

Catchline: "The courage of his people routs the foreign invaders then King Chakra marries the fairest of his subjects."

(For booking information write the "King of White Elephant" Company, Hotel Victoria, Seventh Avenue and 51st St., New York.)[201]

This film review was apparently not that positive. But it gave basic information on the genre of the film—a historical drama that engages with a war of an immemorial past. One of the most important anecdotes that one gathers right away from this review is that *The King of the White Elephant* made it to America. After many failed attempts to reach the foreign soil to be screened before *farang, The King of the White Elephant* was the one film that eventually made it. In fact, this was Pridi's original and primary purpose—to make a film about peace and to distribute it internationally so that it becomes a peace advocate during the world's chaotic transition into another World War. It was even recorded that Pridi wrote the novel first—about a couple years before the beginning of the film production—and actually submitted the novel for the Nobel Prize for peace.[202] Apparently, this submission failed to be acknowledged by the international audience. And, with the unpopularity of the film among the domestic audiences of Siam, it might have not been so successful in delivering its intended message and thus competing with the pro-war sentiment popularized by his opponent, Phibunsongkram.

If the initial purpose of Pridi was not merely to contribute a discourse of peace to the international audience but also to challenge Phibunsongkram's ultra-nationalism, he would have to, first, find a way to engage with film form in a different manner. Even though contemporary pro-democracy critics often praise Pridi for creating a discourse of

[201] *Showmen's Trade Review*, 5 April, 1941, 19.
[202] Sukkhawong, "The King of the White Elephant DVD leaflet," 11.

peace through the gracious act of King Chakra, who decides to only execute King Hongsa in their elephant battle and saves thousands of his subjects' lives, the path toward peace was inevitably paved by the language of a binary opposition. Of course, some would argue that this opposition may be allegorical to the atmosphere of the world roughly divided between the Axis and the Allies. My point, however, is that it is important to consider not only the narrative of the film but also its peripheries, that is, to understand the film not merely as an aesthetic object but also a historical event. Thus, I find inquiring into the production, distribution, and reception of the film equally valuable in evaluating its political force. With regard to the methodology of a film historian, Robert B. Ray's words quoted below are instructive for my engagement with the cinematic events and patterns of contemporary positive criticism of the film:

> First, the cinema as a whole, and, even more emphatically, any individual movie, is massively overdetermined. No film results from a single cause, even if its maker thinks it does; as a discourse, the cinema, especially the commercial cinema, is simply too exposed, too public, to permit such circumspection. Second (and this point allows from the first), in terms of originating causes, the cinema as an institution, and any single film, is thoroughly decentered.[203]

The King of the White Elephant tells a story of the victory King Chakra, the supreme monarch of Ayodhaya—an ancestral kingdom preceding the Chakri Dynasty—over the King of Hongsa (or known to Thais as ruler of the Burmese). The war erupts because King Hongsa wants a white elephant—a sign of majestic greatness—that Ayodhaya possesses. Eventually, King Chakra refuses for the people to go into battle by challenging

[203] Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 6-7.

King Hongsa to fight with him personally on the elephant's back. King Chakra defeats King Hongsa and gives an anti-war speech in front of his subject and the enemy. King Chakra comes back to the palace and reforms the rule of polygamy by getting married with his Lord Chamberlain's daughter—entitling her as his only queen.

According to Ray's conception above, *The King of the White Elephant* is definitely too exposed, starting from the first scene after the intertitle, where it offers a montage of streets and buildings of Bangkok in 1940, to the next that states "Ayodhaya, 1540." As a result, the film announces its attachment to two publics divided not only temporally but politically as well—the former—Bangkok post-Revolution—was the one that Pridi himself pushed forward. The background of the intertitle is a bell tower beautifully decorated in traditional Thai Buddhist art. The background dissolves into a new image of a central top part of a building that looks like a Buddha-image hall. Just seconds later, we learn that it was actually an assembly hall where King Chakra, the protagonist of the film, rules. The camera in the sequence of the assembly hall in which characters of the Ayodhaya—the good party—are introduced frames the scene in a rectangular tableau. Lord Chamberlain is placed in the middle of the screen and in front of a door facing the camera. He waves his hand to the door while stating "King Chakra of Ayodhaya." The door opens and King Chakra steps out into the stage. Not only that the narrative was familiar but the movement of the characters and the mise-en-scène also resemble the staging of a traditional theatre.

