

Thai 16mm Cinema: The Rise of a Popular Cinematic Culture in Thailand from 1945 to 1970¹

Aliosha Herrera²

Abstract

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the introduction of silent 16mm celluloid stock gave rise to a very popular form of cinematic culture in Thailand. This local film production developed in close relation with its largely rural audience and ended at the beginning of the 1970s, when the practice of shooting films in 35mm Cinemascope regained momentum. This research focuses on a non-inventoried archival collection of Thai 16mm movies and retraces their historical context of emergence. The research explores how these low-budget melodramatic fictions, initially interpreted by professional dubbers in live performances, can be characterised as attractions incorporated in the paradigm of an oral theatrical experience derived from older practices of folk drama. The main question addressed is to what extent the wide circulation of 16mm movies might have provided a margin for the popular Thai cinema of that time to become a significant horizon of cultural expression, at the confluence of former local narrative traditions and Cold War modernity.

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² Aliosha Herrera is a French doctoral student at the University of Paris 3 Sorbonne Nouvelle, Department of Cinema and Audiovisual Studies, and conducts her research within the IRCAV (Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual Studies) under the direction of Nicole Brenez.

Introduction

Among the developing field of studies related to Thai cinema since the late 1970s, only scarce historiographic research has been undertaken on what is now unanimously named, in all texts alluding to the cinematic production that followed the Second World War in Thailand, “the 16mm era”. The apogee of this singular form of Thai filmmaking, generally considered by local film historical periodisation to have lasted from the end of the 1940s to the early 1970s, appears as a founding moment in the history of Thai cinema.³ In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, there was a shortage of 35mm stock in Thailand. As a result, local filmmakers experimented with shooting feature films on 16mm silent celluloid stock, which was much cheaper and easier to develop, without sound being recorded. These 16mm quickies, produced at very fast pace, were of profoundly melodramatic essence and seemed to perpetuate a former theatrical entertainment tradition by engaging one or more persons to perform the voices and other foley sound effects at the point of their public projection. Until the mid-1980s, this kind of film narration, called *phak* [พากย์], which had its etymological origins in *nang yai* [หนังใหญ่] and the masked dance performance *khon* [โขน], had a lively existence in Thailand. The 16mm movies were always “versioned”⁴ by professional dubbers in the form of oral performances within cinema auditoriums or in the open-air context of itinerant projection and encountered success among audiences all over the country. These shows, even though they were mostly experienced by the rural population in the provinces, also reached a mixed public in the crowded movie houses of Bangkok, gathering people from various socio-economic strata, from up-country Thais who had made a migratory journey to look for work in the city, to well-to-do, second-

³ In Charnvit Kasetsiri and Wani Samranwet’s periodisation, the period associated with 16mm movies began in 1947 with the slow post-war recovery and ended in 1970, when the norm of feature filmmaking shifted back to 35mm, as the popularity of Thai films shot in Cinemascope grew. See Charnvit, “Thai Films and Nation Building”, 89-112.

⁴ The term *phak* was rendered in English in the film advert pages of the Bangkok Post newspaper in the 1950s.

generation Sino-Thais,⁵ as well as Malaysian, Mon, Indian and Chinese spectators. The shows addressed such audience members as consumers and integrated them into an expanding commercial sphere of cultural production and circulation, opening a path to what might be considered an unprecedented form of mass cinematic culture in the country.

The earliest known Thai 16mm colour movie produced for entertainment purposes, *Local Celebration in the North* (สามปอยหลวง), by Mom Chao Sukonwandit Disakun, was well received when it was released in 1939 at the Sala Chalerm Krung movie theater in Bangkok and versioned by Thit Khiao during 21 days. However, this practice decisively gained momentum after the commercial success of *Thai, the Gentleman Bandit* (สุภาพบุรุษเสือไทย), another film directed by Mom Chao Sukonwandit Disakun and released at the Sala Chalerm Krung in 1949 – soon followed the next year by *Phanthai Norasing* (พันท้ายนรสิงห์), directed by Marut (Thawi Na Banchang). From this moment on, the number of Thai films produced annually grew from 10 films per year between 1947 and 1949 to 50 or 60 films a year, and a flood of new entrepreneurs found their way into the film industry. As a result, approximately 1,384 films were produced in Thailand from 1947 to 1972 (both in 16mm and 35mm format).⁶ The first Thai 16mm movies to reach revenue of more than one million baht were: *Peony* (ไผ่ตื้น), directed by So Asanachinda in 1955; *Garuda's Nail* (เล็บครุฑ), directed by Suphan Phrahomphan in 1957; *Mae Nak from Phra Khanong* (แม่นาคพระโขนง) directed by Rangsi Thatsanaphayak in 1959.

A considerable amount of new movie theaters were built after the war, and several darkened auditoria within the capital became lastingly associated with the memory of Thai 16mm cinema: the Sala Chaloem Thai, the Sala Chaloem Krung, and the Empire, around the Saphan Phut bridge; the Cathay and the Si Ratchawong, on Yaowarat

⁵ See the analysis of the social context of Thai movie viewing (the first ever attempted) by Churi, “Thai Movies as Symbolic Representation of Thai Life”, 157-169.

⁶ According to an estimation provided by Sakdina Chatrakun Na Ayuthaya [ศักดิ์นา ฉัตรกุล ณ อยุธยา] in an interview held for this research in March 2014, Salaya, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand. His father, Warun Chatrakun Na Ayuthaya, was a popular author in literary fiction and also took part, as a director, in the 16mm film production.

Road; the Krung Kasem, near Hua Lamphong; the Phatanakon, the Coliseum, the Broadway, the Chaloe Buri. Wider practices of distribution developed in this period through a corresponding hierarchical organisation of the nationwide market. There were no less than 250 movie theatres of first and second categories in the whole country, but most of them were showing foreign films in 35mm or 70mm format, mostly imported from Hollywood, China, India and Japan, whereas the low-budget 16mm movies generally circulated in second-run, third-run, and open-air exhibition venues.⁷ The accessibility of the lightweight 16mm mobile equipment greatly contributed to extend the sphere of film spectatorship to previously unreachable pockets of the country, such as remote villages, islands, districts, and small towns located in all regions. If the career of a film always started in Bangkok, its success largely depended on its reception in the countryside and coexisted with exhibition practices that maintained a strong emphasis on localised and specific patterns of viewing. The open-air shows were held in diverse contexts, mainly at religious festivities hosted by a local person or group, shows held by itinerant showmen to promote consumer goods, and anti-communist propaganda shows organised throughout the 1950s and 1960s by the film unit of the United States Information Service (USIS). While the overall aspect of the distribution was geared towards showing foreign films, the Thai production sector tended to remain at the level of a cottage industry as most active filmmakers operated as small, often family-run units. Some notable filmmakers of the 1970s and 1980s made their directorial debut with the use of 16mm material, notably Wichit Khunawut with *Kalapangha* (กัลปังหา, 1961) and *Nora* (โนห์รา, 1966) and Choed Songsi with *The Heart of the Earth* (อกธรณี, 1968),

⁷ The movie theaters from this period can generally be classified into 3 or 4 categories: 1) comfortable movie theaters organising first exclusive movie releases, situated in Bangkok and generally conceived on the model of Western theaters, equipped with panoramic CinemaScope screens from 1969 onward; 2) less luxurious movie theaters showing films that had already been released in the theaters of first category, located in Bangkok and in the provinces; 3) movie theaters differing from the previous ones only in their size and their comfort; and 4) places without any particular arrangement, such as warehouses, sometimes used by itinerant film companies in the provinces.

and most of the films produced during these subsequent decades did not seriously question the fundamental cinematic aesthetics whose bases had been consolidated by the 16mm versioned movies.

