

Action Heroes and Representations of Masculinity

Natawan Wongchalard, Chiang Mai University, Thailand

The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper contextualizes a cultural construction of hegemonic masculinity and discusses ways in which Thai action film heroes in Historical and Muay Thai films are represented. Traditionally, the quality of *nakleng* is desirable for Thai action heroes along with having mastery in a particular skill. In a moral realm, the idea of gratitude or *kwarm katanyu*, in Thai, is prioritized and highly regarded to be an inevitable requisite for good men, which includes an action hero. Such a sense of gratitude extends to one's ideological obligation to his motherland or *matuphoom*, which is often thematically portrayed in Muay Thai and Historical films through the struggle of the hero. Based on the reading of the two exemplary films, *Ong Bak* (Muay Thai Warrior 2003, dir. Prachya Pinkaew) and *The Legend of King Naresuan (Part 5): The Elephant Duel* (2014, dir. Chatri Chalermlukol), the different social backgrounds of the two heroes, their autonomy, and lack can be explained in relation to a discourse of Buddhist spirituality. In addition, the ways in which the two heroes are differently depicted is a cinematic device with the aid of which, in addition to the observance of filmic verisimilitude, the representations are designed to cater to segmented subject/citizen audiences. In psychoanalytic terms, each hero from the two films is similarly made to acquire autonomy and experience lack in different realms of the symbolic order.

Keywords: hegemonic masculinity, nakleng, gratitude, kwarm katanyu, autonomy, lack

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Thai action heroes are often linked to commonly accepted ideas of nationalism and masculinity. The possession of qualities associated with being a “good man” according to the general Thai perception of masculinity, or hegemonic masculinity, is also of importance. This is especially the case in action films of the post-1997 era in which the art of traditional Thai self-defence, Muay Thai, was incorporated into the representation of Thai masculinity, allegorically projecting the country to be even small, yet strong and unyielding. This paper will show firstly, how the concept of masculinity is tied to and shaped by national ideology and politics at a particular conjuncture and secondly, how the notion of masculinity, when class differences of heroes are taken into account, may well be perceived differently.

The context of Thai masculinity

Manas Kingchan (personal communication, October 1, 2012), a film archivist, has written in one of his unpublished articles on early Thai action cinema that since the early action film genre emerged out of melodrama, which is *kroprot* or of mixed genre convention, identification of a film as to whether it belongs to the action genre or not was often done by reference to its title, in addition to its narrative. That is to say the titles of early action films are relevant to their generic categorization. Noteworthy, the terms addressing the hero, as shown in the film title, are also indicative of the ideological type of action heroes of a particular epoch. Those terms —*nakleng*, *supap burut* and *singh*¹ or *suea*² —, which roughly connote mixed characteristics of a ruffianish, a gentlemanly and a brave (and powerful) hero, respectively, recurrently appeared in several action films’ titles. To give some examples of films in which Mitr Chaibuncha, who is dubbed as a legendary action hero had acted in: *Chao Nakleng* (1959, dir. Sek Dusit), *Singh Diew* (1962, dir. Sor Asananchinda), *Singh La Singh* (1964, dir. Neramit), *Supap Burut Nakleng* (1965, dir. Sor Asanachinda). The last mentioned film is of particular interest as its title seemingly reflects a kind of paradoxical hero who possesses both gentlemanly (*supap burut*) and ruffianish (*nakleng*) qualities. The normalization of these terms of reference to the action film hero is critically related to the socio-political context of the period. Years under military dictatorship, from the 1958 coup to the 1973 student’s movement, not only led to the production of popular ‘escapist’ movies which were enjoyed by wide audiences, they also led to the formulation of a type of action hero who is brave, ready to act/ fight (*singh/ suea*) and chivalric (*supap burut*) or as being equivalently dubbed in Thai as *nakleng* as described above. Interesting enough, it can also be said that the term *nakleng* is indeed a broadly cultural conception under which *supapburut* (the gentleman) and *singh/ suea* (the brave) are generically subsumed. At one point, the term *nakleng* itself conveyed a negative connotation as it referred to someone (most likely a man) who has a tendency to pick fight or gets himself into a certain (troubled) confrontation. Hence, the manifestation of the *nakleng* quality in the film hero is similarly reflected in films bearing these respective terms in their titles: *nakleng*, *supap burut*, *singh* or *suea*.

¹ The word’s literal meaning is *lion* but this term can also refer to a man who is brave and takes pride in his dignity.

