

CHAPTER IV

The Binds Between Movie Theater and Community in Chiang Mai

4.1 Introduction

In 2008, the last of Chiang Mai's operating neighborhood movie theaters closed down. Within a few months of the closings, the theaters had been completely destroyed, while construction on new development projects on the land they once stood began in haste. For the city of Chiang Mai, it marked the first time in several generations that its neighborhoods were completely devoid of any working movie theaters. All that remains for mainstream movie exhibition in the city are two multiplex theaters located on the top level of Chiang Mai's two shopping malls – Central Airport Plaza and Central Kad Suan Kaew.

The seven-screen multiplex movie theater at Central Airport Plaza (from here on referred to simply as *Airport*, its colloquial Chiang Mai name) is run by the Major Cineplex Group, the largest movie theater chain in Thailand. Major is a publicly listed company on the Stock Exchange of Thailand, the majority shareholder being its founder and CEO Vicha Poolvorluk. As has been stated in chapter two, the Bangkok-based Poolvorluk family has been key actors in that city's movie exhibition industry since the 1950's. Vicha's father, Chamroen Poolvorluk, along with his uncle, Charoen Poolvorluk, started a company in the 1960's called Co Brothers, which developed and operated close to sixty stand-alone movie theaters in the greater Bangkok area. Two of Charoen's sons, Vichai and Visuth Poolvorluk, started their own multiplex theater chain in 1978 called Entertain Golden Village (EGV). In 2002 the two branches of the Poolvorlucks that were still in the movie theater business combined their operations into one giant conglomerate – Major-EGV. As of 2009 they have a combined total of 47 branches around the country, consisting of nearly 350 screens. They opened their Major-Chiang Mai branch at Airport Plaza when the mall opened in 1999.

Major funding for the construction of Airport Plaza in the mid-1990's was provided by the Tantranont family, owner of Chiang Mai's own Tantraphan Department Stores. The Tantranont family invested close to one billion baht in the state-of-the-art shopping center, hoping to anchor the building with one of their own department stores. But with the 1997 financial crisis the Tantranont's were hit hard and subsequently sold off their interests in the mega-retail project to Thailand's largest retailer, the Central Group, who opened a Robinson's Department Store as the building's economic anchor (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2008: 218). This meant that Chiang Mai's own business families were no longer the primary share-holders in the city's biggest retail business ventures. It represented the entrance and subsequent dominance of Bangkok capital into the Chiang Mai retail sales sector in the city's history, channeling revenue out of the city and into the pockets of outside interests. With advent of Major Cineplex Group in Airport Plaza, the same was happening with the world of film exhibition.

The second and older multiplex movie theater in Chiang Mai is the Vista Gad Suan Kaew, appropriately situated on the 4th floor of Gad Suan Kaew shopping mall. The Vista Group is a Chiang Mai-based company, headed by Thawatchay "Tommy" Rotjanachotikul. Vista owned several of the older stand-alone theaters throughout the city before they were razed and replaced them with newer developments. The seven-screen multiplex in Kad Suan Kaew has existed since the shopping mall opened in the early 1990's. Between the two mall-bound multiplexes there are a total of fourteen active screens in Chiang Mai city.

In decades past, the city of Chiang Mai contained single-screen, stand-alone movie theaters in numerous neighborhoods. Today, however, with fourteen movie screens concentrated in two locations, the city has succumbed to a centralization of the movie exhibition business. If the stand-alone movie theaters, as I have argued in previous chapters, are important social and economic spaces in urban Thailand, what has their centralization meant for the city of Chiang Mai? The trend of relocating Chiang Mai's movie theaters from local neighborhoods – where they were easily accessible by a proximate, pedestrian population – to shopping malls – where access is generally dependent on the ability to drive there – has also meant a

significant redistribution of socioeconomic resources. Whether these trends reflect broader socioeconomic changes in Chiang Mai's neighborhoods, or whether they reflect changes in the nature of the film exhibition industry is yet to be determined. However, in keeping with the main argument of this thesis, the relocation of theaters from local neighborhoods and communities will be framed as a net loss for the community regardless of the cause. As a result, Chiang Mai's neighborhoods have, for the first time in many decades, become devoid of family social/entertainment venues.¹

4.2 Chiang Mai's neighborhood movie theaters

4.2.1 Cinema's early days

The earlier movie theaters in Chiang Mai city opened in the area around what is now the Night Bazaar and Gad Luang area. Such locations were the most obvious choices to build movie theaters due to the historical exigencies of these high density business areas. Gad Luang and the Chang Klan Road area represented the center of Chiang Mai's commercial districts, bustling with activity from the wee hours of the morning until evening. Likewise, Tha Phae Road has long been host to market activities. For centuries, women traders have been selling agricultural products including vegetables, rice, tobacco, wax, flowers, fruit, betel nut and dried fish on the Tha Phae road side. Occupying the stalls and shop-houses that lined Tha Phae Road were ethnic Chinese and Burmese traders, selling a combination of produce and durables throughout the year (Ongsakul, 2005: 235). The boat ports along the Ping River in that vicinity facilitated a localized riparian trade that had been active for centuries. But during the turn of the 20th century, the ports along the Chiang Mai city portion of the Ping River began to flourish as never before. This occurred as Bangkok's increased political role spilled over into the economic sphere, with river trade expanding to account for over 70 percent of the imports into the city by 1900 (Ibid: 239). Exports to the Siamese capital also increased, though Chiang Mai developed a rather large trading deficit with its more powerful trading partner.