Very few traces remain of the Thai cinematic production that preceded the Second World War, and many movies produced during these two decades of 16mm popular cinema are currently lost. However, this research has focused on a corpus of more than two hundred works, including both 16mm movies and some major 35mm films, from a non-inventoried archival collection conserved at the Thai Film Archive (Public Organisation). Very few copies were made and distributed during this period. In Bangkok, several theaters shared a copy simultaneously, and the projections were regularly interrupted, while waiting for reels.⁸ Moreover, as the format used was color reversal film, the rare copies developed made by contact printing process were of mediocre quality. Some points of the study are difficult to quantify as relevant public institutions, such as the Thai Film Archive, do not have systematic, long-term records of annual film distribution and revenue, and, as the documents accessible were not conceived for statistical purposes, the information that they can provide is sometimes difficult to interpret and mostly with only an indicative value. This research has to evaluate this gap, both chronological and topical. The only available public report is a 1969 study of the Thai film industry compiled by the Ministry of Economic Affairs.⁹ Another difficulty is to define, through the analysis, what may appear to be specifically Thai in these filmic works, as opposed to what may pertain, more generally, to some cultural traits shared by several countries in Southeast Asia.

The main objective of this research is to retrace the historical context of the emergence of the Thai 16mm movies and to construct a solid ground of knowledge about these valuable visual objects. The research explores how the films have been popularised in correlation

⁸ In this case, a dispatch rider carried the reels from one movie theater to another.

⁹ Ministry of Economic Affairs, *Report of the Research Committee on Thai Film Production and Importing Films to Thailand*. According to this document, the average production cost for a film in 35mm was between 1 and 2 million baht, whereas a 16mm movie could be produced with as little as 300, 000 baht and no more than 700, 000 baht.

with other mass media, such as the press and radio, and integrated in the paradigm of an oral theatrical experience derived from older practices of folk drama that they perpetuated. This research also aims to consider how this form of cinema has acquired an unsteady institutional status, regarded as ‘*nam nao* [น้ำเน่า] (stagnant water)’ and emblematic of what May Adadol Ingawanij named “a plebeian Thai cinema dispositive.”¹⁰ As she observed: “One of the most unfortunate legacies of this period of popular cinema was precisely the top-down antagonism towards Thai films, which endured long after the 16mm movies themselves had been forgotten.”¹¹ During the Cold War, which was an important point of rapid urban development, capitalist transformation and expansion of higher education in Thailand, a new discourse of nationhood was enforced by a military regime that came under the growing influence of the United States. In this context, Thai 16mm movies appeared as under-developed objects within the preponderant national discourse of development and discipline, relying on a rhetoric that entailed a will to make technological standardisation hold. Their anarchic framing, their sub-standard failings and allegedly called amateurish aesthetics, relying on repetitive themes and a fragmented sequencing of events and episodes, were in discord with the efforts of the Thai political leadership of this period to build a modern national image and fell short of the aspiration of the cultural elite of that time towards a *than samai* [ทันสมัย] (modern) spectacle of national industry. More precisely, critics of the 16mm movies have tended to regard them as emblematic of the “backwardness” of Thai cinema and of the failure to follow the lead of the pioneering directors who had created the first homegrown sound films since 1932 in conformity to the standard of 35mm synchronous or post-synchronous sound, characterised as *matrathan sakon* [มาตรฐานสากล] (of an international standard), a recurring utterance throughout Thai film history, that is correlated with the discourse of Thai filmic quality. Consequently, several Thai directors who had used the 16mm format during the 1950s, notably Ratana Pestanyi when he made his

¹⁰ May, “Mother India in Six Voices”, 99-121.

¹¹ May, “Hyperbolic Heritage”, 67-68.

first long feature film in 1951, *Dear Doll* (ตุ๊กตาจำ), engaged in upholding the *sakon*/projected international standard of technical finesse by progressively restricting their output to 35mm sound films in order to make their works known in overseas film festivals and to break into international distribution. However, these attempts were extremely rare before the 1970s, and, if all directors and producers aspired to make 35mm films, the great majority of them could not afford the cost of such initiative and eventually went bankrupt.

Since its most early stages and until the beginning of the Second World War, the Thai film industry had proved to be enterprising and never ceased to compete with the Western production in terms of means and ambitions. However, the end of the war inaugurated a long period of economic hardship that would decisively shape the essential aesthetics of Thai cinema. Stepping outside the logic of opposing “developed” and “underdeveloped” cinema may help us to comprehend the significance of the Thai 16mm visual heritage and to see how the experience of this highly popular mode of film entertainment left a durable imprint on the modern Thai filmic production.

The Heritage of the *Thai Sakon* Model of Filmic Representation

Thai national cinema has continuously aspired to connote Thai difference from the West, while reaching, at the same time, a recognised “international” standard of filmic quality. The term *nam nao*, used to evoke, from a critical stance, the perpetual iteration of invariable dramatic principles and narrative themes, both in literature and cinema, had been previously associated with the popular prose fiction, published in the local press from the 1930s onward, and which inspired the plots of numerous 16mm movies during the Cold War period.¹² From 1897 to 1926, the films shown in the country were mainly imported 35 mm films supplied by Hollywood, and before the

¹² New perspectives were drawn in Thai literature with the stylistic innovations brought by several writers born after the Second World War between 1967 and 1979, notably through the politicised works of Angkhan Kanlayanaphong and Rong Wongsawan. See Anderson, *In the Mirror*, 9-87.

end of the Second World War, the 35mm format was largely dominant in the Thai film production, both for fictional films and documentaries. The 16mm format had been principally used by King Prajadhipok (King Rama VII) and other amateur filmmakers, mostly in the form of home movies shown in the private sphere of the palace.¹³ Many 35mm documentary films were produced by the film unit of the Royal State Railway, the Topical Film Service, founded by the Prince Purachatra (Krom Phra Kamphaengphet Akhrayothin) to keep track of the company's activities. These films were regularly shown to the public at the Phatanakorn and Hong Kong theaters in Bangkok, with the screenings being announced in the pages of the journal *Khao Phaphayon* [ข่าวภาพยนตร์].

