

officially lauded by Soekarno, while their slogans and calls adorned nationalist posters (see chapter 1), and their likenesses and stories appeared ubiquitously in the imagery and narratives produced by the artists of the foundational *Angkatan 45*, or “1945 Generation” (Yngvesson 2014). Mirroring the Philippines, however, it was only under the New Order—when sex workers’ quasi-legal structural and economic roles in society increased while official regimes of morality and visibility suppressed recognition of their contributions—that prostitutes came to colonize national movie screens en masse.

As I have established thus far, an important reason for this phenomenon is the prostitute’s function as a symbol of the structural realities of life under 1970s Southeast Asian dictatorships. A still more crucial reason, I suggest, is the multifarious ways in which screen prostitutes are shown to *see*. The horrific revelations and perspectives to which those who fall into such positions of social, political, and economic compromise also gain access are passed on to viewers, urging them to challenge the ways in which citizens are prompted to look and act under the New Order and the New Society. In comparison to works prior to the institution of dictatorships, many of the 1970s films featuring prostitutes in Indonesia and the Philippines are therefore more closely focused on capital cities or the governments installed there. Among other things, this has led critics to frame filmmakers’ interventions in terms of the development of new patterns and approaches in national, rather than regional, cinemas.¹²

Without denying the implicit and explicit logic of nationalism in these films, I will continue to look at them through the lens of particular genres emerging across the region and what I position as not-so-coincidental correlations between them. In this context, the increased presence of sex workers and other marginalized women on movie screens in Thailand at almost precisely the same time as in Indonesia and the Philippines demands further scrutiny. Intriguingly, however, the first such Thai effort implicitly marks the *fall* of a national Father. In my reading, this is an important caveat, implying that, like citizens, the dictator is himself less an actor and more a reaction to or symbol of broader global shifts to which the region is being pressed to respond. As I will show, in diegetic Bangkok, the prostitute is similarly positioned to address conditions of visibility and power that exceed the purview of both dictatorship and explicit, phallogocentric modes of resistance in the form of public protests. In this case, however, the sex worker’s emergent ability to embody and negotiate the visual and psychic splits of the 1970s is implied to be rooted in her rural past.

PROTEST, PROSTITUTION, AND “FLEXIBLE MEMBERS” IN BANGKOK

Like *Bernafas* and *Maynila*, the Thai film *Theptida Rong Ram* (*Hotel Angel*, dir. Chatrichalerm Yukol, 1974) uses the experiences of a central prostitute figure as an indirect, and at times almost direct, critique of urban Thailand under U.S.-aligned military dictator Thanom Kittikachorn (r. 1963–73). In this case,

however, between the film's production and its release, Thanom was deposed as a result of mass student-led demonstrations and replaced with a democratically elected regime, albeit a short-lived one. *Theptida Rong Ram* hence came on the heels of a rare political triumph against a regional strongman and features the closest thing to a "happy" ending (about which more below) that I have seen so far among Southeast Asian prostitute movies of the time. Many elements of the film's overall political strategy recall those of *Bernafas* and *Maynila*. It projects a populist condemnation aimed to fill the bodies and minds of audiences with seemingly unending injustice, violence, and rape, while offering moving demonstrations of the emotional reactions and shifts resulting from such acts. Despite the coincidence of *Theptida* with political triumph, this strategy is combined with a deep uneasiness about what the actions of "the masses," once triggered, may actually reap.

Theptida's visual engagement with antigovernment protestors, which anticipates Brocka's use of such imagery in *Maynila* a year later, was an even more direct result of the time and place in which the film was made. The massive student-led demonstrations against Thanom in October 1973 literally enveloped the production of *Theptida Rong Ram*, pushing their way through the streets near one of the film's locations. Things came to a head when government forces suddenly attacked the students on October 14, 1973. Mirroring the grim outcome of the First Quarter Storm in Manila, by evening, soldiers had killed seventy-seven protestors and injured eight hundred more. Yet in this case, the extreme show of force inspired more young Thais to join the demonstrations, and as the number of protestors grew to around five hundred thousand, the king announced that Thanom's government had stepped down. The presence of the protests in the film was not scripted but came about owing to the coincidence of proximity between fictionalized and actual political reality (fig. 23). As protestors passed by during the filming of *Theptida Rong Ram*, director Chatrichalerm spontaneously ran outside to capture the melee with his 35 mm movie camera, with no way of knowing what the outcome of the demonstrations would be (Chaiworaporn 2001:146).

