

Tom Yum Goong (2005): A Political Reading of an Action Film

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Abstract

Action films are often criticized for being populist while having a weak political message. This paper contests this criticism by looking at a popular action film, *The Protector*, better known in Thai as *Tom Yum Goong* (2005, dir. Prachya Pinkaew), from a different angle. My analysis of the film, based on the Marxist concept of class, demonstrates that a political message needs not be framed exclusively through filmic dialogue, but also through the figuration of the main characters and the structural dichotomy of the narrative. Within this framework, *Tom Yum Goong*, while not a political film, can be read politically, thus conveying a political message critical to our (re)consideration of political representation in action films, which are often viewed as mechanisms of political conservatism.

Keywords: Thai action film, Marxism, dichotomy, political, representation

บทคัดย่อ

ภาพยนตร์แนวการต่อสู้หรือแอคชั่นมักถูกวิพากษ์ว่าเป็นภาพยนตร์ประชานิยมที่ไม่ค่อยนำเสนอประเด็นทางการเมืองหรือมีความอ่อนด้อยในการนำเสนอเนื้อหาสำคัญด้านการเมือง บทความชิ้นนี้มีความประสงค์ที่จะนำเสนอการมองประเด็นการเมืองในรูปแบบอื่นของภาพยนตร์แอคชั่นเพื่อโต้แย้งและตรวจสอบข้อวิพากษ์ดังกล่าวที่ดูเหมือนจะไม่ค่อยเป็นธรรมต่อภาพยนตร์แอคชั่นเท่าใดนัก ทั้งนี้จากการวิเคราะห์ภาพยนตร์เรื่องต้มยำกุ้ง (2548 กำกับโดยปรัชญา ปิ่นแก้ว) โดยใช้กรอบแนวคิดเรื่องชนชั้นของคาร์ล มาร์กซ ผู้เขียนค้นพบว่าการนำเสนอประเด็นการเมืองในภาพยนตร์แอคชั่น เช่นเรื่องต้มยำกุ้งไม่ได้นำเสนอผ่านเรื่องราวที่เป็นบทสนทนาแบบตรงไปตรงมาแต่มีการนำเสนอผ่านตัวละคร การต่อต้านความทันสมัยและโลกาภิวัตน์ในโครงสร้างตัวบทภาพยนตร์ การวิเคราะห์การเมืองในลักษณะนี้จึงทำให้เราเห็นประเด็นการเมืองที่ซ่อนอยู่และขยายกรอบการมองต่อการนำเสนอภาพแทนทางการเมืองในภาพยนตร์แอคชั่นในฐานะตระกูลของภาพยนตร์ประชานิยมซึ่งมักถูกมองว่าเป็นกลไกของจารีตนิยมทางการเมือง

คำสำคัญ: ภาพยนตร์แอคชั่นไทย มาร์กซิสต์ คู่ตรงข้าม เมือง การเมือง การนำเสนอภาพแทน

Introduction

The action film genre enjoyed commercial success and popularity for nearly four decades before the emergence of TV, rental video stores in the early 80s and multiplexes in the early 90s (Sukawong, 2004). The subsequent decline of action film production has cast doubt on the future prospects of the genre. Various factors have contributed to this trend, including the change in the film viewing culture from a popular activity to an integrated part of urban middle-class culture, the decline of the star system¹ and the domination of the Hollywood film industry. However, like the horror and comedy genres, the action genre remains highly relevant because of both its popularity and its continued profitability for the industry. Even though it is no longer favored by the new class of multiplex audiences, its potential in the global film market, operating within the available formats of distribution particularly DVD form and cable TV, allows for commercial success and recognition for both the films and the stars. The action film genre is often perceived as being excessively populist, anti-political and lacking in cinematic aesthetics. The film, *Tom Yum Goong (The Protector, 2005)*, dir. Prachya Pinkaew), for example, has been widely criticized for its weak dialogue, especially the utterance delivered by the hero. “*Chang ku yu nai?*” (Where are my elephants?) has become a popular line used contemptuously by both critics and audiences who were not impressed with the film’s meager and repetitive expressions spoken by the hero. In this article, my argument is that contemporary action films, of which *Tom Yum Goong* is one example, operating within the context of