The local production of entertainment films was impelled by two main companies, the Tai Phaphayon Thai Company and the Bangkok Film Company, which respectively produced, in 1927, the first two silent features completed by Thai people: *Unexpected* (ไม่คิดเลย) and *Double Luck* (โชคสองชั้น). According to official sources, around 80 films were produced in Thailand during these earlier decades, either by independent producers or by producers working within other companies, such as the Hatsadin Phaphayon Company or the Si Burapha Phaphayon Company. Some films found their plots in local tales or historical accounts, while others depicted romances or war stories involving soldiers devoted to the nation. The importation of literary fictions from the West also inspired many adventure and detective stories. The Bangkok Film Company, founded by the Wasuwat Brothers, Manit, Phao (Luang Konkan Chenchit), Krasian and Krasae, who also owned the journals *Si Krung* [ศรีกรุง] and *Siam Ratsadon* [สยามราชฤทธิ์], soon became the Si Krung Sound Film Company. The Wasuwat brothers built a fully equipped sound studio located in Bangkapi, and started producing films in accordance with the most advanced Western technical standards of that time, adopting the processes of single-system and double-system recording with equipment conceived by themselves. From 1932 to 1942, the Si Krung

¹³ A list of 278 16mm black-and-white films made by King Prajadhipok has been found, and some of these films are still conserved. See Chamroenlak, *Thai Film History*, 118-119.

Sound Film Company produced 25 notable synchronised sound films, especially musicals, a prosperous genre within Hollywood. These films, shown in Bangkok and also in the countryside, were very successful, especially those featuring the company's two major actors, the singing hero Chamrat Suwakhon and the heroine Mani Sumonat. The major competitor to Si Krung was the Thai Film Company, staffed by a group of overseas graduates, which also owned a sound studio with the latest equipment imported from Hollywood. However, after providing six sound films, the company underwent a financial crisis and the studio was sold to the Royal Thai Air Force. Other companies that could not afford the technology of sound film already used the live dubbing practice and the films were shot silent in black-and-white 35mm.

A key aspect of this aspiration towards internationally recognised standards of sophistication within the Thai film industry was the appearance of a new kind of music known as *phleng thai sakon* or *dontri thai sakon* [เพลงไทยสากล ดนตรีไทยสากล], which combined Western orchestral instruments and notation with Thai instruments and the local lyrical tradition of classical poetry. The “Hollywood style” Thai film musicals of the interwar years were the rehearsal ground for this innovation, adopted as the symbol of an equilibrium between Thai tradition and Western modernity. Khun Wichitmatra, a major figure from this period of early Thai cinema, who had written the songs, screenplays and directed some of the Wasuwat brothers' musicals, recalled in his memoir that their purpose was to come up with a form of melody which would neither be overly Westernised, nor overly Thai, but would nonetheless suit the Western modernity of the cinematic medium.¹⁴ He regularly worked in collaboration with composers Manit Senawinin and Nart Thawonbut for the Si Krung Sound Film Company. *His Sweet Melody* (เพลงหวานใจ, 1937), which he directed, was explicitly inspired from the iconographic and aural features of classical Hollywood films. The text of the songs used the pronouns *chan* [ฉัน – I] and *thoe* [เธอ – you], whereas the literary tradition generally used *phi* [พี่] and *nong* [น้อง], two pronouns respectively indicating the masculine and the feminine and

¹⁴ Wichitmatra, *The Bases of Thai Cinema*, 57-58.

laden with hierarchical connotations. This gesture gained emphasis in the propaganda feature films associated with the military leader Plaek Phibun Songkhram. Directed by Khun Wichitmatra and made by the Si Krung Sound Film Company at the initiative of Phibun Songkhram, then Defense Minister, *The Blood of the Thai Soldier* (เลือดทหารไทย, 1935) ensured the support of the Thai armed forces by staging spectacular action sequences involving modern military equipment. The main characters in the film appeared dressed in Western fashion and danced the foxtrot. Another film, *Our Home and Fields* (บ้านไร่นาเรา, 1942), scripted by Khun Wichitmatra according to a plot pattern suggested by Phibun Songkhram, at that point Prime Minister, conveyed the image of a rural community of farmers dressed in Western attire, including boots and full-length trousers instead of knee-length pantaloons. The mobilisation of the *thai sakon* system of representation started from this period on, and developed as a normative discourse of filmic quality. Another important contributor to the rise of the Thai-Western hybrid form of music known as *thai sakon* was Luang Wichit Wathakan, who started writing essays, notably *International History* (ประวัติศาสตร์สากล, 1929), as well as several songs and nationalist drama pieces during his time as Director General of the Fine Arts Department (1934-1942), and who turned his hand to prose fiction and enjoyed considerable success as a popular short-story writer and novelist after the Second World War. His political thought, nourished by the Western-derived concepts of ‘progress (ความเจริญ [khwam charoen])’ and ‘civilisation (ความศิวิไลซ์ [khwam siwilai])’, was closely related to the development of nationalism in Thailand in the post-1932 period and articulated these ideas to contribute towards establishing political legitimacy for the new military-dominated state. He also became the special adviser on national administration and general policy planning to Prime Minister Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1958-1962). His first historical-musical drama, *The Blood of Suphan* (เลือดสุพรรณ, 1936), turned into a cinematic adaptation by Choed Songsi in 1979, promoted ideas supportive of the military and, as his subsequent works, was based on the Western-derived *lakhon rong* [ละครร้อง] operetta genre, incorporating simple everyday dialogue and associating traditional Thai songs and dance with Western musical resonances. These dramas had a strong impact in terms of official cultural representation and somehow emerged

as the premier cultural form in the country through the support of the State.¹⁵ Other propaganda government-funded films, newsreels and documentaries were produced after Thailand was invaded by Japan on December 8, 1941, mainly by the Royal Thai Air Force: among them, *Night Flight* (บินกลางคืน) and *The War at the Back* (สงครามเขตหลัง). But the lack of 35mm film material resulted in these productions never being completed, and many movie theaters had to close their doors temporarily due to the bombardments that occurred regularly in the capital between 1943 and 1944.

The production of 35mm sound films was revived by a handful of new prestigious companies during the Cold War period. Yet, it is crucial to note that, apart from the high technological improvement that they reflected and their very elaborated mise-en-scène, these films did not differ much in their palette of themes and characters from the 16mm movies. They mostly brought a sophisticated frame to an aesthetics that had found its most exuberant and systematic form in this 16mm production. This movement was represented by professional directors and producers endowed with their own studios and filmmaking equipment, provided with investment funds, and essentially efforts to keep up with the *matrathan sakon* criteria of quality – the technical industrial norm identified with Hollywood and European cinemas. The three most important of these companies were Hanuman Phaphayon, founded by Ratana Pestanyi; Asawin Phaphayon, founded by Prince Phanuphan Yukhon, who notably produced the successful *The Boat House* (เรือนแพ, 1961); and Lawo Phaphayon, headed by the Prince Anuson Mongkholkan, renowned for the films *Mrs. Slave* (นางทาส), selected for competition in the Berlin International Film Festival in 1960, and *Money! Money! Money!* (เงิน เงิน เงิน, 1965). But these companies could not produce more than two films per year, and, in the late 1950s, they started to use the process of versioning on a recorded audio track, that is to say, the deferred versioning of the film on the audio track by professional dubbers, instead of direct sound recording, a direct continuation of the flourishing and extremely popular practice of live versioning applied to

¹⁵ Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan*, 121-127.