The dramatic images shot by Chatrichalerm show thousands of students gathered in the city with bullhorns, flags, and paintings of Thai royalty, targeted by water cannons and surrounded by burning cars. Some look directly into the camera with a mixture of suspicion and unease, as if foreshadowing the sacrifice of many protestors' lives and emphasizing this over the tenuous victory that may not have come without it. The way the footage is integrated into the film further amplifies this sense of apprehension. In a style reminiscent of Soviet montage, the protest footage is intercut with *Theptida's* darkest moment: a graphic sequence in which a young girl is beaten so severely by a group of pimps that she runs up several flights of stairs and jumps to her death from the roof of the hotel where she is being held. In the context of the film, the girl's unflinching stance against the men forcing her into prostitution is juxtaposed with the literally "suicidal" activist tactics of the young protestors facing soldiers with live ammunition.



FIGURE 23. A scene from the First Quarter Storm demonstrations against Marcos staged for *Maynila sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (top) and actual footage of protests against Thanom Kittikachorn in Bangkok that was spliced into *Theptida Rong Ram* (bottom).

The unfortunate results suggest a presciently negative perspective on the part of Chatrichalerm—one that, when *Theptida Rong Ram* is positioned as part of a regional genre, as it is here, appears to look beyond the limited triumphs occurring in the context of the national. While in reality, the students' sacrifices were rewarded with the fall of Thanom, in the film, the pimps faced by the girl go on about their business after she ends her own life in protest. In my reading, Chatrichalerm's innovative juxtaposition of documentary footage with realistic staged scenes (based on months of research in Bangkok brothels; Richardson 2016)

suggests that like any pimp, any particular dictator is constituted by a convergence of forces far outside their own control as individuals: an authoritarian “father” who falls could simply be replaced with another, like-minded thug. Indeed, Tharnom’s return from exile in 1976 triggered further protests and mass killings, after which the army once again seized power, leading to “the absolute resurgence of dictatorial government” (Chaiworaporn 2001:145).

In comparison to *Bernafas* and *Maynila*, what stands out about *Theptida* is how it develops the perspective of its central character—placed in the eye of stormy, phallic clashes among dictators, pimps, and protestors—into a more detailed formulation of the limited agency potentially built by sex workers. This juxtaposition forms, in turn, a starker contrast to the film’s negative depiction and interpretation of the ideals of collective political activism or individualistic heroic interventions. The process begins with a now-familiar scenario, as the main character, a young woman named Malee (Viyada Umarin), is tricked into moving from her rural village to Bangkok, where she is coerced into working as a prostitute. Her early experiences in the city are no less harrowing than those of Mila or Ligaya (or Julio) and are presented by Chatrichalerm with shockingly explicit realism. But in this case, the film focuses more closely on the process through which Malee slowly comes to accept and adapt to her fate and how she is able to use part of the money she saves to help her family build a new house in the farming village where she grew up (Mila and Ligaya also use what they earn to help their families, but this aspect is only mentioned in passing by both *Bernafas* and *Maynila*).

This is shown in a formally innovative sequence that also represents one of the few uses of humor in *Theptida Rong Ram*’s otherwise stark atmosphere. Shots jumping from early to later stages in the construction of the new home are intercut with scenes of Malee in her hotel room, moving equally rapidly through a series of johns, each of whom provides an absurd or obviously overdone show of masculinity. The succession of images is underpinned by the kind of “country” or folk music popular in the provinces, contrasting with the use of Thai and Western rock in other scenes set in Bangkok. The sequence ends with a graphic match of Malee opening her bra for a customer, juxtaposed with her father opening the doors to the completed home. As the house is finished, Malee also sends a poster-size photograph of herself, which her father frames and mounts on the wall by the front door (it seems that, like dictators, prostitutes also erect edifices to the regimes of development, however large or small, that they sponsor).

Malee, it appears, can imagine herself a revered, active figure, at least in the eyes of her family and perhaps also her pimps. Yet what she becomes over the course of the film is emphatically not a source of rigid, dictatorial vision or power. Like the young woman whose tragic fate is intercut with the October protests, Malee’s journey begins when she is misled by an agent posing as a boyfriend who will help her find a good job in Bangkok. Shortly after they arrive in the capital, he disappears, leaving her to work off the “debts” concocted by the hotel/brothel where

they spent the night. As with most newcomers, and like Mila and Ligaya, Malee is shown to have a hard head and a strong moral compass. Becoming a prostitute is not an acceptable outcome of the situation, and Malee's first reaction is disbelief and rebellion. When she attempts to escape, however, she is beaten. As the process repeats, she becomes increasingly shocked and dazed by the new and horrifying truth that she is forced to see: the "universal" morals she grew up with back in the village do not operate in the urban mud where she has found herself stuck.