¹ The star system is a method of creating and promoting a star based on his/her promising outlook in the film industry. It was originally associated with Hollywood. In early cinema, films were anonymous productions bearing the name of the studio. Then it became apparent that certain performers could better attract audiences than others. Such actors/ actresses were seen as having capital value (Hayward, 2000). In Thai cinema, the star system was prevalent during the 16 mm. film era in the 60s and 70s, especially due to the immense popularity of an action hero, Mitr Chaibuncha, and his often co-star actress, Petchara Chaowarat. For Mitr alone, during his acting career in fewer than 15 years, before his accidental death in 1970, he appeared in 256 roles. Apart from Mitr Chaibuncha and Petchara Chaowarat, other performers such as Sombat Methanee, Pitsamai Wilaisak, Sorapong Chatree and Jarunee Suksawat were also parts of the star system, making the 60s and 70s one of the best periods in the history of Thai cinema.

global capitalism and postmodernity, often convey political messages, though not explicitly. Drawing on the Marxist concept of class dichotomy, the following reading of *Tom Yum Goong* attempts to offer an alternative to political reading of action films, which calls for our critical engagement.

Marxist Analysis of *Tom Yum Goong (The Protector, 2005)*

It is useful to begin by briefly explaining the Marxist concept of class. This idea is predicated on the premise that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx & Engels, 1848). According to this view, ever since the existence of primitive society in human history, humans have clashed in the pursuit of class interests. Moreover, the division of classes has fundamentally remained until the present epoch. In capitalist society, the factory is the prime domain of class antagonism, that is between exploiters and exploited, between buyers and sellers of labor power. Rather than collaborating, each class is primarily concerned with its own interests. This dynamic results in confrontations of power which are explained by the Marxist notion of the social and historical process (Bancroft & Rogers, 2010). In applying this concept to analyzing the action film, class conflict is situated within the context of globalization in which the action hero is a representative of the proletariat while a Chinese adversary is a representative of the capitalist class. In addition to class, the notion of agency is also relevant if the subaltern is to be fairly represented. Rather than working to serve neither the nationalist defense of communitarianism nor the middle-class desire to be universal, the assertion of *khon* Thai agency is the case in point where the lost voice of the marginalized hero in *Tom Yum Goong* and the action film audience, who are often seen as anti-intellectual, are recovered. Moreover, such identification of *khon* Thai agency reveals the location of political empowerment in both the hero and the local community depicted in the film. This location, in my view, allows the film to be read politically.

On the surface *Tom Yum Goong* can be seen as one of Prachya Pinkaew's nationalist-themed films, in which banal national ideology is authenticated by the corporeal investment of a hero who is projected as an ideal Thai man, who heroically defends the nation's dignity. Like other films released after the economic crisis in 1997, *Tom Yum Goong* seems to have served the middle-class nationalist desire for the label of world-class Thai-ness or specifically as Ingawanij has nicely put it, "the yearning for global visibility as *Thai sakon* [Thai (yet) universal]"² (2006: 10), which can in fact be seen as a kind of narcissistic obsession with world opinion. In retrospect, the film does something quite different. Indeed, as we shall see, rejecting the obsession with *Thai sakon*, the film takes on the notion of *khon* Thai agency, a political strategy forged as a source of empowerment for subaltern subjects to struggle against the modern conditions of capitalist, globalized society, critiquing class structure on one level, and the modernity of the globalized world on another.

Regarding the influence of globalization vis-à-vis the (Thai) nation, even though the film industry is no longer constrained by national boundaries, it does not mean that any issues related to the nation can be altogether dismissed. As a matter of fact, as globalization has selectively served a particular group's interests, it makes sense for nations to have serious concerns about "American or Western Imperialism and attendant cultural homogenization or standardization" (Jameson, 2000 cited in Hjort & Petrie, 2007: 8). In the wake of globalization, Jameson asks us to think about nationalism in cultural and social, rather than political, terms. Linking cultural to economic factors, he argues that American imperialism, which is the heart of globalization, attempts to incorporate by any possible means, such as intellectual property copyrights, patents into its economic corporate strategy, systematically enshrined in the

² In her discussion of 'Thai *sakon* agency' of the heritage film, which is composed of bourgeois spectatorship, Ingawanij bases her argument for the bourgeoisie narcissistic sensibility partly on Kasian Techapeera's social concept of schizophrenia. It is claimed that bourgeoisie narcissistic sensibility is caused by "the simultaneous pull of desire for Thainess and the desire to overcome Thainess in the name of globalizing agency, a tension which both constructs yet destabilizes urban middle-class subjectivity" (Ingawanij, 2006: 29).