² The word’s literal meaning is *tiger* and it shares a similar connotation with *singh*.

The connection between being nakleng and masculinity involves different historical origins but one, which is frequently referenced, is pertinent to the leadership of General Sarit Thanarat who served as prime minister between 1958 and 1963. Sarit is said to personify the epitome of nakleng (Keyes, 1987, Aewsriwong, 2011), who may well be defined as one who is:

[A] person who was not afraid to take risks, a person who lived dangerously, [who was] kind to his friends but cruel to his enemies, a compassionate person, a gambler, a heavy drinker, and a lady killer. In short, the kind of person who represented one central model of Thai masculinity (Thak Chaloemtiarana cited in Keyes, 1987, p. 80-81).

During Sarit's term in office, martial law was implemented throughout, his decisive policy –making approach, severe measures in suppressing communist rebellion and the executions of men charged with arson have earned him notoriety (Keyes, 1987, p. 81). The number of mistresses he had, coupled with his popularly quoted words like “[t]he whole responsibility is mine” when exercising political suppression further accentuated his nakleng image. Given such a dictatorial approach in governing the people, Sarit is still publicly remembered for his ability to crack down on crimes and foster countrywide development, including the implementation of the first social and economic development plan. Whether we like it or not, Sarit's nakleng image found its resonance in the action film heroes of his period. Rome Rittikrai (Mitr Chaibancha), a masked hero in *Chao Nakleng* (1959), for instance, was depicted as a Zorro style masked hero whose mission was to help the helpless and defenceless out of their troubles. However, it remains a moot question here as to whether the nakleng demeanor has been well delivered or not.

The character of ‘nakleng’ as manifested in the former prime minister, Sarit Thanarat has a few social implications worth mentioning here. First and foremost is that, as the notion of being nakleng connotes how one relates to others in terms of leadership, it implies that a Thai action hero is unlikely to be a solitary individual who accomplishes the mission on his own. He has to mobilize assistance from others by employing his social skills in addition to certain intrinsic qualities. For this, there emerged a stock character of a comedian who acts as the main mobilizer for the hero. In addition to the comedian, other minor characters such as villagers and government officials are also important for the hero's mission particularly in films presenting the right ideology (Sungsri, 2004, p. 278-279). Another implication is that the good leadership quality to which the nakleng character is attached requires that the hero must be verbally communicative; hence, the action hero is supposed to be a well-educated man. Even though he should not be boastful, he must be able to communicate effectively when necessary. For this reason, in my opinion, Tony Jaa in all of his action films is deprived of the nakleng quality. He may possess certain requirements such as bravery, humility and honesty which are pronounced in his characterization as represented in *Ong Bak* (2003) and *Tom Yum Goong* (2005). Nevertheless, his inability to articulate may well prevent him from getting access to the domain of leadership which is putatively an ideal kind of Thai masculinity. The depiction of Naresuan (Wanchana Sawasdi) in all sequels of the movie *The Legend of King Naresuan*, on the contrary, highlights the leadership quality of Naresuan which encompasses the nakleng demeanor as well. Released at different times after 1997, the depiction of the two outstanding action heroes differ markedly from one another. This is not only to say

that such differences are intentional and vital for the cultural verisimilitude of each film which tells stories of two men from totally different backgrounds: the lowly common man for Tony Jaa and the high born king for Wanchana Sawasdi. More importantly, there are some cultural and political connections that deserve our attention, which are to be discussed. In addition, a transgender hero, Nong Toom in *Beautiful Boxer* (2003) further indicates that the idea of masculinity itself is not a closed and rigid category but rather an open and contentious one.

Nong Toom's alternative sexuality and Tony Jaa's inability to articulate may well put the relation of masculinity vis-à-vis working class men, a category to which both heroes belong, in the spotlight. While I have no intention of bringing class dichotomy to the forefront, it is worth noting that within the same patriarchal structure, masculinity is allowed to operate differently in different social settings. The working class action heroes are allowed to be less "phallographic" (Mansfield, 2000, p. 70), to use a symbolic term, than those of the middle-class. Different expectations of masculinity can be observed through a comparison of the characterization of Muay Thai action heroes, namely, Tony Jaa (*Ong Bak* trilogy and two parts of *Tom Yum Goong*) and Asanee Suwan (*Beautiful Boxer*) with the hero of Historical epic films, *The Legend of King Naresuan*, (1,2,3,4,5,6), Wanchana Sawasdi. The main focus of the following discussion will be on Tony Jaa and Wanchana who represent notions of hegemonic masculinity although other heroes will also be mentioned.