Gathering her wits about her, Malee makes a quick calculation and decides to acquiesce and bide her time, while looking for ways, however small or seemingly insignificant, to begin to turn the situation around. Willfully suppressing her gut reaction to revolt, she begins to perform the opposite, exuding a sense of softness and pliability. Soon, Malee's attitude and looks make her a top earner, and with her "debts" paid off, she keeps much of what clients pay for her services and begins saving and sending money home to her family. She also begins to see that her strategic sacrifices have gained her a modicum of power, which she starts to act on. When another newcomer arrives and is beaten even more severely for resisting, Malee stands up and intervenes, while the pimps, who have begun to trust her, step back. In a gentle, almost motherly tone, Malee convinces the young woman that she is sympathetic to her plight but that for the moment, there is no hope of escape. Complying with her captors sooner than later will save her from distress, injury, or far worse. Over time, the head pimp, Tone (Sorapong Chatree), begins to see Malee as something closer to a partner, treating her with increasing respect and even tenderness, while the rest of the staff follow suit. The gains are small but tangible.

After a few months in Bangkok, Malee has adapted to, if not fully adopted, the new morals and modes of comportment she has encountered in the brothel, while learning to deploy them differently. On an individual level, as the film implies, she has weathered what is effectively a sudden epistemic shift—one that I read as an allegory of the broader changes occurring in Thailand and other Southeast Asian nations. Almost every country in the region is being pushed to make itself fall, like a "domino," on one or the other side of the global political fault lines associated with the Cold War. It is important, therefore, that Malee is shown to have come through the shifts imposed on her without completely losing herself. I argue that the stronger position assigned by the film to the rural and the traditional functions as a key source of Malee's ability to endure. *Theptida Rong Ram's* imagining of the countryside as an active counterpoint to the urban lairs of pimps and dictators is also what most profoundly sets it apart from other regional efforts like *Bernafas* and *Maynila*.

Beginning with its opening images, for example, *Theptida* foregrounds and returns to particular aspects of the area in Northern Thailand where Malee grew up. The title sequence is made up almost entirely of expansive shots of rural landscapes where trees, grasses, and clouds move gently in the wind, drifting or

bending but never breaking under the constant forces of nature. Chatrichalerm repeatedly comes back to these scenes, rendering the rural not as a silent, vanished nostalgia but a vibrant locale that reacts in particular ways to developments in the far-off capital. On one hand, this recurring focus on rural prettiness functions as a source of visual relief from otherwise stark imagery and themes. On the other hand, it is a strategy that underscores and contextualizes the symbolic and actual powers with which the film invests its central female character.

Research on healing practices in Isan, Northeastern Thailand, for example, points to a basic emphasis on flexibility that is both physical and psychological. Devon Hinton, a medical anthropologist, shows that healing ceremonies there consist of “multimodal presentations” that mix actual flexibility exercises with metaphors of suppleness (2012:151). The latter are produced by aesthetic techniques blending lyrical imagery with music played live on instruments made of flexible natural materials like bamboo. Through song and dance, participants are urged to move as plants in the wind and imagine themselves as pliable and therefore less likely to snap or break under pressure (152). For Hinton, the central message is to “bend according to the various forces, consider all the possible options, survey the multiple patterns that may be played, and respond flexibly to the forces of the moment” (153). He argues that healers’ techniques and concepts function by embedding cognitive flexibility and social adaptability through reemphasizing two common cultural “master codes”: the inevitability of encountering “shifting patterns” that challenge one’s situated perspective (which could include epistemic shifts) and the injunction to embody the properties of a “longitudinal flexible member” (151).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the idea of a flexible longitudinal member as a basic symbolic model is striking in its contrast to the concept of the phallus as the “rigid designator” (Žižek 1989:97) of masculine authority. As in the posturing of the dictators who used mass violence, false ideological claims, and dubiously amassed funds to put themselves in power throughout much of Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s, the phallus as the “basic” or “pure” signifier of order and authority must seem rigid and immutable. Appearing in this way functions to mask the arbitrary, historically specific nature of men’s positioning by default as the heads of families, churches, mosques, and states—and of these particular men’s claims to absolute power. As a strategy of resistance to the emergence of an especially virulent, phallocentric patriarchy, Malee’s soft voice and movements, performance of agreeability with clients and pimps, and ability to hold out until her situation changes are deceptively meek. In light of the film’s ending, where Malee walks away from the brothel and camera carrying a fashion-school diploma she has also paid for with her work, the strategies that got her to that point can be seen as expressing the concept of a “longitudinal flexible member”—one that, over time, highlights the inevitability that a rigid, phallic approach to power will break and be cut short.