16mm movies. Ratana Pestanyi, the most illustrating figure of this group, had notably developed his talent in visual arts through his passion for photography and graduated in engineering in London before entering the Thai film industry. He first gained international recognition with his short film *Taeng* (แตง, 1938) and won a prize at the fifth Scottish Amateur Film Festival in Glasgow. Then, he produced the first Thai feature film ever rewarded in an international festival, *Santi-Wina* (สันติ-วิมล, 1954), directed by Marut and honored with three prizes at the first Southeast Asian Film Festival held in Tokyo in May 1954. His approach to cinema challenged the public taste through the use of rigorous cinematic discursive devices and through playful references to international cinematic genres such as the film noir and the American screwball comedy. Interestingly, the story of *The Hotel of Hell* (โรงแรมนรก, 1957) took place in only one location and all the action occurred on one day, whereas the Aristotelian three unities (unity of space, time and action) were something with which Thai moviegoers were not familiar. His fourth feature film, *Black Silk* (แพรดำ, 1961) was well welcomed by the press when it was shown at the Berlin International Film Festival. He also committed himself to being a film activist and became the leading member of the Thai Motion Picture Producers Association, established as a lobbying group in 1966 to seek support from the government for the development of the film industry. The main requirements suggested by the association were an increase in the tax on imported foreign films, the diminution of the tax on imported film material and shooting equipment, and the creation by the government of a funding structure to support Thai film producers financially. But this support was only granted by the government in 1969, on the condition that those wanting to benefit from these privileges had to work as companies and to produce only 35mm films. Consequently, these measures did not bring benefit to the practitioners of 16mm filmmaking. Some of them started to insert singing scenes shot in 35mm Cinemascope in their movies in order to try to catch up with this esteemed re-emerging standard. However, the years preceding 1970 were well and truly marked by the ascendancy of 16mm movies.

The Perpetuation of Older Forms of Traditional Spectacle

The 16mm movies were embedded in a tradition of entertainment shared by other forms of local popular shows encompassing oral poetics, storytelling, dance and song, such as the shadow theater originating from the South called *nang talung* [หนังตะลุง]; *likay* [ลิเก], a highly improvisatory form of modern folk opera; or *lam tat* [ลำตัด], entirely sung and involving two antagonists singing duos.¹⁶ Their textual form consisted of a rhapsodic, non-linear structure interlacing several genres “bursting with all possible flavors (ครบทุกรส [*khrop thuk rot*]),” a motto commonly used during the 16mm era to advertise the attraction of a given movie. Gérard Fouquet has proposed the concept of “flavor” as a framework to classify the generic characteristics of this disaggregated narrative structure by highlighting the proximity between the aesthetics of flavors at work in popular Thai movies (*rot* [รส]) and in popular Indian films [*rasa*]. To receive a favorable welcome from the audience, a movie had to contain a palette of various flavors mixed together, such as the romantic, the erotic, the parental, the sugary, the *bu* [บู๊] based on the enjoyment of spectacular fight, the thrilling, the disgusting, the furious (the evocation of anger), the pathetic, the wondrous, the comic, the lyric, the expression of quietism, as well as other consubstantial flavors.¹⁷ These elements were intertwined in several corresponding filmic genres, such as romance films (tragic love dramas or sentimental comedies); musicals; comedies; *nang bu* [หนังบู๊], a very specific form of action film close to Chinese action movies and also attached to historical films and war films; films inspired by traditional legends and from the *likay* repertoire; ghost films; or *nang chiwit* [หนังชีวิต] depicting family dramas originally situated in an aristocratic milieu or an upper class environment and revolving around a violent crisis within the family, in a huge Western

¹⁶ Chirapon Witayasakpan highlighted a distinction between court and popular genres of theater in Siam’s pre-modern times: “Whereas the theaters of the court stuck to fixed repertoires and other rules of refinement such as an all-female cast, improvisation was the main attraction of plebeian dance dramas and theatrical entertainments. Those theatrical genres that performed outside the court would have drawn the crowd with their witty repartee, comical quarrelling, and various rhyming forms of call and response.” Chirapon, “Nationalism and the transformation of aesthetic concepts”, 27.

¹⁷ Fouquet, “Le Cinéma thaï contemporain”, 111-341.

style house. These flavors were expressed through dramatic elements, such as situations, sceneries, dialogues, characters, and the conventional acting of the comedians, and constituted the fundamental components of the movies. The 35mm films that followed the 16mm period somehow continued to display some of these codes that were very familiar to the Thai public and are still perceptible, nowadays, in Thai television dramas. As Gérard Fouquet pointed out, since its apparition in Thailand, the cinematic medium has encountered an old theatrical tradition and inscribed itself in a very specific context of reception, where the film screening was not the exclusive concern of the audience, but an interest among others in the larger context of a social event reaching a village or a district (a funeral, a temple fair, etc.). The integration of cinema to this entertainment tradition implied some constraints: a movie was shown among other kinds of spectacle and had to present a fragmented narrative structure allowing the spectators to come to watch it at any time, even if the show was already underway. The flavors, arousing strong aesthetical emotions through the evocation of diverse feelings, guaranteed this immediacy.

In a more exuberant way than the pre-war 35mm films, the 16mm movies systematically implied this rhapsodic genre mixing, privileging the essential pleasure of diversion and deviation from reality over verisimilitude and the linear coherence of classical Hollywood narrative. Very frequently, the plots relied on the idea that good always prevails over evil. The denouement, be it tragic or happy, consecrated a return to a traditional social and moral order that had been momentarily been disrupted by the events recounted.¹⁸ As for the characters, they generally fell into two groups neatly distinguished: a set of good characters, represented by the hero and heroine (พระเอก [*phra ek*] and นางเอก [*nang ek*]) and the comic figures accompanying them as their friends or servants (ตัวตลก [*tua talok*]); and a clique of bad characters (ผู้ร้าย [*phu rai*]), the enemies of the hero or heroine, robbers (โจร [*chon*]), gangsters (อันธพาล [*anthaphan*]), jealous or rival women (นางอิจฉา [*nang itcha*]) or sex stars (ดาวยั่ว [*dao yua*]), according to each plot. These characters appeared in all genres as

¹⁸ Nithi, “The Depth of ‘Stagnant Waters’ in Thai Films”, 78-96.

archetypal figures whose natures were often not nuanced because the star system, as it developed in Thailand throughout the 1950s and 1960s, gave an exceptional importance to symbolism. The movies also depicted marital strife, rivalry among kinsmen and conflicts between persons of unequal socio-economic status, the romance plot being the central arena in which these conflicts were portrayed. Commercially successful, these 16mm movies were not regarded as a medium for social criticism and often revealed the passive acceptance of the existing social stratification patterns in society.¹⁹

The social nature of the interaction between the 16mm movies and the contexts and spaces in which they met their audience was of primary importance. The practice of versioning, based on oral talent and spontaneity, entailed a localised and participatory reception. The performers addressed the spectators and played a key role in educating sensory responses from them, in the straight continuation of the traditional theatrical shows that directly acknowledged the viewer's presence; unlike Western theater, the spectator was not categorically excluded from the stage space. The 16mm shows defined themselves as a spectacle imbued with theatricality in the *hic et nunc* of the versioning performances. In spite of its early impetus towards universal standards, Thai cinema, by inscribing itself in this cultural paradigm of improvisatory theater, put the technical elements of this Western invention at the service of an original local tradition. The versioning of movies perpetuated an art of vocal accompaniment mainly derived from the large puppet theatre called *nang yai* and the masked dance drama *khon*. Some of the most renowned versionists from the 16mm period, such as Phien Panyaphon and Mom Luang Ruchira Itsarangkun, received extensive training during their