WTO and other agreements underpinning neo-liberal ideology.³ Consequently, the entire process has undermined local laws while making way for American cultural homogenization (2000: 52-55). Jameson has also observed that even though this new kind of imperialism has met with resistance from certain Hindu and Arab nationalist groups, he doubts whether these kinds of resistance are forms of 'natural defence' rather than serious acts of resistance which require "a cultural political programme" (52). From what has been discussed, I would like to draw a conclusion here that the thought of nation/national even within the context of the seemingly boundless national geography - that is, the weakened autonomy of the nation-state - remains relevant and has implications for the state's appropriate cultural policy. Perhaps it is the appropriate time for the film industry to rethink the idea of creative or alternative nationalism. That is, it should not be perceived only as a political ideology deployed by the state for its own hegemony. Rather, it can be seen also as a democratic right of the people to harness nationalistic sentiment for their own and/or social good or to access universal values. In reading *Tom Yum Goong*, one important message to note is that, as Marx's utopian vision holds, in spite of any existing circumstances, it is people who make their own history.

Kham, Por Yai and their traditional way of life

Tony Jaa, as Kham, is the son of an elephant keeper who is growing up in the pristine Thai countryside. Kham is strongly connected to this

³ For the Thai situation, questions surrounding FTA between Thailand and the United States remains controversial and issues over property rights violations which have jeopardized the lives of a street coffee stall owner and garbage collector have been widely discussed. For information regarding the FTA, see Aziz Choudry, "Fighting the US-Thailand Free Trade Agreement", 28 Mar. 2004, *Land Destroyer Report*. Date Accessed: 20 December 2014 <<http://landdestroyer.blogspot.in/2011/02/flash-back-thailands-thaksin-and-us-fta.html>>. For issues concerning property rights violations, see "Thai coffee stall vows to fight Starbucks logo lawsuit", 20 Oct. 2013, *The Guardian*, Date Accessed: 25 December 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/20/thai-coffee-stall-starbucks-starbung>> and also "Starbungs vs. Starbucks: Billion dollar corporation vs. street vendor", 18 October 2013, *Bangkok Post*. Date Accessed: 25 December 2014 <<http://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/learning-from-news/375260/starbungs-vs-starbucks-billion-dollar-corporation-vs-street-vendor>>.

family of elephants including Por Yai⁴, the mother and the baby elephant named Khon. However, it is the connection between Kham and Por Yai that is especially highlighted through the first ten shots in the opening sequence of the film, in which little Kham is continuously seen with Por Yai - riding him to school, playing with him, sleeping on his tusks as he is walking along the village road. The first such shot is of Kham standing in his school uniform in the middle of a green field and Por Yai's long, majestic tusks entering the frame from behind; the last shot is of Kham sleeping on Por Yai's tusks. Together they signify the importance Por Yai has in Kham's life. Spiritually, he is like an elder who watches over him, a protector or a guardian angel. The tusk motif is also introduced here. When the mother elephant is killed by a man connected to a political mafia, Kham's father decides to present the father elephant or Por Yai as a token of devotion to the king, believing that he carries special traits that make him a suitable royal possession. However, before Kham's father's wish can be realized, Por Yai is cornered and coerced into a truck and Khon, the baby elephant, follows. Both are smuggled to Sydney, Australia, and end up in a Thai restaurant named "Tom Yum Goong," owned by a Chinese family affiliated with an international mafia gang.

The first part of the film with sequences taking place in Thailand, as described above, represents clearly the kind of world and social class Kham belongs to. He is, according to the Marxian concept of social class, a member of the working class whose elephant functions not only as a means of subsistence but also as a spiritual figure that is both omnipotent and omnipresent. Por Yai is the epitome of Kham's perception of a king - an archetype of the subaltern's ancestor, endowed with physical, mental and spiritual strength. The reference to Kham's dream of becoming a Jatulangkaabaad⁵ soldier who protects the foot of

⁴ Literally, it means "big father", but Northeastern Thai people use the word to refer to a grandfather or a respected male elder.

