

## CHAPTER I

### The Origins of the Movie Theater in Thailand

#### 1.1 Introduction

The motion picture made its Siamese debut on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1897, approximately two years after the medium made its first ever appearance – in the basement of Parisian café. Film was an instant success with Siamese audiences, a notion which was not lost on the enterprising eyes of the days' entrepreneurs. In its inception, the medium grew in popularity first among Siamese aristocracy. The first motion picture camera to enter the country was purchased by Prince Thongtham Thavalyavong, a brother of King Rama V, which he used to produce films of his own. The first permanent motion picture theater, however, was established not by a citizen of Siam, but by a Japanese immigrant who, judging from the success of motion pictures in his native Japan, wisely predicted the popularity that the medium would receive in the Southeast Asian kingdom. In 1905 Watanabe Tomoyori opened the country's first ever movie theater, "The Japanese Cinema," in Bangkok (Sukwong, 2001: 2). The moniker that came to embody the film medium in Siam during its first few years in the country incorporated Watanabe's national origin – "Nang Yipun," or "Japan Film" flourished.

From that point onwards competition among movie theater entrepreneurs in Siam (later Thailand) increased, growing up contemporaneously with the domestic film industry. Movie theaters began to open across Bangkok and soon into the provinces and outlying cities. By 1918 the Siam Cinema Company had established itself as the leading operator of movie theaters in the country, with over 20 theaters in Bangkok alone. The names of some of these theaters, such as the Hong Kong, the Singapore, the Penang and the Java, indicated the international, outward-looking orientation associated with film, a new technology representative of modern times (Sukwong, 2001: 19).

As the decades passed, Thailand had become home to more than 700 movie theaters, showing films from an array of countries across the globe, including those of its own domestic film industry. These stand-alone movie theaters became some of the most important spaces for social interaction in the country, at least on par with temples, schools and universities in terms of their impact on social norms of behavior. In the towns and communities that movie theaters opened, important changes in how people socialized occurred. No longer was the temple the center of social life, nor were *Ngiw* (Chinese opera) or *Likay* (Thai opera) theaters the primary places where people went for entertainment. In many instances, *Ngiw* and *Likay* theaters changed over to film within a few years after the medium had arrived, causing drastic declines in the popularity and study of those traditional performing art types. By the 1960's, the construction of a movie theater in Thailand would have been done with the intention of making an anchor establishment in a business community. Many commercial districts in both Bangkok and the provinces owed their economic viability to the crowd-drawing movie theaters which brought cash-bearing customers to nearby restaurants and shops. What's more, from the films that local moviegoers watched, tastes were shaped and styles impressed upon, influencing societal norms in aesthetically and conceptually.

Stand-alone movie theaters of the past constituted a form of public social space where local artistic talent could be cultivated, or find an outlet for performance. One manifestation of this took place in the form of theater-sponsored talent shows. After a film had finished, or during the intermission period of a double feature, the viewing public often remained in the theater to watch these talent shows, where local performing artists could test their skills in front of a live audience. Another form of talent-cultivation that occurred in movie theaters came directly from the movie screening process, in the form of live voice-over actors. Particularly in small town movie theaters and those in rural areas of the country, silent films were the popular choice of audiences as late as the 1970's. The lack of an audible film soundtrack or dialogue created opportunity for locals to develop their abilities for giving voices to the characters. These artists became known as "dubbers," and they frequently became extremely important entertainment figures in Thai film. For those at the top of the craft, audiences would come to the theater as much for the dubber as for the film itself

(Sukwong, 2001; 10). When the silent film era came to an end in the early 1970's, numerous dubbers parlayed the skills they acquired in the sound rooms of movie theaters over to other forms of performance art.

For many people in Thailand, particularly those from rural areas where educational opportunities might have been less available (and less essential), films that were screened in the local stand-alone movie theater may very well have been their first exposure to a foreign country, or even urban Thailand. This would have been a significant event for a person who lacked the means and opportunity to travel outside of their immediate environment, if not an intentional method of instilling modern, urban values on a largely rural population.

