

# ผลกระทบทางสังคมของละครรำลึกบุพเพสันนิวาส: กรณีศึกษา ละครเรื่อง “โกรงเรื่องเล่า”

## ENGENDERING PUBLIC MOURNING OF KING RAMA IX THROUGH DRAMA SERIES: ROYALISM AND THAI ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

กรพินธ์ พัวพันสวัสดิ์

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### บทคัดย่อ

ในช่วง 1-3 เดือนหลังการสวรรคตของพระบาทสมเด็จพระปรมินทรมหาภูมิพลอดุลยเดช รัชกาลที่ 9 ชาวบ้านทั่วไทยได้ผลิตละครหลายเรื่องเพื่อถวายความอาลัยและรำลึกพระมหาชนก ไทย บทความขึ้นนี้ศึกษา “โกรงเรื่องเล่า” ที่ละครเหล่านี้มีร่วมกัน ต่างไปจากสารคดีเฉลิมพระเกียรติ ตัวเอกในละครเหล่านี้เป็นคนธรรมด้า มีความหลากหลายทั้งทางภูมิหลัง เชื้อชาติ และสถานะทางเศรษฐกิจสังคม โดยเหตุการณ์ล้วนแต่เกิดขึ้นในเดือน ตุลาคม 2559 นอกจากนี้ เนื้อเรื่องยังมีครบถ้วน ทั้งสุข ตก เศร้า เคล้าน้ำตา ควรค่าแก่การพิจารณา “ตัวบท” ของขึ้นงานอย่างละเอียด ยิ่งไปกว่านั้น บทความขึ้นนี้มองว่าละครเหล่านี้คืออักษรการเมือง มีนัยยะและผลกระทบสำคัญในเชิงการครอบจ้ำทาง อุดมการณ์แบบบุพเพสันนิวาส อุดมการณ์แบบกรุงสุริมี และการเมืองเรื่องสัญลักษณ์ภาษา ซึ่งอาจจะช่วย ให้เราไม่เพียงแต่เข้าใจรูปแบบและการทำงานของพระราชนิรันดร์ งานนี้ในช่วงปลายยุคสมัยแห่งรัชกาลที่ 9 แต่ยังเข้าใจความขัดแย้งทางการเมืองไทยที่ยืดเยื้อมาร่วมทศวรรษมากขึ้นด้วย

**คำสำคัญ:** อุดมการณ์บุพเพสันนิวาส สื่อสารเชิงวิพากษ์ ละครไทย รัชกาลที่ 9

### Abstract

In the wake of the passing of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama IX (r.1946-2016), Thailand's entertainment industry produced several drama series participated by countless Thai celebrities. It was a royalist popular culture that aimed to mourn and remember the late king. This paper examines the “narrative structures” widely shared by these royalist series. Unlike in royal documentary films, protagonists in the series are commoners diverse in their backgrounds, nationalities, and socio-economic status. Taking place during October 2016, the plots contain warming, comic, and tear-jerking

messages which are worthy of a close textual analysis. More importantly, this paper argues that these TV series are political arts. They serve to reproduce a hierarchical order and ideological domination through signs and language. This paper also explores the so-called royalism and bourgeois ideology as ruling ideologies; therefore, it enables us to better understand not only royal hegemony during the twilight era of Rama IX but also Thailand's decade-long political conflict – the conflict that outlived the death of the monarch and became a challenging question under the new reign.

**Keywords:** Royalism, Critical theories, Thai drama series, Rama IX

### Introduction

During the first three months (November 2016 - January 2017) after the passing of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, or Rama IX, on October 13, 2016, public mourning became mandatory and ubiquitous in Thailand. It took in various forms in Thai society. People wore black to go to work. Royal portraits were displayed in front of business buildings, whether they were single-storey buildings or skyscrapers. Car owners decorated their vehicles with the stickers saying "We are born in the reign of Rama IX." Even in coffee shops, one could sip their beverage while being moved by slow pop songs remembering the great king.

