

The Revival and Reconstruction of Women Warriors' Popular Representations in Thailand: Backgrounds, Motives, and Strategies of the Post-absolutist Regime

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	<p>Following 1932, Thailand has gone through a period of significant political and social transitions. Citizens became the focus of many social reforms introduced by the civilian government. The post-absolutist period witnessed a number of nationalist campaigns, which employed national martyrs as tools for promotion. From then on, the overlooked representations of women warriors were revived and reconstructed by the government. In this process, their myths were reintroduced, and their roles were reshaped to fit their new roles as state agents throughout the era, which included the era of anti-communist regime and the financial crisis of 1997. This paper aims to explore four Thai women warriors, <i>Thao Suranari</i>, <i>Thao Thepkasatri</i>, <i>Thao Sisunthon</i>, and <i>Somdet-Phra Suriyothai</i> in relation to the discourse of the state's prescribed roles and popular representations. In order to understand the regime's motives to revive and commemorate women warriors as national heroines, the paper is divided into three parts: (i) the state's prescribed role for women in official historiography; (ii) representations of the glorious female warriors as the nation's role models; and (iii) official strategies and motives for the commemoration of female warriors. At the end, this paper will demonstrate the multiple functions of women warriors' representations, who were modelled to serve various purposes for the government in different circumstances and crises that the nation had experienced.</p>

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1. Introduction

The revival of women warriors by reinventing their myths and representations were part of the state's promotion of Thai nationalism immediately following the 1932 revolution, as well as throughout significant moments in contemporary Thai history. This paper explores the relationship between the Thai state and representations of four Siamese female heroines: *Thao Suranari*, *Thao Thepkasatri* and *Thao Sisunthon*, and *Somdet-Phra Suriyothai*. In order to do this, the paper covers three major themes: (i) the state's prescribed role for women in domestic and public spheres; (ii) representations of the glorious female warriors as the state's role models; and (iii) official strategies and motives for the commemorations of female warriors. These three themes lay a fundamental understanding for reasons behind the Thai government's nationalistic approach on representations of female warriors. Prior to the overthrow of the absolutist monarchy, elite women were confined within the domestic boundaries of wifedom and motherhood. However, the new government gradually reshaped women's roles by promoting them as agents for the state's nationalist propaganda and reintroducing the myths of female warriors. This shift reflects the modern representations of woman warriors, which are often portrayed as "man-like" figures in battles as Barbara Andaya explained in her work, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia*.¹ In order to understand the reasons behind the state's attempts to revive and commemorate women warriors as state heroines, the early modern Thai historiography needs to be explored. The new paradigm of *attalak phuying* (female identity) and Thai romantic movements are major emphases in this part of the paper. Both highlight the transition of Thai women from the "domestic sphere" to the "public sphere".

Prince Damrong, known as Father of Thai history in nationalist discourse, conceptualised the identity of women within the domestic sphere.² The woman's role

¹ Barbara Watson Andaya, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2006).

² Saichol Satyanurak, *Somdet kromphraya damrong-rajanuphab: garn sang attalak meuangthai and chun khong chao sayam* (Bangkok: Matichon Press, 2003).

was framed domestically as housewives, whose major task was to take care of the households, while a woman's role in the public sphere existed only to support a male's success in their government career.³ The post-revolutionary government contested this traditional female identity (*attalak phuying*) between 1933 and 1941. The female identity was challenged by the promotion of women's roles in the public sphere and the adoption of monogamy in 1935. Following the Bowaradej rebellion in 1933, *Luang Wichit Wathakan* became a major figure in propaganda when he took the chair of Director General of the Department of Fine Arts in 1934. With this title, he contributed to drafting the Cultural Mandates, or *Ratthaniyom*, prior to the outbreak of the Second World War in Asia-Pacific.⁴ One of *Luang Wichit's* historical-musical dramas, *Lu'at Suphan* (The Blood of Suphan), promoted a new dimension of Thai women's identity. The heroine, Duangchan, demonstrated female bravery in battles. Even as a commoner, she led the people of Suphanburi province to fight against Burma without fear. Scot Barmé has claimed that *Lu'at Suphan* was a popular play with the combination of both "romance and death", which was "designed to elicit a strong emotional response in an audience".⁵ The play was immensely popular as the film remake that emerged in the 1970s and its theme song is still well known today.

