

# *Bunchu Phu Narak* and Resistance to Modernity<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article explicates *Bunchu Phu Narak* in the mode of non-entertainment which revolves around a message of resistance to the changes in modern Thai society. The article makes clear that this film puts emphasis on ideal behavior of youth through the main characters, while frequently portraying the modern environment as being undesirable. The film also repeats and/or idealizes the representation of what may be considered as an outmoded identity to encourage the remembrance of such identity. The article concludes from these themes of depictions that *Bunchu Phu Narak* projects a defiance to the way Thailand has been modernized and promotes localization to counterbalance the trend of globalization that has permeated Thai society.

## Introduction

*Bunchu Phu Narak* (1988) was one of the popular Thai youth films directed by Budit Rittakol. The film was an enormous success, grossing 14 million baht – much more than any other youth films released before. The unanticipated income paved the way for the making of the rest of the *Bunchu* series of films, which have been recognized as Budit's masterpieces in terms of entertainment, with none of them failing to capture the audience's attention. On the

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the author's PhD dissertation titled *Film or Flick?: Budit Rittakol's Youth Films as a Reflection of Socio-Cultural Transition in Thailand*, partially funded by the Film Archive (Public Organization) and the Empowering Network for International Thai Studies (ENITS), Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University.

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surface, *Bunchu Phu Narak* has a quality of a mainstream movie due to the use of Thai style humor and magnetic stars, such as Suntisuk Promsiri in the role of Bunchu. However, this film also functions as a social instrument. As discussed by Cheeraboonya Thasanabanchong, *Bunchu Phu Narak* is one of the many youth films that promotes camaraderie with the image of shared dreams, generosity, and sacrifice.<sup>3</sup> Manoch Chummuangpak explains that the *Bunchu* series, in which *Bunchu Phu Narak* is included, can be identified as good quality films through the incorporation of social concerns, especially, ones that Thai people regularly experience, such as the lessening of generosity.<sup>4</sup>

To broaden the understanding of the film in this context, this article aims to show how *Bunchu Phu Narak*, as a prime example of the entire *Bunchu* series of films, expresses a rejection of the modernization of Thai society that experienced rapid urbanization with an expansion of consumerism and pop-culture. The matter of youth, modern society, and the depiction of Thainess integrated into the story serve as themes of discussion.

## Plotline

Bunchu is a young, rural man whose personality is defined by his strong Suphan Buri accent, simple clothes, and a polite manner. He has to move to Bangkok with Bualoy (his young niece) to take the university entrance exam as desired by Bunlom (his mother). There, Bunchu is looked after by Bunchuay (his brother and Buayloy's father) who tries to educate Bunchu on urban living, and who also brings him to a tutorial school where he meets Moree – a courteous Bangkok girl who lives with her rich, but hot-tempered sister, Manee. At the school, Bunchu becomes friend with Kummoon, Nara, Yoi, Chuey, and Waiyakorn.

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<sup>3</sup> Cheeraboonya, *The Analytical Study of the Characteristics of Thai Popular Youth Movies*, abstract page.

<sup>4</sup> Manoch, *The Narrative of Thai Popular Comedy Film Series "Bunchu" and the Director Creative Approaches*, abstract.

Bunchu makes an effort to be close to Moree because he falls in love with her at first sight, but Moree is often accompanied by Ngentra. Toeng, a delinquent who controls a printing business nearby the school, also likes Moree. One day, Kummoon, Nara, Yoi, Chuey, and Waiyakorn encourage Bunchu to follow Moree to a pizza restaurant where Moree, her friends, and Ngentra are threatened by a group of ruffians. This is a plan set by Toeng who intends to protect Moree from the ruffians to gain her appreciation. However, Bunchu and the group join the fight as well. Moree invites everyone to her birthday party to thank them all. During the party, Toeng and Ngentra are jealous of Bunchu. They deceive Bunchu to serve the birthday cake without Moree's permission. Nara is furious upon learning of their deception. He initiates a fight by which the party turns into a chaotic event and Manee is extremely angry. The day after, Bunchu apologizes for messing up the party. Moree pacifies Bunchu and decides to join their group. Apart from doing activities together, Bunchu, Moree, and the rest of the group agree to take a break at Bunchu's remote village in Suphan Buri. Bunlom notices Bunchu's feeling towards Moree, so she reminds him of his obligation to study and Bunchu changes himself thereafter. He keeps reading rather than having fun with friends, but it turns out that he cannot pass the exam.

Toward the end of the film, Moree is abducted by Toeng. Bunchu and the rest of the group risk themselves to rescue her. Another chaotic scene occurs before policemen arrive to arrest Toeng and his gang. Moree is safe, but Bunchu is sent to the hospital. When Bunchu recovers, he makes a decision to go back to his hometown. Moree rushes to meet with him and cheer him up so that he decides to retry the entrance exam the next year.