Amidst the atmosphere of national grievance, Thai entertainment industry worked against time. It mobilized resources, gathered crews, prepared scripts, and finally produced several drama series participated by countless Thai celebrities. The casting were superstars from both old and new generations. Those included Sorapong Chatree, Thongchai "Bird" McIntyre, Penpak Sirikul, Prin Suparat, and Phakin Khamwilaisak. They are the award-winning actor, Thailand's "King of Pop," sexy actress, beloved actor, and heartthrob singer, respectively. Notably, several big names in the industry were willing to be part of these series projects despite appearing on screen for less than one minute or without a speaking role. For example, in the big budget series "*We are born in the reign of Rama IX: The Series*," Thongchai appears on screen for 30 seconds and delivers merely three lines. "I would have accepted the role even if I appeared in only one scene," said Woranuch Bhirombhakdi, a leading actress from the same series (*Thairath Online*, November 4, 2016). According to Prin, "this project is not about how much we earn in return....Our goal is to do it for the King, Father of Thai

people" (*Line Today*, 2017). It is interesting to explore whether these royalist series are merely popular culture aiming for high viewing rates and commercial success or they can be read as one among political and ideological tools of the ruling class.

## Materials and Methods

This paper examines three drama series broadcasted by three major television channels in Thailand: Workpoint (Channel 23), One (Channel 31), and ThaiPBS (Channel 3). The first series is "Glorifying the Man in the Sky: The Series" (*Lakhon thoet phrakiat khon bon fa*). The second one is "Grandma's Memory" (*Khwam song cham khong ya*). The last one is "We are born in the reign of Rama IX: The Series" (*Rao koet nai ratchakan thi kao doe si ri*). As table 1 shows, the three series are diverse in terms of length, cast, and production scale. For example, "Grandma's Memory" is a low-cost art project in which cast and crew participated voluntarily. Nonetheless, all of them share a similar plot. That is, their stories took place during October 2016, the month that the beloved king passed away, and every character must confront and deal with this national tragedy.

**Table 1** Three drama series in tribute to late King Bhumibol

Title	Television channel	Leading actors	Length	Date of first public showing	Youtube views (On January 29, 2019)
Glorifying the Man in the Sky: The Series	Workpoint (Channel 23)	Sorapong Chatree Winai Kraibutr Sawika Chaiyadech Jack Brown	43.95 minutes	January 2, 2017	43,232
Grandma's Memory	Cinema theatres (December 5, 2016) and ThaiPBS (Channel 3) (October 13, 2017)	Prin Suparat Phalang Kotsin Nitthanit Kunrot	17.38 minutes	December 5, 2016	34,809
We are born in the reign of Rama IX: The Series	Channel One (Channel 31)	Phakin Khamwilaisak Thongchai McIntyre Penpak Sirikul	5 hours 20 minutes	November 14 – 17, 2016	345,010 (Average views of four episodes)

The series can be viewed in two ways. On the one hand, general audience can enjoy the three series as they comprise great acting, supernatural events, a romantic theme, and sentimental as well as comic moments. Unlike royal documentary films, these royalist series do not simply show historical footages and directly retell the great achievements of the Thai monarchy. Rather, they contain elements shared among other media in the Thai popular culture, especially soap operas. Those elements include a "meet-cute" situation, a love plot in which love surmounts many obstacles, and an intense fight scene. On the other hand, the series can be viewed critically as a form of royal domination in the cultural spheres of Thai society. As Hall (2007) suggested, popular culture renders political and ideological effects. Messages on television composed of sets of discourse and symbols are "communicative events." This communicative circuit, Hall claimed, reproduces a pattern of domination (Hall, 2007). The events involve a process of defining particular agendas, legitimizing a certain group of people, and stigmatizing others. Televisual signs become dominant and arbitrary when they produce "natural recognitions" (Hall, 2007). That is, the signs seem very natural and neutral but they are in fact coded with ideological or political meanings.