¹It is important to note the "families" aspect of the venues I refer to. There are currently numerous social/entertainment venues and activities in many of Chiang Mai's neighborhoods. However, they tend to be night-clubs or other drinking establishments which are usually not suitable for family outings.

At the more large-scale end of the river commerce, British trading companies established residence along the river to oversee the transport of their teak logs, harvested from the Northern Siamese forests and across the border in the Shan territories of Burma. The coveted lumber was shipped down the Ping River to the Chaophraya, eventually reaching the Gulf of Siam and beyond. Britain's mercantile presence in turn of the century Chiang Mai, however, was but a fraction of the ethnic Chinese, Burmese and Bangladeshi traders who settled in the area for their own commercial purposes.

The primary beneficiary of both long distance and local trading was the Chiang Mai nobility, whose income was derived from taxes (tribute) paid by the traders, as well as from logging concessions made to British trading houses, like the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation. As the feudal economic order faded away in the face of a growing capitalist economy and greater Bangkok control, however, this revenue began to recede. New sources of revenue were thus needed. As was common throughout much of central Thailand, a canal was invested in with the intentions of opening up more land to commercial rice cultivation. Much of the land adjacent to the canal was claimed by the old nobility, who subsequently encouraged settlement by farmers who they charged rent to. In other instances, Chiang Mai's elite adapted to the changing economy through investing in private enterprises around the city. Movie theaters were among the business repertoire of some of the old nobility. Over the years, some of Chiang Mai's more notable neighborhood movie theaters, including the Suriyong, Suriwong, Suriya and Sang Tawan theaters were built by Jaochai Suriyong Na Chiang Mai, a descendent of the old Chiang Mai royalty.

Prior to the arrival of film in Chiang Mai, most public entertainment was provided by troupes of *likay* and *ngiw* performers, or at regularly staged temple fairs. Up until about forty years ago, *likay* in the north was one of the most common and popular forms of public entertainment, providing a satisfactory living for the troupes who acted in them, as well. The arrival of the cool season marked the beginning of their working high season, when they were hired to perform at temple fairs or by private sponsors at other festivities (Schneider, 189: 1989).

It is important to keep in mind, however, that the early 20th century was a period of ambitious development projects, the primary aims of which were to both increase the economic out-put of Siam's resources and to do so by consolidating the national frontiers, which in many cases were still not completely secured. Chiang Mai, having only come under the rule of Bangkok in latter half of the 19th century, was still only loosely incorporated into the socioeconomic orbit of the capitol by the early 20th century. One way that Bangkok set about extending its political and economic reach was through the construction of the railroad into the less accessible regions of the country. The Northern Line of the railroad was extended to Chiang Mai in 1922. One year later the first movie theater opened in the city, bringing immediate competition to the older entertainment varieties of *likay* and *ngiw*.

In research conducted by the author in the Isan city of Nong Khai, it was discovered that the earliest film exhibitions there, dating to the 1920's, were made possible by importing film reels and projection equipment by way trade emanating from China via Laos.² These riparian and over-land trade routes brought the media of film southwards to the little city prior to its arrival from a Bangkokian point of origin. In fact, it was not until much later that film originating from Bangkok, Thai-produced or otherwise, dominated the exhibition market in that Nong Khai, highlighting the importance of pre-national territory over-land and riparian trade route to that city's economy. As for Chiang Mai, whether or not film reached the city prior to the building of the first movie theater is not yet undetermined. There just as easily could have been film reaching the city by way of caravan trade with Southern China or even Burma prior to the 1923 building of the first movie theater. One way or another, it seems prudent to suggest that the opening of the city's first ever movie theater in 1923 was in conjunction with the opening of the Bangkok-Chiang Mai train line the year prior. In this sense, the arrival of a permanent movie theater in the northern city would have been seen as a product of Bangkok's modernizing qualities.

This initial cinematic endeavor, the Patthanakorn Theater, was located on Chang Klan Road on ground that was most recently occupied by the Chiang Mai Rock Climbing Center. By the early twentieth century the upper stretch of

² Personal interview with 81 year old Yiamjit Thepbanterng – former Nong Khai movie theater owner.

Chang Klan Road near the junction of Tha Phae Road was home to a menagerie of ethnic groups with their own trade specializations. Directly across from the Patthanakorn was the *Baan Hor*, or Hor Village. Hor is the Thai name for the Chinese Moslems originating from Yunnan Province in Southwestern China. Hor Chinese had long been instrumental in the long distance caravan trade between the Chinese province and Thailand. After the victory of the Chinese Communists in 1949, many Hor left China and went into self-imposed exile, fleeing the religious suppression they feared the communist government would impose. This addition to the older Hor community in Chiang Mai, many members of whom had prospered as resident merchants of the northern Thai city, helped expand an already recognizable ethnic enclave centered between Charoenprathet and Chang Klan roads (Ossakul: 2005).