⁵ The invocation of the Jatulangkaabaad soldier, who excels in the art of ancient Thai boxing which incorporates the elephant's postures into his fighting techniques, is significant here. First, it connotes a return to the ancestor, the traditional heritage, which constitutes a spiritual world of a pre-capitalist community - the world in which the realms of the moral and the material converge. "You must learn the way of our ancestors," says Kham's father to young Kham to remind him

the king's elephant during the battle and the fact that his father wants to give the father elephant to the actual monarch, connote the integrative significance of his ancestor in Kham's life-world. Unlike the bourgeoisie whose respect and reverence for the monarch is impersonal, equivalent to a lowly man vis-à-vis an unreachable god, Kham's approach to his king is historically rooted and personalized, as the king resides in his extended family as a grandfather; he also has the baby elephant Khon as his brother. Equally important is the figuration of the elephants as part of the family. Here, it suggests the idea of labor: through physical work a purely corporeal connection is produced. Consequently, Kham is strongly bonded to the elephant at two levels - spiritual and material. The idea of the king as manifested in Por Yai thus makes him not the king of the Thai kingdom, but of the laborer's spiritual world. If Kham's background is read as such, it would allow us to see him as a tangible form of "figurability" (Jameson, 1997: 845), a subject who can speak allegorically for his class. Interestingly, as the story plays out, the way in which Kham asserts his class identity through his labor certifies this kind of representativeness. The establishment of the notion of 'class consciousness' becomes even more concrete later in the film, during his misadventures and extraordinary encounters in Sydney. Kham's verbal constraint, which reduces his expression to a repetitive utterance of "*Chang ku yu nai?*" (Where are my elephants?), rather than being lame, boring or ineffectual, as some critics and audiences have charged, can be seen as a filmic device that presents him in stark contrast with the bourgeoisie. The paucity of his speech then, apart from serving as evidence of cultural authenticity of the story in which he is a country man who cannot converse in English, is by no means meant to reflect the proletariat's inferiority in articulation. Rather, as Kham's ferocious battles, sincerity, and morally-charged motives have shown us, it reflects

of the importance of his ancestral roots which serve as a source of pride and self-determination. In a different context, a call for traditionalism as such can be instrumental in igniting nationalist sentiment, being deployed as a political discourse by the nationalist movement in some previous colonies to resist their colonial ruler. See, for example, Partha Chatterjee, "Colonialism, Nationalism and Colonized Women: The Contest in India," *American Ethnologist* 16 no. 4 (November 1989): 622-33.

the proletariat's capability of expression without using (many) words. His inarticulacy has become the voice that is loud, clear and meaningful. It is void of the bourgeois pretension and rhetorical manipulation with which we are so familiar in our politicized world.

Sergeant Mark, a critic of modernity

Kham lands in Sydney without knowing anyone. His obligation is, not that of a Thai man to redeem his lost dignity, but that of a subaltern figure to bring back his stolen family members, his means of subsistence, his ancestral belongings to the right place and his desire to be with the right people. Sydney is portrayed as it really is — a vibrantly modern, multi-cultural, technologically-advanced city, a promised land to many immigrants, a commercially viable destination for multi-national corporations. This land is far removed from Kham's lived experience. It has a totally faceless king by the name *Law*.⁶ Ironically, one of the city's mundane activities, lurking behind the façade of its alluring outlook of (post)modernity is the criminality which suggests human decadence. The story introduces us to a small number of Thai people who live, figuratively, at the city's periphery. The most crucial one is Sergeant Mark, a police officer who is funny, friendly, and duty-conscious, played by a well-known comedian Mum Jokmok (Peththay Wongkhamlao). The Sergeant Mark character is very interesting, less because of his (attempted) Australian English accent and the jokes that he cracks throughout the film (this actually happens in all the films he has played in) than his reconcilable quality, which reflects well his Isan cultural roots. Pla is a young student who gets into a tangle with a gangster and is caught in a debt trap, owing a large sum of money which she has to pay off by working as a prostitute. Tui is an immigrant whose attempt

⁶ Drawing on Foucauldian ideas of power/knowledge, in modern Western society where literal royal power is absent, what has come to replace it are state apparatuses and other regulating mechanisms sanctioned by state law. All of these function as modern forms of power. Hence, to Foucault, the absence or limited power of the monarch in modern Western society is not simply equivalent to the absence of a sovereign power. Rather, the modern state has constituted a new form of legitimate power, invested in laws and judicial systems, which seeks to regulate, repress and dominate the citizen through multiple forms of subjugation (Foucault, 1980).

to commit crime has failed twice. First, he is released with no charges when caught pointing a gun at the owners of a grocery store, and second, he is shot dead by the police chief known as Vincent. These Thai characters are not connected to one another like an organized diaspora. Yet, they offer a helping hand when it is needed and may come across one another in any Thai restaurant or somewhere in the city. They are depicted as individuals who are scattered throughout the setting, never quite living coherently together. Their national identity, however, can be invoked by a sense of historical memory collectively shared with their compatriots. Given that, however, there is a kind of class consciousness lacking in them. As a matter of fact, these immigrants aspire to become modern members of the bourgeois class in the land of a different king, and they apparently struggle to make it possible.

