

adaptations might not allow them to bargain for more administrative power and resources from the Burman-led Union government.

But the *tatmadaw*'s association with the ruling socialists inside the AFPFL, and its support for election rigging throughout the period of civilian rule, made a bad impression among an increasingly distrustful public. This people's distrust became apparent in the 1956 parliamentary election, when the AFPFL fared poorly, a failure that largely contributed to the split of the AFPFL in 1958. Though *Myawaddy* always claimed that the *tatmadaw* was protecting the democratic constitution of Burma, as well as parliamentary democracy, in reality the *tatmadaw* were focused on the communists' gaining a significant role after the AFPFL split and the government's attempts to draw the rebellious CPB into the legal fold. This showed that the *tatmadaw* was unable to allow a democratic culture under a constitution to come into existence. The *tatmadaw* attempted to topple the unstable U Nu regime twice in five years. The second coup was concerned with ethnic autonomy and the desire of ethnic groups to build a federal state to replace the Burman-dominated quasi-union. This struggle paved the way for the *tatmadaw* to seize complete power, a move that was intended to prevent the disintegration of the Union amid external threats. The military's hold on power in Burma has lasted nearly half a century. Following a credo that posits Burman superiority, an assumption inherited from the 1930s Dobama Asiayone nationalist movement, the *tatmadaw* were bound to adopt a Nietzschean belief in the need for a strong state built by a noble race. Such a state could not be allowed to fall apart due to imperialist stooges, feudalists, and separatists. Although the AFPFL government formed an alliance with the *tatmadaw* to impose some democratic rule while fighting a strong communist insurgency, the *tatmadaw* decided to end parliamentary democracy and suspend the constitution until a welfare state, based on a socialist economy and ethnic unity, was established and "feudalist" ties were swept away.⁵⁷

That is why the *tatmadaw* and its magazine, *Myawaddy*, ultimately failed to win the real hearts and minds of the public during the campaigns to propagate democratic ideals, discredit leftist radicalism, and bring the dream of a unified Burma to reality. The impact of the magazine's efforts to invent the *tatmadaw*'s version of political biography, formulate an official myth of Burma, and present political issues persuasively in fictional terms seem not to have been great enough to achieve the goal of building a socialist welfare state while preserving basic democratic rights. Though the editors of the magazine understood that "culture" had an important role to play in the struggle for power in these critical years of the civil war in Burma, they tried merely to revive old Burman court culture. But this attempt failed to project a unified cultural model and so deepened the existing cultural fault lines between Westernized ethnic Christians, Burman Buddhist nationalists, and ethnic Buddhists like the Mons, Arakanese, and Shans. What *Myawaddy*'s fictional works did convey to its readers, whether or not they were inclined toward socialism, was a fear of communism, an enthusiasm for traditional culture and its preservation, and a desire for a unified, modern state free of insurgency and the threat of foreign intervention.

⁵⁷ Editorial, "Taw-hlan-yay-gyi-atwet-pyin-sin-gya-zo" [Let's prepare for the Revolution], *Myawaddy* 10.6 (April 1962).

THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN GAUNTLETS: MIT CHAIBANCHANG'S *INSI THORNG* AND THE HYBRIDIZATION OF RED AND YELLOW PERILS IN THAI COLD WAR ACTION CINEMA¹

Rachel V. Harrison

"War is Hell Mr. Thornhill. Even when it's a cold one."
— *North by Northwest* (Alfred Hitchcock)

"Everything he deemed communist he detested, and everything he detested was labeled communist."

— Thak Chaloemtiarana, on Police General Phao Siyanon (1910–60)²

On October 8, 1970, the chilling scenes of Mit Chaibancha's body being hauled up out of its coffin for the incredulous crowds gathered in the temple grounds to see provided tangible evidence of the untimely death of this monumental Thai movie

¹ I would like to thank Janit Feangfu for her help in searching out answers to some of my queries on Thai data for this paper and to thank my Advanced Thai Cultural Studies classes at SOAS for giving me the opportunity to test out some of the ideas included here. Thanet Wongyannava was helpful in providing information on the screening of American-backed films in Thailand. Duncan Harte offered a series of insightful remarks on the piece. And Jonah Foran gave indispensable comments on broader film history, which are developed in the paper in the comparisons with *Fu Manchu*. I am grateful both to the editors of this volume, Tony Day and Maya Liem, and to the two anonymous reviewers for their reflections on earlier drafts of this piece.

² Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2007; Chiangmai: Silksworm Books, 2007), p. 57.

star.³ That year alone, Mit had starred in twenty-nine films, eighteen of which remained incomplete at the time of his demise. Throughout his thirteen-year-long acting career, he starred in a total of 262 movies, invariably alongside female counterpart Phetchara Chaowarat. This iconic combination, abbreviated in promotional material and in popular memory simply to "Mit-Phet" (see figure 1, below), contributed to a legendary phase in Thai cinema history. That phase was brought to an abrupt close, however, when Mit lost his grip on a rope ladder suspended from a helicopter and plunged to his death while filming his own stunt in the self-directed action movie *Insi thong* (The Golden Eagle) (see figure 2, below).⁴



Figure 1. Mit Chaibancha stars with Phetchara Chaowarat in a scene from *Awisan insi daeng* (The Fall of the Red Eagle, 1963). Illustration reproduced from Sek Dusit's biographical article on the actor, *Mit Chaibancha kap khaphachao* (Mit Chaibancha and I), in an undated promotional brochure on Mit published after his death.

³ The spelling of Mit Chaibancha's name in English is sometimes rendered as Mitir to reflect the silent "r" that appears at the end of his name in Thai. To avoid confusion, that convention has not been adopted here. A consistent transcription system has been adopted in this paper, with the exception of rendering Thai names, which are spelled according to the preference or common practice of each individual concerned.

⁴ Phetchara herself also suffered at the hands of the film industry, developing serious cataracts as a result of exposure to harsh lighting.

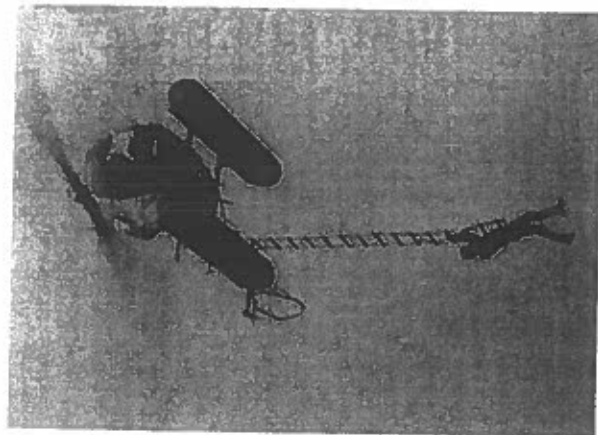


Figure 2. The final scene of *Insi thong* (The Golden Eagle, 1970), filmed shortly before Mit fell from the rope ladder to his death. Image from Ingsak Ket-horm, *Mit Chaibancha: Khwaam-mai haeng chituit* (Mit Chaibancha: The Meaning of Life) (Bangkok: Starpics, 2002), p. 111.

This paper casts a critical eye over Mit's filmmaking career, with particular reference to his final complete film, *Insi thong*, its relationship to the cultural politics of its day, and to the distinctive experience and expression of Thai Cold War paranoia in the "American era" of Thailand's recent history.⁵ In doing so, the paper opens with a discussion of the socio-political environment in which the movie came to be made, drawing out the key foci of the cultural anxieties of its time and how they played out in filmmaking following the release of *Insi thong* in 1970. The paper refers, by way of contextualization and comparison, to the treatment of "The Red Peril" (*phai daeng*) in a selection of roughly contemporaneous movies: notably, *Phai daeng* (Red Bamboo); *Ai yam daeng* (The Madman with the Red Cloth Bag); and *Nak phrai-din* (Scum of the Earth). In each of these Thai Cold War films, as in *Insi thong*, the role of the male action star and pin-up functioned as a vehicle for anti-communist propaganda. Yet, as this paper contends, the outwardly anti-communist position expressed through movies such as *Insi thong*, *Nak phrai-din*, and *Phai daeng* is heavily inflected with a sentiment more closely defined as anti-Chinese. Such

⁵ The "American era" is a term used by Benedict Anderson in the introduction to a collection of Thai short stories (co-translated with Kuchira Mendiones), *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era* (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1985). The term refers to the period following World War II in which Siam/Thailand came under the intense influence and effects of American foreign policy and aid, a period that provides the historical context of this chapter.

sentiments have their roots in the definitions of early twentieth-century Thai national identity, in which the sense of "The Yellow Peril" was firmly established during the reign of King Rama VI (1910–25). The perpetuation of these anxieties, which became entangled with "The Red Peril" of communism, is expressed in the Cold War era through the action movie star, who is portrayed as a defender of a Thainess (*khwan-pen-thai*) embodied in the trinity of Nation, Religion, and King (*chat, satsana, phramahitakasat*).⁶

THAILAND'S COLD WAR: CONSTRUCTIONS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND ITS "OTHERS"

Following the end of World War II, the United States developed a close and penetrating relationship with Thailand, an arrangement that minimized Western punitive action against the country, which had allied with the Japanese during the war. By 1949, US trade with Thailand had, for example, increased by 2,000 percent over the immediate pre-war level.⁷ As the Cold War escalated during the 1950s, Prime Minister Plaek Phibunsongkhram aligned himself yet more closely with the United States, the success of his regime dependent, as Thak Chaloemtiarana confirms, upon his ability to attract World Bank loans and American economic and military aid for the promotion of "development" (*kan-phatthana*) and "national security."⁸ Jumping firmly onto the bandwagon of fighting the "international communist conspiracy," Phibun declared Thailand to be the target of increasingly dangerous communist intentions, fueled by the rise of the leftist independence movements across Southeast Asia that had developed in the fight against colonial rule, and, most especially, by the success of the communist revolution in China in 1949.⁹ In 1960, Richard J. Coughlin depicted the perspective of the ensuing decade: "The politically conscious Thai sees Red Chinese waiting close to Thailand's northern border; from the south in Malaya, whence the Chinese communist revolt has from time to time spilled over into Thailand, comes another threat; while to the east in Cambodia there are signs of growing Communist influence."¹⁰

Phibun endorsed this anxiety over communism by making his country the first in Asia to provide troops in support of the US war effort against North Korea (1950–53). In return, Thailand received in excess of US\$35 million in economic aid and financial loans and was transformed into the pivot of Washington's region-wide

⁶ Since I wrote the first draft of this paper, this same pair of contrasting colors, red and yellow, has taken on an additional significance in the context of contemporary Thai politics and its impact in terms of wider social divisions. Expressing itself in the same hues, the political divide between the "red-shirt" supporters of former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a coup in 2006, and the "yellow-shirt" supporters of the People's Alliance for Democracy continues to shape politics in the twilight years of King Rama IX's long reign.