### **Emphasis on Ideal Youth**

In *Bunchu Phu Narak*, the representation of youth is carried by the character of Bunchu, Moree, Chuey, Waiyakorn, Nara, Kummoon, and Yoi. The focus of attention is shared amongst these main characters in most of the scenes, leading to the idea that youthfulness in *Bunchu Phu Narak* is linked inextricably to the idea of 'group'. What is very interesting is the discovery that the portrayal of all these

characters contrasts with the dominant image of 1980s youth, insofar as each of them thinks and acts in an ideal manner, while the youth in the actual society were more often not so ideal in their behavior. As explained by Rajanikorn Setihoe, the 1980s youth possessed a shared culture by which the city youth would initiate the latest fashions for pleasurable consumption and the rural youth would do the same thereafter.<sup>5</sup> Ice skating rinks, bowling centers and discotheques became the venues for their meeting. Some engaged in new popular culture, such as hard-rock music. As for the rural youth, they would try to be as trendy as the city youth, no matter whether their financial status supported such a lifestyle. This is seen as a consequence of the new economic environment in which services and products, such as modern clothes, films and songs, and coffee shops, were incessantly promoted to the young customers. According to the group discussions titled Youth's Living in the Changing Society, life of the city youth went on without clear direction, while misbehavior was prevalent.<sup>6</sup> As for rural youth, many were part of disadvantaged families. Their development either in educational or professional terms failed to emerge as expected. Regardless whether city or rural, young people engaged in similar practices such as free sex, materialism, aggression, or drug use. Moreover, the number of the young committing illicit or illegal activities in the 1980s noticeably increased.<sup>7</sup> Many young people were found to be taking part in offenses such as stealing, drug-related crimes, unlawful assembly, assault, and possession of offensive weapon or guns.<sup>8</sup> Unlike this reality, *Bunchu Phu Narak* depicts the youth in the film from a more ideal angle. The following discussion will look into the depiction of the main youth characters in this film.

Bunchu is portrayed with a clear intention to exhibit the characteristics of rural people. He has a Suphan Buri accent, which sounds funny for many Thais and can evoke a picture of ruralness because it is not the central dialect used in Bangkok. He often appears

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<sup>5</sup> Rajanikorn, *The Structure of Thai Society and Culture*, 97.

<sup>6</sup> “วิถีชีวิตของเยาวชนในสังคมที่แปรผัน (Youth's Living in the Changing Society)”, 53-59.

<sup>7</sup> Chitsanu, “The Problems of Thai Children and Youth in the Present Circumstance”, 43.

<sup>8</sup> Chanita, “Introduction”, 2.

in simple outfits which gives him the appearance of a country bumpkin. Even so, he possesses personal features that are impressive for Thai people. Firstly, Bunchu moves to Bangkok following his mother's wish, without indicating whether or not he is happy with such; this can only be seen that he never thinks or does anything in defiance of Bunlom. Secondly, no scenes depict Bunchu as an aggressive young man, other than in the fight against the ruffians to save Moree. Thirdly, Bunchu is highly courteous to everyone. He always ends his sentence with the ending particle 'ja' to display politeness. He even pays respect to a cashier with a 'wai' (pressing the hands together in a sign of respect) in the scene of his application for the tutorial class. Fourthly, Bunchu shows himself to be a strict follower of Buddhism. He often mentions Buddhist teachings in Pali. After he moves to Bangkok, Bunchu does not forego the tradition of giving alms to monks either. Fifthly, Bunchu never shows a sign of rejecting his country background or changing his manner to look like a city resident. This is evident when Bunchuay encourages Bunchu to be like a Bangkokian, but Bunchu chooses to remain as he is. Finally, Bunchu feels down every time he sees Moree accompany Ngentra, but he neither expresses his displeasure to anyone, nor does he allow it to hamper his duty, which is to complete the university entrance exam.

These elements indicate that Bunchu's character is obedient, harmless, kind, helpful, and courteous. His faith in Buddhism is very strong and he rarely follows modern trends. He also has the ability for self-control, a trait not so evident in the vast majority of the young generation of the 1980s.

Moree is the opposite of Bunchu in terms of social background. She is a Bangkok teenager whose luxurious outfits, residence, and socialization can be sensed throughout the story. However, despite her wealthy living, Moree matches Bunchu in meeting what some have defined as the desirable expectations of Thai youth. She is highly courteous. Every time she is on the screen, the audience will only see her friendliness toward every character, regardless of their social class. She always greets everyone with a mellifluous, well-educated voice. As well, her reaction towards Bunchu in every scene they are together shows that Moree has a kind heart, not less than Bunchu. She does

not, for example, reveal any signs of disregard, particularly when it is clear that Bunchu hails from a remote village. She even helps Bunchu cross the street because Bunchu is not used to the busy streets in Bangkok. Forgiveness is another aspect seen in the character of Moree. After the chaotic fight at the birthday party, one would guess that Moree would be extremely angry about Bunchu's mistake. However, the next scene shows Moree pacifying Bunchu in a private conversation.