The most dramatic change launched by the late 1930s, affecting not only women but the fundamental Thai society, was the Cultural Mandates. A set of state directives that aimed at the progression of the nation by instituting new socio-economic norms. These directives included a number of dramatic social and national transformations, ranging from the name change of Siam to Thailand, to the state's encouragement to buy and support local products, and to language reform and dress reform.⁶ The mandate on dress reform, in particular, brought massive impact to bear on women and their representations. "Female fashion ... consisted of hats, skirts, blouses covering the shoulders, gloves, and high-heeled shoes".⁷ As a result, female dress reform by the

³ Ibid., 280.

⁴ Scot Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. 1993)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 157.

Cultural Mandates brought women into the public sphere under the supervision of the state. As the government engendered these reforms, women were incorporated into the framework of the society that had previously been male dominated. Although these changes did not directly imply that women were treated as equal subjects to men, they highlighted the expected role of women outside their domestic sphere. Therefore, role models of the redefined female identity became necessary, and that was when myths of woman warriors were revived. In addition, the adoption of monogamy also significantly enhanced women's positions. Tamara Loos⁸ has pointed out that as early as the Rama Sixth period (1910–1926), tensions among the ruling elites grew because of the split opinion on the practice of polygamy. As a group of modern-minded elites supported the abolition of polygamy along the Western line, the rest were reluctant to see women outside Prince Damrong's framework. As a consequence, when polygamy was legally abolished in 1935, the post-revolutionary government inevitably encountered a gender challenge.

In addition to the mentioned transitions in the roles of women, the Romantic Movement in literature also favoured enhancing the roles of women. Craig Reynolds has pointed out that newly developed notion of "national Thai women" that emerged prior to the revolution of 1932, which refers to "a sovereign person entitled to rights of choice", was a direct product of romantic literatures.⁹ The emergence of romantic novels corresponded to the growing nationalist sentiments among the public. "Just as nationalists were arguing about self-rule in the public sphere, so the characters in the romantic novels sought self-rule in the private domain", claimed Reynolds.¹⁰ The independence of love and romance were apparent in fictions of the late 1920s, notably in *Luang*, Wichit Wathakan's work *Sam'on*. The story was a love tragedy between Sam'on, a female secretary, and Banchong, her married boss. As both characters revealed their forbidden love for each other, they decided to run away from their legal partners to the countryside. Unfortunately, the couple's lives ended in their country cottage as a result of revenge

⁸ Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, Law, and Colonial Modernity in Thailand* (Bangkok: Silkworms Books. 2006).

⁹ Craig J. Reynolds, *Seditious Histories: Contesting Thai and Southeast Asian Pasts* (Singapore: NUS Press. 2006).

¹⁰ Ibid., 124.

planned by Sam'on's legal husband. The story demonstrates Wichi's great emphasis on the matters of the heart, and proved that he was believing in woman's equality of the new romantic era.¹¹ Another obvious example is a short story by female and male authors *Ch'om Chori* (The Female Bandit Leader) published in women's paper *Suphap nari* (Genteel Lady) in 1931. The leading character of this serial fiction is a woman called Sichan, who was described as a ruthless "aristocratic criminal boss" of Bangkok.¹² She carried out a number of daring acts, including a scandalous robbery of a necklace belonging to a millionaire's daughter. Sichan's character did not only challenge the traditional representation of women, but also reflected the acceptance of female self-confidence and leadership qualities in Thai society. The story, which ended with the glory of Sichan over the police captain San'o, contested the role of male authority as even a policeman had to give up to this crude and ruthless female character. As *Ch'om chori* became popular among the audience, the paper continued to promote a strong image of national Thai woman. Two stories of elite women warriors *Phra Suriyothai phadet suek* (Suriyothai Ends the War) and *Thao Thepkasatri* (Lady Thepkasatri) were published following *Ch'om chori* as "popular genre of writing".¹³ All of these romantic movements in Thai literature by both male and female authors demonstrate the social embracement of women into the public sphere. As a consequence, when nationalism claimed victory in 1932, the new government needed to establish an official framework for women's capability in the public sphere by turning existing romantic elements into official representations of women warriors.

2. Women Warriors in Official Historiography: Their Prescribed Roles

Representations of women warriors in Thailand differ from other women warriors in Southeast Asia. While the central theme to the commemorations of female popular figures in this region is associated with fear from foreign invasions, representations of Thai female warriors provide a distinct contested characteristic as a national role-model

¹¹ Scot Barmé, *Luang Wichi Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity*.

¹² Ibid., 200.