⁷ See Frank C. Darling, *Thailand and the United States* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1965), quoted in W. R. B. Irvine, "The Thai Yuan 'Madman' and the 'Modernizing, Developing Thai Nation' as Bounded Entities under Threat: A Study in the Replication of a Single Image" (PhD dissertation, SOAS, University of London, 1981), p. 71.

⁸ See Thak, *Thailand*, p. 69.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁰ See Richard J. Coughlin, *Double Identity: The Chinese in Modern Thailand* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), p. 195.

effort to expand its influence.¹¹ Treating the country, as Benedict Anderson engagingly puts it, like a "sort of gigantic immobile aircraft carrier," America made Thailand the headquarters "not only of SEATO, but also for a vast array of overt and clandestine American operations in neighboring Laos, Cambodia, Burma, and Vietnam."¹²

The Americanization of Thailand was further imposed at the level of cinema culture, with 95 percent of the movies screened there emanating from the United States.¹³ A distribution cartel involving eight major US film companies was formed in 1946 and made its effects felt on Thailand by the close of the decade, when its representatives firmly established themselves in the country as part of its mission to ensure that Thais were exposed only to movies from the "free world."¹⁴ As Boonrak Boonyaketmala succinctly puts it, "During most of the collaborator-state period, Bangkok largely left the direction and pace of film-industry development to the mandate of the 'invisible hand.'"¹⁵ While this observation is perceptive, it is also the case that Bangkok's newly emerging bourgeoisie, responsible in 1932 for the demise of absolute monarchy and the introduction of a constitutional alternative, followed in the footsteps of the traditional elite in the deployment of cinema as a tool for propaganda. Boonrak's survey of the "rise and fall" of the Thai film industry, from 1897 to 1992, draws attention to Phibun's own production of two movies preaching militarism and "his own brand of nationalism," respectively: *Leuat thianthai* (*The Blood of Thai Soldiers*, 1934); and *Ban rai na rao* (*Our Fields, Our Lands*, 1940).¹⁶

Popular culture clearly had its political uses, further illustrated by Phibun's establishment in 1952 of a Ministry of Culture, which served to bolster the US-fueled rhetoric that portrayed communism as public enemy number one. This message was disseminated through pamphlets, lectures in schools, radio programs, and even adaptations of folk theater (*likay*) plays, which Phibun orchestrated as head of the ministry.¹⁷ The overall aim, which Thak illuminates so well, was that "Phibun's anti-communism and pro-Americanism points of view would become accepted, vital ingredients in the public's view of proper Thai politics."¹⁸ The success of this state propaganda was epitomized in the sentiments of Phibun's Police General, Phao Siyanon, encapsulated by Thak: "Everything he deemed communist he detested, and everything he detested was labeled communist."¹⁹

These extreme politico-cultural perspectives would gain even greater currency following the rise to power, in Phibun's place, of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, whose premiership, extending through 1958–63, marked the establishment of the military

¹¹ See Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 144.

¹² See Benedict Anderson, "Withdrawal Symptoms," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 9.3 (July–September 1977): 14, 15.

¹³ See Boonrak Boonyaketmala, "The Rise and Fall of the Film Industry in Thailand, 1897–1992," in *East-West Film Journal* 6.2 (1992): 67. The data he provides here refer specifically to the years 1938–40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁷ See Thak, *Thailand*, p. 65, for full details.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

strongman at the helm of Thai politics, in keeping with the worldwide penchant for dictatorship that so typified the Cold War period (e.g., Park in Korea, Ayub in Pakistan, Marcos in the Philippines, Suharto in Indonesia, Amin in Uganda, and Papadopoulos in Greece, to name but a few). Sarit had built up his power base as a military officer throughout the first decade of Thailand's "American era," displaying an internationally fashionable distaste for the Left through, for example, the executions of numerous former left-wing MPs and alleged communist activists.²⁰ Having paid his first visit to Washington in 1950, he subsequently

... presided over the Americanization (in terms of organization, doctrines, training, weaponry, and so forth) of the Thai military. [...] Almost a decade of close ties with the Pentagon prior to his seizure of power meant that after 1959 he found it easy and natural to link Siam to the United States in an unprecedented intimacy.²¹

As a potent side effect of this "unprecedented intimacy," Thailand's fears regarding communism were inextricably interwoven not only with pro-American sympathies, but with a converse antagonism towards the Chinese, and although reluctant to incur the wrath of a powerful neighbor, Thai policy was driven forcefully by the desires for American patronage and the dollars that this earned, interests that outweighed caution regarding China. In this context, the Thai public grew apprehensive of the Chinese, resurrecting an old cultural distrust that lay at the root of Thai nationalist discourse and which was perennially provoked by the substantial Chinese diasporic community in Thailand and the limits to which this community was culturally integrated into "mainstream" Thai society. As Coughlin reports in his 1960 study, the Chinese community in Bangkok was "so self-sufficient that by becoming a part of [this community's] life, the individual is relieved of making more than a superficial compromise with the demands of Thai society."²²

Originally defined by Rama VI in terms of loyalty to the triumvirate of Nation, Religion, and Monarchy, the ideology of Thai nationalist identity discloses, according to Walter Irvine, a persistent anxiety—that of a bounded entity in danger of destabilization:

The notion of the interior enemy who endangers national integrity thanks to support given from abroad was included in the ideology. King Wachirawut [Rama VI] setting up an ethnic minority, the Chinese, as exploiters of the Thai, and as "strangers to the concept of loyalty to the nation" in a strategy geared to sharpening nationalist sentiment.²³

Added to this pre-existing disquiet over the economic power of the Chinese minority came the subsequent threat of communism and internal subversion, posed by what Coughlin defines as the "dangerous explosive potential of the large,

concentrated Chinese minority."²⁴ Motivated by its own internal agendas (and additionally driven by the powerful lobby of the Taiwanese Guomindang regime in Bangkok), as much as by international pressure, the Thai government began its crackdown on the Chinese communities beginning in late 1950. It deported Chinese involved in political activity, smashed labor organizations, imposed restrictions on Chinese schools, increased the alien tax by a hundredfold, to four hundred baht, curbed remittances, changed the Nationality Law to impede naturalization, and even banned Chinese opera shows in Bangkok.²⁵

While the American-led suppression of communism rekindled a distaste for the Chinese communities within Thailand's own borders that had been nascent since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, Thai regimes of the Cold War era that chose to suppress the resident Chinese also took this opportunity to crack down on other perceived enemies of the state, justifying such actions by alleging that the accused showed leftist leanings. One of the clearest examples of this project is the case of former prime minister and senior statesman Pridi Phanomyong (Luang Praditmanutham) (1900–83).

Having returned to Thailand after studying law and political science at the Sorbonne, Pridi became a leading member of the civilian arm of the People's Party (Khana Ratsadom) and was instrumental in the success of the 1932 coup. During World War II, Pridi opposed the Japanese invasion of Thailand in 1941 and played a central role in the formation of the anti-Japanese Free Thai movement (Seri Thai), incurring the wrath of then-Prime Minister Phibun. When Phibun later returned to power following a military coup in 1947, Pridi's safety was threatened, and he took refuge with the Thai navy at the headquarters of Admiral Sindhurong Songkhrachai, a name that would become important in the cinematic demonization of Pridi's role as a political figure in the film *Insi thong*, discussed at length below.²⁶ While Pridi lived in exile in Singapore from 1947–49, the blame for the death of the young King Ananta Mahidol (Rama VIII) was pinned on him by his political adversaries; the king had died in his palace quarters of gunshot wounds to the head in an apparent accident in June 1946, during Pridi's brief premiership. Rumors abounded that Pridi had committed regicide as part of a master plan to convert Thailand into a republic. Following a brief return to Thailand in 1949, during which he staged an unsuccessful coup against Phibun, Pridi then fled to China, where he lived for twenty-one years, and from there to Paris, where he died in 1983. His apparent socialist principles—demonstrated by his support for labor rights and for anticolonial struggles across the region—branded him a persistent threat to right-wing Thai nationalism, even despite the pro-Royalist, nationalist ideals he propounded. *The King of the White Elephant* (*Phra-cha chang phueak*), an anti-war propaganda film both written and produced by Pridi in 1940, while he was serving as minister of finance, provides a clear illustration of a somewhat traditionalist stance and is difficult to interpret as a representation of

²⁴ Landon, *The Chinese in Thailand*, p. 196.

²⁵ Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*, p. 146.

²⁶ Admiral Sindhurong was commander-in-chief of the navy at the time of the Manhattan Rebellion, a failed coup against Phibun led by the navy in June 1951. The relationship between the Thai navy and Pridi was traditionally close, dating from their support of the 1932 coup, which ushered in a constitutional monarchy and in which Admiral Sindhurong had been closely involved. See Thak, *Thailand*, pp. 40–41.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 127–30 and 143–44.

²¹ Anderson, "Withdrawal Symptoms," p. 15.

²² See Coughlin, *Double Identity*, p. 195.

²³ Irvine, "The Thai-Yuan," p. 67. See also Kenneth Perry Landon's discussion of the Chinese in Siam in *The Chinese in Thailand* (New York, NY: Russell and Russell, 1973 [first edition 1941]), pp. 86–95.

leftist sympathies.²⁷ Nevertheless, as his long-term political rival and a former prime minister, Seni Pramoi, succinctly concluded: "We could never get over the suspicion that Pridi was a Communist."²⁸

The mistrust that followed Pridi during the subsequent years of military rule, a martial era fully established by Sarit's grip on power from 1958, was reflected in popular culture, as Thailand joined in the psychological warfare of the Cold War.²⁹ As the ideology that promulgated a right-wing definition of Thai national identity was strengthened during this period, communist sympathies were firmly located in the politico-cultural sphere of the "un-Thai" and marked as a source of treachery to the nation (*thorajot tor phaen-din*). Emblematic of this shift, as Anderson observes, "the triotlet Nation-Religion-King was transformed from placid motto to fighting political slogan, and was increasingly understood as such."³⁰

Center-stage in Sarit's systematic revivification of this trinity lay the position of the monarch as key national cultural symbol around which "true Thais" could unite in a sense of shared identity. In contrast to the diminished role of the monarchy following the 1932 revolution, that of Rama IX was to assume greater political, psychological, and cultural weight, unprecedented since the days of Rama V (r. 1868–1910), eventually attaining the dizzy heights of quasi-deification it has come to hold in early twenty-first century Thailand, in the twilight years of the present king's reign.

