

Ideology & videos - The Royal Anthem: Shaping Thai political views through cinemas nationwide

Sunday 8 January 2017, by [Kornkritch Somjittranukit](#) (Date first published: 22 November 2016).

Throughout modern Thailand's history, Royal Anthem videos have played a significant role in transforming the foundations of royal legitimacy. While the palace previously emphasised the King's commitment to his duties as 'Father of the Land', anthem videos now push the Thai people's duty to love the monarchy as 'good children'.

On 14 November 2016, the Television Pool of Thailand released a new official video for Thailand's Royal Anthem. According to video director Chatrichalerm Yukol, the video will now be played before movie screenings in cinemas nationwide.

The latest version of the Royal Anthem music video - For the videos, look at the original article.

Thai cinema-goers will know well the pre-movie tradition of standing and paying respect to the King while the Royal Anthem plays. This ritual, however, is not a stagnant process. Through Thailand's history, the videos have changed many times to shape the public's political ideology. Different political contexts have given rise to different videos.

The new video marks the last version of the Royal Anthem released under King Rama IX, since Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn is expected to take the throne on 1 December. The nine-minute long video opens with the New Year address that the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej delivered on 31 December 1976, the year of the 6 October Massacre. The last two minutes feature footage from the mass singing of the anthem by over 50,000 Thais at the late King's funeral on 22 October.

*We, servants of His great Majesty,
prostrate our heart and head,
to pay respect to the ruler, whose merits are boundless,
our glorious sovereign,
the greatest of Siam,
with great and lasting honor,
(We are) secure and peaceful because of your royal rule,
the result of royal protection
(is) people in happiness and in peace,
May it be that
whatever you will,
be done
according to the hopes of your great heart
as we wish (you) victory, hurrah!*

This is an unofficial translation of the Royal Anthem provided by Wikipedia. The song was first

composed in the reign of King Rama V and was used as a national anthem during King Rama V's reign. The anthem entered cinemas in 1935 when the then government ordered cinemas nationwide to play the anthem after each show.

In the very first days, the song was played live by traditional bands (*piphat*) since most movies at that time were silent. Only when technology allowed films with sound were videos of the anthem produced. Between 1980 and 1994, music videos merely consisted of the late King Bhumibol's portrait combined with several historical sites such as the Democracy Monument, the Grand Palace and Government House.

The very first version of the Royal Anthem music video – For the videos, look at the original article.

Anthem videos of this era aimed at strengthening the ideology of “Nation, Religion, King”. This ideology was the main discourse employed by the Thai state during the Cold War when it was fighting the Communist Party which was active in rural areas. One of the most popular ways to watch films at that time was “*nang klang plaeng*,” where caravans travelled across the country and showed movies in temporary cinemas. Wherever the caravans went, the state ideology was proliferated through the Royal Anthem video.

In this period, each cinema chain created its own video so there were many versions. Yet despite the variety, the videos resembled each other with the late King's portrait and footage of him at work — visiting rural villagers, inspecting crops and so on. The late King's image was changing from that of a refined monarch to a hard-working “Father” who travelled the country to improve the wellbeing of his “children”. The videos in this era contained strong depictions of “the King of Development”.

In the 1990s, cinema complexes, also known as cineplexes, emerged in Thailand. With better film technology and visuals and sound quality, cineplexes wiped out small-to-medium cinemas. The only two chains to survive today are Major Cineplex and SF Cinema, whose Royal Anthem videos have come to dominate.

In this era, computer graphics technology was also introduced into the movie industry and embellished Royal Anthem videos. The vibrant depictions of the King used various graphic effects such as rain, jigsaws and paint. Each video had its own theme and symbolism.

The “Rain” version symbolises the King as rain nourishing a land suffering drought – For the videos, look at the original article.