Aside from the Ban Hor Chinese, the area around upper Chang Klan Road also contained an Indian community. The original name of this community was Kulwa. A majority of the people comprising Kulwa were from Pakistan. Others came from India via Burma and settled in different cities around northern Thailand. In Chiang Mai, they settled on Chang Khlan and Charoen Prathet Roads. Their primary occupation was animal husbandry, as well as slaughter. The main slaughter house of the city was operated by members of this community. It is said that in the past, the Kulwa descendents slaughtered cattle on their own property and sold the meat at different markets, such as Chiang Mai Gate, Ton Lam Yai, and San Pa Koi. One of the reasons that this group made a living by slaughtering cattle was that Buddhists would not kill animals, as the act is considered a sin. Another related occupation was selling milk.

The ethnic medley surrounding the Patthanakorn Theater necessitated the screening of films to suit the cultural tastes of the local community members. Whether film reels reached the city via the train line, or if they were entering via older over-land trade routes is unclear, however. Some of the international productions screened in Bangkok during these years were brought in via a Singapore-based distribution company (Barme, 2002). But whether the same reels were being transported up to Chiang Mai as part of the same distribution circuit is unknown, however likely. The consistent transportation and communication ability that came with the opening of the train line would have made regular circulation a reality, thus

necessitating a permanent movie theater.

By the 1940's the Patthanakorn had been renamed the Sri Wiang, perhaps reflecting a change in ownership, or perhaps a facilities upgrade. After all, by the 1940's a number of newer theaters had opened across the city, some of which had transitioned from Chinese *ngiw* theaters. Theaters such as the Sri Nakorn Ping raised the bar in terms of luxury and state-of-the-art accoutrements, necessitating an upgrade among an older theater like the Sri Wiang if it wanted to remain economically competitive. But more importantly, the opening of more theaters designed for the showcasing of film was testament to the staying power of the medium. It was quickly supplanting older entertainment forms, such as the previously discussed *likay* and *ngiw*, as the most popular form of entertainment available. In theaters like the Sri Nakorn Ping and Sri Wiang, the films shown were often international productions, giving the Chiang Mai populous a glimpse at foreign cultures and ways of expression. As a form of modern technology, film showing helped establish Chiang Mai as bastion of modernity at a relatively early date.

As a child, Khun Narong lived just to the south of the Sri Wiang Theater. The 67 year old local keenly recalled the theater and its environs from the early 1950's onward. "Originally the theater was named The Pathanakorn," remembered Narong, wistfully recounting his youth, "but that was before my time. When I frequented it the most it was called the Sri Wiang."

Khun Narong recalled going to see movies there at least once per week during his teenage years. The audience was a hodgepodge of locals from the Baan Hor and Indo-Pakistani communities nearby, as well as the general Thai populous. In the same light as many of the other theaters around the country at the time, the film fare was usually internationally produced, by and large, comprised of imports from China and Indian. Although it was common in Thailand at the time to screen films from those two countries, it seems as if it would be particularly fitting for such screenings to make it to the Sri Wiang Theater. After all, much of the neighborhood in those days was made up of ethnic Chinese and Indians who would have had somewhat of a cultural affiliation to the content of such films. One can only guess that watching films from ones native country would often have been one of the few sources of

visual media contact from “back home.”

There were further reasons as to why the theater mostly attracted members of the two surrounding ethnic groups, the primary of which being the stigma that the area acquired due to the nearby slaughterhouse, as well as a crematorium for the Thai deceased and Moslem cemetery. In Chiang Mai and Thailand as a whole, the presence of spirits is a highly acknowledged fact, especially when in conjunction to the deceased. Several interviewees aside from Khun Narong have made mention of the fact that they refrained from going near Chang Klan Raod after dark because they were scared that spirits from the cemetery and the slaughterhouse would haunt them. If that is so, then it naturally precludes any potentially interested movie goers from going to the area for such an event. They would be more likely to opt for films at one of the other movie theaters in Chiang Mai just to avoid disturbing the spirits. The local community of Hor Chinese and Indo-Pakistanis, however, were accustomed to these entities and thus not bothered by them. Movies at Sri Wiang Theater were thus largely the affairs of the said two groups.

In 1965 Khun Narong left Chiang Mai to go and play music in a band on the Royal Air Force Base in Udon Thani. 1965 was the year that the United States officially launched a war against Vietnam and the Thai government gave American military personnel access to bases in various parts of the country in exchange for military and economic “assistance.” The bases were used by the US Air Force to fly bombing missions over parts of North Vietnam and Laos. So from 1965 to 1968 Khun Narong was based in the Isan area of Thailand, earning a living through playing music for the military personnel stationed there. Following that he went to Bangkok in search of further employment, where he resided for several more years. When he returned to Chiang Mai in 1974 to settle down for good, the Sri Wiang Theater had once again changed ownership and the name had been changed to the Wiang Ping. But that was not the only change in the area.

Narong’s old neighborhood centered along Chang Klan Road, with the old Hor Chinese and Indo-Pakistani communities, was also beginning to develop a new character. New businesses were opening. Some of the defining characteristics of the area had begun to be replaced. By the mid-1970’s, many of the older ethnic

enclaves centered around Chang Klan Road began to break up. For some, the accumulation of wealth engendered desire for higher living standard. New homes were sought out in various parts of the city and its outskirts. Soon, the area was redeveloped into one of the city's main retail centers, specializing in products for consuming tourists. The Wiang Ping Theater met its demise soon thereafter.