¹⁹ Churi Wichit Wathakan insisted on this aspect in 1977: "The endings of Thai movies are quite instructive in that they tell us what the limits are and what degree of tolerance there is to social transgressions and deviations from social norms. They also show how ideally human conflicts and problems ought to be resolved. Almost invariably, the bad guys conveniently get killed or die of natural causes. Good guys are rewarded. Bad guys, should they repent, can be readily accepted back into the fold. Even some recent movies which flirted with new ideas will have endings that reaffirm conformation of social norms." Churi, "Thai Movies as Symbolic Representation of Thai Life", 162.

childhood in this form of theatrical performance under the patronage of palace-sponsored schooling.²⁰ In addition many actors gained fame on the stage of popular theater before entering the film industry, especially the comic artists who became the indispensable secondary figures of the 16mm movies: Dok Din Kaniaman, Lo Tok, Chusi Misomon, Somphong Phongmit, and Sukhon Khioliem, whose moustache strikingly resembled that of Charlie Chaplin. Women were extremely rare as comic actresses. The comic was the most controversial flavor of Thai cinema, denigrated by the upholders of “quality” cinema, especially the film critics trained at the Western school of thought; but it was one of the best assets to achieve public success, mostly among rural spectators. The characters embodied by these professional comics were often common people pertaining to the lower strata of society. As Nithi Iaosiwong noted, they played, as in the Thai theatrical tradition, an important part as the characters through which a bond could take shape for the audience between the real world and the fictional world of the performance, by way of a process of identification.²¹ They intervened with more freedom in the stories and their role was often that of critic towards the other characters. They could mock the nastiness of the *phu rai*, or turn the absolute values (love, heroism) embodied by the *phra ek* or the *nang ek* into derision, by commenting on their actions from an ironical stance. By deriding them through their remarks or their behavior, the *tua talok* could open the way, within the world of the screen, to a more humble and human world which was that of the spectators. By doing so, they also tended to reveal the limits and the conventional nature of the imaginary universe portrayed in the movies. Similarly, in former dramatic shows, the comedians could provoke ruptures in the theatrical discourse by addressing some spectators directly or by commenting on what was happening in the audience or in the world exterior to the stage. The very essence of the representation did not change when it developed into cinema.

²⁰ Anonymous, *In Memory of Phen Paniaphon*, n.p.

²¹ Anonymous, *In Memory of Phen Paniaphon*, n.p.

Thai 16mm cinema generally resorted to stories that were already known by the audience or to simple and easily identifiable patterns. Most of the stories were adapted from novels and other literary fiction that had already been popularised by radio dramas in several episodes. Radio dramas were then extremely popular among readers and radio listeners and had an unquestionable impact on the success of the 16mm movies. The producers sometimes allowed theatrical troupes to appropriate the original text from which their movie was inspired in order to let them make a radio drama based on the same story before the release so that the public would already know the story and would want to see the movie. The performances were firstly broadcast live, and recorded on tape later, during the thriving period of these programs (approximately from 1957 to 1972). One of the most prominent radio drama performance troupes, Kaeo Fa, was directed by Kaeo Atchariyakun, who also wrote drama scripts and about one thousand songs, notably the songs of the very popular drama *Chula Trikhun* (จุฬาทรีकुณ), adapted into a 16mm movie in 1967 by Dok Din Kaniaman. Another famous troupe, Paniaphon, was directed by Phen Paniaphon who, in addition to his activity as a renowned versionist, had already turned to radio since the late 1930s. Many other troupes had considerable influence on the popularisation of 16mm movies: Sanesin, founded by Saneh Komarachun; Kasethanat, founded by Sanit Kasethanang; Watanarom; Kantana. However, they gradually disappeared because of the growing success of television. The role of literary fiction became crucial to Thai cinema since the 1930s, as the plots of many filmic works were directly borrowed from them until the 1970s, notably the stories revolving around historical accounts, arranged marriages and tragic loves. Among the writers who counted the most were: Dokmai Sot (Mom Luang Bupha Nimanhem); Mai Muang Doem (Kan Phuengbun Na Ayuthaya); Phanomthien (Chatchai Wisetsuwanaphum); So Asanachinda; Butsayamat (Somneuk Sutabut); S. Naowarat (Sanit Kosarot); P. Phimon; Ingon (Sakasem Hutakhom); Arawan (Liao Sisawek); Raphiphon (Suwat Waradilok). Another famous writer, Warun Chatrakun Na Ayuthaya, best known, among his numerous pen names, as Krieng Kraison and Fon Ayuthaya, was an exemplary figure of this

generation of popular writers who came to play a part in the cinematic production. After having worked as a dance professor and written articles and fictions for several newspapers, one of the stories that Warun wrote, *Tigerhood* (ชาติเสือ), became a great literary success and was adapted in 1959 into a movie directed by Wirat Pheunsunthon. He eventually entered the sphere of cinema as a disciple of Marut, and soon became a director by adopting the 16mm format until the end of the 1960s. He also joined hands with Lamun Atiphayak to make radio dramas. However, Warun regularly had to take out loans to produce his movies because of the lack of investors and his career as a filmmaker was rather precarious until his definitive withdrawal from the film industry in the early 1970s. Most of the producers of 16mm movies encountered such fate and had to cease their activities after achieving only one or two works. However, many other names contributed to make the 16mm period a decisive turning point of Thai film history.

The Main Protagonists of the 16mm Period

In addition to the rare producers who regularly attempted to promote the 35mm format until the 1970s, a small community of multi-talented artists – comedians, versionists, script writers, or other people who had been associated with the world of entertainment for several decades – progressively gained experience as directors and producers and later came to have their own cinema studios. However, as they often lacked money and had to take out loans to make movies, they essentially stuck to the 16mm format. These few talented protagonists eventually became the most significant directors and producers of the 16mm period. Many of them had taken part in the theatre that reemerged during the war, when the importation of foreign films was obstructed by Thailand's cooperation with Japan against the Allies, and flourished between 1948 and 1953. Among them were Phranbun (Chuongchan Chankhana), Banthun Ongwisit, Marut, Phankham (Phromsin Sibunruang), Neramit (Amnuei Klatsanimi), Sane Komanchun, Dok Din Kaniaman, So Asanachinda, Suphan Buranaphim, Wichan and Chalong Phakdiwichit, Rangsi Thatsanaphayak, Chali Intharawichit, Wichit Khunawut, and Siri Sirichinda. A pioneering figure of this new circle of filmmakers was Thae Prakatwutisan. After having