¹³ Ibid., 202.

that deserves further study. David Jones¹⁴ has explored a number of women warriors in Southeast Asia and suggested that all figures participated in battles where sacrifices were made in order to protect their countries from foreign invasions; for example, Vo Thi Sau, Madame Dinh of Ben Tre, and the Trung sisters. These women fought for Vietnamese sovereignty against foreign attacks. Vo Thi Sau and Madame Dinh of Ben Tre led troops to defend against the French invasion, and Lady Trung Trac and her sister Trung Nhi fought in the liberation of Vietnam from China.¹⁵ Stories of Vietnamese women warriors show bravery in their representations but fail to establish the role-models as women of the nation. This is in contrast to how Thai women warriors are represented. The four women: *Thao Suranari*; *Thao Thepkasatri* and *Thao Srisunthon*; and *Somdet-Phra Suriyothai* are represented as national heroines for their bravery in battles in similar ways to the Vietnamese women warriors. However, by intentions of the state, their representations are far more sophisticated than just symbolic figures of national defense. They also represent role-models for serving as women of the nation. Tales and myths of these popular figures and their modern representational images are central to the analysis of this part of the paper.

The role of myths in the commemoration of woman warriors is fundamental to the promotion of Thai nationalism. Stories about *Thao Suranari*; *Thao Thepkasatri* *Thao Sri Sunthon*; *Somdet-Phra Suriyothai* have been recorded in Thailand's chronicles (*Phong-sawadan*) and rewritten a number of times. As a result, stories that were told orally have been modified by different authors at different times. Therefore, these stories are not necessarily accurate and seemed mythical rather than true historical accounts.

The mythical character is apparent in the tale of *Thao Suranari* or Mo: the only commoner woman whose bravery was recorded in the royal chronicle about the battle between Vientiane and Nakhonratchasima. In the official work of Krom Sinlapakon,¹⁶ Mo led 300 female troops into battle against the rebellious Lao Prince, *Chao Anuwong* in 1825. "These women were disguised as men and fought with only primitive weapons"

¹⁴ David E. Jones, *Women Warriors: A History* (Washington: Brassey's. 1997).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Krom Sinlapakon, *Satri-Samkhan Nai Prawatisat Thai* (Notable Women in Thai History) (Bangkok: Krom Sinlapakon. 2004).

under the leadership of Mo, who led the troops on horseback.¹⁷ Mo was born into a commoner family and married *Phraya Suradej*, the Deputy Governor of Nakhonratchasima City. The official representation of Mo intends to praise her heroic act in defending Nakhonratchasima from a foreign force led by *Chao Anuwong*. However, the state's purpose in commemorating a commoner warrior such as *Thao Suranari* is rather ambiguous. Saipin Kaewngamprasert, a Thai scholar wrote one of the most contested theses in Thailand *Kan Meuang nai Anusawari thao Suranari* (Politics Behind the Monument of *Thao Suranari*). The author argues that the truth about Mo's experience in battle is still obscured. The royal chronicle of Rama II has stated the involvement of women in the battle of Tung Samrit.¹⁸ However, it did not clearly state that Mo led the female troops as official popular text has claimed. The issue of ethnic Lao minority on the Khorat plateau should be added into the analysis here. The rewriting of the royal chronicles took place during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), when centralisation was introduced and the promotion of "Thai-ness" was first invented. Therefore, reviving or reinventing the myth of Mo implies that "they" have harmed "us" and all of the people who were born in this boundary of *chat thai*, where *chat* has a dual meaning of nation and birth.¹⁹ *Chao Anuwong* was seen as an enemy of state, while in fact, he had all the rights to claim the Lao-speaking people who lived in Nakhonratchasima. *Thao Suranari* might have fought in the battle with other warriors, but the central Thai-ness was not then present. Later after the crisis had ended, the Royal Palace gave Mo rewards, including swords, clothes, and the title *Thao*.²⁰ Ever since then, Mo was known as *Thao Suranari* and is currently worshiped by Thais as *Ya Mo* (Grandmother Mo), and her official representation as a heroine who saved the nation is still alive.

Another myth belongs to *Thao Thepkasatri* and *Thao Sisunthon*, or Chan and Muk. They were two sisters of Thalang City, nowadays Phuket province. Chan and Muk were daughters of the governor of Thalang. Chan, the elder daughter, was married

¹⁷ Ibid., 114.

¹⁸ Saipin Kaewngamprasert, *Kan-maung Nai Anusawari thao Suranari* (Bangkok: Matichon Press, 1995).