Yoi, Nara, Chuey, Kummoon, and Waiyakorn are the main supporting youth characters who colour the story with their amusing nature. When they are establishing a friendship in their first scene, Kummoon chats easily with Chuey despite their unfamiliarity with each other. The conversation then grows to include more characters, namely, Yoi, Nara, Waiyakorn, as well as Bunchu, whose backgrounds are all completely different – Kummoon is from northeast Thailand, whereas Chuey and Nara are from the north and south, respectively. Throughout the story, they never use violence, other than to help Bunchu deal with the ruffians, such as in scenes at the pizza restaurant and publishing house. None of them are depressed about life and any mistakes within the group never frustrate them. Arrogance cannot be detected from any of their dialogue or actions. They do not, in other words, show off their richness or smartness to impress or put down each other. In summary, they are young people with unaggressive, cheerful, friendly, and ordinary natures.

When considering the characters both in the leading and supporting roles, it is found that they usually have amusing conversations; engage in simple, inexpensive recreation; and act interdependently. Their amusing conversations appear in many scenes, which mostly take the form of Thai style jokes in which the misuse of words is the essence. All of them have the inclination to keep laughing in order to enhance the joyfulness of their talk. Their engaging in inexpensive recreation is obvious after Moree joins the group. For example, they fly kites and play Frisbee together. Then, they take a journey to Bunchu's hometown in order to relieve the tension from their academic pursuits. All these activities can be seen as quite conventional, as well as economical, when compared to the new trend,

i.e., playing popular music, bowling, and roaming around the famous neighbourhoods such as Siam Square. Their interdependence is evident in the fight against Toeng and his subordinates in the second and third sequence, which indicates that none of the main characters are hesitant to join the fight or are afraid of injury. This implies their friendship is based on mutual help.

In terms of lifestyle, none of the central youth characters conform to the new living convention, in that they spend most of their time in preparation for the entrance exam. They attend the tutorial school on a daily basis and focus on intensive reading to build up their knowledge; this is particularly seen in Bunchu and Chuey. During their spare time, Bunchu and the group often use the cafeteria as a place of meeting – not a fashionable fast food restaurant; Bunchu travels by bus – Waiyakorn uses a bicycle. Interestingly, there is a shot of a huge billboard advertisement for a Tina Turner concert. Then, the next shot shows Bunchu and Moree watching *likay* (Thai style folk theatre). The twist can be seen as a joke as much as this is an indication that the two characters are not interested in spending their money on extravagant entertainment. Moreover, they tend to avoid meeting at lavish places or entertainment venues. Expensive consumption is not part in their everyday life; their lifestyle is not colourful or exceptionally adventurous. However, such a lifestyle looks highly appropriate, from a traditional point of view, for young people whose obligation it is to complete their education.

The only romance in the film happens between Bunchu and Moree. The way they both treat their romantic situation is defined by self-control and conscience in which Bunchu and Moree do not struggle with their relationship. Bunchu does not allow his romance to ruin his given duty. Once his mother expresses her concerns about him and Moree, he realizes that he should concentrate on the exam more than adolescent love. He then recommences his rigorous reading and even declines Moree's invitation to her garden where he could be with her in private. After he sees Moree leaving with Ngentra at the end of sequence two, he becomes extremely sad, but reveals to the group that he would rather do anything to lessen his mother's concerns, meaning that he treasures his mother's feelings above his own romantic

feelings. It is also important to note that he can control his emotions with respect to romance in every aspect; thereupon, he does not exhibit any resentment that may affect his friendship with Moree. When Bunchu finds out that he has failed the exam while Moree has passed, he is generous enough to congratulate her, as well as offer her a meal as a special treat for her success. Differently, Ngentra is neither interested in Moree's exam result, nor happy about it. He is only concerned about his own achievement and becomes mad at her after knowing that he has failed. By this comparison, Bunchu's romantic feelings are founded on good care for Moree and his own personal conscience, while Ngentra's feelings are more like a passion for Moree's beauty.

For Moree, it seems as if she is out of Bunchu's league owing to her beauty and social class. Even so, she never expresses her dislike towards him. Every time Bunchu approaches her for a chat, she responds courteously. She talks to him cordially during the first meeting outside the wharf, despite not knowing him. Aside from this, no scenes depict Moree flirting with Bunchu that might cause him undo distraction. She only gives him a friendly smile and that is all. It can be said that the way she copes with Bunchu's feeling meets the traditional expectation in Thai society for young females.

As commented by Nuntana Kumwong, Bundit did not fit the role of a romantic person and he was not expressive and did not engage in public displays of affection.<sup>9</sup> His anti-romantic behavior was confirmed by Thanathorn Rittakol, who further explained that, for Bundit, love was an acceptance of differences and mutual respect, rather than creation of an amorous moment.<sup>10</sup> This could be one of the reasons why the matter of romance is portrayed in such an ideal manner in this film.

The last issue to be discussed is the dominant beliefs as interpreted from the dialogue and actions of the central youth characters, including the communication between Bunlom and Bunchu. The main plotline has Bunchu go to the capital just to attend

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<sup>9</sup> "What Is Hidden in the Films of Bundit Rittakol? (Final)".