This paper explores the royalist series with critical frameworks. It shows that the Thai entertainment industry plays an indispensable role to the reproduction of the kingdom's ruling ideology, royalism. In addition, the three series can be read as reflections on how the Bangkok elites and middle-class indulge in a fantasy about both post-Bhumibol and ideal Thai society. However, it is easy to presuppose that these royalist series are just another form of conservative art similar to others prevalent in Thai society. So, I further contend that the series are distinctive and they need to be contextualized by Thailand's decade-long political conflict. The series-makers indeed recognize anti-royalist sentiments and attempt to incorporate these "deviant" narratives into their stories. Identity-politically speaking, the series provide spaces and voices to the "marginalized," "the excluded," and "the Other." Therefore, they can be called royalist popular culture in the multicultural era. In other words, while glorifying the monarchy and reinforcing royal-nationalism, the series also advocates diversity and toleration towards those who are deemed disobedient to the ruling ideology.

In this paper, I employ a textual and visual analysis as a methodological approach (Bleiker, 2018). That is, I will treat the series as a ‘text’ that can be ‘read.’ I will pay close attention to plots, scripts, and characters (Hinwiman, 2002). More importantly, the paper interprets symbols that are present in the series in order to explain or understand particular concepts, ideologies, and historical events (see for example, Jayanama, 2012; 2019).

## Results

### Central Theme: October 2016 and Self-transformation

All three series are set in Thailand during October 2016. Although the series aim to glorify the King, they revolve around ordinary lives of the protagonists with diverse backgrounds, namely an American writer, a poor man from the Northeast, or a hardworking doctor. These main characters go through this historic period and transformed themselves into “better” human beings. Notably, unlike the same old plot overused in Thai soap operas, the series have no true villain and the plots do not end with goodness overcoming evil (Hinwiman, 2002). In other words, the premise here is rather related to repentance, change, and self-improvement.

*Glorifying the Man in the Sky: The Series* tells a story of a male *farang* (foreigner) named Kevin whose attitude slowly transforms from being skeptic to wholeheartedly convinced of King Bhumibol’s greatness. Unable to understand why “the king is beloved by his people this much,” Kevin goes to stay with his senior relative, Teacher Thomas, and starts interviewing local people in the village. At first, Kevin contemptuously mocks Thomas for being “brainwashed” and blindly praising the king. However, the more Kevin talks to the villagers, the more his eyes become wide open. Local teachers and civil servants explain to him how royal projects help develop the area. A young blind girl lets him listen to a song composed by the king. Nonetheless, by the time he realizes “why Thai people love their king,” the king passed away. Seeing his Thai friends weeping and prostrating themselves before the royal portrait, Kevin puts down his camera and “*wai* (a gesture for showing respect)” the portrait as well. The series ends with the scene in which Kevin is typing a title of his manuscript on a computer, “King Bhumibol, the Greatest King, the Teacher, and the Beloved Father.” “I no longer have any doubt why Thai people love their king,” says Kevin in clear Thai.

The second short series “*Grandma’s Memory*” also deals with curiosity towards the monarchy; however, the protagonist is a young Thai boy “Pop” who by 2016 grows up to be a salary man. Pop has lived with his family including his dad, mom, and grandma. Every evening, while family members are having dinner, grandma always gets up, leaves the dinner table, and sits in front of a television at 8 o’clock. Pop used to wonder “Why did grandma prostrate herself before the TV? Is it possible that the man wearing glasses on TV is my dad’s boss?” Growing up, Pop knows that the man is the king and it is royal news that always appears on the TV screen every 8 pm. In 2016, grandma, now having grey hair, aged, and fragile, suffers from Alzheimer’s. She is gradually unable to recognize her love ones, including Pop. Nonetheless, on October 13, 2016 at 8 pm, grandma does not fail to get up, go to the TV room, and prostrate herself before the image of the king on TV as she has done for decades. Tearfully, Pop realizes that unlike himself, “grandma does not use her brain to remember the king but her heart.” In other words, although she lost her memory, her love for the king lives on.