The element of staged theatre presides only in the assembly hall sequence. Ten minutes into the film, Lord Chamberlain wants the King to select a woman to marry. He introduces his daughter into the hall and the group of ladies enters. They walk to the

traditional Thai music upward to the camera until they start performing a Thai traditional dance for the King. The combination of the mise-en-scène and the camera gives an impression of a staged performance. While the dance is not too complicated, the delicacy of Thainess is captured with close-up shots of the female protagonist's moving feet. Her feet move with the music in a way that underlines the uniqueness of this dance. The narrative of peace and beauty is structured in a way that is nostalgic, starting from the 'now-time' of the modern Bangkok with the images of its public space then returning to the ancestors' throne clustered around by the members of the ruling class and an event of traditional dance – all of which are no longer of interest, let alone taken as central to the imagination and sensibility of the contemporary popular sensibility.

Another point that I want to point to is the fact the film wants to do so much and ends up making all that it achieved to be in conflict with one another. First, the film is nostalgic of the immemorial past of Siam. It is important to note, however, that this nostalgia is different from the nostalgia of the people toward the poetic form as I argued in Chapter Three. This nostalgia operating in *The King of the White Elephant*, on the very contrary, brings up a sense of hope and certainty only in the immemorial past. It reclaims, for instance, the uniqueness of Thai identity; namely by giving an impression of a traditional Thai dance from a fourth wall perspective or by allegorizing the white elephant, which has long been part of the stocked myth of the Kingdom of Siam. Secondly, the film is self-conscious of its enrolling in film form. For example, it uses camera for a close-up on the feet underlining the characteristics and potential of cinema even further. Again, it wants to think ahead about the future shaped by the potentials of global peace, but it revels in a version of a violent past—the absolutism—that already led

to its self-destruction. Ironic for a film that really wants to defeat the propaganda sponsored by the military, it chooses an authoritarian traditional figure and claims its righteousness through his heroic deeds in order to defeat another authoritarian ruler.

After the sequence in the court, the film shifts to the jungle where the story's conflict emerges following the capturing of a white elephant by the Ayodayans who proclaimed it as a sign of the kingdom's greatness. King Hongsa uses the elephant to be an excuse for war. All of these stories somehow feel too familiar to Thai natives—including me—and perhaps even to cinephiles familiar with contemporary Thai cinema who might have known about massive film productions about the greatness of the King of Ayodhaya like *The Legend of Suriyothai* (2001) and 6 parts of *The Legend of King Naresuan* (2007, 2011, 2014, 2015). These films repeated the story of wars between Ayodhaya and Hongsa, made use of a white elephant in the plots, and adopted stock heroic and villainous characters claiming that they were historically true. One might wonder if the occurrence and reoccurrence of this film genre can be framed in the language of hypocrisy especially when these films were made in the post-Revolution period and especially when one might hope for something, perhaps, more revolutionary from the one who pushed forward the purportedly people's revolution. One might wonder as well if this genre was just a result of the early prototype of nationalism and thus an ever-fading autocracy in Siam.

Another characteristic of this stock epic is the impossibility to put a finger on temporal accuracy. This immemorial past correspond to one of the characteristics that constitutes what Benedict Anderson called the imagined community—the assembly hall

is nothing but "the cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown soldiers"[204] And when I mentioned the prototype of nationalism, I also compare the genre of epic to what Vajiravudh did with the language of opposition and his literary creation of *Phra Ruang*—an immerial heroic king of Sukhothai as discussed in Chapter Two and Four. Myths of the nation can fold temporality into abstraction and assume the stage of infiniteness. The emergence and reemergence of the myth at any point in the course of history would give the same effect. The timeless greatness of Siam makes sense and will always make sense through the same set of traditional aesthetics that it entails.

