

## Chapter 13

# Parenthood Versus Childhood: Young People's Generational Rebellion in Thailand

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### Abstract

Thailand has seen waves of youth-led protests over the past three years. Pro-democracy youth activists have vociferously criticised authority figures: teachers, parents and political leaders, especially the king. Drawing on vignettes assembled over a 14-year ethnographic work with young people in Thailand, as well as on current research on youth (online and offline) activism in Bangkok, I examine the multi-layered meaning of kinship in Thai society. The chapter reveals the political nature of childhood and parenthood as entangled modes of governance that come into being with other, both local and international cultural entities. I argue that Thai youth activists are attempting to rework dominant tropes that sustain “age-patriarchy” in the Buddhist kingdom. Their “engaged siblinghood” aims to reframe Thailand’s generational order, refuting the moral principles that establish citizens’ political subordination to monarchical paternalism and, relatedly, children’s unquestionable respect to parents. As I show, Thai youth activists are doing so by engaging creatively with transnational discourses such as “democracy” and “children’s rights,” while simultaneously drawing on K-pop icons, Japanese manga and Buddhist astrology. In articulating their dissent, these youths are thus bearers of a “bottom-up cosmopolitanism” that channels culturally hybrid, and politically subversive notions of childhood and citizenship in Southeast Asia’s cyberspace and beyond. Whatever the outcome of their commitment, Thai youth activism signals the cultural disarticulation of the mytheme of the Father in Thailand, as well as the growing political influence of younger generations in the region.

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## Introduction

On August 10, 2020, during a student demonstration at Thammasat University – Thailand’s most progressive university, founded in 1934 by socialist revolutionary Pridi Banomyong – a 20-year-old innocent-looking yet combative girl, Panusaya “Rung” Sithijirawattanakul, broke a silence that had lasted for more than 80 years: the royal institution, historical pillar of the Thai national identity alongside Buddhism, needs urgent reform, according to the students. It was a bold move, liable to stringent legal penalties, which desecrates the symbolic foundation of Thailand’s social hierarchy (Bolotta, 2021a). It won’t be the last.

Thailand has seen waves of youth-led protests over the past few years: intrepid acts of dissent against the government that are challenging the army’s grip on power, but also the Thai social body’s moral structure. In the last half of 2020, there were close to 400 demonstrations, staged by 112 different youth groups in 62 provinces all over the country (McCargo, 2021, p. 188). Unlike previous generations of pro-democracy activists, today’s youth protesters come from different socio-economic backgrounds, age cohorts, political mindsets and gendered positionalities: high school and university students, LGBTQI+ and feminist activists, working class youths and slum children alike took to the streets to demand a rapid shift to “full democracy.” In articulating their (extensively digital) dissent, these youths are bearers of a “bottom-up cosmopolitanism” (Appadurai, 2013) that creatively engages with transnational discourses such as “democracy,” “children’s rights,” “gender equality” and “republicanism,” while simultaneously drawing on K-pop icons, Japanese manga, Hollywood celebrities and Buddhist astrology. Their criticism is aimed at authority figures: teachers, parents, political leaders, even the king.

Together with the immediate resignation of Thailand’s Prime Minister, Prayuth Chan-o-cha – the army chief who seized power in 2014<sup>1</sup> – a democratic revision of the 2017 military-drafted Constitution<sup>2</sup> and fresh elections, the young demonstrators had the audacity to call for the lifting of royal immunity and, relatedly, the abolition of Thailand’s draconian lese majesty law (Section 112 of the Criminal Code), the world’s harshest, with penalties of up to 15 years imprisonment for the vaguely defined crime of “defamation of the crown” (Streckfuss, 2011).

The verbalisation of “the unsayable” (Ivarsson & Isager, 2010) – that the monarchy needs radical reform – shook the nation’s social body, already numbed

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<sup>1</sup>In May 2014, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), a military body headed by General Prayuth, took over the country’s leadership through a coup, ousting Yingluck Shinawatra’s democratically elected government. Yingluck is the sister of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, himself removed from office in 2006.