The act of gratitude/ kwarm katanyu

The traditional theme of action films is often related to maintaining the status quo of national ideology, particularly as it concerns the three institutions including the nation, the Buddhist religion and the monarch as Sungsi (2004) has explicated in her research. As such it renders the triumph of the good (the nation) over the bad (the other) pivotal to the film narrative's resolution. Apart from the ideological victory of the nation over the political other, action heroes are also depicted to be morally superior to the other. This is consciously done, narratively and cinematically, to support the Buddhist belief in morality. The act of gratitude (*kwarm katanyu*) is just one, among other Buddhist values, that is considered an essential quality of a good man. It is thus a prerequisite, a vital code of conduct to be strictly observed for all heroes regardless of their social background. Critically, the economic breakdown in 1997 which caused waves of aftershocks years later has somehow brought *kwarm katanyu* to the fore. One reason may be that, it is the value pertinent to the discourse of communitarianism and the prevailing sense of nationalism that was resurgent after the recession, and was also taken as a tool, ideologically and pragmatically, to deal with the country's failed economy and the masses' weakened psychology. Social stress resulting from the crisis had effects on both the rural poor and the urban middle-class alike, albeit differently. However, according to Atinc and Walton (1998), the plight of the poor was more severe due to many relevant factors including a decreasing labour demand, rising commodity prices, social services being cut along with failed crop cultivation as a consequence of drought in some areas (Atinc & Walton, 1998, p. 3). It is said that economic growth and overall welfare gains that took place in East Asian countries before the crisis proved inadequate in preparing governments for possible breakdowns.

The idea of communitarianism, which is tied to the king's concept of self-sufficient economy, primarily concerns the invocation of 'the roots' or 'the rootedness' of

identity as well as *Khon Thai* (being Thai) *agency*. The idea calls for one's enactment on personal transformation at a fundamental level based on the practice of Buddhist beliefs in moderation, immunization and pragmatism and the application of the economy or philosophy of self-sufficiency. This was to be followed in order that one or the family can successfully get through the difficult time mentally and materially. Given what is said, the process of finding one's own roots resonates differently in two different classes. While the working class and rural subaltern were oriented towards communitarianism, Buddhist values and self-sufficiency, which basically refers to integrative, sustainable farming for household living and living in harmony with a community, the middle-class and the upper class, on the other hand, were ideologically driven to embrace practices of nationalism and protectionism. This is understandable for a small country that has taken pride in its long history of non-colonization. The economic crisis, which resulted in large scale lay-offs among office workers and closure of financial institutions and companies, may be relatively less of a fear than the loss of sovereignty in the sense that the nation had to subject itself to many regulations imposed by the IMF. In the political landscape, critically what emerged were New Social Movements (NSM), led by key figures from different social sectors including those of the grassroots level and state enterprises such as the labor union, the assembly of the poor, social activities groups³ and others. Dismayed by the IMF imposition concerning economic restructuring regulations on the government, their main commonly shared agenda was to effect a paradigm shift in the direction of economic development away from being internationally dependent and uncritically globalized towards greater self-reliance. This was practiced under the cooperative discourses underpinning the movement including an economy of self-sufficiency, sustainable agriculture, community welfare, community business and Thai wisdom (Kitirianglarp & Hewison, 2009). Notably, such movements did not only harness a fair share of political power, particularly when they aligned with the nationalist group which had primarily fought for the monarch's challenged sovereignty and against the supremacy of a political party like Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party. They had also raised public awareness of political issues, ushering political changes and eventually, culminated in the military coup on 19 September, 2006.

To return to the period surrounding the economic crisis, on the cinematic front, the sensational reception of three local films *Daeng Bailey and the Young Gangsters* (1997), *Bang Rajan* (2000) and *Nang Nak* (2002), all of which were released at the time of the recession testified to the return of the nation. While *Daeng Bailey* presented young notorious gangsters against the backdrop of retro Thailand, *Bang Rajan* invoked patriotism through the ancient battle between Thailand and Burma. Similarly, *Nang Nak*'s reimagining of Thailand's past within the social and spiritual context of the Thai middle-class set the tone for the "heritage films" to follow (Ingawani, 2006). To return to the notion of *kwarm katanyu* or gratitude as aforementioned, the interesting question is how actually it is embraced and conveyed by heroes of the two classes. Fundamentally, the concept of *kwarm katanyu* is originally derived from the personal relations that exist between parents and children,