The mid-1990s coincided with the decline of the late King's health which prevented him from visiting people in rural areas as he did earlier. Younger generations had fewer opportunities to see his daily missions on TV. But since cinemas became more affordable and popular among teenagers at that time, younger generations could still be presented with the late King's works through the Royal Anthem videos in cinemas.

Although huge technological differences mediated how the King was presented in the periods before and after 1994, the meaning stayed consistent — the greatness and devotion of King Bhumibol.

The “Jigsaws” version reflects the variety of the King's tasks] For the videos, look at the original article.

Over the last decade and a half, however, the message of the anthem videos has changed significantly. While the videos previously asked audience members only to watch and appreciate the King's greatness, they now demand people actively practice and perform in order to become “good children of the Father.”

After the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra and two coups in a decade, the legitimacy of the monarchy has been challenged in an unprecedented manner. According to Thongchai Winichakul's work on 'hyper-royalism', the ideology that the King is the Father of all Thai people cannot work properly anymore.

"Since [the 2006 coup], there has been abundant evidence not only of the palace's anti-democratic politics but also of the injustice inflicted upon Thaksin supporters and those who opposed the coups. Widespread disappointment turned into derision, then disillusion with the monarchy. The continuing suppressions of these people since the 2006 coup, especially the brutal killings in 2010, have intensified their bitterness and anger against injustice by the royalist state. The royalist spells that held sway over a massive number of ordinary Thais were broken."

Thongchai also documents rocketing dissent against the monarchy as political conflict continues.

"Although dissension vis-à-vis royalism is not new, the current wave — known among dissenters as the "Ta Sawang" phenomenon (literally cleared-eyes or brightened-eyes, i.e. disillusioned), is unlike earlier ones ... The earlier anti-monarchists were limited to the radicals while the current one is spread across various sectors of the population and regions ... The Ta Sawang survives by open politics and operates in the public sphere; it is not a clandestine operation like the anti-monarchy radicals of the past."

As disillusionment with the monarchy as the people's protector grows, Royal Anthem videos have rooted Thainess in a very basic requirement — a great love for the great King.

In recent videos, fewer images of the King's hardworking life are presented and have been replaced with images of people expressing their gratitude to the King. Some of them cry, prostrate themselves, wave the King's flag or raise the King's portraits over their heads.

By incorporating image after image of citizens expressing their devotion to the King, the videos frame not loving the King as bizarre and unthinkable. A good example is found in the videos produced by Major Cineplex group, in coordination with the Tourism Authority of Thailand. Instead of showing a series of the late King's portraits, this music video portrays people of different ages, careers, regions and religions participating in various ceremonies praising the late King. This presentation carries a very simple message: "everyone loves the King".

The Royal Anthem music video produced by Major Cineplex – For the videos, look at the original article.

As *lèse majesté* cases soar, the pro-monarchy ideology embedded in the anthem videos has correspondingly intensified. One proof is the video produced by SF Cinema group in 2013 when political conflict in Thailand was at its peak, with a coup taking place a year later.

While other videos usually begin with the message, "Please pay respect to His Majesty the King," this video begins with a dramatic message, "The country has faced various crises... But we remain strong and hopeful... We have the centre of the heart ... because we receive great morale... from the Father's blessing."

Each message is followed by pictures of ordinary people who have lost hope due to sickness or other causes, but who are made hopeful and happy by the King's teachings. Then the Royal Anthem is played.

In the original version of the most recent anthem video, after the anthem ends there is a 30-second recording of people shouting "Long live the King" at a royal birthday ceremony. After the video was launched, public questions immediately arose over when the audience should sit down — after the

anthem ends or after the “Long live the King” calls end. In response to that concern, SF Cinema later removed the 30-second ending.

Royal Anthem videos have evolved from telling the story of the King’s dedication to actively setting norms for love and devotion for all Thai people.

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* “The Royal Anthem: Shaping Thai political views through cinemas nationwide”. Prachatai. Tue, 22/11/2016 - 14:34:

<http://prachatai.org/english/node/6732>