In sum, for Thailand, as well as much of the rest of the world, movie theaters have traditionally been social spaces endowed with attributes. For much of the last 100 years, a large proportion of cultural transmission has been conveyed within the confines of movie theaters. Creativity and ideas came along with the growth of movie theaters, as spectators often walked out of them with thoughts influenced by what they had just experienced. In the field of media studies, some have constructed links between movie theaters and the Foucaultian concept of Heterotopia. That is to say that the movie theater “offers a temporary escape from the regulation of social life – access to ‘deviant’ space” – while simultaneously denoting acceptance of the dominant ideology of consumption (Ravencroft, Chua and Wee, 2001: 215). In their most contemporary form, movie theaters in Thailand are the embodiment of that equation, as they have been reconfigured and largely relocated into the consumer havens of shopping malls. This spatial reconstitution has occurred in conjunction with broader socioeconomic changes across Thai society, changes which have come through continuous evolution and adaptation over time. The marriage of shopping mall and movie theater – the latter of which consist almost exclusively of multiple smaller auditoriums (known as multiplexes) – signify the development of high-consumerism and late-stage capitalism within Thai society. For many people, however, the ritualistic and social importance that going to the movie theater had in past eras is lost in the new multiplexes. Paired with the consumerist space of the shopping mall, the act of movie-going has edged closer to act of cultural consumption and away from the dialectical social characteristics that it has in the stand-alone form.

For example, where they were once built to cathedral standards, symbolic of the secular ritualism that they embodied, movie theaters in their new shopping mall domains necessarily are stripped of spirituality by being wedded to mass consumption. One can only imagine the outrage that the religiously pious would likely express if temples and churches arrived at the same juncture.

Through these metamorphoses, a much more homogenous and even anti-social space of spoon-fed consumerism have arisen, where a nationally chosen set of films has replaced the tastes and distinctions of the independent theater proprietor. Old movie theaters are just one of a myriad of public social spaces that have succumbed to these changes, despite the central importance that they once played in the lives of mass society.

## **1.2 Statement of the research problem and justification**

My interest in this topic came about through two reasons, both regarding the perception of Chiang Mai's old stand-alone movie theaters in the minds of locals. On the one hand, during conversations on the subject, Chiang Mai's old theaters were remembered fondly by people of all backgrounds and classes. Nostalgic sentiments shed light on a Chiang Mai of years past which seems to be increasingly hard to find in the Chiang Mai today. On the other hand, the three operating stand-alone theaters that still existed in Chiang Mai had developed a negative stigma among most residents of the city that I spoke to. It struck me as peculiar how something so highly regarded had become a pariah. Notwithstanding the vicissitudes of age and neglect, I wanted to understand what circumstances led to this change in attitude; a change which ultimately led to their disuse. Sadly, the remaining stand-alone theaters had been torn down before I was able to visit them personally, with new housing developments constructed in their place. I soon found that this trend was not limited to Chiang Mai, but that stand-alone theaters across the country were being destroyed and replaced by a variety of new structures. With that in mind, I decided to investigate this topic further.

This research is being undertaken to explore the social meanings that were given to Chiang Mai's stand-alone movie theaters by the people who used them. In the field of media studies, there has been a limited amount of research into the Thai film industry and the social influence of film on the general population. But research into the social significance of the movie theaters that played these and other films is conspicuously absent. This research topic, however, is more than simply an itinerary of the economic and technological changes commonly associated with this phenomenon. Rather, this research is being done with the much broader intention of examining both the social significance of the stand-alone movie theater in Chiang Mai and Thailand as a whole and the consequences that have ensued for Thai public social life since they began to close.

Moreover, this research is a critique of the privatization of space that has occurred under the development paradigm and the century-old pursuit of modernity, which, although initiated by the Thai state, is being continued by an oligarchy of private capitalists whose primary goal seems to be nothing more than the further accumulation of wealth. The stand-alone movie theater, once a symbol of high modernity in itself, as well as a geographical center for socio-cultural activities, is the vehicle used to explore this phenomenon. The aim is to dissect the rise and fall of these once ubiquitous entertainment venues in the context of social, economic and political change – from domestic, regional and global influences, to the shifts in taste between generations that sprung from them. It will attempt to answer the question of why this type of venue, at one time frequently granted royal patronage, eventually fell from prominence to its current position – on the cusp of death.