It is, of course, very difficult for me to position my argument this way especially when the whole archive would push it to the other direction, especially when the film was produced by the respectable founding father of the new state with good will. Here, we can note a rather fallacious tendency that Roland Barthes notes with the following words in *The Death of the Author*: "The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author 'confiding' in us."[205] The good intention of the author is one thing not to be undermined, but it also shouldn't limit critical horizons. Given the plot based on the immemorial battle between two kings, how can one overlook the characteristic of Thai nationalism that always needs a monarch—and is thus what I call royalist nationalism—a nationalist sensibility already at work under the absolutism and now under the staging of peace against the military regime? The question is complex in that it evokes intricacies in the nature of politics and

[204] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London: Verso, 2006), 9.

[205] Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, transl. Stephen Heath. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 143.

hierarchy of power in Thailand. The problem is that it is extremely difficult for those in power to accept that they somehow manage to perpetuate the discursive structure of power that they benefit from though they also claim and seek to reject it.

It is not at all wrong that contemporary critics including preservationists who worked hard to bring back the film reels to life defended the film on the basis of the narrative structure claiming that King Chakra only killed King Hongsa to stop the war and to prevent the loss of lives of both kingdoms. But one must put the good intention aside for a moment and consider the cinematic structure. This enables the reemergence of what I call a pedagogy of royalist-nationalist aesthetic. The complexities of motives—wanting to save the nation, to prevent the collective public to fully engage with the pro-war sentiment, and to eventually participate in the war—push this film to seek an alternative to the pro-war discourse. The result is thus a "rebirth" of a traditional Thai epic, this time perpetually re-motivated on celluloid. The rebirth means a recourse back to an immemorial past of a monarchical epic and a familiar structure of power that has always surrounded the public—that has continued to inform, formulate and reform its efficient pedagogy.

Lastly, one cannot leave out the ramification of the film as the first Thai film to finally make it to the international stage. Though the distribution of this film to America and Singapore may have only been an add-on to the strategy to overcome his opponent, it still underlines a concept of film diplomacy already discussed with *Miss Suwanna of Siam.* As one may notice the conceptual trajectory of film diplomacy that I proposed did not cease its operation. Rather, it also echoes into the present time in which its afterlife becomes the question of the archive and historiography. In the case of *Miss Suwanna of*

Siam, the archive did not tell us about any initiative of Vajiravudh in pushing the co-production as part of his nationalist scheme. It was, on the very contrary, the commoners—common people involved in the film industry—that emphasized in their writings the significance of film as diplomat of the great nation of Siam. This leads to a counter-intuitive model of the relationship between cinema and nationalism whereby instead of the sovereign power, its subjects are those who realize the potentials of nationalism inherent in cinema and yet fail to sustain it due to top-down intervention. This echoes Walter Benjamin's famous words that "The film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one.[206] In the case of *Miss Suwanna,* the [cult] value of traditional aesthetic presented in the film, for example, by the presence of royal stage actors recedes. What replaces it was the excitement among the people of Siam not only for an occasion to see Siam on celluloid but for everything altogether—the unfolding of factual Siam into the fictional world enabled by the technological reproduction of the celluloid, the exhibition of those who looked like the audiences in theatres replacing Hollywood stars, etc. The popularity of *Miss Suwanna of Siam* among the domestic population emphasizes not only the shifting values and attitudes toward cinema but also how cinema threatened the absolute authority of the sovereign—especially when they were dealing with "a critic" and "an examiner" though an absent-minded one.

While that was the case for *Miss Suwanna,* Pridi's *The King of the White Elephant* already started off with an immense concern for nationalism. It wanted another version of

[206] Benjamin, *Illuminations,* 240-241.

nationalism that did not repeat its militarist version run by Phibunsongkram and his supporters. Regarding the context that I provided above, it is thus fair to say that from the start, the film did not only plan to be a diplomat representing Siam on the international stage but also to be a bullied—a once victim—who emerges even more majestically than ever. Instead of melodramatizing the trope of victimhood, it worked out this international appearance in the opposite direction—presenting its strength and long tradition in the genre of indigenous epic. I briefly mentioned the unpopularity of the film among the Thai public in 1941: the film could not hold the interest of the Thai public for they knew too well the story that inscribed itself as a history of the kingdom.[207] In the decade following the revolution, what *The King of the White Elephant* provided was a bit off and even at odds, nostalgically portraying the revival of the monarchical power in an era when democracy and freedom were discussed.