Likewise, the Buddhist monkhood, or *sangha*, was also drawn more closely into the nationalist agenda, involving it directly in the fight against communism through, for example, the distribution of anti-communist propaganda leaflets. As Sombun Suksamran observes,

Posters showing a fierce demon, representing a communist, destroying *wats* [temples] and places of worship, cruelly torturing the monks, together with the words "if communism comes, Buddhism, *wat*, and monks will be destroyed," were seen and distributed everywhere.³¹

²⁷ Restored and re-released on DVD by the Thai Film Foundation (Munithi nang thai) in 2005, *The King of the White Elephant* was made in English as part of Pridi's firm anti-war statement on behalf of Thailand to the international community. The film is an historical epic set in the sixteenth century Kingdom of Ayutthaya, and deals with an era roughly contemporaneous with that explored in the nationalist Thai blockbuster, *Suriyathai*, released in 2000. The film's chief protagonist, King Chakra (a name that resonates with the ruling Chakri dynasty of the Bangkok era), righteously negotiates for peace but is drawn into war with neighboring King Hongsa (whose name evokes the sixteenth-century Burmese dynasty of Hongsawadi).

²⁸ Quoted in Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*, p. 141.

²⁹ According to Morakot Kaewjinda, the national perception of Pridi can be categorized into three different views, depending on the historical period. Seen first as a "republican" and an "anti-monarchist" in the immediate aftermath of the 1932 coup, he was perceived post-1933 as a "communist" following his proposals for a new economic structure in Siam. After the pro-democracy coup of October 14, 1973, Pridi acquired the reputation of a "liberal democrat" and "protector of the monarchy." Morakot proposes that the various images of Pridi relate more closely to their role as political devices (*khruang-neu thang kan-muang*) than to forms of "truth." See Morakot Kaewjinda, *Phap-lak Pridi Phanomyong kap kan-muang thai* [The Image of Pridi Phanomyong and Thai Politics] (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2000).

³⁰ Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 166.

³¹ Quoted in Irvine, "The Thai-Yuan," p. 74.

Such sentiments were marked by yet greater extremes in the 1970s, when anti-communist sympathies had become more firmly entrenched in the nation. Following the ousting of the military dictator, Thanom Kittikachorn, and his sidekick Phraphas Charusathien on October 14, 1973, as a result of effective prodemocracy demonstrations, the country entered a three-year period characterized by extreme internal divisions between Right and Left, culminating in a bloody rightist coup: the events of October 6, 1976, when right-wing vigilante groups led a violent attack on student demonstrators at Bangkok's Thammasat University (which had been established by Pridi). Some months prior to the attack, the outspoken Buddhist monk Phra Kittiwutho had made a speech declaring that no religious demerit would be accrued by Buddhists who killed communists (*kha khommitunit mai bap*):

Killing communists is not killing persons because whoever destroys the nation, the religion, or the monarchy, such bestial types are not complete persons. Thus, we must intend not to kill people but to kill the Devil (Mara); this is the duty of all Thai.³²

THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL HEROES AND THEIR ENEMIES ON SCREEN

The heightened tensions of the times are notable by comparison with the spirit of the previous two decades, in which, as Anderson points out, "it was possible for many Thai conservatives to view the Thai Left quite sincerely as a kind of alien minority ('really' Vietnamese, Chinese, or whatever), and the anticommunist struggle as a lofty national crusade."³³ Reflecting this perspective, the 1954 novel *Phai daeng*, which was translated into English in the early 1960s under the title *Red Bamboo*, depicts the hazards posed to deeply rooted Buddhist belief, which in the novel undergirds a traditional and harmonious, pastoral Thai lifestyle. (Although the Thai word *phai* in the novel's title means "bamboo" and alludes therefore to China and its related communist threat, a differently spelled though similarly pronounced word *phai* also provides the meaning of "danger," therefore compounding the "Red Peril" connotation here.)³⁴

Penned by senior statesman and founder of the conservative Social Action Party, Khukrit Pramoi, *Phai daeng* conveys traditionalist predilections similar to those of Khukrit's elder brother Seni, who had so mistrusted Pridi's political persuasions.³⁵ The novel is closely modeled on Giovanni Guareschi's tales of the village priest Don Camillo and his quarrel with the local communist mayor. As in the Italian prototype, Khukrit's protagonist—this time a Buddhist abbot in the Thai village of Phai Daeng—is at odds with a communist zealot in his community whom he has known since childhood; and, like Don Camillo, he gains advice through communion with a

³² The translation is provided by Charles Keyes, quoted in Anderson, *The Spectre*, p. 89. As Anderson relates, the offensive against the Left went into high gear in the spring of 1976, particularly during the campaign for the April parliamentary elections, when the leader of the Chart Thai party, Pramarn Adireksarn, announced the slogan "Right Kill Left."

³³ Anderson, *The Spectre*, p. 173.

³⁴ The tonal register of the two words is also different, with *phai* meaning "danger" pronounced with a mid tone and *phai* meaning "bamboo" with a low tone.

³⁵ Khukrit also served as prime minister between 1975 and 1976.

religious icon in his place of worship. In 1979, *Phai daeng* was made into a film (dir. Phomphon Choei-arun), with the script authored by Khukrit himself. In accord with the spirit of the times, the film's release coincided with a cooling of the polarized hatred between Left and Right and coincided with the announcement of an amnesty for all former students, activists, and intellectuals who had swelled the ranks of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in the jungles of the north, south, and northeast in the aftermath of the October 6 coup.

Unsurprisingly, the film ridicules its antagonist, Kwaen, for his "quaint convictions" and blind, stubborn allegiance to Maoist ideology, while confirming the integrity of Thai village life as it is formed around the core community values of Buddhist religion. Mockingly referring to Kwaen as "Comrade" (*sahai*), the abbot has some important (and patronizing) lessons on life to convey to the village communist as he directs his gaze to the sky and explains how "the sun is red at present, but soon it will turn to gold." In other words, communist ideology will be superseded by the "traditional" ideology of royalist, Buddhist Thailand, embodied in the ultimate "Golden Land," Suvarnabhumi.³⁶ The symbolism of his teaching is supported by more direct advice: "Comrade, there are many ways in life to solve a problem without having to resort to arms!" The abbot calls on the virtues of compromise, traditionally deemed in nationalist discourses to constitute an integral feature of (Buddhist) Thainess. Significantly, what unites these two oppositional elements, personified by the abbot and the communist, in addition to their shared childhoods, is the attack made on their community by the grasping Sino-Thai businessman Sia Leng—both his name and his heavily accented Thai speech betray his Chinese heritage. Here, the threat posed by the "Yellow Peril" trumps that of the Red. When Sia Leng dupes a poorly educated old lady out of her land and pursues fraudulent means to build a dam on the nearby canal for his own personal gain, the fellow villagers of Phai Daeng attack and capture him, supported by the prompt arrival on the scene of police and government agents who have come to arrest him on charges of corruption. Here, the traditional lifestyle of Phai Daeng's ethnic Thai community members is threatened more by the machinations of a diasporic Chinese merchant than it is by an adopted communist ideology, recalling Irvine's definition of the Thai national self as a bounded entity in danger of destabilization by an interior enemy; communist ideology is relatively unthreatening, since it can be contained within "Thai ideals" by a combination of good humoredness, self-deprecation, and compromise.³⁷

The veteran actor Sorapong Chattri (b. 1950) plays the part of Kwaen in *Phai daeng*, a role that seems to suit this star, who had been typecast as the embattled, radical hero of a number of socialist realist movies throughout the seventies. Sorapong rose to fame in the latter half of the decade at the forefront of the

generation of actors who succeeded Mit Chaibancha, and he made his particular reputation as the lead in *Khao cheu Kan* (His Name was Kan, dir. Chatrichalem Yukhon, 1973), *Thep-thida rongraem* (Hotel Angel, dir. Chatrichalem Yukhon, 1974), *Thongphun Khoekoh*, *raisadom tem kian* (Taxi Driver/Citizen I, dir. Chatrichalem Yukhon, 1977) and *Phiae kao* (The Scar, dir. Cherd Songsri, 1979). One of his most interesting performances, however, is captured in the little noted film *Ai yam daeng* (The Madman with the Red Cloth Bag, dir. Chao Mikhunsut, 1980). Like *Phai daeng*, this movie relies on the narrative device that features an evolving conflict between two characters who were once childhood friends, but who are brought into opposition in later life. Despite making no direct reference to the traditionalist/communist divide that marred rural Thai community relations in the 1970s, *Ai yam daeng*'s symbolism clearly evokes Thai political history, though its references to political conflicts remain oblique. The cover of the VCD version of this film depicts a harried and blood-drenched Sorapong, sporting long, tousled hair, a red bandana and armbands, and clutching both a sickle and a bloodied cloth shoulder bag (see figure 3, below). His style of dress immediately calls to mind those who took part in Thailand's leftist student movement, as protests built up in the heady days between 1973 and 1976. The cloth shoulder bag, or *yam*, was de rigueur attire for such activists, while the sickle clearly reads as a symbol of communism. Yet *Ai yam daeng* deals only figuratively with these concepts, preferring instead to define societal breakdown within a rural Thai community in terms of the offence committed against a poor villager (Sorapong) by a wealthy one who abducts the poor man's pregnant wife. When the husband loses his wife as a result of the emotional trauma, he metamorphoses into "*Ai yam daeng*." "The madman with the red cloth bag." In his "unbounded" state, to use Irvine's anthropological terminology for mental instability, "*Ai yam daeng*" puts this vital accessory of the cloth bag to good use as storage for the unborn child whom he cuts from his murdered wife's womb with his sickle, consequently reddening the bag with blood. The film has all the macabre overtones of Thai literary texts penned in the prelude to and immediate aftermath of the October 1976 bloodshed.³⁸ Nursing the maggot-infested fetus in the bag as he goes, "*Ai yam daeng*" soon becomes the scapegoat for all village crimes, assumed culpable for several murders and treated by all but the headman's daughter Bunlam as a pariah. Bunlam's love for him restores him to sanity, but the weight of both public and state incrimination, compounded by residual self-loathing, eventually drives him to commit suicide by slashing his throat with his sickle.³⁹

³⁶ See, for example, Rachel Harrison, "Birth, Death, and Identity in the Work of Sidaoru'ang," in *Thai Literary Traditions*, ed. Manas Chitakasem (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1995), pp. 87–117.

³⁷ The interpretation of this persecution of a "mad" or abnormal person at the hands of a wider village community as a politically loaded trope accords with Chusak Pattarakulvanit's reading of Chat Kobjitti's 1981 novel, *Kham-phipaksa* (The Judgment). Chat's text ostensibly discusses the demise of a village school caretaker, Fak, as he succumbs to persecution by fellow villagers for sheltering his deceased father's mentally ill wife, Somsong; his sorrows drive him to become an alcoholic. In Chusak's interpretation of this work, the villagers can be read as bullying, rightist activists, while Fak and Somsong are symbolic of the intimidated leftist students who were hounded into the ranks of the CPT post-1976. See Chusak Pattarakulvanit, "25 Years of 'The Verdict' and Somsong's Appeal" [25 pi kham-phipaksa kap kham-uthorn khong Somsong], *Matichon sut sapada* 26, 1347–8 (June 9, June 16, June 23, and June 30, 2006), pp. 89–90.

³⁸ As testimony to its enduring popularity, *Phai daeng* was also adapted for television in 1990.