Today, though the neighborhood in which Khun Narang was raised is far cry from how it was fifty or sixty years ago, the legacy of its eclectic character lives on. The Night Bizarre, currently one of Chiang Mai's top retail oriented tourist attractions, draws its workforce from an ethnic hodgepodge consisting of recent arrivals from Burma and numerous ethnic minorities with Thai citizenship. Even a number of Hor Chinese and Indo-Pakistani's have adapted to the new consumer market by setting up businesses along the strip. The Pathanakorn/Sri Wiang/Wiang Ping Theater which for many years constituted one the neighborhood's most well loved social institutions, however, is but a fading memory.

4.2.2 The Sri Nakorn Ping Theater

One of the key components of the push for modernity as initiated by the state was to create an environment in which business could prosper. The ensuing business competition usually leads for key business actors to constantly jockey for better market position. In the world of movie theaters, as in most other businesses which rely on innovation and modernization in order to remain competitive, proprietors are constantly trying to out-do the competition. Thus, as the Patthanakorn Theater marked the initial movie theater establishment in Chiang Mai, competitors soon tried to undermine its dominance by opening bigger and better theaters of their own.

According to numerous locals, the Sri Nakorn Ping Theater was the first in Chiang Mai that might be considered a "first-class" movie theater. With all the bells and whistles indicative of pomp and luxury, the Sri Nakorn Ping was an instantaneous success across the city – a veritable marker that northern Thailand's most revered city had reached a new milestone along the road towards modernity. It was built in before World War II (exact date unknown), and originally played a mix of Chinese Opera and movies.

Descriptions of the Sri Nakorn Ping Theater and its environs come from the memory of 76 year old Yai Gee (also known as Che Cheng). Her family has owned the Kasem Store, across from where the Sri Nakorn Ping used to be, for the past 35 years. But prior to that, Yai Gee worked in Gad Luang for many years, just to the south and east of the Sri Nakorn Ping. According to Yai Gee the owner was a woman named Khun Nai Ladda, a member of local nobility. Another source claims that the theater was built by Jaokaew Nawarat, one of Chiang Mai's most notable patricians of the 20th century and last of the ruler of the Chiang Mai monarchy (History of Chiang Mai City p. 252). Behind the theater was the estate of one of Chiang Mai's wealthiest merchants – Jek Ow. The Chinese immigrant made his initial fortune selling gold from a shop behind the theater, but his business interests were tied up in many ventures. Yai Gee recalled seeing Jek Ow and his children in the balcony of the theater, where the expensive seats were located, while she sat down below. Most of the time, the theater showed Indian or Chinese movies, with a live dubber providing the Thai voices. Yai Gee preferred the Indian films because of the frequent romantic story lines.

As a young girl, Yai Gee could only afford to sit at the front of the theater. She recalled with a smile her and her friends bringing a mat which they would spread out on the dirt floor of the theater to watch movie. Many neighborhood children apparently practiced this seating arrangement. But the theater itself was just one component of a close-knit community in Chiang Mai's main commercial district.

“When I was young, everybody knew everybody around here,” mused the 76 year old shop keeper. “Most of the houses were made of wood, not the concrete that they're made of now. After the fire in Gad Luang (1967), however, that's when people started to rebuild their shops and houses out of concrete.”

“People were always visiting with each other. It was common in those days to just drop by a neighbor's house. Sometimes we would walk to the movies together rather than visit at the each others houses. It was a festive place, the theater was. If it was a really popular movie the

theater would hire a band to play out front. In the early years, there were lots of trees around the place, not many buildings. In the shade of those tree people used to come to sell things. Thai and Chinese sweets were a favorite. Iced tea too.”

Yai Gee spoke with nostalgic reverence about the old movie theater. Her memory of the activities surrounding the theater before and after the show seemed most vivid for her. Like many of the old neighborhood theaters in Thailand, the grounds of the Sri Nakorn Ping was a meeting point for the crowds coming to watch movies. Vendors selling various drinks and snacks would set up carts in around the theater, satisfying the hunger pangs of eager movie-goers. Having crowd-drawing capabilities such as it did, the Sri Nakorn Ping Theater became a de facto community meeting place. Residents from the neighborhood often chatted with each other before the film, exchanging news and gossip about this and that. Even the neighborhood elite could be seen among the crowd, mingling freely with the other neighbors.

“I remember everybody getting along nicely,” said Yai Gee. “We common folk would always marvel at the fancy clothes and jewelry that some of the more upper class residents would wear to the theater. It was an opportune time for people like that to show off their latest décor.”

4.2.3 Chiang Mai’s 20th century cultural benefactor

In the early days of his movie theater proprietorship, Jaochai Suriwong Na Chiang Mai rented an older, already existing theater owned by one of Chiang Mai’s old citizen elites, Jaogaew Nawarat. His was the Sri Nakorn Ping Theater, on Chang Moi Road – one of the largest movie houses in Chiang Mai of the 1940’s and 50’s. Through Jaochai Suriwong’s efforts at the Sri Nakorn Ping he was able to compile a tidy sum of money, which he would then use to purchase two plots of land at the head of Tha Phae Road. On that land he built the first of his movie theaters, the Suriwong, with the investment of one-million, five- hundred thousand baht. A short time later he was extended further credit, and as a means of completely filling the plot of

land he had purchased, ordered the construction of a second theater, just behind the Suriwong, the Suriya (History of Chiang Mai City, p. 253)

Jaochai Suriwong's theaters were a success. His investment of a further two-hundred thousand baht for the purchase of an American-made 70 millimeter projector made him the first theater in all of Thailand to employ such technology (Ibid). This allowed for wider, clearer projection and an overall better viewing experience. By doing so he also raised the standards of film exhibition for the city of Chiang Mai and Thailand as a whole, ushering in an era where going to the cinema would establish itself as the premiere form of entertainment across the country.