And then there came the international reception when it was first screened in New York in April 1941. I already cited a review of an American critic who showed little to no interest in the film. There were a couple more that I could find, for example, in *Film Daily* and *Motion Picture Herald.* Most of the reviews focused on the cinematic qualities while using the Hollywood standards. There was one that actually avoided an exoticizing language and referred more in detail to Pridi himself. Here is a review by Katharine Anne Ommanney in *Theatre Arts* published in April 1941:

[207] My argument differs from the observation of Dome Sukkhawong who explained that the unpopularity of the film might be due to the fact that the film was spoken in English and thus needed a live dubbing person during the screening. See Khapachao eng (It's Me), "The King of the White Elephant," *Introductory Leaflet to the DVD produced on the Occasion of the 70th Anniversary of the film of "The King of the White Elephant"* (Nakhonpathom: Thai Film Archive, n.d.)," 10.

> He wrote his scenario to show the selfishness of rulers who force war upon their people for their own purposes. It is indeed ironical that the première of his 'campaign for peace', as he calls it, will take place when his beloved Land of the Free—Thai literally means 'free'—is involved in actual war with one nation while another lines up battleships in the nearby harbor.[208]

While other reviewers were not at all interested in decoding any political implication, at least this review managed to do so, even if briefly and insubstantially. Regarding the reception in the "Land of the Free", the cry for help may have failed somewhere along the line.[209]

However, if we return the concept of film diplomacy and evaluate its impacts, two things that the film definitely accomplished were, first, the introduction of a concept of a national cinema from Thailand and, second, the rights to be preserved. For the first accomplishment, one might thing that it did its job because it went right to the land of Hollywood, simply affirming what Andrew Higson states. But let me recap the concept of national cinema here:

> To identify a national cinema is first of all to specify a coherence and a unity; it is to proclaim a unique identity and a stable set of meanings. The process of identification is thus invariably a hegemonizing, myth-ologising process, involving both the production and assignation of a particular set of meanings, and the attempt to contain, or prevent the potential proliferation of other meanings. At

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[208] Katharine Anne Ommanney, "*The King of the White Elephant*" *Theatre Arts* 25 (April 1941): 314.

[209] It is important to acknowledge the nature of the film consumption in America, which was definitely not different from that of Thailand. Film industry under the beacon light of Hollywood thrived for entertainment. With such dynamic of a commodity culture, a film text must do a lot more to even start to become politically relevant.

> the same time, the concept of a national cinema has almost invariably been mobilized as a strategy of cultural (and economic) resistance; a means of asserting national autonomy in the face of (usually) Hollywood's international domination.[210]

For Higson, a national cinema makes use of its indigenous resources while directing its attack to the paradigm of Hollywood cinema. Interestingly, given the plan to exhibit in America, I argue that Pridi's *The King of the White Elephant* only fits Higson's first category in which he discussed the term national cinema as a symbolic cultural myth-making process. Like I discussed earlier, the rebirth of a traditional indigenous epic is a refashioning, re-motivating and reactivating of the royalist sensibility that used to successfully unite the people of Siam. To those who might think like Pridi, siding with a royalist-nationalist aesthetic might sound like a better idea than submitting to fascism under the military authoritarian rule. And in Pridi's *The King of the White Elephant,* the film seemed to profess Prince Boribhat's conviction that the monarchs knew "how to govern the Thais," leading thus to a reemergence—a borrowing—of royalist sensibility on silver screen.

But for the second category, if one follows my argument on the purpose of the film being both the diplomat and the representative of a once victim who overcame it all, this would deviate from Higson's idealism of resistance against the Hollywood paradigm. Eventually, one must not forget that Prasat Sukhum, the cinematographer of the film, was educated right in the Paramount Studio in Hollywood in the same class as Jame Wong

[210] Andrew Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema," *Screens* 30, no. 4 (Autumn 1989): 37.

Howe in 1923.[211] If the film did not resist Hollywood but rather embraced what it had to offer, then the concept of national cinema derived from this case might, yet again, confirm that there was no Thai cinema without Thai cinema being seen elsewhere—a condition of diplopia.