¹⁹ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

²⁰ *Thao* is an equal title to lady.

twice to aristocrats of the southern region, while Muk's marital status was unknown. When Burma attacked Siam in 1785, Chan and Muk defended the city of Thalang on behalf of Chan's sick husband, *Phraya Surintararacha*.²¹ The chronicle recorded that they led local troops of males and females to defend against Burmese attacks. Nonetheless, the story of Chan and Muk has some ambiguous aspects. First, the marriage of Chan was rather unclear. Sunai Ratchaphantharak²² has stated in an analysis of the chronicles of Thalang that there is evidence that Chan married twice, and that the information about her husband during the war was rather confusing. Second, in the official text by the National Department of Fine Arts.²³ Chan was represented as a faithful Thai female aristocrat who came to Bangkok to pay respect to the King after the war had ended.²⁴ Nonetheless, evidence demonstrates that Chan visited Bangkok in order to claim her tin debts rather than to pay respect to the King. Another aspect of the historical account of Chan and Muk that has never been emphasised is their ethnic background. This avoidance was due to the fact that the mother of Chan and Muk was of Malay origin as recorded in a number of chronicles including the chronicle of Thalang.²⁵ As official representations of women warriors including Chan and Muk are subjected to the central government body in Bangkok, mentioning the non-Thai origin of these heroines could undermine the status of the centralised state. Yet the Two Sisters of Thalang might have taken the leading role in battle against Burma, and their sacrifices should be seen as provincial defense rather than national martyrs, as is often portrayed in official national historiography. Therefore, the story of Chan and Muk still remains a myth.

Another popular heroine from the former kingdom of Ayutthaya was the queen warrior, *Somdet-Phra Suriyothai*. Her story also remains as mythical as the mentioned tales of *Thao Suranari*, and the Two Sisters of Thalang. Suriyothai was the queen

²¹ Krom Sinlapakon, *Satri-Samkhan Nai Prawatisat Thai*.

²² Sunai Ratchaphantharak, *200 Pi Wirasatri meuang Thalang* (Phuket: Victory Powerpoint, 1985).

²³ Krom Sinlapakon, *Satri-Samkhan Nai Prawatisat Thai*.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

consort of King Mahachakaphat of Ayutthaya. She saved her husband in battle when Burma attacked the Thai kingdom in 1548.²⁶ As it is widely promoted in Thai official historiography, Suriyothai was disguised in a male soldier's uniform and secretly followed her husband into the battle. When her husband was about to be charged by the Burmese prince, she attempted to save him and was killed.²⁷ The official representation of Suriyothai demonstrates her dedication to the nation and her husband. These two qualities have been promoted as noble qualities. However, a modern Thai historian, Sujit Wongthet²⁸ has argued that the myth of Suriyothai could have been reinvented by King Vajiravudh. The author claims that King Vajiravudh encouraged the commemoration of Suriyothai by permitting the construction of the first commemoration site near Wat Sopsawan (Sopsawan temple) where locals believed her body was cremated. Sujit's argument aligns with Vajiravudh's nationalist policy in the early twentieth century. Therefore, the claim that the myth of Suriyothai was recently reinvented is quite persuasive.

All three tales of Siamese female warriors concealed the civilian government's objectives. The story of *Thao Suranari* and the Two Sisters of Thalang demonstrates its relations to the national promotion of Thai-ness. While the story of Suriyothai praises her as a national martyr, it nevertheless emphasizes the qualities of the noble wife that she possessed.²⁹ With evidence that tales of these female warriors have been repeatedly reinvented, it can be concluded that they are myths rather than valid historical accounts as recorded in official historiography.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Amporn Jirattikorn, "Suriyothai: hybridizing Thai national identity through film," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4, no. 2 (January 2003): 296-308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1464937032000113015>

²⁸ Sujit Wongthet, *Phrasuriyothai Pen Krai? Ma Chak Nai?* (Bangkok: Matichon Press. 2001).

²⁹ Rawiwan Rakthinkamnert, "Samruat baprian prawattisat-thai mua 'chat' pen khruengmue thang kanmueang". *TCIJ*. (December 2, 2014). <https://www.tcijthai.com/news/2014/02/scoop/5154> (Accessed December 19, 2019).

3. Representations of Glorious Female Warriors as the Nation's Role Models

The Thai state employed various methods in telling these myths to the public. Common tools included education and media. In history education, national heroines appeared in Thai history textbooks as early as Grade 2.³⁰ The first heroine that Thai students learn about is *Thao Suranari*, followed by *Thao Thepkasatri* and *Thao Sisunthon* in Grade 3. In popular media, women warriors are also shown in different genres such as TV series and films. The story of Queen Suriyothai, for example, has been immensely popular in motion picture format with the release of *the Legend of Suriyothai* in 2011 (the film will be discussed later). While popular narratives of women warriors in education and media are important ingredients for nationalist promotion, visual representations are also essential to understand their roles in the public discourse. This part of the paper focuses on the warriors' visual representations in monuments, amulets, and other popular objects.