<sup>2</sup>With the 2019 general elections, Prayuth was confirmed in his role as Thailand’s Prime Minister. The elections, considered by several commentators a farce, were preceded by a “military revision” of the Thai constitution (2017), which turned the Buddhist Kingdom’s senate – formerly an elected body – into an army’s semi-permanent outpost in parliament.

by the virologic surveillance and suffocating control of Prayuth’s “praetorian government” (Montesano et al., 2020) during the COVID-19 pandemics. The taboo of criticism of the monarch was broken, and the royal protocol impertinently disregarded, not by opposition parliamentary representatives or by eminent constitutionalists – for their part in agreement in affirming the monarchy’s sacredness – but by “children” (*dek*), as students of all levels are condescendingly called in Thailand (even when they are above 18 years of age).

As a matter of fact, in the traditional Thai social system, which reflects Thailand’s normative Buddhist cosmology of kingship, the term *dek* does not refer only to minors, for it can also serve as a socio-linguistic indicator of hierarchical grade and karmic merit (*bun*). However old an individual, if their interlocutor is a higher-status person (e.g. a parent, a monk, a soldier), they will be considered as though they were *dek* in that context: *phu noi* (“small people”) of a lower karmic status, who must demonstrate respect and gratitude to *phu yai* (“big people”) – the highest-level referent of whom is the monarch, who embodies *barami* (charismatic power) by virtue of his greatest karmic legacy, good deeds and accumulated merits (Bolotta, 2021b, p. 47). This relationship between *phu noi* and *phu yai* has long epitomised state–citizen relations in the modern context of Thailand’s royal fatherhood: children must interact with parents as Thai subjects are expected to relate with the king.

In spite of their different socio-economic profiles and internal tensions, all of Thailand’s youth-led activist groups are seemingly shattering this very paradigm, as the new monarch’s alleged inability to uphold the Buddhist ruler’s and benevolent father’s moral standards is opening up unprecedented opportunities for Thailand’s *phu noi* to reshape the nation.<sup>3</sup> Whilst the old and new are intertwined in this process, I argue that children’s and youth’s (online and offline) rebellion may mark the beginning of an epistemic shift in Thai studies: from “parenthood” to “childhood.”<sup>4</sup>

Drawing on vignettes assembled over a 14-year ethnographic work with young people in Thailand, as well as on current research on (online and offline) youth activism in Bangkok, this chapter examines the multi-layered meaning of childhood and parenthood in contemporary Thai society. In-depth interviews with

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<sup>3</sup>Thailand’s highly revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) – worshipped as the nation’s father – passed away in 2016, triggering a legitimacy crisis in the critical interregnum (Pavin, 2021). According to many protesters I spoke to, Bhumibol’s heir and Thailand’s current king, King Vajiralongkorn (Rama X), would indeed be less worthy of veneration for his highly discussed indulgence in mundane affairs, extravagant habits and visible distance from the Buddhist ideal of the virtuous ruler.

<sup>4</sup>Childhood studies is a relatively young academic field in Thailand, as most research on childhood in the country is carried out in the natural sciences, especially pediatrics, developmental psychology and epidemiology. On the other hand, most scholars of Thailand in the social sciences, with a few highly relevant exceptions (Bolotta, 2021b; Mahony, 2018; Montgomery, 2001), have traditionally prioritised the study of what I refer to as “state parenthood” (e.g. the monarchy, Buddhism and Thai ethno-nationalism) over childhood(s) and young people’s social life.

youth activists, digital ethnography, as well as extensive periods of participant observation into young people's everyday lives in protest sites, schools, universities, NGO venues and homes in the capital of Thailand form the empirical basis for this analysis.<sup>5</sup> I will look back at history to look forward, in the effort to gain a better understanding of non-linear connections between past and present as we envision the future of Thai young people. This analytical exercise shall reveal the political nature of “childhood” and “parenthood” as entangled modes of governance that come into being with other, both local and international cultural entities.