³ Nevertheless, the movements were viewed as problematic particularly when their vision on political ideology was concerned. See Kitirianglarp and Hewison, "Botwiphak karnmuang phak prachachon nai prathet thai: Khor cham gut khong naew wikror lae yuttasart karnmuang baeb khabuankarn khlaen wai thang sang khom roopbaeb mai [Critique of "People's Politics" in Thailand: Limitations of analysis and strategic politics of "New Social Movements"]", in *Fadiewkan* (2 April-June 2009: 120-55).

masters and students or givers and takers. To be regarded as a *katanyu* person, one is required to return someone else's favor when it is possible to do so. Between the parents and their male child, the best act of *kwarm katanyu* the latter can do toward his parents is to be ordained as a monk. Becoming a monk even for a short period of time is considered important for Buddhist men since it is the opportunity for spiritual purification and the learning of dhamma. This is to say, ordination allows Thai men to perfect their socially required masculine duty. *Daeng Bailey and the Young Gangsters*, the film that set the trend of the New Thai Cinema, has two sequences that present the ordination ceremony of the hero, *Daeng*, both of which are interrupted by his rival gang. The first ordination takes place at the beginning of the film, while his head is being shaved and the second one occurs toward the end in which he is sitting on an elephant, while the joyful procession is ongoing. Suddenly a gunshot is heard and the lotuses, symbolizing purity, fall to the ground. The crowd screams and is dispersed bringing the ceremony to a halt. The failed attempts to be ordained as a novice monk prevent the hero, who later becomes a formidable gang leader, from performing the honorable act of paying gratitude to his mother. Both *Daeng* and his mother, a prostitute whose most cherished wish is to see her son being ordained as a monk, are forever confined to the realm of *bhab* or sins. Similarly, the transgendered hero in *Beautiful Boxer*, Nong Toom, is ordained to be a novice when he is very young. Once he is caught applying a lipstick, Nong Toom has to confide to his novice friend how he desires to have a beautiful feminine body. Nong Toom's revelation is objected to by the fellow novice he is speaking to who warns him that thoughts such as those would result in a karmic consequence to his parents. Here, it reflects another dimension of the concept of ordination in that it is merely a path to merit making that one man can give to himself and his parents. Yet, it is not something that would justify every conduct of an ordained man. In addition to consideration of the individual level, the concept of *kwarm katanyu* is also deployed on a collective level. As being integrative into the communitarian and nationalist discourses in the wake of the economic crisis, it was required that such awareness was to be extended to one's grateful feeling for his native land. Within such discourses, one was obliged to pay gratitude to his *matupoom* or motherland in whatever ways possible.⁴ Sometimes such an act is commonly referred to as *kwarm katanyu tor phandin*, meaning the act of paying gratitude to the land.

The concept of gratitude to the land is obviously manifested in *Ong Bak*, *Tom Yum Goong* and *The Legend of King Naresuan*, albeit in varying degrees. In both *Ong Bak* and *Tom Yum Goong*, Tony Jaa, who plays a bumpkinish hero, is determined to take back what has been stolen from his community, namely, the head of a Buddha statue in *Ong Bak* and two elephants (mother and baby elephants) in *Tom Yum Goong*. The significance of the stolen items is not only tied to their spiritual and material value for the individual hero, but they are also bound to certain collective cultural roots, which are part and parcel of the local history of the community. In the prequels of *Ong Bak*, namely *Ong Bak 2* and *Ong Bak 3*, the legend of *Ong Bak*, the Buddha statue which is

⁴ Gratitude to the mother's land is a broad concept which, in addition to communitarian way of living, involves conservation of natural resources and cultivation of civic consciousness and volunteer spirit. Discourses of both gratitude and gratitude to the motherland were presented and practiced via various channels such as songs, poems, monk's sermons, and schools' and the army's projects. See for example, a clip titled "katanyu tor phandin", 25 February 2014, in *Hmong Hub: Music video online*. Date Accessed: 20 March, 2015 <<http://www.lajsiab.com/MnQ3ZlZlZ2xsTGcx>>.