In other words, even though years passed—the absolute monarchy was over, the bloodless Revolution and many changes of faces of the rulers occurred—an anxiety of the uncolonized nation remains. The question of how to safeguard the sovereign always comes with a process of making others convinced—believing that Siam/Thailand has a long tradition, that Siam/Thailand has always been civilized and that Siam/Thailand has always been capable to keep up with whomever is on the lead of global politics. Nationalism that seems homogeneous was actually broken down always into double visions.

[211] Khapachao eng (It's Me), "The King of the White Elephant," *Introductory Leaflet to the DVD produced on the Occasion of the 70th Anniversary of the film of "The King of the White Elephant"* (Nakhonpathom: Thai Film Archive, n.d.), 22.

CHAPTER VI

EPILOGUE

One can say that the Wasuwat Brothers are the Thai reincarnated version of the French Lumière Brothers. They are founders of Srikung Film Company, the first Thai Film company that produced the first silent feature Thai film—*Double Luck* (‘*Choke Song Chan’*) (1927), and later the first sound film—*Going Astray* (‘*Long Tarng*’) (1931). Not only that they were the cameramen on the day of the 1932 Revolution (as mentioned in Chapter Four) but they were also known to the Thai public for being the first to lead the Thai film industry. They possessed the newest contemporary film cameras of the time, and owned a film studio for their film productions that was turned into a theatre after the First World War. It was located in Bangkrapi, which was known from the late 1920’s to the beginning of the Second World War as Hollywood of Siam.[212] The final chapter of the book, *Siam Phappayon,* written by Dome Sukkhawong, former director and founder of the Thai Film Archive whose works ostensibly partake in the writing of the history of early Thai cinema, is contributed to the legacy of the Wasuwat Brothers. The chapter is titled: “From Studio to Theatre to Final Stage,” marking the ending both of the greatness of the Wasuwat Brothers and of the history of early Thai cinema that he presented in the book. Some final remarks that the author leaves to us can be translated as following:

> A few years ago, traces of houses and vinyl industry can still be found here. But in the year of his [*Luang Kolkarnjenjit*] 100th birthday anniversary in this Bangkrapi field, which used to be the location of Sri Krung Theatre and known as the

[212] Sukkhawong, *Siam Phappayon,* 45.

> Hollywood of Siam, everything is now demolished. The land is now being excavated. They are building a metro station right here. They want to call it Asoke station. In the future, our kids and Bangkokians will busily go up and down this metro station without any idea that they are walking upon what used to be the dignity of the nation. Unless some officials would kindly grant a memorial plate, or change the name of the station to Srikrung Station.
>
> However, on these papers, in this anthology of history of 'Nang Thai,' I am inscribing his works. I am making them visible as evidences so that our descendants can study them further in the future.[213]

What interests me most is not only the bury ground of what once was the culmination of privately-led Thai film industry but also how easy it actually is to not preserve the legacies of the people and to move forward only with whatever the state thinks is progress. Additionally, the image of layers of earth, and of the pasts not only piled up literally underneath Asoke station but also underneath some of the initial motifs behind the construction of the sky train. One must not forget the stark contrast between the train in *Railway Sleepers* in my introduction—the one that is for the rural areas and for the poor, and this sky train that is for Bangkok. For everyday commute, the ticket per trip is too expensive to those who earn minimum wages in Bangkok, let alone those day laborer who emigrate to Bangkok from provincial areas of Thailand. Those who can comfortably afford the tickets without any complaints are not only the middle-class but the upper middle-class, and perhaps, tourists. And one should never forget as well the initial name of the project of this sky train. Before shortened to BTS, it was actually entitled

[213] Sukkhawong, *Siam Phappayon*, 257-58.

according to the reason of its inauguration: "The Elevated Train in Commemoration of H.M. the King's 6th Cycle Birthday."