Figure 3. VCD cover of *Ai yam daeng* (The Madman with the Red Cloth Bag, 1980), starring Sorapong Chatrit. Courtesy of Solar Marketing.

In contrast, and again symptomatic of the time during which it was made, the overtly didactic 1977 movie, *Nak phaen-din* (see figure 4, below), is impelled by fervent anti-communist sympathies. Starring and directed by Mit Chaibancha's contemporary, the extraordinarily prolific and popular Sombat Methanee (b. 1937), *Nak phaen-din* takes its title from the song of the same name, played incessantly after its introduction in 1975 by army-sponsored radio programs in support of rightist ideological values, according to which those who chose to be communists could not be embraced as truly Thai:⁴⁰

All who call themselves Thai, and who look like Thais
All who live in the Buddhist land of the King, but who think to destroy it.
All who think the Thais enslaved, and look down upon the Thai nation,
But who still live off its provisions, while despising Thais as its slaves.

They are the scum of the earth.

They are the scum of the earth.

These people are the scum of the earth!

⁴⁰ The term *nak phaen-din* refers to the tale of the Buddhist monk Devadatta (Thai: Thewathali) who attempted to kill the Buddha and was, as a result, swallowed up by the earth. Thus, *nak phaen-din*, or Devadatta, represents the stereotypical villain who would betray his parents' nation, religion, or king. See <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2007/09/11/scum-of-the-earth>, last accessed September 18, 2008.

All who agitate for Thais to fight among themselves and who disunite them,
All who rouse the mob to cause confusion to pitch Thais against each other,
All who extol other nations, yet threaten their own,
Seizing our assets to slaughter fellow Thais,
while respecting foreigners as their own.

They are the scum of the earth.

They are the scum of the earth.

These people are the scum of the earth!⁴¹



Figure 4. VCD cover of *Nak phaen-din* (Scum of the Earth, 1977), starring and directed by the central figure in the illustration, Sombat Methanee. Courtesy of Solar Marketing.

Nak phaen-din was also adopted as the anthem for the Thai Village Scout movement (*lukisua chao-ban*) and became the popular theme song of the violent months leading up to the lynching, torture, and execution of student demonstrators by right-wing vigilante groups in October 1976. Quoting the work of Natee Pisalchai, Anderson indicates that mock murders of the students were actually staged at one Village Scout training camp in the days preceding the actual attacks.⁴² Described by Anderson as "the culmination of a two-year-long right-wing campaign of public intimidation, assault, and assassination best symbolized by the orchestrated mob violence of October 6 itself," the 1976 coup evidently provided the impetus for the production of fanatical films such as *Nak phaen-din*.⁴³ Boonrak confirms as much in his acknowledgement that, in the immediate aftermath of October 1976, the

⁴¹ The translation is my own and remains intentionally close to the Thai to convey a sense of the use of language in the Thai original.

⁴² Natee Pisalchai, "Village Scouts," *Thai Information Resource* (Australia) no. 1 (May 1977), quoted in Anderson, *The Spectre*, p. 172.

⁴³ Anderson, *The Spectre*, p. 170.

government was lobbied to engage more actively in pressuring local film companies to produce movies that would reflect the right-wing ideology of Nation, Religion, and King.⁴⁴

In a clarification of its political allegiances from the outset, the film *Nak phaen-din* opens with a lengthy rendition of the song performed by a mass gathering of Village Scouts at a training session in a rural area of Northeast Thailand (Ubon Ratchathani province). Linked to the Boy Scouts (established in Siam by Rama VI as a quaint inheritance from the days of his English education), the Village Scout movement gained huge popularity, indicated by the fact that over five million residents, or 10 percent of the population, completed its five-day training courses in a short time following the organization's establishment in 1971.⁴⁵ The training program included "lectures by right-wing monks, parades, oath-swearings, salutes, beauty and dance contests, visits to military installations, royal donation ceremonies, and 'sing-songs,'" and a number of these activities are depicted in the film's opening credit sequence.

Nak phaen-din—both song and movie—reiterates the notion that the threat to "authentic Thai identity" is one posed from outside, and identified specifically in this period as communism. The threat of communism is foregrounded at the beginning of the film's narrative by the attack on a Village Scout tour bus, carried out by armed men—presumably leftist guerrillas, though they appear undifferentiated from common bandits—who kill a number of the Scouts. The two key characters, Chat (a common Thai name, which is nevertheless loaded here by its literal meaning as "nation") and Thai (i.e., Thai or "free," a character played by Sombat), attend to their wounded leader, whose dying wish is to hear repeated to him the "three commandments" of the Scouts code of honor. Sombat/Thai promptly obliges:

One: I must be loyal [*jong-rak phak-dii*] to Nation, Religion, and King.

Two: I must be of help to others at all times.

Three: I must act according to the regulations of the Scouts.

Reassured, the old man expires in timely fashion, leaving the cinematic audience in no doubt of the film's ideological standpoint and underpinnings.

From this point onwards, the narrative maps the trajectory of Chat's "demise" as he deviates towards the cause of the "enemy within," as defined by the lyrics of *Nak phaen-din*. As in the case of *Phai daeng* and *Ai yam daeng*, the movie achieves its

⁴⁴ Boonrak, "The Rise and Fall," p. 83.

⁴⁵ See Katherine A. Bowie, *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 1. This date is at odds with Irvine's reference to the Village Scouts, in which he states that even by 1958, over 5 percent of the Thai population had completed the five-day training course. See Irvine, "The Thai-Yuan," p. 73. Agreeing with Bowie, Benedict Anderson, in his essay "Withdrawal Symptoms," states that the Village Scouts organization was founded in 1971. Others who agree include Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*; Chai-anan Samudavanija and David Morell, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Oelgeschlager, Gunn, and Hain, 1982); and Thak, *Thailand*. This is contradicted, however, by the details provided on the website of the Thai Border Patrol Police (BPP), under whose aegis the movement was established. According to them, the Village Scouts organization was founded in 1969, however, training programs commenced later, in August 1971. See: www.bpp.go.th/bpp22/scout.html, last accessed September 22, 2008.

⁴⁶ Anderson, *The Spectre*, p. 160.

narrative aim through recourse to the device of binary opposition, formulated as a rift between former childhood friends that draws them into divergent ideological positions—Right and Left. Chat experiences a series of personal mishaps and misadventures, orchestrated by local entrepreneurs and dyed-in-the-wool, exploitative capitalists precisely typical of those vilified in leftist, socially conscious fiction of the time. Oddly, however, in terms of the film's political position, these capitalists turn out to be undercover communists. (In reverse, similar ideological confusions are to be noted in the film's penchant for having its Rightist heroes invariably sport bright red attire.)

After unfairly depriving Chat of his leased truck and his rice harvest, the capitalist communists of *Nak phaen-din* draw him further into their web. Forced to leave for Bangkok, Chat abandons his pregnant wife and his blind, frail, and aged mother, the potent symbols of the traditional Thai family/nation. Once in the metropolis—a site persistently associated in Thai cinema and literature with the evils of American-era development and with cultural "impurity"—Chat falls victim to more plots invented by the well-heeled communist agents, who wish to lure him into debt and dependence. Trapped into succumbing to their ideological pressures, he is shown swearing his allegiance to an international gathering of representatives vaguely suggestive of the brainwashing leftists who are assembled in the dream sequences of the American Cold War classic, *The Manchurian Candidate* (dir. John Frankenheimer, 1962). The group is marked out by stereotypical features for easy recognition: it includes a man in Indonesian national costume (hence inciting audience fears via reference to the proximity of recent communist activities in the region) and a Westerner (or *farang*), oddly referred to by his accomplices as "Mr Sam." The choice of name here, which implies "Uncle Sam," a nickname for America, is again ideologically disorienting, and it remains uncertain whether this labeling is intended by the scriptwriter as ironic or humorous, or is merely inept.

Once confirmed as a member of their team, Chat earns from his high-powered communist "brothers" a reward that asserts patron-client hierarchies rather than equality: a trip to the brothel for a raunchy sexual encounter is followed by the company of easy women who ply him with luxurious food at a "no hands" banquet. These scenes represent stereotypical sins of the city, strangely associated here with the lure of communism, despite the fact that socialist-realist filmmaking and short-story writing of the same time label such adventures equally clearly as symbols of the erosion of Thainess under the pernicious influences of Western capitalism.⁴⁷ *Nak phaen-din* compounds this ideological confusion when the camera cuts away to show the meager serving of sticky rice (*khao niao*), a potent symbol of rural Northern and Northeastern Thai identities) that Chat's indigent wife feeds to her blind mother-in-law on the balcony of their run-down wooden hut in the country. The wife's loyalty and poverty are clearly antithetical to "communist" values as interpreted by the film.

Sated by the pleasures of the city, Chat accompanies the clique back to its hideout near his home village and is sent forth to disseminate the communists' propaganda in the local market place. He is promptly met with a feisty resistance, spearheaded by his former Village Scout comrade, Thai. Thai reminds the gathered villagers that their impoverished life is the fault of inadequate parliamentary representation, but that to fight this inequity through violent rebellion, rather than

⁴⁷ See, for example, the urban experiences of the prostitute, Mali, in Chatrichalem Yukhon's *Thep-thida rongraem* (Hotel Angel), 1974.

by democratic means, would be un-Thai, un-Buddhist, unjust, and counter to the monarchy that rules the nation (*ni khwam-pok-khroing yu*). Thai's concept of "democracy" appears to discount the constitutional role of the king. Nor does he heed his own counsel advocating peaceful protest as he lunges aggressively towards the treacherous Chat.

Hearing the news of Chat's political conversion, Chat's wife, mother, and foster-brother all disown him, so horrified are they by his newly espoused ideals. The mother acts out her loathing by beating her breast in despair and implores the heavens to condemn Chat to death by the sword, by poisoning, and by torture, and to ensure Chat burns in everlasting hell for his treachery. Little doubt can remain in the audience's mind as to the intensity of her maternal rejection when she expresses her wish that, were it not a sin, she would have the unborn child torn prematurely from her daughter-in-law's womb. The breakdown in Thai familial relations is compounded by Chat's subsequent accidental murder of his mother, when she steps on a land mine he has planted to deter those who would attack the communists' headquarters. But the inviolability of the "ideologically unsullied" family is then restored when Village Scout hero Thai valiantly paraglides into the communist compound to rescue single-handedly his girlfriend and son who are being held hostage there. (The venture presumably recalls, and pays tribute to, the last airborne moments of Mit Chaibancha's fateful stunt in *Insi thong*.)