Sergeant Mark is a Thai-Australian police officer who makes frequent appearances in and around the Chinatown area. He is recognizable and quite well-liked by Asian immigrants there not just because of his proximity to the people but also for his accommodative nature. As a law-enforcement agent, what Sergeant Mark often does, however, is not simply conform to legal rigidity and exactitude. Rather, he seeks to find ways to bend the rule of law and make it fit for each different case he has to deal with. Sergeant Mark integrates into law a sense of empathy. In a sequence in which the convenience store is robbed and its owners are being held up, upon arriving at the scene and being informed of who the robber is (an Asian teenager), Sergeant Mark tells his partner, Rick, that he will deal with the incident himself. When he sees a nervous, trembling robber, he recognizes him immediately and starts addressing him by his name, Tui, in spite of his stocking covered head. "Hey, hey, hey, take it easy, take it easy. Let's talk, Ok? Ok? *Auo ai Tui!, ai chiphay! Mung ma tham aria wa?* (Aha it's you, Tui! You stupid prick! What're you doing here?), he says to the teen robber. He tells Tui that he remembers him as his face looks like a kind of fish (a spiny eel) and then manages to catch him after invoking the presence of Tui's mother. Here, this may sound funny and unprofessional in dealing with a criminal. But it has a cultural impact that affects Tui

psychologically. Mark, stepping out of the store with the handcuffed Tui, puts the stocking back on Tui's head to cover his identity. He also refuses to answer a journalist's question but only exclaims, "It's been just another day. Anyway, enough fun for now, okay? Bye!" Then he takes Tui into his car and removes the stocking from his face upon hearing his sobbing. Ultimately, he frees Tui against Rick's objection.

Sergeant Mark to Tui: *Pai! Pai! Pai! Ya sam-oi ai nii* (Go! Go on! Run! Don't be such a wimp!)

Rick: How could you do that, Sarge? It's against procedure.

Sergeant Mark: It's no use arresting a young junkie mind.

Rick: Yeah, but we should go by the law.

Sergeant Mark: Don't you want to? *Thua thua khan pai* (no big deal, forget it!). Let's go.

For Sergeant Mark, the impersonal power of the law is inhumane because it prevents marginalized figures from sharing their different stories and historical conditions. It operates only between the two opposing positions of legality and illegality, hence lacking the transformative will to serve the needs of the victims. From a modernist's point of view, Sergeant Mark may be thought of as an outcome of the unfinished project of modernity, a signifier of the incomplete bourgeois revolution that is haunting the political systems of many third world societies. However, as some post-colonial thinkers have remarked, one single form of modernity which is based on the logic of Western enlightenment and which does not take into account social differences and traditional sensibilities can be detrimental to people's lives. Modernity itself should then be seen as varied and dependent on relevant circumstances and social contexts (Chakrabarty, 2004; Chatterjee, 1997). As far as modern law is concerned, its fixed interpretation and exactitude make no attempt to resolve blurring and overlapping categories and will not accept multiple affiliations. It is this impersonal nature of law that Sergeant Mark is aware of and one that he constantly criticizes through his legally deviant acts. It is unfortunate that, as a comic character, and a Northeastern comedian actor in real life, his critical voice can hardly

be seen as serious enough to be subversive but merely as a component that contributes to enjoyment of the film.