regarded by the village people to be the god of protection and cultivation, is told. Likewise, the elephant in *Tom Yum Goong* is also traced back to the career of the hero's ancestors — royal soldiers called 'Jaturangkabath' whose duty is to protect the king's battle elephant, and it is also the hero's childhood dream to become a Jaturangkanath soldier. Even though within a modern context, such an occupation is non-existential, the film implicitly links the past to the present, the traditional to the modern so that the hero's agency and communitarianism can be visibly observed. A connection to one's roots is used to allegorize the moral obligation of the hero (as representative of the people) to his native land. In *Ong Bak*, after the hero has succeeded in bringing back the stolen head of Ong Bak, he is ordained as part of the village's festival. The gratitude he has for his native land is impeccably paid and it is ceremonially recognized. The ordination ceremony not only functions as a way of celebrating the recovery of the stolen item, but serves as an indication of the completion of the paid gratitude. Psychoanalytically speaking, it helps relegate the hero's lack (inarticulacy) to the realm of spirituality, in which the mastery of leadership is not recognized and he is bestowed with a sense power and privilege. More importantly, it is indicative of the village's prevailing sense of history and the collective future of communitarianism.

In *King Naresuan*, being a consciously patriotic film, King Naresuan is shown to have developed a strong connection to his native land ever since he was a young boy as a hostage of the Burmese King, Bayin Naung. Unlike Tony Jaa in *Ong Bak* and *Tom Yum Goong*, who was nominated by the village people to defend the communitarian way of life, Wanchana Sawasdi, who acted as King Naresuan is the nominee of the nation. He is thus prefigured to be the ideal nationalist hero who is qualified to lead, rule and perform. He is the sum of the nakleng quality as was aspired to by the former premier Sarit Thanarat. However, it is his image as a brave, virtuous warrior and his devotion to protecting the people and to strengthen national sovereignty that places him in a superior position, rather than his royal status alone. Naresuan's practice of monogamy, in contrast to ancient Thai kings, past rulers and many Thai men of the present time, suggests his approach to modernity, highlighting an ideal feature of masculinity and the nation alike. The first episode of *King Naresuan*, or officially titled *The Legend of King Naresuan: Hostage of Hongsawadi*, was released in January 2007 under the newly set-up post-coup interim government. In this episode, Naresuan is seen as a young boy, a hostage to Hongsawadi who is already inculcated with a strong sense of being Siamese. Given his tender age and monkhood status, he is preoccupied with thoughts of a subservient Ayodhaya, his homeland. The rooster fighting sequences in which the lost rooster of Siam (or Ayodhaya, supposedly belongs to the Siamese hostage) is made to fight against the Burmese rooster illuminates his intentions of fighting for freedom. Against the Buddhist's precept of refraining oneself from causing harm and violence, once young Naresuan finds out about the origin of the rooster, he is not reluctant to bring it to the fighting ring. "I doubt the Siamese rooster would ever yield to the Burmese one", he said before taking the rooster to the ring. The first rooster fight ends with the victory of the Siamese side leading to further fights. Even though Naresuan is punished by the senior monk for his misconduct, what keeps resonating in his mind is the voice of the Burmese rooster house's owner saying "the fight must happen before the freedom is gained". As such, it has led him to bring the rooster to another fight against the one that belongs to Mang Sam Kiet, or Bayin Naung's nephew. Surprisingly, this time he is supported by the senior monk, which suggests a certain legitimacy of moral intervention, upon the

request that the former must make this rooster fight the final one. Just before the fight begins, upon hearing Mang Sam Kiet's intimidating and insulting words, dignifiedly, Naresuan responds "given its underdog position, my fighting rooster is Siamese which never recedes from its rival". After the first round, the Siamese rooster appears to be inferior and defeated, thus the young prince speaks to the rooster:

If the Siamese blood within you remains strong, you must never give in. Rather, you shall make it evident to the Burmese that no one can frighten the Siamese. You will now bring me victory.