It is family ties that ultimately bring Chat back to his senses and cause him to realize the full weight of his transgression against Thainess, for his awakening takes place when he stumbles across his mother's corpse in the battle that ensues between Right and Left. It is too late, however, for redemption, and Chat must be castigated in the film for the error of his ways: he is killed in the Scouts' attack on the compound, their victory symbolized by Thai/Sombat's ardent sprint across the screen, with a billowing Thai national flag under one arm and a machine gun clasped in the other. The red flag of communism is duly toppled and, in the military-assisted mop-up of the wounded, the army commander magnanimously offers to sacrifice his place in the rescue helicopter for the injured leader of the communist force. Experiencing a sudden ideological transformation, the adversary graciously declines: "Your life is far more valuable than mine. Wicked people [*khon chui*] such as I do not deserve to be helped." The soldier consoles him with persuasive counsel: "We are all equals here. And even though you have wronged, you now have the chance to redeem yourself."

The sense of Thai community is hereby restored through the medium of "Buddhist compassion" and forgiveness in a statement of nationalist propaganda that is characterized neither by subtlety nor nuance. The movie's consistent implication is that communism is a threat from "outside," an Otherness that has been brought "within" the confines of the traditional rural community that epitomizes Thainess. Identifying "The Yellow Peril" as an aspect of this Other represents part, though not all, of *Nak phaen-din*'s didactic purpose: the movie's communist capitalists have drawn the local Sino-Thai shopkeeper into their network, but he is, at the same time, a victim of their manipulative, authoritarian ways, as demonstrated by the fact that they threaten to execute him if he fails to secure them sufficient supplies. The real enemy here reads as a heady mix of international capital working under a communist guise. The film depicts this mix in negative terms, not because of ideological difference but because it represents an Otherness within that provokes cultural anxiety.

As such, *Nak phaen-din* provides a robust, if somewhat crude and clumsy, illustration of the nationalist ideologies that crept into filmmaking and became particularly prominent in the 1970s, as Thai society grew yet more polarized in its political allegiances. In this sense, the movie clearly reflects anti-communist filmmaking in the West, with its tendency to depict subversives as operating in small, isolated groups rather than as part of a wider conspiracy, and to focus on the threat presented by an "enemy within."⁴⁸ The plot development of *Nak phaen-din*, and the rightist anxieties this film seeks to isolate and develop, also recall aspects of Hollywood movies such as *The Red Menace* (1949), *I Led Three Lives* (1953), and *Red Nightmare* (1962). *Red Nightmare*, for example, depicts an idyllic, small-town family being turned into unfeeling apparatchiks by a communist takeover, and was produced by the US Department of Defense as an educational film to be screened in American schools.⁴⁹

As Cold War paranoia gained momentum in the 1960s, both in the United States and abroad, American-funded Thai-language movies thematically similar to those described above were also widely shown in Thailand, most notably in rural and border areas deemed under threat of insurgency. Examples include the United States Information Service-sponsored films *Fai yen* (Cool Fire) and *Hei-koet thi Phang Phone* (The Incident at Phang Phone), the latter vilifying early CPT activities in the Northeast. Both Thai and American filmmaking of the 1960s and 1970s fueled anxieties that were typical of the anti-communist mindset in Bangkok and beyond.

GOLD WAR CINEMA: PROPAGANDAS AND PARANOIAS

As marked by examples that can be found in US and Thai filmmaking alike, widespread paranoia was a significant cultural and psychological side effect of the Cold War. Sharon Packer articulates this succinctly in her work *Movies and the Modern Psyche*: "During the Cold War, the 'Free World' worried [...] to the point of paranoia. That paranoia seeped into films produced during those strange years."⁵⁰

The anxieties of the times were expressed through propaganda transmitted by words and by images and employed as an essential and often seemingly innocent "fourth weapon" in the Cold War armory that firmly comprised military, economic, and political strategies.⁵¹ According to Tony Shaw, while high art was deployed by the CIA to communicate a sense of ideological superiority to the elite, "moving pictures were aimed emphatically at the masses."⁵² Cinema became not only a passive "reflector" of the zeitgeist, but an active producer of political and ideological sentiment.

⁴⁸ Tony Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War* (London and New York, NY: I. B. Tauris, 2001), p. 45.

⁴⁹ See David Seed, *Brainwashing: The Fictions of Mind Control* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2004), p. 67. See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Nightmare, last accessed September 22, 2008.

⁵⁰ Sharon Packer, *Movies and the Modern Psyche* (Westport, CT, and London: Praeger, 2007), p. 710.

⁵¹ See Tony Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 3 and 5.

⁵² Tony Shaw, *British Cinema*, pp. 1 and 3.

The American and Soviet film industries are known to have played an integral part in the establishment of a Cold War culture in their respective countries. [...] Hollywood is widely held to have contributed significantly to the "Red scares" that periodically swept American society after 1917, particularly during the McCarthy era of the early 1950s. More recently, historians have cast light on Hollywood's semi-official capacity as advertising agent to the US government during the Cold War, exporting American ideals in line with the State Department's wishes.⁵³

According to Shaw, the late 1940s and early 1950s are commonly regarded as "Tinsel Town's darkest hour," as producers and actors alike were placed under considerable pressure to participate in and display the national aversion to communism.⁵⁴ Yet while numerous filmmakers' careers were destroyed by bogus accusations that they were active leftists, other well-known stars rallied to the government cause, nowhere better exemplified than by the career of the veteran US actor John Wayne. Defined by Shaw as the Cold War's "living symbol of American patriotism," Wayne

waged a relentless war—on and off screen—against those he defined as America's Cold War enemies. Wayne was at the peak of his powers during the Cold War's most critical years, and had a greater impact on the way Americans viewed the conflict than probably any other Hollywood figure. Moreover, Wayne's powerful cowboy-cum-soldier persona was tied inextricably to the special relationship that the film industry enjoyed with the military during the Cold War.⁵⁵

A clear case of this "special relationship" is exemplified by the production of *The Green Berets* (1968), co-directed by and starring Wayne as the protagonist, Colonel Mike Kirby. This was the only Hollywood Vietnam War film to have been made and released during the war itself. Shaw typifies it as: "A paean to the US military's efforts to show that the Cold War was just as much a matter of life and death as the Second World War. *The Green Berets* represented mainstream Cold War cinematic propaganda at its most overt."⁵⁶

Clearly, Wayne's role in *The Green Berets* serves as a model for Sombat Methanee's dedication to the cause of *Nak phraen-din* a decade later. But while Sombat holds a place in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the actor who performed in more movies than any other person in the world, his star status has been eclipsed by a greater name in Thai film history—that of Mit Chaibancha. It is Mit who stands out as the Thai actor whose Cold War politico-cinematic career most closely parallels that of the American "Duke" Wayne.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 2.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 1.

⁵⁵ Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War*, p. 200.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

The Making of a Thai Cold War Movie Star: Mit Chaibancha⁵⁷

Born Phichet Phummeh in the province of Phetchaburi in 1934, Mit assumed his stage name when he embarked on a career in the movies in 1957, the same year in which Field Marshal Sarit came to power. Mit had joined the Royal Thai Air Force upon leaving school, achieving a rank equivalent to that of chief master sergeant in the US Air Force (*phai-jai-akat-tho*). Deploying his military associations to good effect, and clearly capturing the mood of the times, Mit canvassed for cinematic roles by distributing photographs of himself in his uniform (see figure 5). The fine figure he cut in this guise led to him being cast in his first film, *Chat seua* (Life of a Gangster), as an action hero, starring alongside no less than six leading ladies.



Figure 5: Mit in his Royal Thai Air Force uniform. Reproduced from a commemorative postcard of the actor.

Like most actors of his time, Mit had received no formal training in the dramatic arts, nor did he have prior theatrical experience. But following the success of *Chat seua*, he was recognized as having audience appeal based on his handsome looks and above-average height. Describing him as "more than a little dashing" (*samga mai noi*), the prolific author Sek Dusit (Roengchai Praphasanon) was keen to have this twenty-

⁵⁷ Much of the material on Mit's acting career in the section below is taken from Sek Dusit's undated biographical article on the actor, *Mit Chaibancha kap khaphachao* [Mit Chaibancha and I] and from Ingsak Ket-horm's extensive biography, *Mit Chaibancha: Khwam-mai naeng chitrit* [Mit Chaibancha: The Meaning of Life] (Bangkok: Starpics, 2002).

three-year old novice play the key part in the first screen adaptation of his widely popular pocketbook adventure series *Insi daeng* (The Red Eagle). Sek considered Mit to have a perfect physique for the role, although his "feminine politeness" (*riaproi meuan phuying*), reticence, and lack of practice in smoking and drinking were at odds with the characterization of Sek's protagonist, Rome Rithikrai. Sek's main character, Rome, was a somewhat flamboyant, elegantly dressed, womanizing, and off-inebriated Bangkok businessman, a successful, urban, middle-class man who transforms himself into the masked action hero "The Red Eagle" to confront local and national emergencies (see figures 1 and 7). In terms both of the requirements of the role and of the hero's attire, the character *Insi daeng* drew clear inspiration from a range of British and American action heroes, from Batman, Superman, and Captain America to James Bond and Sherlock Holmes, all of whom Mit said he admired. A further likeness is to be noted between "The Red Eagle" and "The Green Hornet," the crime-fighting star whose adventures were initially broadcast over radio in the United States and whose show shifted to the medium of television during the 1960s, with Bruce Lee cast in the role of the Hornet's similarly masked, kung-fu-blasting valet, Kato.⁵⁸ Nor is it surprising that Thai authors and actors would be inspired by Hollywood. K. P. Landon observed that, even before the Cold War, in the Thai film industry of the 1930s:

Movie heroes are made members of the community life. [...] Many Siamese young men yearn to go to Hollywood. [...] A heroic figure named "Towmick" featured in daily stories recounted by one employee [of a Siamese film production company]. This fabulous character could fight bandits, save helpless women, and escape from impossible situations. [...] The movies are helping to form Siamese character as shown by the candid admission of a certain bandit who said that he got some of his best ideas from the shows he saw. Standards of living shown in the movies, patterns of behaviour that are acted out, and styles of clothing that are shown, are all observed and often are copied.⁵⁹

The Green Hornet, like The Red Eagle, spends his days, when unmasked, as a dashing and debonair public character—Britt Reid, a newspaper publisher. The alter egos of both these action heroes resemble that of Batman, the masked vigilante who, by day, performs as a young socialite—Bruce Wayne. By night, Batman, the Hornet, and the Eagle work independently of the "official" police force, outside the mainstream (cf. Sherlock Holmes). In one film in the Thai series, *Awasan insi daeng* (The Fall of the Red Eagle, 1963), one faction of the Thai police force is bent on tracking down the vigilante and arresting him. Despite this characterization, neither Batman nor The Red Eagle is a mere dumb action hero; they also function in

⁵⁸ As a result of Lee's involvement in the series, it was widely screened in Hong Kong and may have become a success in the wider region as a result. I am grateful to Duncan Harte for drawing my attention to the relevance of *The Green Hornet* to this paper, most notably the theme of racial difference evoked by the casting of Kato initially as Japanese, then Korean, and later as a Filipino (albeit acted by a Chinese American), depending on the international relations of the time.