<sup>10</sup> Interview by Thanayod Lopattananont.

the university entrance exam. After his application for the tutorial class, he engages in conversation with Waiyakorn whereby the audience learns that Waiyakorn has taken the exam for many years to try and win a place in medical school. Other characters are committed to passing the exam in a similar way, without any thoughts about alternatives in case they do not succeed. In the opening sequence, Bunlom urges Bunchu to focus on the exam. She says to him that the degree will bring the entire family great pride. Then, in the last half of sequence two, she repeats her wish to see him succeed. From the point of view of Bunlom, the duty of young people should be to achieve a higher education. As for Bunchu, it is his responsibility to do as desired by his mother. According to Narupon Chaiyod, Bundit himself seems to have been a devoted believer of the Thai education system.<sup>11</sup> This is why the central characters are shown being committed to their education. It is undeniable then that the central youth characters are, as can be concluded from these data, purposely portrayed promoting the belief in higher education in which qualification for a place in a state university is a primary achievement.

### **Critical Image of Modern Society in the Late 1980s**

*Bunchu Phu Narak* contains many different plot lines, one of which shows a critique of modern society in the late 1980s. McGregor, Camfield, Masae, and Buapun point out that a modern lifestyle has brought about the reduction of social interaction amongst people in the same community, no matter if they were neighbors or relatives.<sup>12</sup> Krittinee Nuttavuthisit, et al., gives a more detailed discussion, saying that the past development that connected the country within the global cultural current granted precedence to a materialistic and/or consumeristic lifestyle and such lifestyle has often resulted in a weakening of local identity, plus replacement of social relationships with an ‘each man for himself’ mentality.<sup>13</sup> As summarized by the Seventh National Economic and Social

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<sup>11</sup> Interview by Thanayod Lopattananont.

<sup>12</sup> McGregor, “Wellbeing, Development and Social Change in Thailand”, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Krittinee, *The Effect of Global Cultural Change Towards Thai Society and Culture*, 3.

Development Plan (1992-1996), Thai society struggled with change to suit the new economic environment.<sup>14</sup> Insofar as the manner of living changed in accordance with modern values and attitudes, the plan noted that recognition of morality, local culture, spiritual activities, including the traditional way of living declined. The Plan goes on to explain that while the percentage of some criminal acts decreased, many cases have turned out to be more serious and poverty in the city area and informal urban settlements has become a worrying issue. It is theorized that these problems emanated from socio-economic changes resulting from an emphasis on an industrialized and urbanized way of life. To show this issue, there is a plotline in which Bunchu struggles in the city environment during his preparation for the entrance exam. The city residents are depicted as very mean, causing Bunchu to be uncomfortable living in Bangkok. However, Bunchu can survive with his innate sense of decency and harmlessness. Thus, *Bunchu Phu Narak* offers a visual comparison between rural and urban life in a way that the former embodies moral and ethical advancement (to be discussed in the next section), whereas the latter does not. Some of the supporting youth characters, other supporting characters, background elements, as well as some specific signifiers, are elements in the film that create a negative portrayal of the urban space.

Regarding the supporting youth characters, the one deserving particular discussion is Ngentra who appears in the story as Moree's companion. Ngentra has the features of a young person with an urban lifestyle. He dresses fashionably, drives an expensive car and spends his money freely. He likes to impress Moree and her friends with his wealth, as shown in the pizza restaurant scene when he proposes to pay for the meal. Interestingly, Ngentra's character is filled with selfishness and envy, despite his modern appearance. For example, Ngentra rejects Moree's request to offer Bunchu a ride in his car in the first scene between Moree and Bunchu. He reasons that the space is too small to let Bunchu in the car. At the birthday party, Ngentra is jealous of Bunchu and is not hesitant to cooperate with Toeng in

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<sup>14</sup> Office of National Economic and Social Development Board, *The Seventh National Economic and Social Development Plan (1992-1996)*, 2-3.

humiliating Bunchu by tricking him to cut the birthday cake without permission from the host. Finally, Ngentra is very upset with his exam failure, whereupon he becomes aggressive towards Moree, indicating that his own interest and problems always comes first. The name Ngentra means 'money' and it can be understood that the way he is portrayed gives the connotation that prosperity does not always come with a good spirit.

Toeng is another character to examine. He appears as a delinquent who earns his living through publishing and selling textbooks or sheets around the tutorial school. He is always on the screen in trendy outfits with stylish caps and chewing gum. The presentation of him, similar to Ngentra, suggests the new socio-economic influence by which people were interested in Westernizing their appearance. However, Toeng is a rude, selfish, arrogant, violent and mean character. The way his character is portrayed can be interpreted as a message by Budit speaking against the way Westernization was adopted in Thai society in that people did not embrace moral or ethical improvement. Toeng's undesirable features can be seen in all the scenes in which he appears. In the cafeteria, Toeng refuses to share the same table with Bunchu, and scolds him, telling him to find another spot. He often uses the word 'ku', which means 'I', but is an impolite form of first person pronoun in the Thai context. He dishonours Moree by flirting with her openly. He also says to his subordinates that he will do whatever to capture her heart, albeit just for fun. He plots the situation in which Ngentra, Moree, and their friends are threatened by his cohorts and then he appears to protect them to make a heroic impression. At the very end of sequence two, he orders his subordinates to abduct Moree at night and keep her in the publishing house. These elements are sufficient to conclude that Toeng's role was a way for Budit to show how foreign culture was adopted in the urban space, which was more in terms of look and appearance rather than absorbing some of the desirable aspects of the foreign culture, such as discipline, honesty and creativity.