The sequences and quote elucidated above reveal a few implications that emerge from within and outside the film narrative. The first implication is that the rooster fight is an analogy of Naresuan's own fate. Like himself, the rooster is a Siamese hostage which is destined to fight for its freedom. The fight itself cannot be a one-off competition but which will take place many times before true victory is achieved. The invocation of Siamese blood within the fighting rooster is comparable to both the individual (Naresuan himself) and collective invocation of the public audience who are decentered by the political turmoil happened prior to and at the time of the film's release. The ousted Mr. Thaksin, who was prime minister then, was exposed as having engaged in cases of law amending, tax evading and questionable business dealing that while benefiting his family's businesses, sabotaged national interests.⁵ The emergence of Naresuan whose primary concern is the nation's interests, albeit at certain points through territorial expansion and suppression of hostile states as portrayed cinematically, is much appreciated by the middle-class nationalists who feel betrayed by Thaksin and his party. Naresuan's defence for the state's territory, his victorious battle that sets Ayodhya free from the Burmese Hongsawadi bondage rightly entitles him to the badge of the man who is *katanyu tor phandin* or the man who has repaid a debt of gratitude to his motherland. On a sub-textual level, it also denotes the legitimization of the coup, or more specifically the military leader, that had actually occurred twice in September 2006 and May 2014 when *Naresuan 1* and *Naresuan 5* were released respectively. In terms of leadership masculinity, the image of the latest coup leader, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, who is the current premier, is a case in point here. He is indeed a popular personality among the middle-class nationalists due to his nakleng quality: proactive, decisive, straightforward, morally conscious, yet willing to negotiate.⁶ When such traits are combined with his display of loyalty to the throne and "everything I do, I do it for the country" approach, just like King Naresuan's portrayal on screen, he has probably become one of the most powerful military leaders in the recent history of Thai national politics.

⁵ There is a large amount of existing materials written about Thaksin's financial irregularities and allegations. One of the most notorious is perhaps his US\$1.9 billion Shin Corp and Singaporean-owned Temasek Holdings transaction. For other charges and more details, see Kaewsan Atipothi, "The Return of Thaksin Regime", August 2011, in *Isra News Agency*. Date Accessed 22 April 2015 <www.isranews.org> and also "Check Lists of Thaksin's Inescapable Allegations", 25 November, 2014, in *Isra News Agency*. Date Accessed: 22 April 2015 <<http://www.isranews.org/58-isranews/isranews-scoop/4390>>.

⁶ Nevertheless, he is also despised by the red shirts and liberal groups who, other than their anti-coup ideology, have criticized his ruthlessness on handling the anti-coup protests, the use of martial laws and lately the implementation of article 44 in place of martial law and his tough restrictive stance regarding the press.



Young Naresuan talking to his Siamese rooster

Autonomy and lack

Given different representations of masculinist roles between the middle-class hero and the working class or subaltern individual, there is no conflict of duality between the two. As a matter of fact, the different social classes of the nation should not be seen as being separated by a fixed, rigid divide that causes a great social disparity, rather if the history of feudal cultural legacy is considered, the class relations are not completely free from their origins in kinship relations, which implies that there is a degree of amicable communication and negotiation between the classes. As such, the differing images of the working class hero and the middle-class one do not reflect a social or class conflict. Rather, they are related to the segmentation of targeted film audiences (or say, the masses, multiplex middle-class or cinephiles), all of which look at things differently in their imagining of the nation. Whether it is located in the present or in a historical setting, the depiction of both Tony Jaa as a rural hero and Wanchana as a national hero can be subsumed within the discourse of Buddhist values and spirituality. It is the sphere accessible for identification to all subjects/citizens. The mastery of Naresuan in the art of war and leadership is important to his autonomy. The same is also applied to Tony Jaa's Muay Thai skills. Being situated within the multiplex's middle-class audiences, King Naresuan is there to be gazed upon and recognized as *the phallus*, the symbol of totality in the political, symbolic order. Unlike the subaltern hero, Tony Jaa, who is ostracized for his sheer lack of voice⁷, King Naresuan is endowed with leadership qualities that make him the father of the nation. Nevertheless, his phallic power is neither eternal nor transcendent. According

⁷ The character of Kham in this film, *The Legend of King Naresuan: The Elephant Duel*, is a reference to Kham as played by Tony Jaa in *Tom Yum Goong*. Here Kham, as depicted in this film, is the care-taker of Naresuan's battle elephant, Phra Chaiyanupap. Interestingly, he is portrayed as a dumb, primitive figure whose extraordinary ability of taming and communicating with the wild beast is an accidental discovery.