While research into movie theater-related phenomena will draw on examples from various parts of the country, the majority of research is focused in the cities of Chiang Mai and Bangkok. Social and spatial changes that have taken place specific to Chiang Mai city over the course of the past few decades has left it with a much altered character than it has long been regarded as having. The concentration of retail sales in a few shopping malls and hypermarkets, for instance, has changed the social, ethnic and functional composition of older, street-level retail areas which once served more localized communities. Likewise, the replacement of the city's older stand-alone movie theaters with its current shopping mall multiplexes has signaled that this form

of entertainment has not been immune from such changes. Drawing on historical records and oral histories, this research aims to determine why such changes have occurred.

Chiang Mai presents a particularly worthy case study for a number of reasons. For one, being the nodal city of northern Thailand, Chiang Mai is endowed with all the infrastructure and institutions that give it a variegated, diverse social climate. From numerous universities and regional offices for international non-governmental organizations, to destination for tourists and migrant workers, Chiang Mai contains a sufficiently multifaceted set of circumstances behind which its social and spatial geographies have changed. With such a vast array of diversity it would stand to reason that almost equal diversity should exist in regards to other facets of the city. Contrarily, with regard to cinema, the location of the city's existing 14 screens and the places which they stand are rather homogenous. This marks an important development for the city's social life, given the significance of the stand-alone movie theater in the Chiang Mai of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. By examining the phenomena behind this, I hope to shed light on how broader changes at the national and global level have affected lives at the local level.

As for the choice to focus part of the study in Bangkok, the breadth and depth of the movie theater forms there will help add greater context to the analysis. The holes in Chiang Mai's stand-alone movie theater past, made via the demolition of all but one of the cities former movie theaters, will benefit from comparisons to a Bangkok movie theater scene that is much more varied. Though the scales might be far different, parallels can be drawn between the two.

In order to guide me through this research the following questions and objectives have been devised:

### **1.3 Research questions**

1) What was and/or is the role of the stand-alone movie theater in defining the communities in which they stood/stand? How has social memory related to stand-alone movie theaters contributed to continual association of communities with geography?

2) How has policy conducive to the growth of big retail simultaneously

led to the reduced role of the small retail outlets, including the stand-alone movie theater, and privatization of the urban commons? What has been the consequence for Chiang Mai's cinema scene?

3) How have local communities which once consisted of stand-alone movie theaters adapted and reacted to the loss of these venues?

#### **1.4 Research Objectives**

- 1) To demonstrate how and why the stand-alone movie theater was a critically important social space within the communities they were/are located.
- 2) To determine the factors which led to the gradual obsolescence of these once ubiquitous and important social spaces.
- 3) To contextualize these factors within the development paradigm, as influenced by various agents of change (i.e. the state, capital and ordinary people)

#### **1.5 Literature Reviews**

##### **1.5.1 Conceptual Framework**

###### 1.5.1.1. Discourse of Modernity

This concept will allow us to see how the modernity discourse socially deconstructs spaces deemed “out-of-date,” culminating in their eventual “redevelopment” or “gentrification.” In his book *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, David Harvey employs the term “creative destruction” to convey how the concept of modernity is used to do away with that which is not deemed orderly for the powers that be. “One of the myths of modernity,” he posits, “is that it constitutes a radical break with the past” (Harvey; 2006). In so breaking with this past, those prior manifestations must necessarily be destroyed and replaced with the rationally planned, improved version – that which is modern. Harvey, arguing in the context of a post-French Revolution Paris, describes how an obsession with modernity pervaded the Parisian aristocracy. This obsession affected not only the spatial reorganization of many parts of the city, that is, the destruction of older working-class neighborhoods, but also the elevated perception Parisians had of themselves juxtaposed against the rest of French society. It became the driving force which legitimized the expansion of the governing body into what were formerly relatively sovereign regions. The use of

the modernity discourse by the French State set the standard by which the development paradigm was able to find sway over political entities throughout the world, especially as the industrial revolution found momentum outside of Europe and North America.