Bunchuay and Manee are the other supporting characters to be discussed. According to the study of their backgrounds, actions and dialogue, they project an 'urban' element in a manner that shows

modernity at the cost of one's spirit. Bunchuay moves to Bangkok in accordance with Bunlom's wish. Originally, he is supposed to further his studies, but falls into a romantic relationship with a woman who becomes Bualoy's mother, who later leaves him. Bunchuay continues his life in the capital. He invests in a business at a Chao Phraya River wharf with money from Bunlom. During the story, Bunchuay tries to be like a smart Bangkokian, as well as tries to eliminate his rural image in order to fit into the city environment. A study of his character suggests that, while he turns his back on his rural origin, developing himself to be a better person in terms of being kind and caring, such as Bunchu, is not his primary interest. In one scene, he brings Bunchu to the tutorial school and teaches him about urban behavior – to not do anything too foolish, as well as to try to be like an aristocrat. In another scene, he learns of Bunchu's feeling towards Moree and urges Bunchu to eliminate all his rural qualities to impress her. His words in both scenes mirror his desire to challenge the rural way of living. When he first talks to Manee, he hides the truth that Bualoy is his daughter to give the impression that he is single in order to capture Manee's attention. He then tries to engage in conversation with Manee, in which he implicitly praises himself. His interaction with Manee indicates that he is a character with a tendency toward self-interest.

Manee is a wealthy working woman whose place of residence is Bangkok. She owns a huge bungalow surrounded by a wide lawn with plenty of plants and flowers. She looks dignified, wearing elegant outfits, cosmetics and accessories. In contrast to the aura of urbanity, Manee is often unkind, unreasonable and lacks emotional control. During the fight in the party scene, Manee slides off the table by accident and Bunchuay saves her from falling on the floor. However, Manee hits him in the face with extreme anger and drives Bunchu and his group away without any attempt to find out the truth. In the end of sequence two, Manee believes that Bunchu arranged the abduction of Moree just because it is reported that one of the kidnappers speaks the same dialect as Bunchu. She hurriedly takes policemen to Bunchuay's house in order to capture Bunchu. There, she acts forcefully toward Bunchu and Bunchuay, while refusing to listen, no matter how they

reason with her. Once Bunchu is proven innocent, no scenes show her apologizing for the misunderstanding.

The use of the city background has various meanings. Sometimes the background is just a cinematic component without significant meaning. However, at other times, the background is there to indicate some negative connotation, working together to emphasize the decline of personal conscience in the urban arena.

The bus station and walkway are the first two elements introducing typical troubles in the urban area. The bus station appears at the beginning of the second sequence where Bunchu leaves some of his belongings with Bualoy to look for Bunchuay. Very quickly, a thief takes the belongings while both of them are not looking. The walkway scene comes into the story not long after and is the location where Bunchuay teaches Bunchu to act properly. Two teenagers walk pass quickly uttering many swear words. These two background settings show that safety of one's property is in danger once entering Bangkok, while offensiveness can easily be encountered.

The tutorial school contributes to the emphasis on educational beliefs in most of the story. According to Somboon Tanya, Thai people think of education as an acceptable path to a better life and prestigious career.<sup>15</sup> They often are determined that their children become as well educated as they can. However, the school serves to depict the business of academics as well. This is evident in the scene in which Bunchu has a pile of sheets and books put in his hands by Toeng's subordinate on the date of his application for the tutorial class. He understands that they all are given to him without charge, but a moment later, he is terrorized to pay. At the same time, there is a shot of students buying the materials for their studies. All these situations communicate that gaining knowledge in the urban area has a high price.

The printing shop is owned by Toeng and operated by a group of delinquents and ruffians. The place itself gives the impression of a capitalistic venture because it supplies academic materials in exchange for profit. In the printing house, the audience can only hear crude talk

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<sup>15</sup> Somboon, *Thai Educational Values*, 135.

among the workers. During the climax of the story, the printing shop is turned into a party site full of light, colour, and drinks, but reveals a high level of amorality when Moree is sexually harassed there. Pop music, costumes, a discothèque, and arm wrestling shown during the party can be interpreted as representatives of foreign culture. Their existence in the party is Bunit's message that the trend of adopting foreign culture in the city area has a significant relationship with the denial of traditional Thai culture.

The signifiers of this argument to be discussed include certain dialogue, location, and props. Bunchu's conversation with Moree after the fight in the birthday party is a good example, implying the problem with urban people:

“I am sorry. I apologize. I am inexperienced. I am truly sorry. I did not think people in Bangkok would be this mean.”