to Silverman (1992, cited in Chaudhuri, 2006, p. 107), no one can actually possess the phallus or an unattainable wholeness due to universal castration. Throughout King Naresuan's adult life, he is enmeshed in wars with rival states. Any sign of uprising or lack of cooperation from even a small vassal state is promptly translated into 'an act of disloyalty', thus urging him to march out with his army to suppress the resistance. This evidently reflects his ever-present fear of losing the grip of total power. The continual warfare with which Naresuan is engaged, thus, signifies his need for the confirmation of his masculinity, given his awareness of the transient nature of victory. In the same way, Tony Jaa in *Ong Bak*, seeks refuge in the religious domain where his masculine power is fulfilled. For King Naresuan, his masculine power depends on the actions that occur here and now in the material world, or rather, the symbolic world. His every victory in the battle works to conceal his lack, securing the illusion of perfect masculinity. Nevertheless, due to every man's inevitable subjection to "universal castration" as Silverman has rightly claimed, the King's lack was eventually manifested in the film's finale, *Naresuan 6 (The Legend of King Naresuan: The Fall of Hongsawadi, 2015)* when he is found to be fatally ill. Here, he is bed-ridden due to a malarial fever that he caught during his military forays. This physical fall lends him the final revelation in which death, one form of sufferings according to Buddhist philosophy, is endorsed. In one sequence toward the film's ending, he said to his wife Maneechan, "I may have won so many battles, but I'm being defeated by the god of death". Such a revelation as is shown here is not merely intended to affirm the existence of the universally inevitable lack, which literally suggests one's loss of control over his own fate. Rather, it sanctions the superiority of the religious/ Buddhist spiritual order to that of the symbolic one.

Conclusion

The somewhat different images of masculinity presented by the two heroes, does not mean that the one who may appear to belong to the modern sphere, in this case, Naresuan, given his nakleng, leadership quality and rational outlook, is morally or politically superior to a subaltern hero like Tony Jaa. To repeat what I previously mentioned, each hero is projected to cater to different segments of the masses. The ordination ceremony of the hero in *Ong Bak* in which the hero is mounted onto the elephant may well be comparable to Naresuan being seated on the throne in the accession ceremony. Each of the heroes is made the object of divinity witnessed by each respective subject/citizen audiences. At the same time, each hero is made to catch a glimpse of his totality and completion in different spheres of power.

References

Aewsriwong, N. (2011, February 18). Nakleng lae chaopo lae nakleng tai [Nakleng and godfather and Southern nakleng]. *Matichon Weekly Online* 31 (1592), 18.

Atinc, M. T. and Michael W. (March 1998). Responding to the global financial crisis: Social consequences of the East Asian financial crisis. An extended version of the report originally prepared for the Asia Development Forum in March 1998 in Manila. The World Bank Group. Retrieved from <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/1998/12/5532918/responding-global-financial-crisis-social-consequences-east-asian-financial-crisis>

Atipothi, K. (2011, August 15). Karn klap ma khong rabob Thaksin [The return of the Thaksin's regime]. *Thai Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.m.ryt9.com/s/tpd/1212981>

Chaudhuri, S. (2006). *Feminist film theorists*. London and New York: Routledge.

Ingawanij, A. (2007). Nang Nak: Thai bourgeois heritage cinema. *Taylor Francis Online Studies*, 8(2), 180-193. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14649370701295599>

Keyes, C. F. (1987). *Thailand: Buddhist kingdom as modern nation-state*. Boulder and London: Westview Press.

Kitirianglarp, K. and Kevin H. (2009, April-June 2). Botwiphak karnmuang phak prachachon nai prathet thai: Khor cham gut khong naew wikror lae yuttasart karnmuang baeb khabuankarn khlaen wai thang sangkhom roopbaeb mai [A Critique of "People's Politics" in Thailand: Limitations of analysis and strategic politics of "New Social Movements"]. *Fadiewkan*. 120-155.

Mansfield, N. (2000). *Subjectivity: Theories of the self from Freud to Haraway*. New South Wales: Allen & Unwin.

Sungsri, P. (2004). *Thai cinema as national cinema: An evaluative history*. (Doctoral Dissertation). Murdoch University, Perth, Australia. Retrieved from <http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/354/2/02Whole.pdf>

News articles from webpages with no author

Check lists of Thaksin's inescapable allegations. (2014, November 25). *Isra News Agency*. Retrieved from <http://www.isranews.org/58-isranews/isranews-scoop/4390>

Katanyu tor phandin [Gratitude to the land]. (2014, February 25). *Hmong Hub: Music video online*. Retrieved from <http://www.lajsiab.com/MnQ3ZlZlZ2xsTGcx>

Image source

CMV Media. (2014, April 25). Retrieved from <http://www.cmvmedia.com/talk/viewcomment.php?tid=182&cat=>

Contact email: garamchay@gmail.com