James C. Scott, in his 1998 book *Seeing like a State*, takes a similar stance on state planning. He infers that what the state does by reorganizing spatial and social relation is done in the name of “legibility” – state planning based on efficiency of resource extraction and control over population (Scott, 1998). The state must be able to discern and hence manage the resources it has at its disposal, lest its grip on power over its subjects weakens. In the context of Thailand, those urban areas which were settled and/or built in the absence of a state support, in which only those who live there know how to negotiate it, or those areas which, in the presence of state sponsorship, have since been utilized in an unintended manner, the state has often tried to redevelop them by citing the need to “modernize,” or “redevelop.”

In her paper “*Revival of Ritual Ceremony in Hue Royal Temples after Renovation: The reconstruction of identity*” (2005) Huynh Thi Anh Van postulates that the revival of Nguyen Phuc dynasty rituals, as implemented by the central government, marks a change of historical discourse towards what were once labeled as “backwards” and “superstitious” events, and in contradistinction to Vietnamese communist ideology. The key element in the “revival” of these rituals is state discourse (in its negotiation and adaptation to changing geo-political situation).

Applying this same discourse to the stand-alone theater requires a rearrangement of the elements involved, but nonetheless encompasses a similar change in discourse towards a social space and practice. The biggest difference is the respective promulgators of these discourses. In the case of Hue city, Vietnam, the change in discourse came by way of state initiated policy directly related to and aimed at the Temple rituals. As for the decline of Thailand’s stand-alone theaters, discourse towards them was shaped by an informal middle-class conception of modernity, within a capitalist consumer framework. Although the Thai state and/or local municipalities played a key role in implementing the policies that helped shape this discourse, they were not directly aimed at this specific social space.

Furthermore, both cases represent forms of “revival” or “renewal,” albeit by taking completely opposite measures. In Hue this cultural revival has been set in motion through historic preservation, while in Thailand urban renewal, or the revival of older communities, is proceeding by the destruction of that which is old. Examples of this discourse will be provided through interviews with local people.

#### 1.5.1.2. The social production of space

Space is not an abstract and neutral void: it is in fact defined by relations between activities, processes and elements of the environment (Lefebvre 1991: 36-46). Taking inspiration from Marc Askew’s 2002 book “*Bangkok: Place, Practice and Representation*,” I will apply the theory of the social production of space to explore how Thailand’s once ubiquitous stand-alone movie theaters became centers of a Thai social and cultural life in both rural and urban communities. The employment of this theory, however, is less concerned with the influence of films on Thai culture, than on how the movie theaters themselves became important socio-cultural centers. Through studies of and interviews with the people who were once tied socially or economically to the old stand-alone theaters, I aim to show how ongoing structural changes and broader global processes have shaped the role that this formerly integrally important space played in the development of modern Thai society, and how this same modernizing forces have since caused the stand-alone theater and the unique form of social space that it embodied to collapse. I employ the following examples of how this has unraveled:

#### 1.5.1.3. Technological change

The home entertainment center: As international pressure to develop modern infrastructure increased in the 1960’s, the greater part of Thailand began to see changes that would forever alter the country. Dams were built for generating electricity with credit from the International Monetary Fund, as well as the foreign aid departments of many “developed” countries – but particularly the USA. In 1961 the state-run Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) was established to both provide and distribute this new energy source nationwide. The stage was set for widespread electrification in Thailand, among other technological developments,

which would forever alter the country on a national scale. With electrical power being sent into nearly every household and business in the country, markets were opened for an influx of home electronics that would soon become as essential to the average Thai as the buffalo or the mortar and pestle had been for centuries before.