Kham vs. Madame Rose: The inevitable class war

What makes law less humane is how it is manipulated not for social justice but to serve the specific purposes of a particular group, particularly the one that is already successful in its own constitution of sovereignty through legal power. The collaboration between Madame Rose, who runs the Tom Yum Goong restaurant, her mafia gang which engages in subterranean criminality, and the police and government reflects how powerful a ruling class in the guise of a capitalist corporation could become. The face of the ruling elite may have changed, but their characteristics in social reality remain the same and pretty much so does their influence on class consciousness. Rose's sexual ambiguity, as despised by her elderly family members, is suggestive of this complicated character of the bourgeoisie within a framework of globalization. She can also be seen as the embodiment of China's economic power, which is threatening to several nations. The filmic depiction of Rose in stark contrast to Kham enables us to see the structural class dichotomy in metaphoric form. To illustrate, unlike Kham who is spiritually connected to his family members including the elephants, Rose has not only isolated herself from other family members, she also excludes anyone who obstructs her way to power, including the two young cousins who are expected to become the family business leaders. In the same way, Vincent the police chief, who has a clandestine relationship with Rose, does the same thing to his colleagues. In the words of Karl Marx, "the bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation" (Marx & Engels, 1848). Throughout the film, we do not see Rose express any emotions other than her sadistic smile when someone is removed from her way to power. This contrasts with Kham who is shown to be angry and frustrated whenever he utters, "*Chang ku yu nai?*" (seven times). His exhaustion from endless fighting and extreme grief when he learns about

the demise of the father elephant is also evident. Another emerging element that positions Rose and Kham as polar opposites is that Kham receives assistance from Sergeant Mark, a powerless cop who defies legal rigorosity, while Rose is allied to those who take legality to its most rigid extreme. Such intense conflicting energy between the two social classes, one represented by Kham and the other by Rose, can no longer be contained. Thus, the class war must begin.

The sequence in which Kham and Khon, the baby elephant, are heading toward the building where Rose is holding a business reception is extraordinary. It begins with bird's eye panoramic shots showing the iconic Harbour Bridge over which Kham and Khon are marching side by side, alien to the city residents, passing the Opera House as seen from the bridge. Feeling empowered and confident with his purpose (in contrast to the earlier shot of a stray elephant keeper and his elephant being caught and loaded into the truck), Kham's unexpected appearance at the reception hall and his lucid articulation, "*Chang ku yunai?*" bring Rose's speech to a sudden halt. She has just mentioned her new business empire and the full collaboration it receives from the government and the police. At this moment the last battle begins. Kham learns that Por Yai has been killed and his tusks and bones have been used to make an ostentatious symbol of Rose's superstitious beliefs. For Rose, the elephant's tusks are only an ornamental representation, an isolated object whose value is measured by price and perception. But Kham cannot see the elephant's tusks separately from the elephant's body; each part is the sum of the totality of his consciousness. Utterly enraged and grieved, he is fighting together with the spirit of the dead elephant against the four colossal bodyguards. Reminded of the Jatulangkaad's fighting techniques through the voice-over of his father, Kham thrashes all of the big men before he engages in a duel with Rose, ultimately defeating her. After leaping in the air to kick Rose as she is trying to escape by helicopter, Kham falls onto Por Yai's tusks where he is saved. This shot recalls and reconnects with the film's opening shots presenting the close ties between Kham and Por Yai. The war is over but Kham's

victory over the ruling class is won only at the high price of Por Yai's life.

Conclusion

Prachya's *Tom Yum Goong* may have disappointed some critics and some audiences for its weak storyline. However, it does have something to say politically. It affirms the proposition that the subaltern subject can make his own history and that the new powerful elite under the guise of multinational corporations operating through the global network, represented by Rose, can be even more fearsome than the traditional capitalist class. Regarding the place of politics in popular cinema, Jameson's ideas are relevant here when he says that for commercial reasons, the genuinely political film is not likely to be produced, and hence commercial films are often criticized for being vehicles for ideological manipulation. He explains,

No doubt this is so, if we remain on the level of the intention of the film-maker himself, who is bound to be limited consciously or unconsciously by his objective situation. But it is to fail to reckon with the political content of daily life, with the political logic which is already inherent in the raw material with which the film-maker must work: such political logic will then not manifest itself as an overt political message, nor will it transform the film into an ambiguous political statement. But it will certainly make for the emergence of profound formal contradictions to which the public cannot but be sensitive, whether or not it yet possesses the conceptual instruments to understand what those contradictions mean. (Jameson, 1977: 846)

As Jameson has shown, because of commercial conditions attached to film production, it is not always possible to make an overtly political film or to explicitly reveal the political message of the film. However, the film narrative or structure itself is usually enmeshed with

political messages which can be discovered by means of close and sensitive reading. Through such attentive reading, Jameson believes, “formal contradictions” significant to the film’s quality of being political can unfold.

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Figure 1 Kham (Tony Jaa) bidding farewell to PorYai (father elephant), in the manner one uses with a respected elder.



Figure 2 “Take it easy!” Sergeant Mark trying to negotiate with Tui as the latter attempts to rob a grocery store.



Figure 3 Madam Rose, a mafia gang leader