⁵⁹ See Kenneth, Perry Landon, *Siam in Transition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), pp. 175–76.

detective mode, employing deduction and resourcefulness to fight crime.⁶⁰ Moreover, both characters tend to be drawn into the overall didactic purpose of their adventure tales, as the war against crime becomes "not just a personal vendetta but a patriotic duty."⁶¹

In addition to these "Western" attributes, however, *Insi daeng* also discloses ethnic Thai accretions, with references back to the protagonists of popular writer Por Intharapalit (1910–68, see figure 6, below) and to the first masked hero of Thai cinema, Chaiya Suriyan in *Hao dong* (Wild Cobra).⁶²



Figure 6. The book cover of the third edition (2004) of *Phien phikhat* (The Murder Plan), by Por Intharapalit. Courtesy of Praphansan Press.

⁶⁰ The assessment of Batman for purposes of comparison here is drawn from Will Brooker, *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (New York, NY, and London: Continuum, 2005), p. 46.

⁶¹ See *ibid.*, p. 65. Brooker stresses the extent to which comic books and cartoons were decisively recruited into the war effort. "Comics and cartoons, then, were used for propaganda purposes in domestic advertisements, on recruitment posters, in satirical newspaper features, in leaflet drops for allies and enemies, in humour strips shipped out to servicemen, and in the superhero titles read at home and on the front" (p. 72).

⁶² See also Mit's contemporary Leuchai Nareunat in *Phrai dam* (Dark Specter) and the masked actresses who appear in movies such as *Ai maew dam* (The Black Cat). As Baker and Pasuk note, Por Intharapalit was the author of "hugely popular serialized fiction about swaggering bandit chiefs and superheroic crimebusters." See Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*, p. 171.

Various biographical references have noted that Mit, when playing the role of The Red Eagle, was particularly proud of his *Insu daeng* outfit, a tight-fitting black trouser suit, with a partially unzipped top, black leather gloves and boots, a red felt eye mask in the form of an eagle's head, and matching leather belt, echoing the eagle symbol in its red buckle (see figure 7, below).³ Mit himself took personal responsibility for the storage and care of this costume, entrusting it to no one else, in a demonstration of possessiveness that reveals the degree to which he identified himself directly with the role. Certainly the part proved to be the making of Mit as a successful Thai movie star; the first film of the series, *Jao nak-leng* (The Gangster), earned in excess of a record one million baht at the box office when it was released in 1958. Moreover, it marked a sea change in the approach to Thai movie publicity, for in this case the name of the leading actress, traditionally featured ahead of the male star's name, was relegated to second billing. Mit's performance as The Red Eagle was not only to effect permanent change in the gendered ordering of screen names, but more widely, to signal the advent of the male pin-up in Thai cinema history.



Figure 7. DVD cover for *Awusan insi daeng* (The Fall of the Red Eagle, 1963), showing the "Red Eagle" in the foreground in full costume. Courtesy of Saha-phanthamit Sound and Film.

³ See Sek, Mit Chaiyabancha, and Kingdao Darani, *Banthuk chuiwit-rak khoring Mit Chaiyabancha* [Remembering the Love Life of Mit Chaiyabancha] (Bangkok: Sannak-phim sam si, 2000).

Following his performance in *Jao nak-leng*, Mit went on to play the lead role of The Red Eagle in the entire series of films about that character: *Thap samingkhla* (The Venomous Snake, 1962); *Awusan insi daeng* (The Fall of the Red Eagle, 1963); *Pisat dam* (The Black Devil, 1966); *Chao insi* (The King of Eagles, 1968); and finally, *Insu thong* (The Golden Eagle, 1970).

The integration of the actor's own persona with that on screen persisted when Mit resolved to undertake his own stunts. His refusal to rely on stand-ins led, prophetically, it would seem, to a personal accident and injury in the production of *Neua manut* in 1958, an action drama also penned by Sek Dusit. During the filming of this movie, Mit jumped awkwardly from a moving truck and was knocked unconscious, yet following this incident, he insisted that the mishap had taught him a lesson that would improve his technique and announced that he planned to continue performing his own stunts.

Binding himself even more closely to his on-screen persona, Mit established his own film production company, *Chaiyabancha phaphayon* (Chaiyabancha Films), the logo of which depicted a lone warrior on a rearing horse. Responsible for the release of an additional movie scripted by Sek, the company fell foul of the censors in naming the film *Khrit dam* (The Black Garuda) after the mythical bird that was the symbol of Thai government offices, and it was forced to alter the title to *Yiao dam*, or "The Black Falcon."

Mit went on to perform leading roles in numerous movies in a full range of different genres, from action and adventure (*uang bu*), to melodrama and romance, (mild) horror (*uang phi*), and Chinese martial arts (*uang kamlang-phai-nai*). Prior to 1965, all were filmed in 16mm format and therefore dubbed, but with the advent of 35mm film, higher production values were made possible and implemented, illustrated by the release of *Phet lat phet* (Operation Bangkok) in 1966, which was filmed in part in Hong Kong and similarly authored by Sek Dusit.

Mit's international profile was subsequently enhanced through his appearance in 1968 alongside a Chinese actress in *Sombat mae-nam khuae* (The Treasures of the River Kwai), which was screened not only at home in Thailand but abroad in Hong Kong and Italy, presumably attracting attention through its title's reference to the 1957 Oscar-winning movie set in Thailand, *Bridge over the River Kwai* (dir. David Lean). Such overseas exposure reflected Mit's conviction that the products of the Thai film industry should be able to compete alongside foreign productions and that its movies should be exportable, as exemplified by his performance in *Asavin dap kayasit* (The Knight with the Magic Sword), filmed entirely in Hong Kong in 1970 by a Taiwanese director for Southeast Asia Films and reportedly screened in Chinatowns all over the world. As a self-styled Thai nationalist *asawin* (knight), Mit made the strengthening and support of the Thai film industry a symbol of the country's cultural success on the world stage and central to his campaign when he chose to stand for election in 1969. Having been unsuccessful in campaigning for election to the Bangkok city council two years earlier, Mit entered the arena of national politics as an independent candidate (*mai sangat*), deploying the private fortune he had amassed from his movie-making career. Little detail is recorded indicating his political beliefs, other than to suggest his fulsome support for the Thai film industry and his self-presentation to the electorate as their guard dog against corruption (*suwak thi jao-rawang mai hai khrai-ko-lam ma khlot-kong prachachon*). But the particulars of the problems he encountered with Thai film journalists in 1964, when he accused them of communist sympathies, suggest that he supported the mainstream rightist

cause, an inclination further evidenced by his direction of *Insi thong* (The Golden Eagle).⁶⁴ Mit's charisma as an actor clearly outshone his performance as a would-be politician, and he failed to secure a seat in parliament. The speech he gave at the announcement of his defeat was nevertheless characteristically spirited and defiant: "I will always continue to dream and to hope, [...] and even though my dreams have come to naught, I will never give up and will continue in my love of life—so that I can carry on fighting."⁶⁵

WHEN BATMAN MEETS FU MANCHU: TRACING THE SYMBOLIC TRANSFORMATION OF "THE RED EAGLE" TO "THE GOLDEN EAGLE"

The huge numbers of movies in which Mit Chaibancha starred, the immense following he cultivated as a local hero of the silver screen from the late 1950s to 1970, and the widespread national mourning that ensued at his death all bear testimony to the popularity of cinema in Thailand during the American era. Mit's profile and success coincided with what Anderson typifies as a massive war-related boom, "which built on, but far outstripped, the 'prewar' prosperity of the early Sant years," prompting "a proliferation of hotels, restaurants, movie houses, supermarkets, nightclubs, and massage parlours."⁶⁶ With the birth of a new middle class and petty bourgeoisie that Anderson recognizes as the effect of such rapid economic expansion, the social base in Thailand became ready for a quasi-popular right-wing movement to spring into action.⁶⁷ The final section of this paper argues for Mit's significance, through his participation in *Insi thong*, as a representative of this new social class, symbolizing its political prejudices and aspirations, framed as they were by the influences of American capital, American ideology, and American Cold War paranoia.

Set in Bangkok and its environs, *Insi thong* opens with a credit sequence displaying scenes in saturated red negative. The multiplying and menacing image of the film's antagonist, Ba Khin, his tauntingly mirthful head a seeming composite of Ho Chi Minh, Fu Manchu, and Rasputin, is subsequently encapsulated in a glowing red orb that flits intermittently across the screen. The color-coded iconography suggests the evident perils of a communist threat, which is problematic for an adventure series that has drawn, in all its previous episodes, on the feats of its action hero, The Red Eagle. In this expression of anxiety over the potential for a communist takeover of Thailand, as Dulles's "domino theory" forecast, the persona of The Red Eagle is hastily ditched. It is revealed early in the narrative that an enemy force has adopted the hero's disguise and usurped his identity and is committing murders in the name of the popular and respected vigilante. Breaking into the bedroom of a Bangkok newspaper editor, the bogus Red Eagle taunts his victim, who realizes the truth of the deception just before he dies:

You cannot be The Red Eagle. Who are you? The Red Eagle never kills the innocent. You must be a fake. Yes, that's it. Now I know. You are from the Red

⁶⁴ Mit's relationship with Thai journalists is documented by Ingsak, *Mit Chaibancha*.

⁶⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 81.

⁶⁶ Anderson, "Withdrawal Symptoms," p. 15.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

Bamboo gang [*phuak wai-rai phai daeng*], the gang bent on harm to the nation [*chat*].

Leaving the audience in little doubt as to the film's ideological underpinnings, this politically committed dialogue alludes to the title of Khukrit Pramoj's earlier novel, *Phai daeng* (Red Bamboo), and, as with Khukrit, draws the audience's attention to the links between the communist threat to Thailand and mainland China.

Now that his heroic guise has been commandeered by leftists, the genuine Red Eagle must assume a new and untarnished identity. The transformation is a symbolic one, whereby his new costume represents an upgrade of the old outfit, from black and red to gold, changing the color of his boots, gauntlets, and mask, so that the mask now clearly suggests an association with the iconic eagle which represents the United States (see figures 8 and 9, below). Thus transformed, "The Golden Eagle" undertakes to root out the invasive Red Bamboo gang after two more businessmen die suspicious deaths from shock, effected by mysterious commands emanating from a red glass statue. In a salubrious Bangkok nightclub, owned by a Sino-Thai entrepreneur with the Thai-ified name of Mr. Thongchai Limpattana (a.k.a., Liam Jiew Thong), just such a statue is delivered as a gift to a guest celebrating his birthday in the company of his friend Rome Rittikrai. (The film confirms its lack of ideological conviction in the principles of equality when it has the birthday boy's fellow diners express their suspicion of the package that arrives at their table and all agree to have the waiter open it for them in case it is a bomb.)