The portrayed images of women warriors demonstrate them as national role models. Each representation of the women warriors has hidden meanings that need to be explored. Among the four female warriors, only *Thao Suranari* came from a commoner's background while the two sisters, Thalang and Suriyothai, were from aristocratic families. With this fundamental information, *Thao Suranari*'s representational images have been adjusted in order to fit the government's intention to promote a commoner woman as a "woman of the nation". *Thao Suranari*'s monument illustrates an image of a well-dressed aristocratic Bangkok woman. Saipin Kaewngamprasert³¹ has pointed out that the clothing of the statue shows the central style of elite women of the early Bangkok era. This reflects the central government's goal to link her representation to a central Thai identity. In this way, Bangkok could limit the influence of the strong Lao ethnic base of Nakhon Ratchasima province, where the monument was constructed. Furthermore, the Bangkok government did not only insert Thai-ness into *Thao Suranari*'s clothing, but also enhanced her social status. Even though *Thao Suranari* married the Deputy Governor of Nakhonratchasima, she came from a commoner family. This type of dress with a long sarong and shawl is not the usual style of a commoner outside the royal palace in the Bangkok period.

³⁰ Amporn Jirattikorn, "Suriyothai: hybridizing Thai national identity through film."

³¹ Saipin Kaewngamprasert, *Kan-maung Nai Anusawari thao Suranari*.



Fig. 1. Statue of *Thao Suranari*, Nakhonratchasima

Source: Samnak-ngan Changwat Nakhonratchasima ³²

Therefore, this can explain the government's agenda to uphold the female warrior from a non-aristocratic background in order to create a role model for the commoner woman in the era of civilian government. Accordingly, the following part of the paper will analyse timely strategic moments that were chosen by the state to commemorate these female warriors.

Contrary to the representation of *Thao Suranari* of Nakhonratchasima, the images of *Thao Thepkasatri* and *Thao Sisunthon*, and Queen *Suriyothai* are directly related to the promotion of aristocracy. All three female warriors were known to have high status. *Thao Thepkasatri* and *Thao Sisunthon* were daughters of the Governor of Thalang and *Suriyothai* held the status of a queen. As a consequence, their portrayals by the state emphasize the bravery of these women as warriors who were willing to sacrifice for the nation rather than showing off Bangkok's elite fashion. *Thao Thepkasatri* and *Thao Sisunthon*, or Chan and Muk, are represented with unisex warrior's clothes

³² Samnak-ngan Changwat Nakhonratchasima, "Prawat: History". <http://www.nakhonratchasima.go.th/nakhonrat/index.php?link=history&na=c4ca4238a0b923820dcc509a6f75849b> (Accessed October 7, 2011).

from eighteenth-century Siam. They wear *chongkraben*³³ and a blouse with a shawl wrapped around their chests. From their appearances, the Thalang Sisters' attire is simple and plain. They are represented with images of warriors with swords in their hands who are ready to fight their enemies. Their poses are in contrast with the pose of *Thao Suranari*, who is represented on her monument without any implications of war.



Fig. 2. The monument of *Thao Thepkasatri* and *Thao Sisunthon*, Phuket.

The Two Sisters of Thalang wear *chongkraben* and a blouse with a shawl wrapped around their chests.

Source: Phuket Today³⁴

Similar to the images of Suriyothai, the monument of Suriyothai in Ayutthaya illustrates the scene of the battle as she sits on an elephant in a Siamese soldier uniform and holds a spear in her hands. Even in the amulets, Suriyothai always appears in military uniform. These appearances show no differentiation in gender unlike the intended representation of *Thao Suranari*.

³³ Sarong wrapped around the waist to resemble trousers

³⁴ "Hilight in Phuket", Phuket Today. 2011. http://www.phukettoday.com/hilight_eng.php?id=264

(Accessed October 7, 2011).



Fig. 3. Queen Suriyothai Monument portrays the battle scene of 1548, Ayutthaya

Source: Royjaithai³⁵

Commodified representations of women warriors are also widely popular. Among the four selected warriors, Suroyothai's image is by far the most commodified. The making of the film Suriyothai "has opened up a space for merchandising Thai-ness, royalty and tradition", said Amporn Jirattikorn.³⁶ Apart from the film's immense popularity amongst the Thai audience, with its grand settings, costumes, and large cast numbers that broke all records in Thai film production, other commodities such as T-shirts, magnets, and key rings were also widely sold around the country.³⁷

³⁵ Royjaithai, "Somdet Phra-Sisuriyothai". <http://www.royjaithai.com/phrasrisuriyotai.php> (Accessed October 7, 2011).