started his career as a professional photographer, he took his first steps in the film industry by working with Khun Patiphak Phimlikhit and worked for the Sala Chaloem Krung company and the Air Force Unit by shooting newsreels in 16mm format during the war. After the release of *Thai, the Gentleman Bandit* (สุภาพบุรุษเสือไทย), his first huge commercial success, he worked as a renowned cinematographer and also produced and directed many other movies in 16mm, including *Madam Butterfly* (สาวเครือฟ้า, 1953), *Hao Dong* (เห่าดง, 1958), and *Four Kings* (สี่คิงส์, 1959), before switching to 35mm in 1967. The itinerary of Dok Din Kaniaman is also emblematic of this period. He first became famous as a comic artist among itinerant theater troupes in the southern part of the country, before making his first two 16mm movies in 1952 and 1953, inspired from popular literary fiction by Pricha Intharapalit published in episodes from 1939 to 1968, *Three Pals* (สามเกลอ), in collaboration with the comics Lo Tok and Somphong Phongmit. He soon foresaw the popularity of 16mm cinema, and after making several comic movies in which he also appeared as a *tua talok*, he found a more personal method and aimed at reaching a large audience by mingling all genres together and included a musical scene in all his productions. His approach to the 16mm format engendered some of the greatest commercial successes of that time, with earnings exceeding the one million baht mark. The first of these achievements was *Nok Noi* (นกน้อย, 1964), starring Mit Chaibancha and Petchara Chaowarat, and the slogan “*Lan laeo cha*” [ล้านแล้วจ้า], “(a million reached)!”, was regularly used, from this moment on, for the promotional announcement of his movies.²² Dok Din was an advertising genius and, for each of his movies, he composed announcement couplets which remained durably engraved in people’s memory. He only adopted the 35mm format after the release of his last 16mm movie in 1971, *King Quail* (ไก่อิน). Another prolific and successful director from a business standpoint, also representative of this multi-talented generation of filmmakers, was So Asanachinda. After taking his first steps in journalism and fiction writing, he began his career in acting in 1947 when he was cast as *phra ek* for a stage play adapted from the story *Miss Datchani* (ดรรชนีนาง) written by Ingon.

²² Ingkhasak, *Here is the Life of Dok Din, Artist of the People*, 49.

During his twenties, he became the lead actor of the theater troupe Siwarom, directed by Lada Saratayon. He started his screen career by appearing in anticommunist documentaries and was rewarded in 1961 for his role in *The Boat House* (เรือนแพ) with the national award of the best masculine supporting role. He kept writing literary fiction and soon developed a talent in scriptwriting, conceiving more than one hundred film scripts. His two most successful films as a director were *Dear Father* (พ่อจำ, 1957), which introduced the actress Ratanaphon Intharakamhaeng, one of the most important *nang ek* from the 16mm era, and *One Against Seven* (หนึ่งต่อเจ็ด, 1958). It is also worth mentioning the importance of his cameraman, Chalong Phakdiwichit, on whom a large part of the success of his movies depended. Some movies were shot abroad during these decades, notably in France with *Three Loves in Paris* (สามรักในปารีส), directed by Neramit in 1956, and in the United States with *The Red Sweater* (สเวตเตอร์สีแดง), directed by Rat Sethaphakdi during the same year. Several Thai film companies also asked film stars from China or Hong Kong to come to Thailand so as to have them act in their productions and to extend the distribution of Thai movies abroad. However, these initiatives were rare and the largest part of the film producers who engaged in the Thai film industry during the 16mm period were amateurs, inexperienced persons who did not have knowledge about cinema but who wanted to try their luck in the hope of gaining money or fame. From 1947 to 1972, approximately 426 producers entered the film industry, but at least half of them produced only one movie before vanishing.²³ Many constraints existed to be granted an advance on earnings and the part of investors was crucial in the development of 16mm cinema. Very often, the directors and producers depended on the investment offered by the owners of movie theaters, who exerted a considerable control over the content of the movies by imposing some conditions to ensure their commercial success, notably the choice of the main actors. These restrictive circumstances directly affected the quality of the 16mm movies.

²³ According to another estimate provided by Sakdina Chatrakul Na Ayudhya in the interview of March 2014.

The postwar decades were also the moment of emergence of the first true film icons of Thai cinema history. Before this era, the actors, even if some of them had been popular (especially Chamrat Suwakhon and Mani Sumonat, the leading couple of most of the films produced by the Si Krung Sound Film company), were not professional actors, but aristocrats or members of the upper middle class who had other sources of income and who entered the film industry as dilettantes. They never created unconditional enthusiasm among the audience, as would happen throughout the 1950s and 1960s with the ascent of the cult movie duo formed by Mit Chaibancha and Petchara Chaowarat. This change was somehow officialised with the creation of the national film competition Tukata Thong [ตุ๊กตาทอง] initiated in 1957 by Sangop Suangsiri with the support of the Chamber of Commerce. No less than 52 Thai movies entered this competition in its first edition (4 works in 35mm format, 48 in 16mm). Leuchai Narinat became the first actor to receive the award for best masculine leading role for his role in *Garuda's Nail* (เล็บครุฑ), and Wilaiwan Watanaphanit was saluted as the first best leading actress for her role in *Madam Butterfly* (สาวเครือฟ้า). The second edition held in 1958 marked the accolade of Surasit Satayawong as best leading actor in *The Duty of Gratitude* (กตัญญูประกาศิต), based on a script written by So Asanachinda, and of Amara Asawanant as best leading actress in *Jealous Love* (รักริษยา), directed by Marut, along with Prachuap Rikiamdi, awarded as best supporting actor in the same movie. This film ceremony included awards in all aspects of the Thai film production: best director, best versionist, best script writer, best editor, best movie, etc. The actors rewarded were among the most memorable icons of the 16mm period, all categories of roles included: Thaksin Chaemphon, Ratanaphon Intharakamhaeng, Chaiya Suriyan, Meta Rungrat, Suphan Buranaphim, Phitsamai Wilaisak, Sombat Metani, Naowarat Watchara, Adinan Singhiran, and Petchara Chaowarat. The most attractive elements, in the eyes of the audience, were the stars, whose presence on the screen prevailed over narrative coherence; if a star was already well known, the spectators came to attend the screenings, no matter how often they had read the stories in question or if they had heard them several times on the radio. The mobility of the 16mm equipment also occasioned an

important change during this period. Instead of the studio-bound shooting practice adopted by the Thai directors who tried to restrict their output to 35mm sound films during the same Cold War decades, the 16mm production engendered a shift towards location shooting, its stars performing scenes for the eyes of the crowd. The amplified circulation of numerous film magazines also greatly contributed to the iconisation of these actors. The spread of 16mm cinema and the gradual growth of the popular public throughout these years led to the development of a star system which found its most emblematic expression in the “Mit-Petchara” duo from 1961 to 1970. Mit Chaibancha, who first appeared in *Tigerhood* (ชาติเสือ) and in *Top of the Tough Guys* (เจ้านักเลง), both directed by Prathip Komolphit in 1958 and 1959, co-starred in more than 150 movies with Petchara Chaowarat, out of the 265 movies that he made in the course of his career. His accidental death on October 8, 1970, during the shooting of a stunt in *The Golden Eagle* (อินพรีทอง), a 35mm film starring Mit and directed by himself, marked the symbolical end of the 16mm era. His popularity was so high that he could take part in three to five different shootings on the same day. Strangely, he was never granted the Golden Doll trophy, but, as Mom Ratchawong Kukrit Pramoj noted, his symbolic aura led him to perform no other role than his own self. No matter which character he embodied, a millionaire or a poor man, a student back from abroad or a *luk thung* [ลูกทุ่ง] singer, he was always Mit Chaibancha, and “he just had to stand in front of the camera and to be himself, because the spectators only wanted to see him.”²⁴ These icons became a determining element in the rise of Thai 16mm cinema during all these years, even though the limits inherent to the 16mm format obstructed all concurrence with the international cinematic standards of that time.