The first part of this chapter focuses on family as a political trope in Thailand. In a country where the royal head of state is historically construed as a Buddhist saint, royal fatherhood works as a national ethos that infantilises the citizenry. In this context, childhood – as citizenship – is a derivative concept, the lower vertex of an inverted familial triangle, which has (monarchic) fatherhood and, subordinately, motherhood at its top. Yet, in an era of digital cosmopolitanism and globalisation-related transformations, this moral construction of parent–child (and state–citizen) relations is significantly challenged by alternative cultural imaginaries about the political value of family, generational hierarchy and the institutional organisation of power. The second part of the chapter highlights young people's active role in the re-making of Thai society. While youth activists are advocating for political change, I argue that at a deeper, symbolic level, they are also attempting to rework dominant tropes that sustain “age-patriarchy” in the Thai traditional social hierarchy, especially the ideas of “King as Father” and “citizens as children.” They are doing so by channelling pan-Asian, culturally hybrid and politically subversive notions of childhood, gender and nationhood in Southeast Asia's cyber space and beyond. In order to fully understand the symbolic significance of these claims, it is necessary to take a first step back, and examine the political configuration of fatherhood that today's protesters are attempting to disarticulate.

## The Father Paradigm

Prominent conservative jurist Borwornsak Uwanno stated that the Thai monarchy is not a political institution but “a social institution in the same way as the family institution [...]” (Borwornsak, 2006, as cited in [Ivarsson & Isager, 2010](#), p. 12). Thai citizens would recognise in the king the nation's Father, as well as the supreme personification of the Buddhist Dharma: semi-divine qualities, certainly extra-constitutional, which Western observers, Borwornsak, pointed out, would be scarcely able to understand. These are not new words.

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<sup>5</sup>I initially got in touch with many of my young informants as a volunteer for an international children's rights NGO. As my ethnographic work in Thailand became a decade-long endeavour, interviewees and research participants turned into friends, elder (*phi*) and younger (*nong*) siblings. The methodological, ethical and affective implications of this relational shift are addressed in some of my earlier works (e.g. [Bolotta et al., 2017](#)).

The necessity to preserve national morality (embodied by the King, an “otherworldly” and fatherly figure) from corruption, vote-buying and misgovernment – presented by the royalists as unescapable side-effects of “worldly” democratic politics – is the key argument through which the army justified the 12 successful coups that have marked Thai history since the 1932 Siamese revolution, the bloodless uprising that transformed Thailand in a constitutional monarchy. Notably, on the side-lines of the 1957 coup d’état, General Sarit Thanarat, the Americans’ anti-Communist standard-bearer during the Cold War, known in Thailand for his “despotic paternalism” (Thak, 2007), declared that the golpe rested firmly on the principle that the king and the nation are unique and indivisible, and that “the one who governs is nothing but the chief of a big family that must look at the population as he would at his children and grandchildren” (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2005, pp. 176–177). With Sarit, after decades of political invisibility following the fall of the absolute monarchy, the transfigured figure of the Buddhist ruler returned to the centre of public life in the role of the national family’s “supernatural guarantor.” Despite his limited government powers, recently deceased King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) – the world’s longest-reigning head of state (1946–2016), living symbol of “Thainess” and Buddhist morality and bastion of conservative order – played a crucial role in the following decades, endorsing several coup leaders and thus bolstering the monarchy’s influence in (military) politics (Handley, 2006).

If the king is the nation’s father, the model citizen must be aware of their filial position. In this ideological context, marked by a certain Sino-Confucian flavour, the Thai school system is traditionally a nationalistic laboratory for the infantilisation of citizenship (Bolotta, 2021a). The role of students towards teachers must reflect the duties and responsibilities of children towards their parents, and – by symbolic extension – of citizens towards the royally blessed state. The examples of this are countless.

In 2014, while I was undertaking research in a few Bangkok schools, I attended etiquette classes for primary school children. These were intended to teach pupils politeness and Thai manners (*marayat*), and involved role-playing exercises aimed at conveying to children – as representatives of the “small people” (*phu-noi*) – the correct ways to relate to teachers – as representatives of the “big people” (*phu-yai*) – also in terms of body language (postures, gestures, tone of voice, eye contact). In one of these classes, children, kneeling, moved towards the teacher, thus expressing respect and submissiveness. The difference in level between the adult (high) and the child (low) was even more pronounced when, in the role-playing, the adult was a monk. When this was the case, students had to bow three times (the same number as Buddhism’s “three precious jewels”: Sangha, Buddha and Dharma) (Bolotta, 2021b, p. 39).