Prior to dam construction and the formation of EGAT, however, in many rural areas of the country the movie theater would have been one of the few places that had electricity, utilizing diesel generators to achieve this end. But as an increasing number of towns and villages gained access to salable electricity, and the monetization of Thai society percolated beyond the cities and into most rural areas, a newly cash-laden public began investing in luxury items like televisions and later video cassette recorders (VCR's), video compact discs (VCD's) and digital video discs (DVD's). Before long the motion picture medium had entered the private home. The movie theater had a new and highly viable contender. Theater owners around the country saw their revenues take a tumble as an increasing number of television stations brought a diversity of entertainment right into the homes of the average Thai.

The car: The negative impact of the home entertainment center on the single-screen movie theater is easily correlated. Simply put, the TV and its accoutrements is a variation of movie theater technology which ultimately undermined it. If we maintain that the ultimate resolve of the pursuit of modernity is individualism, independence and convenience, then the TV and the ability to screen films at home is the logical progression from the movie theater. It only stands to reason, then, that the movie theater would descend into the ranks of the obsolete once this new technology hit the market. However, there is another culprit in the death of the single-screen theater. One in which the correlation is much less obvious, but equally as lethal: the car.

Newly created suburban lifestyles opened up by the car played a direct role in the economic degradation of some urban centers, or sections of them. The public street culture, once perhaps the most prominent feature of urban Thailand, was undermined by the coming of the car. Stand-alone theaters, being so heavily tied in with this public life, also suffered from the proliferation of a car-driving population.

As economic affluence spread into certain segments of the Thai populace, particularly in Bangkok and the central region of the country, an increase in the number of car owners followed suit. By the late 1970's, into the 80's, Bangkok and other larger cities swelled with cars. Soon, the newly emergent middle classes fled to the car suburbs, where new gated housing communities were built amidst what used to be some of the most fertile land around. In Bangkok and other densely populated areas, central cities were becoming urban islands in an ever-expanding sea of suburban satellites. This spread of living areas and work locations was a direct extension that started and accelerated with urbanization itself.

As the suburbs continued fanning out, some industries began to follow the population trends by settling where land was cheaper and where efficient one-story factories and office buildings could be built. Skilled and white-collar workers bought homes there; the air was cleaner, the surroundings better. Hypermarkets and shopping centers moved into huge buildings on the roadsides, where a *mae ban* could buy all her goods and gadgets with a minimum tax on her energies.

Along with the middle classes went most of their money. Shops and other businesses of the central areas, the movie theater being no exception, saw their sources of revenue vanish. The street culture that once formed the basis of the Thai business, often anchored by the stand-alone movie theater, suffered a fatal blow. With the car bringing the middle classes to their suburban palaces, what remained in the cities were the slum tenant, the widowed, the confirmed city dweller, the reclaimed exurbanite and the atypical folk. In the larger cities, the car had turned the old stand-alone theaters into obsolescence, or dens for the subaltern. Downtowns became inconvenient for the new suburbanites. In the eyes of the new middle-classes striving to maintain what they perceive to be cultural superiority, urban centers became increasingly stigmatized places, brimming with the undesirable types that the suburbs promised to isolate them from. Yet despite these sentiments, city centers continued to be indispensable components of the average suburbanite's lives. More often than not the suburbanite still commutes 5 days a week to his or her job in the city center, using their tediously earned salary to pay for the increased expenses that come with this existence. Moreover, the city still contains the venues that add spice to life. By and large the suburbs have failed to provide the amenities and interests the central city

offers – entertainment, more interesting people, more relief from dullness, and a larger sense of anonymity when one needs it. But without the proper infrastructure to induce regular trips to the city for the suburbanite, these venues will (and have) find home in the suburbs themselves. Enter the mega-shopping mall, solving the quandary of the city by allowing for access to the benefits of city centers without the inconveniences that dissuade the middle-classes from coming. The glut of cars on the road can be housed conveniently in the shopping mall's parking garage. Never mind having to deal with the urban poor, the downtrodden, the addicted and the criminal, for they are banned from entering these consumer palaces, unless, of course, they are providing a service.