In the early days of his Suriwong Theater, the viewing fare was mixed between Thai and American films, as well as original viewing fare which he conceived of himself. For instance, one day he read in the news that the famous muay Thai boxing champion, Phantip Gaewsuriya, was putting his title on the line in a bout to be held in a Bangkok sporting arena. Jaochai Suriwong was well aware that for many denizens of Chiang Mai, muay Thai was a popular event, and in the pre-television era, a chance to see muay Thai would draw a huge crowd. With that in mind, Jaochai Suriwong boarded a train for Bangkok, bringing with him a film camera to record the fight. After the fight was finished, Jaochai Suriwong caught the next train back to Chiang Mai, where he threaded the filmed fight into the projector at the Suriwong and showed to an anticipant crowd. The fight was shown numerous times to sell-out crowds, with great economic gains for Jaochai Suriwong (Ibid). Over the years, Jaochai Suriwong's while endearing him to the local populous as a cultural and entertainment benefactor to the city of Chiang Mai.

Two of Jaochai's earlier theaters, the Suriwong and the Suriyong, were notable for playing almost exclusively Western films, with nightly showings in their original language soundtracks to accommodate the educated elite of Chiang Mai society as well as the sizeable community resident Westerners. Other than that, however, there was at least one regular patron who fit neither category.

From the late 1950's through the mid 1960's, trips to the Suriwong Theater were routine for Ajarn Suriya Samuttkup. As a teen, his family's home off of Rachadamnoern Road was no more than a five minute walk from the theater.

“During the day,” recalled Ajarn Suriya, “the Suriwong showed movies dubbed in Thai. I was usually busy during the day time with school followed by after-school jobs, so I rarely made it to the dubbed versions. That was not a problem for me, though, because as somebody really interested in learning English, I preferred the late night shows to the day time ones. To my recollection almost all the films shown there were American or from some other Western country; maybe Britain.” Either late in the afternoon or in the evening, the Suriwong would screen films in their original dialogue, providing an opportunity for Ajarn Suriya to listen to English as well as be entertained. For inquisitive locals interested in improving their English language ability or gaining informal access to Western culture, the Suriwong Theater became – in a sense – an educational institution, thanks to the types of films it showed.

Taking advantage of the Suriwong Theater’s ability to attract an English speaking clientele, a small book shop opened in the theater’s lower level. The owner of the book shop was a Chiang Mai native who had spent a number of years in Bangkok working in the newspaper industry. Upon returning to Chiang Mai, he parlayed the literary knowledge he had gained from publishing into a retail book business. The Suriwong Book Store, as it was called, became the first privately owned book store in the city to sell English language literature (personal interview with Ajarn Chayan Vaddhanaphuthi). For centuries, Chiang Mai had been a city deeply endowed with religious institutions, thus almost all the available literature in the city prior to the opening of the Suriwong Book Store was in some way related to the religion. The first printing houses to open in the city came with Christian Missionaries, who used the technology to disseminate the Holy Scriptures in the local language, as well as in English. When the Suriyong Book Store opened, it was a cultural watershed in the city’s modern history. For the first time the people of Chiang Mai were provided with joys of secular information, opening minds to new ideas and building, in a number of ways, the foundations of a burgeoning local intelligentsia. For the likes of Ajarn Suriya, the combination of movie theater and book store was like a window into another world.

“My mother allowed me to go to the Suriwong for the late night soundtrack showings. Although I went alone, which was atypical for young people in Chiang Mai at the time, my mother figured it was close enough to our house that it would not be a problem. She was also sympathetic to the reasons that I wanted to go there, knowing well that it was a great opportunity for me to practice listening to English.”

But the movies were not the sole reason Ajarn Suriya frequented the Suriwong Theater. The book store likewise provided a secondary reason for the future scholar to go to the movies.

“Before the start of the film, I would spend time browsing through the books and magazines on sale at the book store. It was the only place in town, aside from the Information Service Center at the United States Consulate that, carried English language literature. If you went there before the late night soundtrack show like I frequently did, the store would be crowded with farang. I often went around that time, and while I was looking through the books and magazines, I would also observe the farang who were there. They were a mixture of people. Some were officers from the American or British consulates. Others were missionaries. There were anthropologists there as well, I recall. On a few occasions I saw [the American anthropologist] Clark Cunningham there. Many of them would meet in the book store to chat with each other, or just to read before going into the auditorium. I remember trying to listen to their conversations, hoping to comprehend what they were saying.”