The last and biggest budget series is “*We are born in the reign of Rama IX.*” It was produced by Thakolkiat Weerawan, one of the biggest TV producers in the kingdom. It contains 8 sub-plots about people from various backgrounds confronting the loss of the king. Due to limited spaces, this paper will focus only two stories about a young doctor and a rich man who travel to the past and turn into better men because of lessons they have learnt from the king. Rat, a Bangkokian doctor, does not shed tears on October 13. His priority is work because he wants to make lots of money. Rat loses consciousness in a car crash and finds himself in Thailand’s northern mountain in 1969. Hill people from a Mong tribe save him. Becoming sick, Rat is carried by these Mong people to a group of royal doctors stationed nearby. Moved by these selfless doctors and the king, Rat realizes that life is not just about work and money. When Rat travels back to the present, he does not hesitate to be a volunteer doctor at the royal funeral ceremony.

Another character, Posh, a rich young man, also goes through a car accident and time-travelling experience. Before his incredible journey, Posh, like Rat, does not have any emotional connection with the king’s death. He even feels depressed being surrounded by crying people. Posh went back to the year 1980 and found himself in

the northeastern Sakon Nakhon, one of the so-called “red districts” during the Cold War. Fleeing frightfully from gunfire between the Thai army and communist insurgents, Posh is saved by “comrade Khram” – an *Isan* (northeastern) villager and a communist fighter. The two teenagers—one rich and another poor—become friends and transform into “better” men. Posh sympathizes *Isan* villagers who suffered from drought, economic hardship, and state violence. He vows that he will care more about his fellow citizens. More importantly, comrade Khram slowly realizes that communist ideology and the party are unrealistic and hypocritical. On the contrary, His Majesty’s development projects can truly improve *Isan* people’s lives. In the end, Khram gives up his radical thoughts and works at Phu Phan Ratchanivet Palace whereas Posh returns to year 2016 with the determination to eradicate poverty, following the king’s footsteps.

## Discussion

### Royal Panopticism and Royally Docile Body

In “Thailand’s Hyper-royalism: Its Past Success and Present Predicament,” Winichakul (2016) points out that “royalism is intensified and exaggerated in public and everyday life” in the late Bhumibol’s era. He defines this “politico-cultural condition” as “hyper-royalism.” Rather than top-down state propaganda, hyper-royalism has been perpetuated by members of various socio-economic sectors. In other words, royalist rhetoric and symbolic representation have been adapted to the post-modern age of communication, commodification, and “feel-good” consumption.

Put it theoretically, the latest form of royal power in Thailand does not solely rest upon the negative “sovereign” power to kill and create fear (Foucault, 1990). Instead, as Foucault (1995) argued, power is strong and effective when it is less centralized and “capable of operating everywhere...down to the finest grain of the social body.” Foucault called it disciplinary power and biopower. In the same fashion, royal “panopticism” and “surveillance” have prevailed in contemporary Thailand to encourage certain kinds of gesture, speech, and lifestyle which can be read as a form of constructing a royally docile body and royalist subjectivity. For instance, the “royal gaze” is projected from portraits and calendars on the wall, buildings, and billboards, featured images of the king and other members of the royal family (Krittikarn, 2011). The “royal gaze” is also reinforced everyday at 8 pm on the royal news. Most Thais

know when and where he or she has to “stand up,” “crawl down,” “prostrate,” or “weep.” Which color must (not) he or she wear on what day? Several outward expressions, in both public and private, serve to glorify the monarchy. They become collectivized and naturalized on the daily basis. Winichakul (2016) describes Thai society as a “community of believers” who are capable of “shouting and singing similar words....shredding tears for the same cause, having the same faith....[and] expressing it in a similar, uniform way”.