### **1.5.2 Review of related studies**

#### **1.5.2.1 Anthropology of the Cinema**

There is scant written material about movie theaters or even film history in Thailand. The closest work directly related to this topic would be Dome Sukhwong's *A Century of Thai Film*, in which one short section is dedicated to the rise of theaters throughout the country. Sukhwong posits that during the years of the Indochina War, Thailand was the recipient of massive amounts of American aid money, earmarked for development and infrastructure projects, some of which, he claims, trickled down into the entertainment sector, leading to the rise of nearly 700 movie theaters across the country (Sukhwong, 2005: 14).

For an understanding of the origins of Thai cinema and how this influenced the rise of theaters, particularly in the provinces outside of Bangkok and the central region, the doctoral thesis *Cultural Identity in Thai Movies* by Kultida Redmond is the most relevant work available. Among other integral topics, Kultida highlights the importance of theater owners in the development of Thai cinema, and henceforth in broader cultural transmission. The demands of theater owners and film distributors on the types of films produced ensured their roles as agents of change in Thai society. Theater owners knew the tastes of Thai audiences better than the producers (Kultida, 1993: 40).

For a comparative analysis of the rise and fall of stand-alone movie theaters, I examined the work of Professor Rina Locsin, of the University of the Philippines. Her *History of the Baguio City Cine: Cinema and City in the Hybridity of Modernity* is a variation of my topic, with the central focus being how, in a bizarre twist of irony, the desire for modernity was the impetus behind the rise as well as the fall of the old stand-alone theaters in the Philippines city of Baguio. Concurrently, Locsin portrays the old *cines* of Baguio as a central component of the public social life that flourished in the city in the early and middle years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. “It was a time,” she laments, “when the movies were intertwined with the old town ambiance of the city, where personal interrelationships were so pervasive across the halls of school and entertainment, among others” (Locsin, 2008: 10). She ultimately concludes that the movie theaters of Baguio, enduring numerous blows to their operations, were done in once the first shopping mall appeared in the city in 2000. In many ways, our two studies are nearly identical, differing primarily in the fact that Professor Locsin’s study was limited to one municipality – the city of Baguio – while mine is a sampling of all the regions of Thailand.

A more in-depth glimpse into the social function of cinemas as a part of Thailand’s incipient public social life comes from Scot Barme in his 2002 book *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex and Popular Culture in Thailand*. Barme’s work is primarily concerned with a fundamental change in the Thai social formation that saw the appearance of new social classes and the related development of mass commercial culture through which growing numbers of the populace were exposed to a myriad of ideas and influences (Barme; 2002: 7). The Thai cinemas of the 1920’s and 30’s, he argues, played an integral role in these social changes. Through Barme’s research into the social life of Thai movie theaters, attention is drawn to the seminal desire for class exclusiveness that developed within the capitalist system, and later found an outlet once technology had advanced.

#### 1.5.2.2. Technologies of power and social class

The most prominent of these exclusivity technological advances can be seen in the growth of middle-class housing estates on the urban peripheries. Mark Askew sheds light on this socio-technological innovation in his book *Bangkok: Place,*

*Practice and Representation.* Askew posits that the portion of the middle classes that comprise the largest number of residents in suburban housing estates share a core value system. Included in this value system are the importance of education, social respectability (appropriate public behavior, particularly in social intercourse), self-improvement, and concern for a safe, secure and orderly environment for their families, for which the home is a key symbol and space (Askew, 2002: 173). By incorporating this relatively new social phenomenon into this study, we will be able to see how these “new” core values, centered on the suburban housing estate resulted in drastic economic and social declines in numerous urban centers throughout Thailand, with the stand-alone theaters losing their importance simultaneously. Askew’s main contribution to this research, however, comes from use of collective memory to qualify the conception of community based on locality. In this case, the collective memory of going to the old stand-alone theaters and what it meant helped to define the more cohesive communities that supported them, based on broader local inclusion and participation than what exists at the present.