As show time approached, the crowd migrated to the auditorium. With his modest earnings from tutoring local children in English, Ajarn Suriya would purchase a ticket for the cheapest seats. The two and a half baht ticket price placed the inquisitive young man in the mezzanine seats, towards the front of the auditorium – very close to the screen. Being cheap it was usually dirty. The putrid smell of urine would fill the dank air on occasions and the buzz of mosquitoes often distracted him from the movie.

“I can’t remember a single time where there was anybody besides myself in those cheap seats during soundtrack shows. All the foreigners bought the expensive seats up on the balcony and the only Thai people in attendance other than myself were upper class, who could understand English and afford the expensive balcony seats. So it was only me down below. If something funny happened in the movie I would hear a roar of laughter come from the balcony, though I usually didn’t understand the humor. My English wasn’t so good at the time. I would think, ‘what are they all laughing at.’”

Between the book store and the movie theater, the area around the mouth of Tha Phae Road grew into a regular destination for Chiang Mai’s resident English speaking community to visit. That being the case, an argument for the role the Suriwong Theater played in leading to the development of this area as the center of Chiang Mai’s tourist industry is worthy of deeper inquiry. During the same era that Ajarn Suriya was a regular at the Suriwong, Chiang Mai began to grow into a tourist destination. Around 1970 the central government began promoting Chiang Mai as a center for tourism. Initially, the city appealed primarily to foreign travelers seeking adventure. Later it developed into a haven for the Bangkok middle class as a vacation spot, site for a second home or semi-rural retreat. By the mid-1980’s, however, its reputation began to take on international proportions, with the central government

investing heavily in attracting foreign tourists.

The Suriwong Theater was located on Kotchasan Road, just south of the intersection with Tha Phae Road. Today this area is generally considered the central tourist zone in the city, with a high percentage of the nearby shops geared towards the tastes and interests of this relatively high-spending, transient population. In the early 1960's, however, the area was still largely oriented to locals. Besides the movie theater and the book-store, the surrounding businesses were largely owned by Chinese and Sino-Thai merchants, who provided goods and services to a largely local clientele. Over time, however, the business community gradually began to reorient itself towards foreign travelers. Ajarn Suriya recalled that a restaurant beside the theater which specialized in northern Thai cuisine was often patronized by Western diners. Like many of the other nearby restaurants, a large percentage of revenue was likely derived from patrons of the Suriwong Theater. Movie-goers would extend their leisure time by enjoying lunch or dinner before or after the film. It stands to reason that the area developed into its current status as the central tourist zone thanks in part to the drawing power of original soundtrack films attracting Westerners to the area. If this is the case then the Suriwong Theater and book store of the same name play historic roles in the growth of international tourism in Chiang Mai.

As noted previously, Jaochai Suriyong Na Chiang Mai was the builder of other theaters in Chiang Mai besides the Suriwong. The Suriya Theater (no relation to Ajarn Suriya Samuttkup) – a smaller enterprise just behind the Suriwong belonging to the Noppadol – rounded out the cinematic options near the Tha Phae-Kotchasan intersection. Another, the Suriyong Theater, stood on Loy Kroh Road next to the Suriwong Hotel. Although now demolished, this area, much like the area around the Suriwong Theater, developed into an important center for tourism in Chiang Mai, as well.

Instead of holding original soundtrack movie screenings at designated times, the Suriyong Theater was wisely equipped with a “soundtrack room.” In the past many stand-alone theater owners were savvy to this critical audile issue. As a means of satisfying their majority-Thai audiences without alienating those who wanted or needed the original language soundtracks, most of the theaters built in the 1960's and

70's came equipped with "soundtrack rooms." These rooms were usually located next to the projection room, behind a glass wall, where for a premium one could watch the same movie that everybody else was watching, but with the original soundtrack. It was a relatively simple way of keeping everybody happy. This technological addition, along with the English speaking crowd that it attracted – like the Suriwong Theater at Tha Phae Gate – served as a catalyst for the area to grow into a second center of tourism in Chiang Mai. The Duang Dawan Hotel now stands in its place.

4.2.4 Social class and the cinema

Because both the Suriwong and the Suriyong theaters provided movie exhibition services for a Western clientele, as well as Chiang Mai's educated elite, they developed a reputation as being the city's upper-class theaters. Through interviews with local Chiang Mai people old enough to remember these theaters, it became clear that lower-middle and lower class residents of the city usually did not attend screenings at either. For some, the fact that "farang" watched movies there made them feel uncomfortable. "As a young girl, there were a number of occasions when my friend's and I used to stand across the street from the Suriyong Theater just to watch the farangs come and go," recalled a local woman now in her late 40's. "We never actually watched a movie there. They usually played farang movies, which we didn't want to see, anyway. But we did like to stand and watch the foreigners around there. In our minds, they had such unusual styles. And the rich Thais, too!" (personal interview with Mae Nui, age 47)

Segregation at the movies, however, was not limited to social class in a strict sense. There were cases where *ethnicity* played more of a role in defining a theater's patrons than class. A prime example in this de facto segregation comes from one of Chiang Mai's which is no longer standing. Located in Chiang Mai's Meuang Mai Market, the Meuang Fa Theater developed into the space for Chiang Mai's ethnic Tai-Yai community, a minority generally looked down upon by the majority Khon Meuang.