The grandma character in *Grandma’s Memory* can be read as an affirmation of the royal biopower and hyper-royalism. As shown in the previous section, grandma gradually suffers from a decline in memory, thinking, and reasoning skills; however, she never fails to prostrate herself before the TV everyday at 8 pm. This scene can be read in two ways. On the one hand, the filmmaker intends to let the audience appreciate grandma’s love for the king which is firm, unchangeable, and beyond reason. On the other hand, wouldn’t this kind of love perfectly characterize royalism in Thailand? Even in the most private space and during a relaxing time, a good royal subject insists on showing her deferential gestures. This royally docile body needs no explanation, in particular, logical or scientific ones. It becomes so internalized and naturalized that it overcomes Alzheimer’s. As a consequence, an act of repetitive servility, without “using brain” as the protagonist describes it himself, is admirable and exemplary in Thailand’s royalist regime. In other words, royalism here no longer needs true believers as long as people kneel down and act as if they believe. Indeed, Slavoj Zizek claims that this is how ruling ideology functions nowadays (Sharpe & Boucher, 2010).

### **Mass and Bourgeois Monarchy**

Semiotically, from the late 1980 onward, royalist symbols and signs have become diversified and widely shared through various channels. Ordinary objects have been “encoded” with monarchical virtues and reinforced royalism. Put it concretely, in Thailand, “a flattened toothpaste tube” does not merely signify “a need to buy the new one.” It powerfully means Rama IX’s philosophical way of life, namely sufficiency economy and frugality. Therefore, in *Glorifying the Man in the Sky: The Series*, it is crucial to interpret the quarrel scene between Kevin, the doubtful *farang*, and Thomas, the royalist *farang*. After fiercely arguing about the status of the Thai king, the former points at a flattened toothpaste tube and aggressively asks why Thomas still keeps this

useless empty container. In response, Thomas picks up the tube, squeezes it, and gently says “there is still plenty left.” This scene is remarkable. The ignorant, wasteful, and culturally-insensitive otherness is juxtaposed with philosophical, self-sufficient, absolute goodness. A foreigner who is skeptic toward the king and clueless about deeper meanings of the toothpaste tube encounters a wise senior “Thaiified” foreigner. The latter can see things with a Thai royalist lens.

Several scholars have argued that symbolic representations of Rama IX have changed since the 1980s. Peleggi (2009) argues that the visual production of the monarchy shifted from an emphasis on the militaristic dimension to a developmental and benign stance. In the post-Cold-War era, King Bhumibol turned into an “inspiration” or a “role model” for his subjects. Jeamteerasakul, (2005) further specifies that in the 1990s the monarchy was “humanized” and royalism and depended on modern justifications through easily understood narratives. In the era of the “mass monarchy,” rather than a demi-god, Bhumibol became an exemplary squarely fitting into bourgeois values: intellectuality, fatherhood, love, hard-working, and dog master. As Jeamteerasakul argues, the Thai middle-class relies on the newly-formed royalism so that they could survive in the competitive world of rapid transformations and uncertainties. Developing from Jeamteerasakul’s thesis, Puangchon Unchanam’s “Bourgeois Monarchy” (2018) shows in detail the bourgeoisification of the Thai monarchy. For example, images of the king wearing business suits downplay those of His Majesty in military uniforms. Instead of holding guns and fighting communism, the king carries pencils, maps, cameras, and books. Unchanam, (2018) argues that Thai royalism is not only compatible with but central to capitalist development in Thailand.

Contemporary royalism heavily popularizes the idea that King Bhumibol was a hardworking monarch. The iconic portrait of the king with a bead of sweat on the tip of his nose symbolized this self-sacrificing diligent virtue (Stengs, 2009). As one television commercial preached, “While His Majesty has been working for his people thousand times harder than we do,” he could still manage to see his mother “five days a week” (Charoen Pokphand Group, 2014). The king’s selfless workaholic aspect was tamed and balanced by his emphasis on family values. No doubt, the king represented the ideal type for the Thai bourgeois class; work hard yet never forget to express your gratitude towards your parents.