For analysis of the modernization of urban spaces the work of David Harvey was indispensable. His book “Paris, Capital of Modernity” provided a framework for examining both state and bourgeois discourses towards modernity. Specifically, what he has termed *creative destruction*, a concept he used to describe the state sponsored demolition of parts of Paris following urban uprisings, served a guide for thinking about slum clearance and urban preservation in a number of Thai cities.

More broadly, theories regarding changes in lifestyle, specifically changes in urban transportation and living arrangements which have played an influential role in the rise and fall of such movie theaters can be found in the work of Wolfgang Sachs. In *For Love of the Automobile* (Sachs 2001), Sachs illustrates how the unceasing quest for comfort, convenience and independence has negatively impacted many other aspects of society, including the decline of urban areas. Specific to the issue of urban change, Lewis Mumford in his classic book *The City in History* details how cities have incorporated different forms of technology into their landscape, which have brought about changes in urban social patterns and lifestyles, for better or worse.

### 1.5.2.3. Economic development in Thailand

While the theoretical underpinnings of Sukwong, Barme and Kultida help account for the rise of the film industry and movie theaters in Thailand, they only graze the surface of how economics and Thailand's role in the regional and global production chain influenced this process. Furthermore, intra-national variation in infrastructure and levels of development led to the unequal distribution of access to movies at different times. For insights into such issues the works of Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (1995, 1997, 2005) on development in Thailand have helped to frame these issues more clearly. The fall of single screen theaters in Thailand was influenced by a similar yet different set of circumstances. Although economics factors in broadly between rise and fall periods of stand-alone movie theaters, the years leading up to the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, as well as the years following it led to the final collapse of an entertainment form that had been on the wane since the early 1980's. Pasuk Pongpachit and Chris Baker bring to light many of these factors in their 2008 book *Thai Capital: after the 1997 crisis*.

## 1.6 Conceptual Framework

## 1.7 Research Methodology

### 1.7.1 Research Site

The majority of the field research for this study will be undertaken in Chiang Mai city. As the third largest city in the country, the rise of movie theaters in Chiang Mai indicated the city's acquisition of a technology of modernity, and its keeping pace with Bangkok. By looking at the role of stand-alone theaters in Chiang Mai we will be able to get a sense of how they helped to signify, for a time, a form of public space that has been increasingly under threat by an urban economy where wealth is derived from the value of the land itself more than anything else.

There are pros and cons to doing this research in Chiang Mai, however. On the one hand, there is only one remaining stand-alone theater in the city, though there used to be 15. This lack of actual field sites poses a problem in terms of accessing people who had a direct connection to the theaters. It also negates the chance of examining these theaters through a palimpsest lens, or looking at how they have

changed and been adapted over time. Furthermore, in terms of longitudinal studies of social and functional change, focusing on one location, Chiang Mai or otherwise, does not leave room for analysis of the multiple experiences that have beset these old theaters. For this reason, examples will be drawn on from several field sites around the country; a theater in rural Chiang Rai province; one in Bangkok and another in Nong Khai province.

Chiang Mai is not without its unique benefits for this research. Because there is only one remaining stand-alone movie theater and the “mallification” of retail has been so significant to the city’s overall economy, Chiang Mai is, in many ways, quintessentially representative of the main arguments of this thesis; namely that the family-oriented business model which was so strong throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Thailand is being replaced by a corporate business model. In so doing public space and small scale livelihood production has been marginalized.

Supporting evidence of the role of stand-alone movie theaters in Chiang Mai was provided through historical accounts of locals from numerous classes and backgrounds. Furthermore, observations of other forms of informal public space, such as fresh-markets, has been undertaken to provide context for the analysis of stand-alone movie theaters.