I learned this while interviewing a lifelong Chiang Mai resident and ethnic

Khon Meuang. He recalled going to watch films at some of Chiang Mai's old theaters. The Chang Peuak Rama, once located behind the Chiang Mai's provincial bus station off of Chang Peuak Road, offered mid-night movie showings which he enjoyed going to. Just down the street was the Mahanokorn Theater, which offered daily double features. However, when it came to the Meuang Fa Theater, he expressed slightly negative sentiments, recalling that it was "only for Tai-Yai's. *Khon Thai mai koi pai tao rai* : Thai people didn't really go there very much.³

The identification of the Meuang Fa as a theater for a locally marginalized minority group, even if was given a slightly negative connotation in the words of a local of Khon Meuang descent, shows how the old stand-alones developed into places of social and cultural meaning for those who frequented them. Being a culturally, politically and economically marginalized ethnic group means that certain cultural traits might not be accepted in the space common to mainstream society. This does not necessarily mean that the marginalized do not want to participate in this society, but rather that spaces consistent with ones own cultural tastes and preferences, where a member of a particular group can engage in behavior that might not be accepted (or permitted) in mainstream venues, needs to be constructed. For Chiang Mai's Tai-Yai community, the Meuang Fa Theater served this purpose. It provided Tai-Yais with a space to participate in a leisure activity enjoyed by most Chiang Mai residents, only without the discomfort of having to modify their social customs and behavior. Groups of Tai-Yai teens could socialize in front of the theater in their own language without being the subjects of scorn, while older people could attend a film wearing their traditional clothes without drawing unwanted stares. The surrounding Meuang Mai market supplied a steady stream of patrons comprised of laborers and vendors who worked there, many of whom were ethnically Tai-Yai.

Through the collective act of movie-going the, Chiang Mai's Tai-Yai community was able to generate an identity for the Meuang Fa Theater as a Tai-Yai social space. The process involved in this phenomenon would not have been able to occur had it not been for the accessibility of the Meuang Fa Theater. Local networks based on Tai-Yai ethnicity and the work space available to them at the Meuang

³ personal interview with security guard at my apartment building, age 50

Mai Market, made it possible for the theater to gain a reputation as a Tai-Yai social space. It added an important element to the diversity of Chiang Mai city where pressure to conform to the dominant group ideology could be temporarily left behind. To be sure, the Vista Gad Suan Gaew Cineplex and Major Airport Plaza Cineplex, the only remaining movie theaters in Chiang Mai city, provide no meaning specific to any one group. In all their homogeneity they merely reinforce mainstream consumer ideology, devoid of alternative modes of function. There are, however, issues regarding class in both of these theaters as well, which will be addressed in subsequent sections.

4.2.5 The Sri Visan and the Chintatsani theaters: Thaksin's holdings

The Sri Visan Theater on Tha Phae Road was owned by the father of deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra – Mr. Lert Shinawatra. Mr. Lert opened the theater in partnership with several other investors, but soon bought their shares to become the sole proprietor of this Chiang Mai movie institution (Sapyaphaithun, 2003: 61).

Over the years, the Sri Visan became somewhat of a cultural landmark in the city. In its earlier days,⁴ it was the city's veritable "Chinese" theater. Even before it opened, however, another theater stood in its place. That original theater, called by its Chinese name *Tong Kok*, was the center of entertainment for the Chiang Mai Chinese community. Between *Ngiew* opera and Chinese movies which were part of the regular entertainment fare, the Tong Kok theater also hosted the circus when it came to town. The opium den which once occupied the space now home to the abandoned Tantraphan Department Store likewise began as a movie theater. It was called the Tong Hang Theater and like its rival down the street specialized in showing Chinese films. At some point, however, it made the switch over to being an opium den. Behind the old theater was *Kham Phaeng Din*, or the old wall of the city, which was then, and still is, little more than a mound of dirt stretching out around the city. As early as the 1950's the area around *Kham Phaeng Din* was famous for housing poorer segments of Chiang Mai society. First, the rural poor from surrounding villages comprised the

⁴ There is no exact opening date, but locals dated it roughly to about 1950.

majority of tenants. In later years, as demographics changed, ethnic minority groups, like Akka and Lisu, who had migrated to the city in search of employment began to occupy such slum communities. Situated among the rickety shacks that lined the narrow street were cheap whorehouses and the working girls that plied their trade thereabouts. A few hundred meters to the east of the Sri Visan Theater, on the ground now occupied by the abandoned Tantraphan Department Store, stood an opium den which catered largely to new arrivals from China. Ajarn Suriya Samuttkup recalled that it was common for adolescent boys to playfully taunt each other with accusations of “you go buy your noodles down by the Kham Phaeng Din,” slyly making reference to the prostitution found there.

One can only imagine the red-light atmosphere which prevailed along that end of Tha Phae Road. Between the whorehouses behind the theater and the opium den down the street, an aura of vice comprised a significant part of the social environment. In fact, in many cities around the world the presence of Chinese opium dens signified a vice economy, often attracting society’s more deviant characters in search of various illicit forms of pleasure.

The Sri Visan Theater prevailed as the main theater for the areas ethnic Chinese community until Tha Phae Road, like Chang Klan Road, began to undergo a state initiated transformation into a tourist zone. The theater lasted until the early 1990’s when it was torn down by Thaksin Shinawatra himself. In its later years, before it finally met the wrecking crew, it was known for hosting mid-night pornography screenings, a feature which would have helped it blend in nicely with the whorehouse alley that flanked it left side. The land is now home to the Chiang Mai branch office of Thakin’s AIS Company.