³⁶ Amporn Jirattikorn, "Suriyothai: hybridizing Thai national identity through film," 305.

³⁷ Ibid., 298.

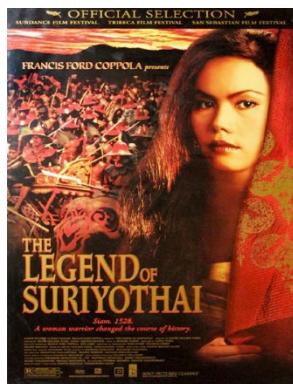


Fig. 4. Poster of the royal-sponsored film Suriyothai.³⁸ (2001) Suriyothai was immensely popular when it was released in 2001. The film was directed by *Momchao Chatri Chalermyukol*

Source: Gotoknow³⁹



Fig. 5. Suriyothai amulets became widely popular among worshipers even before the production of the film. This collection was released in 1995.

Source: Siammongkol⁴⁰

In general, amulets are widely popular amongst Thai Buddhists and usually portray images of monks and the kings of Siam. Nonetheless, amulets of female warriors have also gained popularity and have been commercialised as products of a

³⁸ Ibid., 298.

³⁹ Gotoknow, Ibid.

⁴⁰ Siammongkol, "Rian Somdet-phra -Suriyothai". <http://www.siammongkol.com/productinfo.php?code=01366> (Accessed October 8, 2011).

local cult. *Thao Suranari*'s nick name, *Ya Mo* demonstrates that she is being regarded as a grandmother of the inhabitants of Nakhonratchasima province and the nearby cities, as *Ya* means grandmother in central Thai and Nakhonratchasima dialects. Images of *Ya Mo* have been resembled and printed on amulets. People worship *Ya Mo* as an ancestor who would protect and bring them prosperity.



Fig. 6. *Ya Mo* (Grandmother Mo) became the symbol of the Nakhonratchasima province as well as a symbol for Ratchaphat University Sports' Games of 2010.

Source: Nakhonratchasima Ratchaphat University ⁴¹



Fig. 7. Images of *Thao Thepkasatri* and *Thao Sisunthon* appear in amulets in 1985, in the 200 year anniversary celebration of their glorious victory over Burma.

Source: Samplepete ⁴²

⁴¹ Nakhonratchasima Ratchaphat University, "Ya Mo Games". [http://www.nrru.ac.th/yamogame/main.php?pack=information&page=about4_\(Accessed October 8, 2011\).](http://www.nrru.ac.th/yamogame/main.php?pack=information&page=about4_(Accessed October 8, 2011).)

⁴² Samplepete, "Rian *thao Thepkasatri thao Sisunthon*". [http://samplepete.com/product.detail_0_th_3608835 \(Accessed October 8, 2011\).](http://samplepete.com/product.detail_0_th_3608835 (Accessed October 8, 2011).)

Furthermore, *Thao Thepkasatri* and *Thao Sisunthorn* are also seen in the form of amulets with a similar role to *Thao Suranari*. Nevertheless, the Two Sisters of Thalang are being worshiped as heroines who saved the city in a time of crisis rather than as ancestral guardians. The official representations of Queen Suriyothai also give a similar implication. Suriyothai is being portrayed and commercialised as a warrior queen with the aim of promoting the royal cult. Therefore, the distance between the queen and the worshipers is even greater when compared to other mentioned figures. In other words, Suriyothai is being portrayed more as a majestic martyr, while *Thao Suranari* and the Two Sisters of Thalang are serving the nation as role models for women of the nation and the provincial guardians.

4. Strategies and Motives of Thai Government in the Commemorations of Female Warriors

“Representations of every monument depends on the context of time that the monument appears” said Saipin Kaewngamprasert.⁴³ This statement suggests that the context of time is fundamental to the structure of representations of monuments, especially in commemoration of national heroes and heroines. This part of the paper will examine the specific historical eras when the following monuments were constructed or commemorated: *Thao Suranari* (1934), Two Sisters of Thalang, (1967), and Suriyothai. (1992). The historical events that might have influenced the government’s decision to revive or reinvent these national female figures will be linked to the analysis; for example, *Thao Suranari* and Kabot Bowaradej (Bowaradej Rebellion), Sisters of Thalang and the communist aggressions, and Suriyothai and anti-military movements. The motives of the government that served as a force behind the promotion of official representations of the aforementioned female warriors will be illustrated.