In *Glorifying the Man in the Sky: The Series*, a local civil servant challenges Kevin by asking “Tell me which monarchy in this world work harder than His Majesty?” The narrative here is to both humanize the Thai king and to distinguish him from the rest. Unlike other royal families, as the narrative goes, the Thai one is superior due to its selfless industrious virtue. Similarly, in *We are born in the Reign of Rama IX: The Series*, Rat, a doctor, is so obsessed with earning money and thus he refuses to take his mother to the royal funeral ceremony. As mentioned previously, even a workaholic like Rama IX must take care of his parents. Therefore, Rat finally learns a lesson from the king. He successfully manages to spend his time with family, working, and also being a good royalist.

Finally, rather than leading a glamorous, extravagant way of life, King Bhumibol was admired for his down-to-earth and frugal lifestyle. An image of a flattened toothpaste tube stirred up a public sensation in early 2000s. As the story goes, the king squeezed out every drop from the tube. The “royal toothpaste tube” has been put inside a glass box and is now exhibited at the Faculty of Dentistry, Chulalongkorn University (Tejakumpuch, 1999). As a consequence, this toothpaste tube does not fail to make an appearance in the fight scene between Kevin and Thomas.

#### **Royalist Eye-opening Experiences: Shared Narrative Structures**

Unlike the typical theme in Thai soap operas, there is no villain to be defeated and pay karmic dues in these royalist series (Hinwiman, 2002). Instead, the villain characters are replaced with “the outsider,” “the curious,” “the ignorant,” and “the misled.” They have to go through an “eye-opening” process, repent, and succumb to the royalist ideology. These characters include Kevin the *farang*, an *Isan* communist fighter, and young Thais who do not feel sad (enough) after the king’s death. Undoubtedly, the eye-opening experience would not be possible without morally superior characters including a local civil servant, a good *farang*, or the grandma.

This paper argues that the eye-opening plots in these royalist series can be read as reactions against the anti-royalist eye-opening trend emerging after the 2006 coup d'état. The term “*ta sawang*” or eye-opening was used among redshirt participants whose belief and attitude toward the Thai monarchy drastically shifted. Forming in 2007, the redshirt movement (formally known as the United Front against Dictatorship) is a mass political movement that supports former-Prime Minister Thaksin

Shinawatra and opposes unconstitutional interventions, especially by the judiciary and military, to overthrow the elected government. A vast portion of redshirt protesters comes from Thailand's north and northeastern provinces where Thaksin-endorsed parties dominate. Several works show that redshirt members value the principle of popular sovereignty, majority rule, and elected representation (see Thraisuriyadhammar, 2010; Krachangpho, 2010; Chiangsen, 2011; McCargo & Thabchumpon, 2011; Satitniramai et al., 2013; Laungaramsri, 2013).

In "Anti-Royalism in Thailand Since 2006: Ideological Shifts and Resistance" (2018), the author claims that an eye-opening experience among redshirt participants happened at least twice. First was on October 13, 2008 when the queen and princess presided over the funeral of a yellow shirt protester, Angkana Radappanyawut. Falling from grace and being disappointed, several redshirt members call October 13, 2008 the "national eye-opening day." Then, another break took place after the 2010 crackdown of redshirt protesters. The following poem vividly describes the meaning of redshirt eye-opening. It says "I had been mistaking a vicious wheel for a lotus flower for all my life. Wrongly misled, I was willing to sacrifice even my life....But now Thais have their eyes open capable of seeing the righteous path (Pik sai, 2010)."

In the royalist series, eye-opening experiences take in opposite directions. That is, plots begin with characters who "mistake a vicious wheel for a lotus flower." These include Kevin who ignorantly judges the king and his people based on western values; Pop who never understands grandma's love for Rama IX; Rat who prioritizes work and money over family and the king, Posh who thinks public mourning is too depressing; and comrade Khram who hates and wants to overthrow feudalism. Actually, it is crucial to link the Kevin character to Paul Handley, the author of *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej* (2006). This book offers counter-accounts against the idealist and morally superior image of the Thai monarchy. After the government's failed attempt to prevent its publication, the book was banned in Thailand in 2006 (Hewison, 2008). Both Kevin and Handley are *farangs* as well as independent writers. However, Kevin is fortunate to meet Thomas who warns him "don't write just to make money." So the series ends with the redeemed Kevin writing a book far different from *The King Never Smiles*.