Nonetheless, a neat scission existed between the visual appearance of these actors on the screen and their vocal incarnation, assumed by the versionists who dubbed their voices. The part of these versionists was as important as that of the movie stars to attract

²⁴ Mom Ratchawong Kukrit Pramoj, column on Mit Chaibancha in *Siam Rat*, No. 12, October 12, 1970 : “อาจจะเป็นพระเหตุนี้ ที่เขาสามารถเล่นหนังได้พร้อม ๆ กันในวันเดียวกันถึงห้าเรื่อง เพียงแต่ปรากฏตัวหน้ากล้องก็พอลมไปแล้ว เพราะคนดูต้องการเพียงแต่นั้น”

moviegoers. Some of them became extremely famous and their names were written in bigger letters on movie posters than the names of the actors. Their way of dubbing movies found its roots in a long theatrical tradition and stayed very conventional, based on characteristic voices such as the grave and poised voice of the heroes, the innocent and high-pitched voice of the heroines, the scratchy and rude voice of the bad characters, the tense voice of the comic characters, and the trembling and fragile voice of children and elders. This repertoire also included some very codified onomatopoeias associated with the conventional gestures of the actors. However, the principle of non-synchronicity at the heart of these performances provided the versionists a margin to improvise and to orientate these shows towards an alternative horizon of experience, a ludic public sphere of cinema. More often than not, the versionists did not strictly respect the cues of the visual register, shifting across various enunciating positions and registers of address, showcasing their talent to grab the viewers' attention. The role of the versionist has been theorised by Germain Lacasse as a mediating role in intensifying the experience of cinema.²⁵ This practice was commonly used around the world in the first three or four decades following the emergence of cinema, in largely European and North American contexts from England to America, from France to Germany and Spain, but also in Japan, Iran, or Korea. What seems unique about the case of Thailand is that it emerged during the 1930s, at the end of the silent era, but mostly flourished after the Second World War. Lacasse designated the versionist as a "bonimenteur", the word "boniment" referring, in French, to a very ancient narrative tradition that encompassed the first magic lantern shows and the spectacles in which some singers and storytellers illustrated their stories with painted images. He described this performer as an author appropriating the film and integrating it to a traditional form of oral spectacle; the versionist dubbing a foreign film acted like an interpreter who translated the language and vernacularised it in a local context, for an audience attached to other cultural codes. Consequently, Lacasse suggested that the versioning of

²⁵ Lacasse, *Le Bonimenteur de Vues Animées*, 125-150.

films was a persistence or a resurgence of oral tradition in the audiovisual world.

Interestingly, this practice appeared in Thailand when, as the first sound films were making their way into the country and the first domestically made sound films were being released in Bangkok, Thit Khiao (Sin Sibunruang) experimented with adapting the narration template of the masked dance *khon* to accompany an Indian silent film based on an episode of the Ramayana, “Hanuman Burning Lanka”.²⁶ A talented itinerant film projectionist, film magazine editor, theater troupe owner and film versionist, Thit Khiao is considered as the father of Thai versionists and the very founder of this profession. The initial idea of accompanying films with an oral performance came when the Siam Cinema Company was trying to solve the problem of the over-stock of silent films at the beginning of the sound era and was suggested in 1928 by Tuan Yawaprapat, who had spent some time in Japan and discovered the equivalent practice of Benshi.²⁷ Live versioning became popular among the audience and gained even more momentum during the following decades. When Thailand was under Japanese occupation during the war, new film releases from allied countries could not be imported. Theater owners and cinema exhibitors adapted to this situation by engaging versionists to give a fresh treatment to the old reels in their supply through live performances. This practice was applied to foreign movies and, gradually, to Thai movies shot in silent 16mm format and continued even after Thai movies were again shot in 35mm in the 1970s; however, by then dubbing was always recorded in studios and not performed live in movie theaters. The versioning scripts [(บทพากย์ - *bot phak*)] were always carefully written, notably, during the first generation of live versionists, by Phranbun, Chuangchan Kankhana, Hom Nilarat Na Ayuthaya, and Phankham, the son of Thit Khiao, who translated foreign film scripts and composed songs for his father and who also worked as a script writer, a live versionist, a film director and

²⁶ Dome, “‘Thit Khiao’ and the Thai Entertainment World”, 133-164

²⁷ During the silent era and before the introduction of film versioning, movie theaters would produce cheap leaflets in Thai and Chinese detailing the story of the films being projected for the audiences who could not read subtitles or could not understand English.

a *phra ek* in several movies and stage dramas. The versionists who were active during the 16mm era represented the second generation of versionists who came right after Thit Khiao, formed through an apprenticeship in the troupe that he had founded, and the third and fourth generations who started apprenticing from the late 1950s or the late 1960s. At the beginning, they worked as solo performers, but in the 1940s, women were also engaged to accompany the male stars and interpret the voices of women, children and animals; although sometimes, they agreed to remain in the shadows of their male partner and were not credited on the movie posters. The two most prominent duos of versionists of the 16mm period were those formed by Maratsi Itsarangkun Na Ayuthaya and Mom Luang Ruchira Itsarangkun,²⁸ who together dubbed a large number of Japanese and Indian movies, notably the huge popular success *Mother India* (ชวลีเกียรติยศ, Mehboob Khan, 1957), and by Churi Osiri and Somphong Wongrakthai, who regularly interpreted the voices of Mit Chaibancha and Petchara Chaowarat. Another important figure of versionist was Sane Komarachun, who wrote several satirical songs, notably *The Police Holds Batons* (ไปลิสถือกระบอง), sung for the first time at the Sala Chalerm Krung theater before a film screening and mocked Phao Siyanon, who was then director general of the national police. There also existed many regional versionists, such as Somchai Panphen and Bunmi Khamisi (North), Konchanat and Daraphong (Isan), or Chaicharoen Duangphatra, Kanika and Sirichai (South). Some of them were always associated with the same movie theaters, but most worked in an itinerant way by following the distribution circuit of the movies. Towards the end of the 1960s, the tradition of live versioning was supplemented by playing recorded tape reels of the performances during the projections. However, more and more directors made a practice of using direct sound during the 1970s, notably Prince Chatrichalerm Yukhon, and many local versionists started to work for television or became unemployed after the revival of the 35mm format.

²⁸ A former dancing stage comedian and ventriloquist, Mom Luang Rujira became extremely famous as “the man with six voices [(มนุษย์หกเสียง)]” and even won the first prize in an international versioning competition held in Hollywood.