4.1 Thao Suranari Vs. Kabot Bowaradej (Bowaradej Rebellion)

The construction of *thao Suranari*’s monument was considered as the state’s response to Kabot Bowaradej (Bowaradej Rebellion). The “royalist counter-revolution” took place in October 1933, which identified the internal splits of opinions in the post-

⁴³ Saipin Kaewngamprasert, *Kan-maung Nai Anusawari thao Suranari*, 115.

absolutist period.⁴⁴ Prince Bowaradej, a cousin of King Prajadhipok, led rebel forces in an attempt to overthrow the *Khana Ratsadon* (People's Party) government under their prominent leaders, such as Phahon Pholphayuhasena, Plaek Phibunsongkhram, and Pridi Phanomyong. The royalists made the claim to convince the masses that the People's Party government wanted to establish a communist dictatorship. Within three weeks of the conflict, which resulted in a 10,000 baht reward for Prince Bowaradej's capture, the government had completely crushed the rebellion.⁴⁵ Bowaradej then retreated to the northeast region, where provincial garrisons were gathered to assist him with the rebellion, before finally fleeing to Cambodia. From this angle of history, it is not a coincidence that the monument of *Thao Suranari*, which is situated in Nakhonratchasima province, was only erected after the crushing of the Bowaradej Rebellion.⁴⁶ The construction of the monument, although seen as a commemoration site for a provincial heroine, offers a rather complicated explanation. Kaewngamprasert has pointed out that *Thao Suranari*'s monument aimed to strengthen the power of the "new" government in a continued conflict with the "old" regime or the royalists.⁴⁷ Because *Thao Suranari* was a commoner, her symbolic representation announced that commoners can also be recognised in history as much as royalties. The People's Party government, which mostly comprised of commoners, wanted to use the commoner female warrior figure as a tool to fight the royalists. Furthermore, Nakhonratchasima province is considered the gate to Northeastern region (Isan) where forces of Bowaradej Rebellion were recruited. In choosing *Thao Suranari*, who originated from this province, it illustrated the government's intention to reaffirm its victory over the royalists in the region. Therefore, the construction of *Thao Suranari*'s monument and the post-Bowaradej rebellion's situation are closely linked. *Thao Suranari*, as a female warrior, appeared at the right time when the People's Party government needed to reassert its position in the society.

⁴⁴ Scot Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity*, 61.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁶ Saipin Kaewngamprasert, *Kan-maung Nai Anusawari thao Suranari*.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

4.2 Two Sisters of Thalang versus Communist Movements

The monument of *Thao Thepkasatri* and *Thao Srisunthon*, the two female elites who were said to have saved Thalang (nowadays Phuket City), was erected in 1967 when Field Marshall Thanom Kittikhachon was Prime Minister. Within the context of Thanom's era, one of the military dictator's major concerns was the communist encroachment. Communism had spread its influence across Thailand via decolonization movements in neighbouring countries, such as the movement of North Vietnam, Laos, and Chinese settlers into Thailand.⁴⁸ When communist influence first arrived in Thailand, it was well accommodated by the Thai government, especially under the leadership of Pridi Phanomyong, who was known to have supported Vietnamese and Lao liberation movements. Nevertheless, by the 1960's, the Thai government under Thanom had established a firm relationship with the United States and the communists were automatically seen as enemies of the state. This circumstance can be related to the construction of the monument of the Two Sisters of Thalang, as the anti-communist policy of Thanom served as a key government motive. By 1964, the North Vietnamese had employed communist propaganda on Vietnamese settlers in Thailand to form a "Communist front" in the Northeastern region.⁴⁹ A similar approach was used by Chinese communists to spread the egalitarian doctrine amongst Chinese descents in Thailand. Phuket province, although situated in Southern Thailand, is enriched with Chinese heritage and population. With Thanom's fear of communism spreading amongst the Chinese Thai population, the monument of Thalang's sisters demonstrates the state's hidden attempt to propagate an anti-communist policy. The representation of both heroines depict them as guardians of the city during the war, as evidenced by them carrying swords and their eyes being positioned to look out for enemies. This is unlike *Thao Suranari*'s statue, whose eyes were looking down, which is represented in a way to symbolise that the city was at peace and the war had been won.⁵⁰ With a large number of Chinese settlers in Phuket, and an increasing influence of communism encroaching

⁴⁸ Phirot Kanchanaphan, "Kan-totan Kan-khotsanachuanchuea Khong Fai-Khommunit doi Ratthaban-Thai: Sueksa chapo Korani Phak-thawanok-chiengnua," (Master's thesis, Thammasat University, 1975), 6.