Recently, Arjun Subrahmanyan published an article, "The Unruly Past: History and Historiography of the 1932 Thai Revolution," discussing the complexities of the political discourses inherited from ideological conflicts after the 1932 Revolution and on the significance to revisit the historiography of the revolution. He starts his interrogation with a controversial incident, at least for the progressive minds in Thailand, of the disappearance of the plaque that commemorates the beginning of democracy in Siam. The story goes as following:

> In early April 2017, a near-century-old plaque sunk into the pavement on the Royal Plaza in Bangkok disappeared. The unremarkable, 30-centimetre brass marker bore a simple inscription that encircles its rim: "At this spot the People's Party (*Khana Ratsadon*) established the Constitution for the progress of the nation." The centre read "24 June 1932, Dawn." […] The 1932 plaque words worn over time by foot and car traffic across the Royal Plaza, was replaced overnight with a new plaque carrying a very different meaning.[214]

The first time that I saw social media posts and trends using the term *prachachon sooksan nah sai* or "fresh-faced happy citizens," in relation to the news of the disappearance of the 1932 plaque, I was extremely confused. Who would have dared to think that those silly terms are actually part of the "catch-words" replacing the new plaque installed in lieu of memories of the Revolution? The full message at the center of the new plaque reads: "Fresh-faced, happy citizens are the strength of the land." And

[214] Arjun Subrahmanyan, "The Unruly Past: History and Historiography of the 1932 Thai Revolution," 74.

around the central text, writings in circular form reads: “Loyalty and love for the [Buddhist] Triple Gem, one’s clan and having an honest heart for one’s king are good. These are the tools to make one’s state prosper.”[215] The news of the new plaque declaring “fresh-faced happy citizens” surrounded—literally—by the textual presence of the sacred institutions—nation, religion, monarch, of course, did not even reach the majority of the Thai population, let alone create a national uproar. The lack of national protest organized against this erasure is to no one’s surprise especially given the fact that the history of the Revolution, of the people and of Thai democracy in general are not really well inscribed in the national consciousness anyway. But for those who care, they are found dumbstruck. Who would have imagined this level of audacity—of this ridiculously fearless travesty—had there not already been countless of incidents of such imposed act of erasure and replacement? The violence of erasure feels too familiar, too close and real to happen time and again. One the one hand, we feel helpless—too accustomed to such sadistic treatment and feel smaller each time it occurs. But, on the other hand, as infuriated as we are by the mocking smirk of “fresh-faced, happy citizens,” we angrily ask: “Are we just a joke?,” and then we persist—finding a new way to organize and resist the injustice disguised in the act of erasure.

My dissertation, on the one hand, works in the scholarly fashion of the historical turn in film theory, providing an alternative narrative to the historiography of early Thai cinema. It argues for the heterogeneity of modernities in Siam through the analyses of the receptions and practices of media modernity from the period of the modernizing Siam under the absolute monarchy to the first decade after the Siamese Revolution. I also

[215] Subrahmanyan, “The Unruly Past,” 74.

provided in this dissertation epistemological conflicts of media modernity among different classes, practices of control that demonstrate the nature of the sovereign power as well as possibilities in critiquing aesthetic inheritances—royalist-nationalist aesthetics—in the formation of national cinema. On the other hand, my dissertation seeks to remember where remembrance has been privileged and often termed as commemoration for certain groups, and yet, where it become, to the less privileged party, not only a cognitive struggle but a political one. The political act of remembering emerges from the site where national hegemonic history is prevalent and where normalization of amnesia and erasure is part and parcel of that tradition of historiography.

The condition of amnesia in Thailand presents a very complex set of entanglements and the fight against it often ends up in either violation of human rights or simply in violence.[216]

I am led to believe that the attempt to recuperate the past is a challenging task since the past has always already been structured by, as I already suggested in my chapters, continuous epistemological understandings constructed by the ruling class and by a particular version of discursive nationalism that focuses on the independence of Siam, the greatness of the monarchs and the moral superiority of Buddhism. When there has not been any single break from the long-lasting epistemological worldview, when almost everything that one sees so far—modernity, prosperity, independence, democracy—has always been granted from above, how can one even imagine any changes, let alone dream of positive ideal for inclusivity and solidarity? How can one even make sense of the

[216] In the protesting spirit, I am referring here to the lack of juridical progress, after ten years, in investigating and rendering justice to 99 deaths on the day of the government crack-down in Bangkok against the Red Shirt protesters in 2010.

notion of liberation in this strictly totalizing regime—in the regime where most of the narratives are given and made natural?

Trying to respond to the question above, I am still struck by one of the most simply-put yet powerful answers of Apichatpong Weerasethakul. The now-auteur director responds to a question on the concept of reincarnation in his awarded Palme d'Or film, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010). The question was asked with a hypothesis that the concept of reincarnation is not completely divorced from his native culture. His answer not only touches on the cultural aspect and circulation of the concept of reincarnation but also how it motivates him and determines his choices in cinema. I am quoting below his intoxicating response.