### **1.7.2 Unit of Analysis**

The research undertaken for this thesis was carried out, intermittently, over the course of 8 months beginning in December of 2008. It involved very little long-term residence with the subjects being interviewed, nor were there any questionnaires, surveys or other written forms, with one lone exception. I would locate a particular movie theater by asking local people whether or not there had ever been one in the area. Depending on the answer I received, I would ask for directions to the theater and then question other people I would meet along the way. This double checking of the theaters’ status would often yield a variety of answers. More often than not, these stand-alone theaters have been out of operation for many years. On the rare occasion that they have managed to stay in business until much more recently, outdated technology, structural deterioration and the stigma that is often associated with things old has kept large portions of would-be theater-goers away. In their absence, many

former patrons have lost track of the status of a particular theater. Sometimes I would be assured that such-and-such a theater had been destroyed many years ago, only to find later on that it was still standing. On other occasions, a local person would explain that the theater was still open and functioning, but upon further inquiry I would find that it had been razed. Such inconsistencies in people's memories necessitated the need to consult with multiple people in order to get the most precise answer possible.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note the type of people that would offer correct responses. For the most part, people engaged in the professions, that is, those of middle and upper-middle class backgrounds, were generally incorrect about a theaters' status. They would generally make assumptions based on their relation to, or perception of a given location where the theater may once have been. By and large, since the areas where a theater once was is likely to have fallen into a state of disrepair, professional people were prone to give an incorrect response. This was usually a negative answer. Without any factual data to support it, I speculate that this phenomenon is a result of the negative connotation that the middle-class professional associates with the usually lower-class areas that old stand-alone theaters tend to occupy. Because middle-class people no longer have any reason to go to these areas and are thus unaware of the daily activities taking place there, they make assumptions based on their perceptions of lower-class people. In the mind of most middle-class professionals, the lower-classes have less culture and even less money to spend on such luxury activities as going to the movies, and once a theater closes down, the logical economic answer is to raze it and sell the land. The number of times I encountered professionals who made incorrect testimonials towards a theaters status is extremely high.

### **1.7.3 Level of Analysis:**

After physically locating a particular theater, the real research would begin. Again, initial inquiries were informal, materializing in questioning people in the immediate vicinity about the particular theater. If, by chance, the theater was closed but the structure still in use under a secondary function, owners, employees or residences of the old theater present at the site would be questioned as to its history.

Always, however, owners are sought out. Owners generally have the most data on the theater, especially if they are or were present for the day to day operations of the business.

Furthermore, there is a tendency among the owners of old movie theaters to be very open and willing to participate in interviews about their former livelihoods. On the whole, they tend to be proud of their movie theater proprietor legacy, knowing that they were an integral part of the fabric of their community and that they were responsible for the entertainment of many people. Never did I meet a movie theater owner who was not willing to talk freely about their theater.

In the cases where an owner is not immediately present, I ask locals if they know where the owner can be found, or if the contact information of for him or her is available. Sometimes contact can be made, other times not. On occasions where the owner is not available at all, efforts are made to interview former employees. If that too is impossible then people with living memories of the movie theater when it was still in operation are sought out. This can sometimes yield quite relevant data and from the alternate perspective of the movie-goer.

#### **1.7.4 Data Collection**

In terms of data on Chiang Mai, perhaps the most critical of all key informant interviews has been with Khun Boonserm Satrapai, a life long Chiang Mai resident and photographer. His documentation of Chiang Mai infrastructure and social life over the years has given him first-hand knowledge of developments in the city and their impact on the residents. Other notable interviewees have included the writer and native of Sansai Khun Kham Phaka, Ajarn Suriya Sammutkup, Ajarn Chayan Vathanaphuthi and smattering of local people old enough to remember the old theaters across the city.

#### **1.8 Timetable**

Research commenced December of 2008 and continued up until the January of 2010. From the research a total of 6 chapters have been written, both during and after the data collection process. The following is a timetable for the undertaking and completion of the thesis.

<b>Activities</b>	<b>Date</b>
Preliminary data collection	Dec. 2008 – Aug. 2009
Proposal writing	Aug. 2009 – Oct. 2009
Proposal Defense	November 2009
Continued data collection	Nov. 2009 – Jan - 2010
Thesis writing	Jan. 2010 – April 2010
Thesis Defense	April 2010
Thesis completion and submission	May 2010

ลิขสิทธิ์มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่  
 Copyright© by Chiang Mai University  
 All rights reserved