The location and props are a pizza restaurant and birthday cake, both of which indicate the coming of foreign culture. Pizza is considered a foreign dish, popularized in Thailand around the mid-1980s amongst urban residents – the youth in particular. After Moree, Ngentra, and two other female friends enjoy their pizza, Ngentra is attacked by ruffians as plotted by Toeng, leading to the first scene of mayhem. The birthday cake is a central component in the party scene. Toeng and his cohorts, including Ngentra, mislead Bunchu by telling him to serve the cake to the elders who have joined the party. This causes Bunchu to cut the cake without permission from the host. He is then blamed by the attendees, while receiving a scornful laugh from the three. Suddenly, Nara initiates the chaotic fight because of his fury at witnessing Bunchu's embarrassment. Serving birthday cake is not originally a Thai tradition, and cake itself is not deemed a Thai sweet. Based on these elements, Bunit has used signs of foreign culture matched with improper behaviour to imply the mindlessly way of cultural adoption in Thailand. As suggested by Udomporn Yingpaiboonsuk and Premwadee Karuhadej, Thai people have often copied foreign culture without consideration of what deserves to be

accepted.<sup>16</sup> They tend to, in other words, merely follow the form of foreign lifestyle, rather than taking into consideration ethical and moral development.

### **Promotion of Traditional Thai Identity**

Amid the growth of the free economy, some aspects of traditional Thai identity were considered old-fashioned. Based on Riggs' explanation in "A Model for the Study of Thai Society", traditional Thai society was originally one wherein people's lives depended on nature.<sup>17</sup> The lives of many locals were connected to cultivation and people typically adopted some sort of social interaction to aid in their crop production, with such interaction resulting in tight relationships, generosity, forgiveness, or whatever was capable of strengthening their unity. The agrarian aspect of traditional Thai culture can be seen through rituals and ceremonies such as Tum Kwan Kao (The Spiritual Side of Rice), Raeg Na Kwan (Royal Ploughing Ceremony), or Hae Nang Maew (Cat Procession Ritual to Call for Rain), the theme of which revolve around agricultural activities.<sup>18</sup> Apart from these social aspects, the familial aspect of traditional Thai society is another matter to consider. According to Rajanikorn Setihoe, the extended family is the most common form of family unit found in the traditional social mode.<sup>19</sup> Extended families are a mix of generations comprising parents, children, grandparents, and, sometimes, close relatives. Manus Wanitchanon states that the extended family has been an integral part of Thai society by which the young are well provided with love and care, including proper instruction in ethics and customs.<sup>20</sup> In addition to extended families, Manus asserts the perhaps idealized view that Thai society is praised for its serene quality, with a belief in peaceful living, law of karma, mercy and forgiveness pervading the society;<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Udornporn, *Students' Sexuality in Rattanakosin District*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Paibul, *The Aspects of Thai Society and Administration*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Narong, *Thai Living*, 23.

<sup>19</sup> Rajanikorn, *The Structure of Thai Society and Culture*, 96.

<sup>20</sup> Manus, "The Warmth of Thai Family and Sustainable Happiness", 29.

<sup>21</sup> Narong, *Thai Living*, 24.

therefore, an aggressive approach to any conflict is supplanted mostly by conciliation, which embeds the image of being a compromiser into the notion of being Thai. In *Bunchu Phu Narak*, some of these traditional identities are represented throughout the story. Parts of such identities are presented from a positive angle, whereas other aspects appear in the film to stress the idea of what is socially or culturally distinctive.

The characterization of Bunchu not only supports the concept of ideal youth, but also projects a positive view regarding agricultural and rural society. As discussed before, Bunchu represents the young generation from a rural environment as shown by his clothes, dialect and manner. With his agrarian image, the audience can sense civility and benevolence. As well, he never changes himself to fit economic modernization, even though his rural nature becomes an obstacle in some situations, but instead manages to continue his studying as expected by his mother, Bunlom. With the combination of a character with a rural background, Bunchu delivers a good feeling about agriculture and the rural environment, which is Budit's way to challenge the concept of modernization that is primarily focused on industrial capitalism at the expense of the traditional agriculture economy.

Interestingly, the concept of an *everyman* character can be applied to Bunchu to understand the link between Bunchu and promotion of traditional Thai identity. Everyman refers to the character designed to represent the ordinary person, originating from the 15<sup>th</sup> century English allegorical play titled *The Summoning of Everyman*.<sup>22</sup> Throughout the story, Bunchu is an average Thai male with whom the audience can identify easily. His name sounds very traditional in terms of pronunciation and meaning. In Thai, *Bun* means 'merit' – in fact many Thai names often start with this word – while *chu* denotes 'elevation'. The name Bunchu, as a whole, can be understood as loftiness of merit and reflects the Thai belief about karma whereby people feel compelled to conduct good deeds in order to achieve a high level of virtue. This type of name is rarely found

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<sup>22</sup> Merriam-Webster, "Everyman".

amongst people with urban backgrounds. Aside from his name, his face, speaking style, belief in Buddhism and clothes convey a sense of Thai ruralness that reminds the audience of an agricultural society that existed around the period of the film's screening. This is why Bunchu is a purposively created character. To be precise, he is in the story to highlight the common ordinariness of Thai people.