A later cinema operation of the Thaksin family was the Chintatsani Theater. This was in the Sanpakoi neighborhood of Chiang Mai, not far from the train station. While the Sri Visan presented a variety of films from various genres and countries, the Chintatsani specialized in Hong Kong martial arts productions. The swashbuckling antics of Chinese pugilist, films steeped in themes of revenge, of justice outside the bounds of the law, was widely popular among Chiang Mai residents. Perhaps originating from Bangkok’s political and cultural

hegemony, and the concurrent expansion of outside market forces that so drastically altered the social fabric of the city, the Chintatsani and its film fare of subaltern themes, Hong Kong style, was fondly recalled by denizens from across the social spectrum. But like Sri Visan, as well as other theaters in the city which were later purchased by Thaksin Shinawatra or members of his family, the Chintatsani was destroyed to make way for building of much less social consequence – in its particular case, a branch of Kasikorn Bank.

One Chiang Mai native recalled another theater – the Fah Thani, which by all accounts was an elegant theater in its time and the only one in the Suthep sub-district – that was purchased by a member of the Shinawatra family. Once under Shinawatra ownership the quality of the venue was alleged to have deteriorated, until finally it was closed and subsequently razed. “It was a real shame that Fah Thani Theater was destroyed. It was a cultural icon of the city in the 1980’s. All the money that Thaksin and his family made, he never gave anything back to his home town. In fact, he only destroyed good things. I feel nothing for Thaksin because of that.⁵”

4.3 Conclusion

In years gone by, Chiang Mai’s neighborhoods played host to their own movie theaters. These entertainment institutions helped to both characterize and define the various groups who attended them and the actual boundaries of the neighborhoods. In regards to the latter, there can scarcely be a more apt example of that than the territorial gang wars that were prone to occur around the Sri Visan Theater. The demarcation that the theater represented between groups of youngsters was part of a broader social divide that – for better or worse – was prevalent in certain parts of the city in the past. Over time those divides have ebbed and flowed, as the character of the neighborhood changed from ethnic enclave comprised of numerous migrants from both abroad and the Chiang Mai country side. Presumably, such territorial disputes continue in other parts of the city and with alternative kinds of landmarks as the point of conflict.

⁵ Personal interview with a Ratchapay University art teacher, 32 years old.

In other respects, the movie theaters of old helped to shape the future of the neighborhoods in which they stood. The Suyiwong and Suriyong theaters, for example, were most frequented by Chiang Mai's English speaking community. Whether they were officials at either the British, American or French consulates, missionaries undertaking proselytizing work among various regional ethnic groups, anthropologists or tourists on holiday, these two theaters had the capacity to draw the city's English speaking community. The surrounding businesses slowly began to respond to this phenomenon by reorienting their products and services to suit foreign tastes. As a result, both areas evolved into a dualistic epicenter of Chiang Mai's international tourist industry.

Over the years, however, Chiang Mai's old movie theaters have been lost to redevelopment schemes and changing demographics. Neighborhood characteristics which once made them viable business ventures, as well as important social institutions, have been augmented as technology and government policy have ushered in new living ways. Similar to the case of Bangkok, road congestion caused by increased car ownership have rendered specific street-level retail forms virtually useless for those reliant to the car for getting around. For many Chiang Mai consumers, the comfort and ease of entering the garages of

The movie theater geography in Chiang Mai today is as vapid as it has been in dozens of years. There are two multiplex movie theaters, both of which are attached to shopping malls, while all of the older neighborhood theaters have been destroyed. The old communities which supported them have likewise thinned out and moved on. Following trends at the national level, much of Chiang Mai's retail sales has relocated from traditional shop houses to the two larger, climate controlled shopping malls mentioned previously. This reflects, among other things, a shift towards private car ownership among Chiang Mai residents. Rising rates of car ownership means that more road space is utilized, inducing drivers to seek the easiest, most convenient method of parking in close proximity of their shopping destinations. Shopping malls, equipped with parking garages, have answered the drivers'/shoppers' call. With this in mind, it's important to note that these kinds of changes are indicative of a growing middle-class with a presumably higher disposable income than in years

past. Thus, it can be said that the decline of neighborhood stand-alone theaters and the communities that frequented them was part and parcel of a collective socio-economic step forward for the people of Chiang Mai. Economic progress, however, can have dubious results. While the benefits of increasing wealth are seemingly clear, the negative aspects are often overlooked. The decline of Chiang Mai's neighborhood movie theaters are, perhaps, indicators that the social bonds which helped fortify the city and community relations are dwindling, while for the average person, high-consumption and the alienated individualism that often accompanies it, are waiting in the wings. Such potential dangers are not inevitable. They result from the conscious decisions of policy makers and ordinary people, alike. In order to avoid making them it is necessary to step back for a moment and deeply scrutinize the direction that society is taking. Is Airport Plaza better than the older retail districts around the city? Is that really what the people of Chiang Mai aspire to? Moreover, is the car so important that the rest of the city has to suffer a scourge of pollution, noise and countless deaths? Is not their room for real modernity in the form of a functioning public transportation system?