Notably, these skeptic attitudes mentioned in the series originate from the lack of correct information. And thus they are considered “curable.” Kevin, for example, offensively said that Thomas and Thai people are “brainwashed” by the elites. Yet, this is because Kevin just arrived in Thailand and speaks as an outsider. After he immersed into a village, he began to have his eyes open and see Rama IX the ways ordinary Thais do. On the other hand, Pop, Rat, and Posh represent a new generation of Thais who have shallow feelings toward the king. They do respect and love the monarchy; however, it is not enough. As their grandma and parents, the older generations, set examples, the youngsters must invest more emotionally in their royalism.

The most interesting character is comrade Khram, the only Thai protagonist who can speak of the monarchy offensively such as “I hate their guts, the feudalists” in a northeastern dialect. However, the series represents comrade Khram as a sympathetic poor man who advocates communist ideology out of necessity. Most importantly, comrade Khram is portrayed as a historical character during the Cold War era. Like leftist students or the “Octobrists” who had wanted to change Thai society, comrade Khram understandably took arms and fought with the Thai state. Nonetheless, after spending just a few years in the deep jungle, these people decided to go “out of the forest,” disarmed themselves, and quit their communist ideology in the late 1980s (see Lertchoosakul, 2012). Dominant narratives regarding Thai leftism thus revolved around repentance and realization regarding the wickedness and hypocrisy of the communist party (Srinara, 2013). Comrade Khram eventually transforms into royalist Khram when he takes off the red-star cap and works at the Phu Phan palace, serving “the feudalists” which he used to hate.

As mentioned above, this eye-opening theme needs to be contextualized. For more than a decade, Thailand experiences social conflicts, two military coups, and political violence. As .10Aeowsriwong (2014) states, every political institution, including the monarchy, faces a crisis of legitimacy. Arguably, the series attempt to deal with challenges against the legitimacy of the monarchy. The audience can easily identify people who share the same attitudes with Kevin, Rat, or Posh in real life. The series recognize the existence of those whose beliefs are deviant from the official royalist ideology. However, these series indicate the limits of tolerance regarding positions toward the monarchy. Ironically, radical *Isan* people here can only be historical figures;

they cannot be anti-monarchist redshirt participants nowadays. In reality, several members from the latter group are summoned by the coup makers, went to the so-called attitude adjustment camp, and were charged for violating Article 112 of the Criminal Code, the *lèse-majesté* law, especially after the 2014 coup. For these royalist series, it is still too offensive to mention about “the Redshirts,” let alone those with “radical” thoughts. Perhaps the red dissidents are “incurable” and thus cannot be included in the ideal Thai society depicted in the series.

### **Conclusion**

In recent years, Thai entertainment industry and popular culture have been crucial topics for several scholars especially in the fields of critical and cultural studies. Many have attempted to decode Thai soap operas (Hinwiman, 2002), fictional historical series, (Itsaradet, 2002) or tourist advertisement (Keawthep, 2014). Critical findings usually concern consumerism, nationalism, and sexism. Royalist popular culture, however, has been left exempted from critical analysis and ideological critique. As it has taken in various forms, changed dynamically, and been financially supported by both state and business sectors, royalist popular culture is influential in Thai society and it needs to be studied seriously. To fill the void, this paper expands the boundary of Thai cultural studies. Certainly, the three royalist series in this paper remain insufficient to capture power and ideology of the Thai monarchy, particularly, those that developed in the reign of King Bhumibol. Yet, the goal is to bridge the gap between critical media studies and monarchy studies in Thailand. As politics is inseparable from popular culture, critical and semiotic analysis of royalist popular culture enables us to better understand not only the monarchy as a political institution but also its relations to Thailand’s conflicts, socio-economic inequality, and lack of basic rights and freedom.

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