Referred to as a "doll" (*ukata*) in the script, the statue in the package clearly resembles a seated Chinese Buddha image, again implying that China is a source of peril: the icon, in fact, connotes Chineseness much more than it connotes the atheism typical of communism. From within the doll comes the voice of arch villain Ba Khin, whose monstrous instructions are activated when the victim establishes eye contact with the statue. Ba Khin's powers of brainwashing (*lang samong*) and his ability to separate his body from his soul to assume immortality and to appear in triplicate are explained in the narrative as "tricks of the trade," which he has apparently learned from the school of Rasputin. But these expressions of demonic prowess have seemingly less connection with the brainwashing techniques of fictional villains invented during the anxious Cold War era than they do with the magical and less overtly politically grounded potencies of popular fiction villains, many of whom predated the Cold War. For although, as David Seed confirms, the concept and the term "brainwashing" were popular Cold War phenomena directly invoking communist conspiracy, pre-1945 Western fiction certainly referred to practices that resembled brainwashing.⁶⁸ *Insi thong* arguably draws its inspiration less from the tools of the anti-communist grand narrative than it does from the attributes of the character of Fu Manchu, who, making his first appearance in Sax Rohmer's 1913 novel, *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu*, was defined by the author as "The Yellow Peril incarnate in one man." The subsequent adventures of this Manchurian arch-villain,

⁶⁸ See Seed, *Brainwashing*, p. xiii. As Seed further notes, the term "brainwashing" was coined in 1950 to describe the thought-reform methods being used by the communist authorities on Chinese citizens and was then applied to describe the treatment of US captives in the North Korean prison camps set up along the Manchurian border. By the end of the decade, the term had become "associated with all communist efforts to extract confessions and indoctrinate captive audiences, as well as with their internal educational and propaganda efforts." Seed, *Brainwashing*, p. 27.

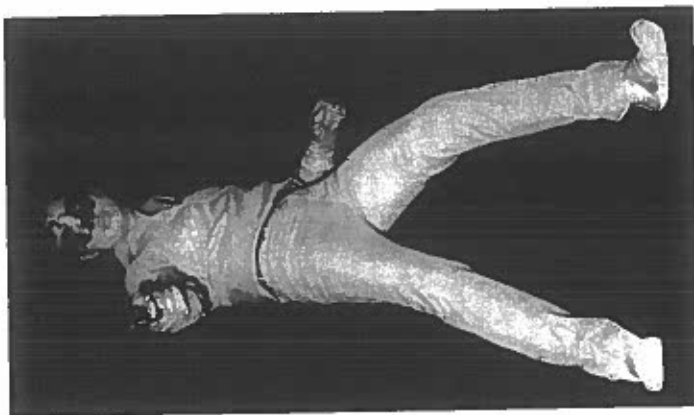


Figure 8. "The Golden Eagle" strikes a dominant pose. Illustration reproduced from Sek Dusit's biographical article on the actor, *Mit Chaiabandha kap khaphachao* (Mit Chaiabandha and I), in an undated promotional brochure on Mit published after his death.

widely reworked over the next ninety years in the various media of cinema, television, radio, and comic books, revolved around Fu Manchu's machinations as head of the secret and criminal organization Si-Fan, bent on nothing less than world domination. To succeed in his quest, Dr. Fu Manchu has devised and imbibed a special elixir to grant him longer life. Detective Nayland-Smith of Scotland Yard (a throwback to Sherlock Holmes, who was himself popularized in early twentieth-century Siam in Rama VI's rewrites of the Conan Doyle tales) is charged with the task of countering Fu Manchu.⁴⁹ The antagonist's equally devious daughter, Fah Lo Suee, on occasion rebels against Fu Manchu, siding instead with his enemies, and in one incident she is brainwashed by her father into forgetting her identity.

⁴⁹ For a further discussion of the King's detective fiction, see Rachel Harrison, "Elementary, My Dear Wat": Influence and Imitation in the Early Crime Fiction of 'Late-Victorian' Siam," in *Cheating on the West*, ed. Doris Jedamksi (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 303–47.



Figure 9. DVD cover of *Insi thong*, showing the "Golden Eagle" locked in combat with the bogus "Red Eagle" and epitomizing Thailand's Cold War struggle with the communist enemy. Courtesy of Saha-phandhamit Sound and Film.

Apparently, a spate of popular, British-made Fu Manchu films released each year between 1965 and 1970 had a direct impact on Thai adventure filmmaking of the 1960s. The British films included: *The Face of Fu Manchu*; *The Brides of Fu Manchu*; *The Vengeance of Fu Manchu*; *The Blood of Fu Manchu*; and, finally, *The Castle of Fu Manchu*. Clear accretions from this source can be discerned in the *Insi daeng* series: *Awasan insi daeng* introduces, for example, a Thai detective recently returned from training at Scotland Yard; and, in *Insi thong*, the daughter of Ba Khin's accomplice, Benjamat, beds the film's action hero, becomes sympathetic to his cause, and is punished with death by brainwashing at the hands of Ba Khin. Here the tantalizingly wicked, Svengali-style charisma of Christopher Lee, or the low-tech maneuverings of Ernst Stavro Blofeld in the early James Bond adventures, appear far more inspirational to the demonic techniques of Ba Khin than do the brainwashing sequences of Frankheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate*.⁵⁰ Moreover, the connection between the anti-Chinese sentiments expressed in *Insi thong* (as in *Nak phien-din* and *Phai daeng*) become conveniently, yet not consistently, blurred into anti-communist ones, speaking to an unrelenting suspicion of the Chinese that long predates the Cold War era. Rama VI, who took inspiration from the detective fiction of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, also chose to translate Sax Rohmer's 1919 novel, *The Golden Scorpion*, a decision that has political implications. Another classic of the "Yellow Peril" genre, *The Golden Scorpion*/Malaeng-pong thong introduced the character of Fo-Hi, a

⁵⁰ Despite this, the distinction between the influences behind Fu Manchu and those that helped shape *The Manchurian Candidate* are blurred by the effects of the former on the latter. As Seed notes in his extensive discussion of the 1958 novel by Richard Condon, on which the movie was based, *The Manchurian Candidate* combines "three elements in its title: the threatening Chinese alien (Fu Manchu), American politics, and specific allusions to Korea. Condon deploys a number of Chinese references throughout *The Manchurian Candidate*. In particular, his oriental conspirator, Yen Lo, is compared to Fu Manchu at one point." See Seed, *Brainwashing*, p. 109.

Chinese arch-villain who, like Fu Manchu, was identified as "the oriental mastermind behind the greatest criminal organization the world has ever known."⁷¹ For Rama VI, Fo-Hi surely provided an illustration of fiendish characteristics similar to those the monarch outlined in his political writings on the Chinese, to which Baker and Pasuk refer as follows:

Borrowing from the anti-semitism which flourished among European aristocracies in the early twentieth century, Vajiravudh [Rama VI] labeled the Chinese as "The Jews of the East." In the 1913 pamphlet of that title, he accused the Chinese of refusing to be assimilated into Siamese society, being politically disloyal, expecting undue privileges, worshipping wealth as a god, and being parasites on the economy "like so many vampires who steadily suck dry an unfortunate victim's life-blood."⁷²

Given these cultural precedents, there is less irony here than might be imagined in the way that *Insidi Thong* draws upon the character of Fu Manchu as inspiration for the proponent of "Red Peril" when, in fact, Fu Manchu was called upon in his adventures post-1949 to fight against communism in his homeland. For, as in other processes of adaptation and reinvention in Siam/Thailand (and elsewhere), the original associations become dislodged, and a charismatic character such as Fu Manchu can comfortably be manipulated into becoming a "free-floating signifier" to suit the cultural and political purposes at hand.⁷³ Moreover, a number of alluring, popular fictional characters have been drawn into didactic political debates through the years, including Fu Manchu, Sherlock Holmes, Batman, and the hero of *Insidi daeng* and *Insidi Thong*. Thus, reconsidering the functions that US comic strip heroes of the World War II generation were designed to serve helps clarify the ways in which both the iconic "Red Eagle" and the "Golden Eagle" were put to use, as Will Brooker demonstrates:

By locating the serial within the national discourse of anti-Japanese propaganda, Columbia [film company] was able to position Batman as a contemporary patriotic adventure in keeping with so many other films of the early 1940s. [...] This discourse of unashamed hatred for the racial "other" was enthusiastically taken up by many superhero comics of the period. The comic book covers discussed above—from *Captain America*, *Major Victory*, and so forth—echo the popular shorthand of the time in their depiction of grotesque "Jap" soldiers with bright yellow skin and buck teeth. More pertinently, *Detective Comics* embraced the same stereotypes and racist slurs, in virtually every strip but Batman. In the early 1940s, this treatment extended equally to the Chinese, who were popularly regarded in the Fu Manchu mould as a part of a generalised Oriental "Yellow

⁷¹ See www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/sax-rohmer/golden-scorpion.htm, last accessed November 8, 2008.

⁷² Baker and Pasuk, *A History of Thailand*, pp. 114–15.

⁷³ For a discussion of similar transformations and mutations, see Harrison, "Elementary," pp. 303–47; and Rachel V. Harrison, "Siam's/Thailand's Constructions of Modernity under the Influence of the Colonial West," in *South East Asia Research* 17.3 (November 2009): 325–60.

Peril," before any need arose to distinguish between "friendly" Chinese and "enemy" Japs.⁷⁴

In *Insidi Thong*, the Fu Manchu-inspired Ba Khin is revealed to be none other than the disguised political villain Luang Prasituthitham, or Mr. Prida Panayan, a Thai who has returned from exile in Beijing to bring the nation to its knees, inspired by the communist ideology he espouses. Prida's name clearly alludes to that of Pridi Panomyong (Luang Praditmanutham), discussed in detail above, while his son in the movie, Phuwanat (meaning "king"), the villain's heir apparent, raises the specter of the end of the Thai monarchy and the imposition of a new regime. Phuwanat has been engaged, since the time when their fathers were friends, to the daughter of Admiral Sindhu-apa, a name that clearly resonates with that of Admiral Sindhu Songkhramchai, who sheltered Pridi before he went into permanent exile in 1949. While Phuwanat has taken on the guise of the bogus Red Eagle, his fiancée, Ratchani (meaning "queen"), has been abducted by the Red Bamboo gang in revenge for her father's refusal to cooperate with their plans. (Here the plot again recalls devices typical of the Fu Manchu movies, as father and daughter are, respectively, tortured and captured to fulfill the antagonist's evil scheme.) The Golden Eagle breaks into Liam Jiew Thong's house, where he finds Ratchani in chains on the balcony. After helping her to escape, he runs the gauntlet of Liam Jiew Thong's henchmen, all of whom appear clad in skin-tight trousers and polo neck T-shirts, seemingly modeled on the costumes of the crew of the Star Ship Enterprise in episodes of the popular 1960s space adventure television series, *Star Trek*. The Golden Eagle, in turn, escapes by slipping unnoticed into the bedroom of Liam Jiew Thong's daughter, Benjamat, where she willingly succumbs to his amorous charms and conceals him within her room for the remainder of the night. This Superman's sexual prowess, also alluded to in earlier films in the series, corresponds not only with the characterization of the traditional Thai male hero (*phra-ek*), but also models itself on the sexual accomplishments of Special Agent 007, James Bond. The Golden Eagle's first encounter with Benjamat comes when he accidentally enters her bedroom while she is sleeping. The camera pans across her scantily clad body, prone on the bed, revealing piece by piece, in eroticized segments, first her thighs, then her knees, and finally her ankles, as The Golden Eagle sheds extra light on them with the aid of a tiny torch!