Cold War Anxieties and the Films Produced by the USIS

If the live versioning shows endowed with a strong local connotation appeared as an alternative public sphere of cultural expression that developed in parallel to the more “legitimate” model of cinema represented by the subtitled sound films or the Thai 35mm sound films with an international aspiration, they only opened the way to a very relative sense of subversion. It is difficult to figure out to what extent the versionists improvised or introduced a critical discourse into their performances as almost no audio records of these shows have been conserved.²⁹ It seems that, apart from playful remarks not included in the scripts, the versionists could not radically transform the textual nature of the movies and could only hint, for example, at really sensitive political issues. A censorship board, established by the 1930 Royal Film Act, applied a strict regulation to the Thai film industry, and another Act instituted in 1943 imposed constant control, amongst other things, over the film scripts used by the versionists.³⁰ Moreover, a considerable amount of movies produced in Thailand during these two decades tended to reflect the political anxieties of these Cold War decades in a propagandist way, mostly the American-funded movies produced by the United States Information Service (USIS). This period, designated by Benedict Anderson as the “American era”,³¹ was characterised as a time of great American alarm about communism and “Red Chinese” expansionism, and the post-war military dictatorship became heavily supported by this outside power. Thailand came under the intense influence of American foreign policy and was provided with financial and military aid from Washington for the promotion of “development (การพัฒนา [kan phathana])” and “national security” in the country, while collaborating

²⁹ However, May Adadol Ingawanij could find the record of a live performance by the duo Daraphan-Wanthani for an Indian film directed by Yash Chopra, *Waqt* (1965), titled in Thai as *The Moment of Life* (นาทีชีวิต).

³⁰ Chamroenlak, *Thai Film History From its Beginning to the End of the Second World War*, 86-105.

³¹ Anderson, *In the Mirror*, 1. In writing on modern Thai fiction during the Cold War, Anderson proposes this term for the decades between 1955 and 1976 as a moment of intense American political and military presence and mass cultural influence in Thailand.

closely with America's prosecution of the Cold War in Asia. There were then no less than eight American airbases in Thailand. USIS started its activities in Thailand just after the end of the Second World War, in 1946, and gave support to the Thai government for the production of anticommunist movies, with a financial aid of five million baht and the assistance of an American propaganda specialist. These movies included both 35mm documentaries and cartoons. After the foundation of SEATO in September 1954, USIS notably produced an animation film made in 1955 by Payut Ngaokrachang, *The Children and the Bear* (เด็กกับหมี), where a cruel and dangerous bear comes to Southeast Asia to devour several children, who represented the various countries in the region. But eventually, the children join hands together and succeed in sending the bear back to Russia. This film was shown in Bangkok, but also in open-air exhibition venues throughout the country as was the case with all the films produced by USIS. The building of roads and highway financed with American support greatly contributed to the expansion of film reception in the country; some spectators who attended the screenings in the countryside had never seen any film before. Wichit Khunawut, who started his career as a 16mm director, also collaborated with USIS in the production of several films, especially a documentary titled *The Struggle against Communism* (ต่อต้านลัทธิคอมมิวนิสต์) in 1955. Other films about the royal institution were produced and shown in the most remote provinces and in border areas deemed under threat of insurgency.³² The American influence in Thailand was furthered at the level of cinema culture, as the largest number of movies screened in the country were coming from the United States. Rachel Harrison observed very judiciously how Mit Chaibancha, in his last movie before his death in October 1970, *The Golden Eagle* (อินทรีทอง), embodied a masked action hero who unequivocally appeared as a cultural symbol of Thailand's "American era" and of the cultural anxieties inherent to this period through his quest to overcome the "Red Bamboo gang" led by Ba Khin, a master in the power of

³² For more detailed information about the films produced by USIS in Thailand, see Sakdina, "The Cold War", 167-210.

brainwashing representing the communist threat.³³ The Thai 16mm period is inseparable from this context and the widespread patterns of official representation that it engendered.

Conclusion: The Decisive Shift of the 1970s and 1980s

On January 26, 1970, the first page of the journal *Thai Ratsadon* [ไทยราษฎร์] announced that Thae Prakatwutisan was selling his 16mm film equipment after having adopted the 35mm format. In the aftermath of his sudden death, Mit Chaibancha left more than 10 movies unfinished, and from this moment on, popular enthusiasm for 16mm movies began to fade away. Another symbolic demise marked the end of the 16mm era and the onset of a deeper general concern about the technical quality of Thai films: that of Ratana Pestanyi, struck by a heart attack when he was giving a speech at the Monthien hotel on August 17, 1970, in front of a panel of government officials to ask for support in favor of the local film industry. During the same year, two significant Thai 35mm films were released: *The Wonder of Luk Thung* (มนต์รักลูกทุ่ง), a musical directed by Rangsi Thatsanaphayak and starring Mit Chaibancha and Petchara Chaowarat, which was a great commercial success and brought an unprecedented spectacular dimension to the aesthetics of the 16mm era; and *Thon* (โถน), starring Chaiya Suriyan and Arania Namwong and directed by Piak Poster, who introduced new artistic perspectives into the Thai film production by attaching more importance to visual composition, editing and acting. The 35mm format was promoted once again as the exclusive production standard to adopt, and only one last major 16mm movie, *The Eel* (พ่อปลาไหล), directed by Choed Songsi, was released in 1972 at the Cathay theater.

The rhapsodic structure that characterised the 16mm production progressively changed in favor of a more dynamic narrative, and the content of Thai movies tended to evolve towards the depiction of social problems, a movement initiated with *His Name is Kan* (เขาชื่อ

³³ Day, *Cultures at War, 195-226*. *The Golden Eagle* was the last episode of a series of five movies all starring Mit Chaibancha, inspired from a widely popular pocketbook adventure series by Sek Dusit, *The Red Eagle* (อินทรีแดง).

กานต์), directed by Prince Chatri Chalerm Yukhon in 1973. Choed Songsi (*The Scar* [แผลเก่า], 1977), Wichit Khunawut (*Mountain People* [คนภูเขา], 1979) and other new directors such as Euthana Mukdasanit (*Namphu* [น้ำพุ], 1984) contributed to raise the technical aspects of Thai films towards a quantum improvement. Nevertheless, as Churi Wichit Wathakan observed, most of the Thai films produced during the 1970s and 1980s still perpetuated themes from the 16mm period: “The basic themes of Thai movies have remained fairly constant over the years. While the setting of the themes of contemporary movies may be more varied and the presentation of the story takes on greater realism and sophistication, the principal themes of Thai movies have persisted.”³⁴ The shift of the 1970s and 1980s did not call the preeminence of flavors into question. The habits and expectations of the spectators remained the same during these subsequent decades, especially in the provinces, where at least 70% of the films acquired their receipts. The expansion of TV broadcasting and the arrival of video in the 1980s had a much more significant impact on the gradual desertion of movie theaters and the aesthetic principles of the Thai 16mm movies found a new extension in television dramas. The significance of the 16mm era can be acknowledged through this continuation. Some contemporary Thai films have also paid a playful homage to this cinematic heritage, deemed anachronistic today, by means of pastiche: the romantic Western *The Tears of the Black Tiger* (ฟ้าทะลายโจร), directed by Wisit Sasanatieng in 2000; the musical-action-comedy film *The Adventures of Iron Pussy* (หัวใจทรนง), directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Michael Shaowanasai in 2003; and even the Isan language parody film series *Hello Yasothon* (แหมมยโสธร), directed by Petchathai Wongkhamlao from 2005 to 2013. In an inventive and colorful way, these films appropriated and revitalised the essential form of the *nam nao* melodramas as a retrospective recognition of the founding moment of effervescence that the 16mm period represented -not the mere archaic extension of former narrative traditions, but an exuberant and fruitful form of experimentation of the cinematic medium.

³⁴ Churi, “Thai Movies as Symbolic Representation of Thai Life”, 158.

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