⁴⁹ Saipin Kaewngamprasert, *Kan-maung Nai Anusawari thao Suranari*.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

upon Thailand, the Sisters of Thalang were reimposed once again to fight the state's enemies, although this time the enemies were communists rather than Burmese.

4.3 Queen Suriyothai Vs Black May and Tom Yum Kung Crisis 1997

The image of Queen Suriyothai as a martyr for the nation and as a role-model of a faithful wife was first revived in 1992 with the construction of a commemoration monument in Ayutthaya. Later on, this was reproduced in the production of the film *Suriyothai* (2001) that began as part of a royal-sponsored project after the economic crash of 1997, also known as the *Tom Yum Kung Crisis*.

It is not a coincidence that the monument of Suriyothai was completed in the same year as Queen Sirikit's sixtieth anniversary. Hence, the commemoration of the great queen warrior could be seen as part of the state's project in collaboration with Queen Sirikit's celebration. Another hypothesis links the commemoration to 1992 when the military carried out a mass killing of demonstrators. Prior to the tragedy of *Black May* 1992, Prime Minister Chatchai Chunhawan (1988-1991), a non-military leader, had given new hope for Thai democracy, which had been interrupted by the military since the revolution of 1932. Nevertheless, a military coup ended Chatchai's democratic hope in February 1991, while the administrative power was transferred to the military group led by General Sujinda Kraprayun.⁵¹ Finally, in 1992, Sujinda became Prime Minister and one of the most disastrous incidents between the military and demonstrators was recorded as the tragedy of *Black May*. In relation to the representation of Queen Suriyothai, the state illustrated its attempt to highlight the militaristic image of a martyr queen by constructing the monument with the setting of the actual battle scene where the queen sits on an elephant. This representational image differed from other female warriors discussed. Suriyothai's monument signified the government's motive to strengthen the military image, which apparently conforms with the degrading image of the military at the time of the early 1990's. In other words, the government had decided to commemorate Queen Suriyothai in order to enhance the military image by demonstrating her militaristic appearance in addition to her royalist background.

⁵¹ Dunyakan Sombun, "Kan-lukhue Khong Prachachon Nai Kan-totan Karn-khrobngam Thang-kanmeuang Khong Thahan: Korani Hetkan Duean Prutsaphakhom 2535," (Master's thesis, Chiangmai University. 1996).

In addition, after the traumatising *Tom Yum Kung* economic crisis, Suriyothai was once again revived in film. The economic crisis triggered “a national search for the golden age of antiquity; the golden age where everything was good”.⁵² This phenomenon was evident in the rapid boom of period film production such as, *Nang Nak* (1999) and *Bang Rajan* (2000).⁵³ Both were period films that achieved tremendous popularity among the Thai audience and at international film festivals.⁵⁴ *Suriyothai* served as a symbol of Siam's glorious past, which aimed to install a sense of Thai pride to the audience in a period of post-economic crisis. Once again, the government had manipulated the context of time in order to engender a unified sentiment. Suriyothai appeared in the film as a royalist symbol and as a figure of Thai pride in the moment where unity was most needed and the hope that stability would be reestablished.

5. Conclusion

Women warriors have played two major roles for the Thai state: as role-models for women of the nation; and as tools to strengthen the government's image. The four heroines discussed in this paper—*Thao Suranari*, *Thao Thepkasatri* and *Thao Sisunthon*, and Queen Suriyothai—were first revived by the state when the concept of Thai-ness was officially launched in the late twentieth century and they continued to play significant roles in Thai society through to the present day. On the surface, the patriotic representations might have been used solely to strengthen the Thai military. However, women warriors' tasks are far more sophisticated than their appearances. The state has modeled these national heroines to serve its needs. In other words, the women warriors' major task is to support the state's policy of a particular political era.

This paper has investigated the first era of female involvement in the making of nationalistic propaganda. The paradigm shift in women identity or *attalak*, as well as the romantic movements of the early Thai nationalistic era, have caused the state to revive the myths of women warriors and use them as tools to propagate national unity and implement the concept of Thai-ness. Furthermore, the second part of this paper

⁵² Amporn Jirattikorn, "Suriyothai: hybridizing Thai national identity through film," 301.

⁵³ Ibid., 301.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

studied the four most popular women warriors in their mythical representations, class/status, and commodified subjects of Thai-ness. Finally, the state's motives in commemorating these national figures were revealed in the third part of this paper. The context of time demonstrated that the commemoration of women warriors is always accompanied by the state's political aims. Even though the political agenda has shifted over time, the state's usage of national heroines is always useful for nationalist promotion. This paper, therefore, has concluded that women warriors have been powerful tools for Thai nationalist promotion throughout the twentieth century and still are today.

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