Bunlom and Bualoy represent the 'rural' in a similar mode. They both connect the audience with a feeling of kindness and sincerity. Aside from stressing educational beliefs, Bunlom is included in the story as an elder rural person with religious faith, as well as being kind-hearted. In the opening sequence, there is a shot of Bunlom offering food to monks at the paddy field, together with Bunchu and Bualoy. In the second sequence, Bunlom welcomes Moree and the group during their visit to Bunchu's village. She eagerly provides drinks and food for them. Thereafter, Bunlom discerns Bunchu's feeling toward Moree. She could rebuke him, but she does not. Instead, she tells him to focus on his studies rather than romance. She gives him the choice of coming back to grow rice with her in case he is not successful. The tone of her voice does not contain force that may hurt Bunchu.

Bualoy is a young rural girl whose thoughts are not yet overwhelmed with the modern lifestyle. She has a strong Suphaburi dialect similar to Bunchu. Her overall appearance looks neat and clean. It can be seen that Bualoy can distinguish what is deemed proper and improper in the traditional Thai context. In the first sequence, Bualoy joins the conversation between Bunchu and Bunlom. She realizes how Bunlom expects Bunchu to conduct himself. Therefore, she warns Bunchu of the undesirable consequence of his romance after seeing him with a photo of Moree. During the first conversation between Bunchu and Manee, Bualoy is sitting next to Bunchu to help him collect travel fares, indicating her kind intention to be of help. Interestingly, no scenes depict Bualoy annoying Bunlom, Bunchu or Bunchuay. She does not ask for toys or sweets, either at home or outside, such that one could say that she is not a peevish child. Bualoy's actions are found to be obedient to Bunlom; she often appears in the story to remind other characters,

such as Bunchu, of appropriate behaviour. Her character – in conjunction with Bunlom's – produces the impression that rural people have admirable natures.

In addition, these two characters can also be understood through the concept of Everyman, similar to Bunchu. It is found that they not only related a good feel toward the rural image, but also bring agricultural identity to the fore. Bunlom means being surrounded with merit; whereas Bualoy refers to the name of a popular sweet dish (small rice balls in sweetened and thickened coconut milk), having been adopted into the Thai culinary culture and modified to suit the local taste. The two share similar appearance and faith. They do not use makeup or fashionable clothes. They believe in the law of karma and conform to social taboos; urban demeanor is not part of their character.

Bundit used the rural background to show the beauty of the local environment in the absence of economic modernization. These settings, such as rice paddies, Bunchu's house and the local community, are filled with peace and good spirits, which is absent in the representation of Bangkok.

*Bunchu Phu Narak* begins with an image of a rice paddy in the early morning. The paddy looks fresh and virtually free from the uproar of the city, with no threats or miseries perceived. According to Thanathorn Rittakol, Bundit had a continuing bond with the rural area, forests, rivers, mountains or canals, once revealing that he wanted to have a house in the rural area.<sup>23</sup> Although the rural atmosphere may have originated from Bundit's personal preference, the employment of the rice paddy in this mode repeats the agrarian identity as much as stresses the beauty of agrarian society.

Bunchu's house is not built in a style that replicates modern-style housing, but instead has the same structural details as framed by traditional Thai architectural concepts. The house is elevated from the ground to facilitate air flow and to store harvests or livestock beneath. A large indoor space designed for family gatherings is a prominent part. The house is unpainted. Electric appliances, such as a television,

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<sup>23</sup> Interview by Thanayod Lopattananont.

refrigerator, electric fan, are not found, only baskets in numerous sizes. In the opening sequence, his house is the place where Bunchu, Bunlom, and Bualoy are having a meal together. They eat with their fingers, the food composed of different dishes to complement a portion of rice in their hands. They clean their fingers in a bowl of water after finishing the meal. The combination of the house and the eating manner is the living style that prevailed before economic modernization. The point is that Bunchu is one who never foregoes such an outmoded lifestyle or shows any signs that such a lifestyle is unfavourable. His acceptance of such a lifestyle was included to remind one of the perceived uniqueness and blissfulness of traditional Thai rural culture, which, according to Decharut Sukkumnoed, is in opposition to the modernization theory that speaks against the value of the rural sector.<sup>24</sup>

The local community harmonizes with the paddy field and the house in a way that makes the community look very Thai, particularly the centre of the village to which Bunchu, Bunlom, and Bualoy belong. In the opening sequence, all three characters walk along the community to reach a minibus. A marching band walks through the community, followed by the image of the three characters greeting their acquaintances. They interact with one another in a relaxed manner. The simplicity of communal lifestyle can also be seen from a number of extras in common casual clothes and sarongs, as well as a row of old wooden houses aligned with the street. Economic difficulty is not shown in this representation, despite being essentially undeveloped. Only a good mood predominates.