FIGURE 24. Malee framed by plants bending in the wind (and hard but flexible bamboo) in the opening of *Theptida Rong Ram*.

The first full shot we see of Malee in her village likewise emphasizes this rural/traditional/natural flexibility, positioning her in the shadow of a livestock pen while all around her, brightly lit, swaying cattails and green leaves fill the foreground and background, as if enveloping her in their calm kinesis (fig. 24). Throughout the film, Malee continues to perform and embody flexibility, even, and especially, when she is trapped in the hard, masculine world of urban hotel-brothels and their pimps (some of the pimps are women, but they fortify their claims to authority in a similarly rigid and violent manner). As she patiently faces veritable armies of these miniature dictators and their minions and johns, Malee remains at the center of the film's imagery and narrative, performing compliance but always meeting the gazes of those who command her—and the looks of those who watch and identify with her from the other side of the porous screen where she is on display. Because her mode of “flexible activism” outlasts the ability of any one pimp to stay in power, and often to stay alive, Malee eventually accomplishes what the would-be heroes in *Maynila* and *Bernafas Dalam Lumpur* cannot: extracting herself from the ever-more pervasive urban mud into which she had “coincidentally” fallen. Another key difference is that by the end of *Theptida Rong Ram*'s narrative, the numerous male characters who have attempted to save or impose their romantic ideals on Malee have all been sidelined and are hence not positioned to unwittingly cause her demise.

In this sense, Malee, in her role at the center of the film, enables its function as a “multimodal metaphor,” much like what is deployed in treating those with physical and psychological ailments: a model of comportment and much-needed

source of healing for citizen-victims facing the arbitrary, rigid, and violence-begotten rule of a military dictator. In a broader, regional sense, ending up as an unattached, sexually active, and increasingly critically minded woman, Malee embodies the flexibility shown to underpin the symbolic order that ultimately prevails—or at least endures where others snap—in *Theptida's* brutal onscreen world. Exposing and juxtaposing this pliant, strong figure to the punches and kicks of pimps and to images of actual Thais attacked by the forces of a real dictator further muddies the distinction between diegetic and actual, building on the populist politics of other regional prostitution films. The logic driving *Theptida Rong Ram's* various montage sequences and visual comparisons implies that Thanom's inflexible response to the demonstrations is precisely what has made it impossible for him to endure. At the same time, radical leftist imperatives of meeting state violence with armed insurgency are tacitly questioned and compared to the rigid tactics of government authorities.

PROSTITUTES, CONJUGAL DICTATORS, AND THE RETURN OF FEMININE ACTORS

As the above analyses suggest, the near-simultaneous emergence of Malee, Mila, Ligaya, and other marginalized, sexually active screen women is no mere coincidence or convergence of market forces around gendered imagery. Taken together, these populist figures point to the advent of complicated models of resistance and the political necessity of the “gray areas” infecting screens across the region via its new prostitution genres—just as strongmen were forcing their way into the highest offices of the affected nations. I argue that sexualized figures who merged and blurred conceptions of activity and passivity, tradition and modernity, firm and flexible modes of comportment, and masculine and feminine symbolic power provided important, regional spaces of convergence that were, like the figures underpinning them, pointedly multimodal.

In line with previous waves of films in the region, the global cinematic impact of such figures and the genres they spawned in the 1970s was also “gray” and difficult to categorize, leading to comparatively minimal recognition outside the region, with a few prominent exceptions. For example, the formal “shocks” (as in splice-and-shock) delivered by Brocka and other emergent Filipino auteurs such as Mike de Leon and Ishmael Bernal across numerous films are particularly resonant with oppositional techniques innovated by pioneers of Soviet montage such as Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov. In *Kisapmata* (*In the Blink of an Eye*, 1981), de Leon also references later Soviet cinema like Andrei Tarkovsky's *Zerkalo* (*The Mirror*, 1975) with a slow-motion, black-and-white dream sequence of a house flooded by water, contrasted with other natural elements like wind and fire—a Tarkovskian signature. In this sense, many Filipino populist and political films of the 1970s show a clearer interest in the tropes of established art and oppositional