The film's sexualization of the female body acts as a counterpoint here to its usual gaze, which is more typically focused on the physical attributes of the male action hero, performed by Mit Chaibancha. As Yvonne Tasker notes in her study of masculinity and action cinema, the body of the star as hero characteristically functions as spectacle.⁷⁵ The male pin-up, she contends (albeit from an avowedly "Western" cultural perspective), "is certainly of a different order to the female pin-up, shot through with a different set of anxieties, difficulties, and pleasures."⁷⁶ In making this point, Tasker refers to Richard Dyer's argument that such uncertainties are linked to problematic processes involving the "disavowal of the very fact that the man is being looked at." This disavowal, Dyer asserts, is achieved through imagery

⁷⁴ Brooker, *Batman Unmasked*, pp. 86 and 91.

⁷⁵ Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 76.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

that stresses tough, hypermasculine action as compensation for the display of the male body, thus offering "the body as to-be-looked-at whilst refusing the 'femininity' implied by that quite passive position."⁷⁷

In the case of *Insi thong*, Mit's performance, undertaken in the characteristically tight-fitting attire that also typified his other roles, suggests an appeal to female visual pleasure. In movies such as *Pisat sanetia* (The Allure of Ghosts, 1969), his skintight trousers have an added sheen, though by the time he appears in *Insi thong*, the ravages of early middle age and good living are clearly beginning to take their toll on the Chaibancha waistline. The poster images of Mit as The Golden Eagle are undeniably sexualized, shot from below to emphasize his dominance over the viewer as the camera points upwards towards his crotch (see figure 8). Mit's pin-up status clearly owed as much, if not more, to his aesthetic pull and charisma as it did to his acting talents. His overt display of sexual charm intimates a change in the status of Thai women under the influence of modernization and Westernization. The American era arguably opens up a space for the expression of female sexual desire, as implied by the elements of the *Insi thong* plot itself, in which women are depicted as independent, mobile, fashionable, and urbanized.⁷⁸ It is The Golden Eagle's wife, Oi (played by Phetchara Chaowarat), who arrives to collect her drunken husband from a night out on the town, pulling up outside the bar in a white sports car and modeling a pink trouser suit, thus ensuring that the visual pleasure of the male cinema audience has also been accommodated. *Insi thong* is set in a swinging Bangkok of the late 1960s, complete with nightclub singers, dancing, and a performance by Western entertainers belonging to an itinerant knife-throwing act. In this depiction of a buzzing nightlife, the audience is also introduced to a third element of gendered focus: the transvestite (*kathoey*) "call-girls."

By introducing the character of Sisamorn, the movie draws the depiction of feminized masculinity into its broader political framework, evoking audience anxieties over communism, homosexuality, and transgender sexuality and combining those threats into a tidy package.⁷⁹ Sisamorn transpires to be a key member of the Red Bamboo gang. She appears in the narrative following The Golden Eagle's rescue of Ratchani. Arriving at Rome's gate complete with bouffant hair and a handbag, Sisamorn requests a meeting with Ratchani to convey the threat that Ratchani's father will be executed by the gang if she fails to cooperate. The scene then shifts, by way of a comic editorial cut, to a nightclub-cum-brothel, where Sisamorn and her fellow transvestites entertain their customers. The opening image

⁷⁷ Ibid., with reference to Richard Dyer, "Don't Look Now," *Screen*, 23, 3-4 (1982): 61-73.

⁷⁸ I am grateful to Janit Feangfu for drawing my attention to this portrayal of women in the movie.

⁷⁹ This echoes similar practices in Cold War filmmaking in the United States, as Thomas Doherty illuminates in *Cold War, Cool Medium* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003, p. 221). Doherty writes: "In the cultural and constitutional law of the land, the link between homosexuality and communism—of perversion and subversion, red-baiting and fag-baiting—was overt. Like domestic communists, homosexuals met in secret cells, possessed a preternatural ability to detect one another, and threatened the moral fiber of the nation." For a detailed discussion of homosexuality and *kathoey* as sexual and social deviance in Thai discourse, see Terdak Romjampa, "Watthakam kiam kap 'gay' nai sangkhom thai, 2508-2542" [Discourses on "Gay" in Thai Society 1965-2001] (Master of arts dissertation, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 2002). See also Jaray Singhakawintia, *Unimagined Desires: Gay Relationships in Thailand* (PhD dissertation, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2009).

is a close-up shot of a jiving male bottom on the dance floor, doubtless intended humorously to suggest homosexual gaze and encounter. A Thai policeman, Chat (Mr. Nation, once again), poses in drag to intercept the Red Bamboo gang through seduction, while The Golden Eagle listens at the wall of the next bedroom. However, when the policeman's cover is blown—his wig falls off as he attempts to extricate himself from the tryst—he is mugged by the assembled transvestites waiting outside in the corridor and driven away in a truck. The Golden Eagle comes to his rescue, after which he takes up pursuit of the remaining villains, rushing to Ba Khin's headquarters in the outskirts of Bangkok.

With the aid of military intervention, the gang is successfully defeated. The Golden Eagle shoots the fake "Red Eagle" dead and terminates the ever-multiplying Ba Khin by unlocking his disembodied heart from the crystal ball in which the villain had sheltered it and destroying the heart. The "magic" of Ba Khin's politically motivated spells expires in a narrative that follows less the style of a political thriller than it does a comic-strip cartoon. Order is restored, and Thailand remains a free, anti-communist nation. The Golden Eagle can safely reassume the red-and-black attire of his regular Red Eagle persona ... though it was in this Red Eagle guise that Mit Chaibancha was to meet his own death as he filmed the character's final journey home.

CONCLUSION

The role of the masked action hero of *Insi thong*, performed by the iconic movie star Mit Chaibancha, provides an apposite cultural symbol of Thailand's American era and the particular nature of its own Cold War anxieties. Shedding his associations with the "redness" of communism, the revamped vigilante of this 1970 movie steps out to defend the values of the Thai nation in a redesigned uniform that is complete with golden gauntlets and an eye-mask shaped to mimic the features of an eagle, symbolic of the United States. This paper has investigated some of the confusions, uncertainties, and hybridities regarding such symbolism in Thai cinematic interpretations of the Red Peril and its associated ideology. By drawing comparisons with later films, such as *Nak phaen-din*, the paper pinpoints idiosyncratic understandings of the communist threat to Thailand, as expressed in cinema, in two key ways: Firstly, the most significant feature of communism from the perspective of the Thai Right is as "threat" to the nation, defined in Irvine's anthropological study of the period as "a bounded entity in danger of destabilization." In order to convey this sense of menace most poignantly, *Nak phaen-din* draws on popular understandings of that which is menacing, which, somewhat confusingly, often includes threats that are the antithesis of actual communist belief and practice. In *Nak phaen-din*, therefore, the communist villains are, in fact, depicted as well-heeled and sinister capitalists with a penchant for the various overindulgences they are at liberty to experience amid the bright lights of the city. In this they differ little, if at all, from the villains of socially conscious leftist literature and film of the same period. Nevertheless, these characters are clearly emblematic of treachery and read by popular cinema-going audiences as a threat to that which is widely understood by them as essential to "Thainess." For those sympathetic to the ideology of *Nak phaen-din* and its trumpeting of the Village Scout movement, that core national identity is conveyed through a sense of loyalty to Nation, Religion, and King, with a particular emphasis on King.

Concomitant with this is the second aspect of Thai anti-communist paranoia this paper has sought to identify, namely, a merging between the peril posed by the Left and an older and persistent threat posed by the Chinese that figures in popular cultural belief and plays out in filmmaking practice. At both the political and the cinematic levels, fear of the "Red Peril" provides only a thin veneer over a persistent and historical mistrust of the Chinese as "other" to the construction of Thai national identity. *Insi thong* reveals in several ways anxieties that identify Beijing as a counter to Thailand's constitutional monarchy, raising the specter (quite literally through the characterization of Ba Khin) of the return of exiled former statesman Pridi Panomyong and the threat of republicanism he was imagined to have posed. Through recourse and allusion to the popular symbols of the "Yellow Peril," far more than to the emblems of hard-line communism, *Insi thong* invokes Fu Manchu as the demon to be slain by Batman-cum-James Bond.

These expressions of cultural adaptation and reinvention should not come as a surprise: they are neither new nor unique to Thailand. Popular cultural references are frequently syncretic in nature, making them ripe for ideological (mis)representation. Amidst this sea of "free floating signifiers," Thai cinema forged its own articulations of the Cold War experience.

FESTIVAL POLITICS: SINGAPORE'S 1963 SOUTH-EAST ASIA CULTURAL FESTIVAL¹

Jennifer Lindsay

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between culture and the Cold War is a broad topic that has been approached in various ways. In their useful "stocktaking" of the study of Cold War cultural history, Patrick Major and Rana Mitter summarize a major difference in definition separating recent writing on this broad topic, namely between the "cultural cold war" and "cold war culture." Writing on the former, they say, focuses more on "cultural diplomacy between the blocs, and within them, in areas outside what is ostensibly the direct state and governmental ambit, whether in the field of high culture (literature, the arts, music) or popular culture (television, pop and rock music, films)." The latter "has a more anthropological sense, relating to the less specific but wider-ranging concept that everyday social existence may have been shaped by the global dynamics of the cold war."²

No matter which way one looks at it, the relationship between culture and the Cold War is central to any understanding of the period. One need think only of the prominence given to culture in Cold War ideologies, whether it be the role for culture in diplomacy (winning hearts and minds for "freedom" or for "social justice"), in popular edification (inculcating socialist ideals), or in popular expression (facilitating the voice of the People). (I am not using "popular" here in the Major/Mitter sense noted above, of mediated, commercial culture—not a particularly useful distinction in this context—but rather I refer to culture for, or of, the people, which included literature, the arts, music, and film.) Furthermore, the

¹ The Festival was named "The First South-East Asia Cultural Festival." I maintain the hyphenated "South-East" when referring to the festival; otherwise, I use the common "Southeast Asia." Clearly, organizers expected that there would be ongoing festivals. At a meeting at the end of the festival, Thai officials proposed to host the second one. However, since the region was embroiled in conflict from 1963, no subsequent festival was held. Henceforth, I omit the "First" in my references to the festival.

² Patrick Major and Rana Mitter, "Culture," in *Palgrave Advances in Cold War History*, ed. Saki R. Dockrill and Geraint Hughes (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 240–41.