The riverside house in Bangkok owned by Bunchuay only looks classier than the house in the rice paddy owing to the inclusion of furniture and traditional decoration, but without luxurious items that are a sign of conspicuous consumption. The windows and doors are carefully situated to assist the circulation of air, thereupon no air-conditioners comes into view in any of the riverside house scenes. The walls are also decorated with Thai design. The riverside house is the home for Bunchu while he prepares for his exam. Given the focal

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<sup>24</sup> Decharut, "Urban Living in Harmony with the Rural Area", 76.

nature of the house, its existence in the film helps emphasize the recognition of a traditional Thai way of living; whereas, if Bunchu resided in a mansion or newly constructed townhouse, the emphasis would have been on socio-economic development.

The Chao Phraya River seems to be a major location in *Bunchu Phu Narak*, appearing in many sequences with different purposes. For example, the river includes images of hotels, skyscrapers and fine restaurants in order to communicate the difference between the city and the rural village, as well as the rise of extravagance during the period of economic development. Sometimes, the river highlights the depiction of an inexpensive lifestyle by which people travel by cheap ferries and boats, while the rich will only use a private car. The Chao Phraya River has been a part of the socio-economic environment in Thai history since the Ayutthaya era when it functioned as a main channel for commercial contact between the locals and foreigners, as well as being a fertile site for agricultural activities.<sup>25</sup> The repeated use of the river as a setting has an implicit purpose, instead of using a business zone such as Silom or Sathorn which might well exhibit the economic superiority of the city. The purpose is to recall a sense of Thainess by way of a historical memory of the importance of the use of waterways, rather than the new economic imprint, i.e., cars and roads, that feeds the process of modernization.

Dialogue that projects a traditional Thai identity can be seen from Bunlom and Nara. One is about Thai belief as regards love; the other concerns agricultural activities. With respect to love, Bunlom says:

“What I am most concerned about is women. You must avoid..... Otherwise, you will feel sorry for your choice of a woman.”

This bit of dialogue shows that Bunlom does not like to see her son get involved in any romantic relationship, reflecting the traditional belief that obligates men to be careful of women, especially when they

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<sup>25</sup> Paladisai, *Chao Phraya River Legend*, 175-177.

are not fully mature. In the scene where Bunchu is dreaming about Moree in his reading room, Bualoy uses similar words to remind Bunchu of his duty. Kritaya Archavanitkul asserts that Thai society has strict control regarding sexual contact or love. He notes that such control is often maintained by planting orthodox thinking or discourse in the minds of the young, such as do not fall in love while studying, youthful sexual relations is not permitted, etc. Romantic relationships in the new social context are, however, considered to be less controlled.<sup>26</sup> The repetition of the dialogue, therefore, indicates a traditional belief in defiance of easy-going romances.

Regarding agriculture, Nara says:

“It is all right to be a farmer. I am proud of it, because a farmer is comparable to the backbone of the nation.”

Nara says this at the end of sequence two when Bunchu grumbles about his exam failure that he would be a farmer for all his life. The words sound old-fashioned, especially when the free economy was transforming Thai society into an industrialised society. One would not expect such a thought to be spoken by a young character such as Nara. Therefore, the dialogue is in the film intentionally to connote the positive side of an agrarian society.

## Conclusion

Bunchu, Moree, and their friends occupy roles that show ideal young people with minimal engagement in modern youth culture. Urbanization, on the other hand, is made to appear troublesome through the depiction of unethical behavior by some characters who enjoy an urban lifestyle, bringing about an impression that some of the city residents are not always civil and economic modernization does not always bring forth moral or ethical enhancement. On the contrary, the depiction of traditional Thai identity, which some say lessened in significance during the 1980s, is represented repeatedly and in a good light as emphasized by the dialogue and the settings for the central

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<sup>26</sup> Kritaya, “Sexuality Transition in Thai Society”, 57.

characters that promotes an appreciation of Thainess in a traditional sense. Therefore, while *Bunchu Phu Narak* does not entirely reject the trend of modernization, the film tends to speak against the way that modernization was adopted. This can be understood as a reflection of Bundit's desire to defend old Thai culture – particularly, a culture that portrays an idyllic Thai society.

However, it is found as well that *Bunchu Phu Narak* does not reject modernization in a forceful manner because part of urban modernity is portrayed in the film in quite a positive way, especially, through the character of Moree. Moree is an urban character whose background involves expensive lifestyle to a certain extent, but she is generous and kindly accepts traditional rural culture. Her good nature can be interpreted as a message that even though urban modernization can bring about undesirable results and impacts traditional Thai ways of life, it is not totally negative. Simultaneously, Bunchu does not declare a desire to go completely against modernity. He agrees to join the entrance exam which could be considered to be part of the modern Thai educational system.

Being in the stream of modernism as such suggests the idea of how rural and urban cultures can co-exist. 'Resistance to modernity', in this context, does not, therefore, indicate a call to terminate modernization, but rather was Bundit's message to encourage good awareness of the way Thai society has, or perhaps should be, modernized. Based on the constructive portrayal of ruralness and the emphasis of local identity, *Bunchu Phu Narak* was, nevertheless, a voice in support of localism amid the increasing strength of globalism in the late 1980s.

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