> It's not too farfetched to say this [reincarnation] is another reality because the reality now has changed from when I grew up. The media has changed, the landscape has very rapidly changed in my town. Also the way we make films, even though the contents are very local — ghost stories or whatever [*laughs*] — utilizes a very standard, Hollywood-like vocabulary. So I felt like I wanted to make *Uncle Boonmee* as a remembrance and tribute to all those films that I grew up with, the ghosts and the invisible, the human world, and all in between. All these things had expression in the past but not now. In Thailand we believe, of course, in ghosts. In the media it's treated differently, with a lot of digital effects. Sometimes I feel not into this.[217]

In my contention, Apichatpong is one of the Thai artists who sees hope for resolutions to most political conflicts in Thailand *in the past*. This vision corresponds to the vision of

[217] Howard Feinstein, "Past Tense," last modified October 10, 2018, https://filmmakermagazine.com/19141-past-tense/#.W9dgamhKi70.

another director, Sompot Chidgasornpongse, as his camera in *Railway Sleepers* portrays the train moving forward, stray dogs running after the train and the poor sweating and cramming together in a dilapidated train compartment. Apichatpong makes it clear that recovering the past requires us to make sense of the inheritances of what makes up the present—to incorporate, for example, "the ghosts and the invisible, the human world and all in between." As Apichatpong states that "all these things had expression in the past but not now," I share with him a commitment to find ways in which many overlooked pasts could hold their expressions in the present.

In my forthcoming article, "The Critique of Anti-Communist State Violence in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*," in *Asian Cinema,* I argued that *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* successfully evades the capture of the hegemonic right-wing narrative that justifies the state-violence in the anti-communist pogroms in the 1960's-70's by deploying the same justificatory tool as the right-wing's—Buddhist teaching, or rather, the political mobilization of the Buddhist discourse of reincarnation. This dialectical play underlines the challenge of recuperating the past, especially the past that the state and some agents of power want us to forget. To me, the challenge of making justice available to those who suffered injustice, of rendering voices back to the voiceless population lies not only in making the historical facts about them known more widely. The challenge also lies in finding means and methods to refute the hegemonic discourse and history that pre-determine our sensibilities, our sense-making of the world, our subjectivity as a citizen of a nation, our perceptions of others who are different than us.

I have put an idiom “this is all we have” somewhere in the introduction of my dissertation actually as a sarcasm to what we were made to believe. In the same sentiment as to Apichatpong’s “I feel not into this,” the proclamation that is more accurate for me is “This is not all we have”—these are the two statements that negate the inherited conditions of what being Thai means. To me, the ultimate goal of my investment in historiography is never simply about urging a revisionist narrative but to actually inquire into the conditions that make possible, sustain and reproduce the same narrative, aesthetic pedagogy, social interaction of the people toward the deaths, losses, injuries of the disempowered and the underrepresented population. Knowing too well that we lack a space to mobilize and sustain ethical questions around the violence of erasure and amnesia, I still have to move forward with the same old train like everyone else—the one that Sompot brilliantly captured on celluloid. The only difference is that now I am the camera set at the very back of the last compartment of the train—letting many other curves and contours of the past unfold before me.

APPENDIX

NOTE ON LANGUAGE, TRANSLATION, NAMES AND DATES

All translations in this book are mine unless stated otherwise. The Thai words in this dissertation have been transliterated into roman characters. For transliterated words in the bibliographic information, I have followed the ISBN information of each source registered to the Library of Congress. If some other transliterated titles have already been available and read more familiar to readers, I adopt those versions instead. With regard to names of authors, I follow the common rule in most scholarship of Thai studies by referring to their first name instead of their family name after the first mention. Regarding dates, in Thailand, they are counted in the Buddhist era (BE), which is the common era (CE) plus 543 years. In both the main body text and bibliographic information, I did the calculation for readers and used CE years throughout. However, given the fact that there were texts in this dissertation that dated back before the application of the Buddhist era and were formatted in a different calendar system, some debates around the precision of dates in the common era might occur.

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