In continuity with the military juntas that preceded him, Prime Minister Prayuth appears to have perfectly grasped the political implications of this paternalistic construction of childhood. A few months after the 2014 coup, the military introduced a new nationalistic ritual in all schools in the country with the aim of reinvigorating Thai children’s patriotism. Before class, “good children” (*dek di*) must recite the “twelve core values of Thainess,” the Thai national identity. Unsurprisingly, these

included injunctions to honour parents, Buddhism, the monarchy and the nation, of which the army proclaims itself supreme guarantor. At kindergarten level, 6-year-old pupils are even required to wear military-style camouflage clothing for a “patriotic activity” known as “Army Guarding the Country” programme, which aims to make children love the nation, build discipline and appreciate the country’s history (Bangkok Post, 2022). The Thai state’s post-coup pedagogy is thus an old ideological recipe for entrenching children’s (and citizens’) filial nationalism by welding royal fatherhood and military propaganda.

## Thai Mother’s Day

Whilst royal fatherhood is the overarching framework within which the child-citizen construct takes shape, motherhood too features in public rituals of national loyalty as well as in classroom activities across the country. Mother’s Day (*wan mae*) is celebrated in Thailand on August 12th, Queen Mother Sirikit’s birthday. This is a public holiday dedicated to mothers and, by symbolic extension, to the queen, who is publicly portrayed as mother of all Thai people. Her maternal exemplarity and docile devotion to His Majesty the King is what makes her an ideal Thai woman, embodiment of “moral goodness” (*khunatham*) – the gender-biased equation “good girl, good wife, good mother” is here rendered in an exquisitely royalist Buddhist fashion (Lindberg-Falk, 2008).

During *wan mae*, public spaces are covered with royal insignia, garlands and flags, all in light blue: Queen Sirikit’s astrological colour. Enormous portraits of the monarch are displayed everywhere, while national events providing visual evidence of Thai citizens’ filial reverence to the “nation’s mother” are feverishly organised, especially in Bangkok. On the morning of 12 August, a solemn procession intended to be representative of all sectors of Thai society (the army, the government, the school system, etc.) marches up to the royal palace, where flowers are presented to the queen’s delegates. Thai public media broadcasts images of jubilant crowds and deeply emotional ordinary citizens, in tears listening to the song “Mother of the Nation” (Bolotta, 2021b, pp. 78–79).

Mother’s Day’s royal iconography is mingled with a highly dramatised exemplification of the ideal relationship between mothers and children. On their knees, carrying garlands made of white jasmine (the emblem of motherly love), sons and daughters bow in front of their mothers and are granted their blessing. Soon after, the same ritual sequence is jointly played out by each mother and child in front of an image of the queen, in a move that projects both as “children” relating to the “mother” of all Thai citizens. Parades of this kind are held in all public institutions, especially schools, where students are expected to behave as “good” Thai children should do. The standardised celebration of *wan mae* is not optional, nor are the modalities of its performance discretionary. Thai institutions must follow the ritual protocol as defined by the Ministry of Culture.

Years ago, while I was exploring the relationship between child poverty, humanitarianism and state education in Bangkok, I was thrust into a research setting that revealed how royal motherhood can turn into symbolic violence. I was doing

fieldwork in a number of NGO shelters for orphans in the capital's slums, and was keen to visit their school during Mother's Day. Although many of these children had never met their biological mother, they were nonetheless expected to take part in the national celebration as Thai citizens. In their case, this entailed writing poems and singing songs praising an unknown mother, and finally acknowledging their own debt of gratitude to the queen, mother of mothers. When I rather sarcastically asked the school principal whether the orphans would bow down before an empty chair, I discovered that female schoolteachers were to serve as replacements for the children's absent mothers (Bolotta, 2021b, pp. 78–79).

For Mother's Day, a row of chairs for the students' mothers was set up on a raised platform in the school's auditorium – a proscenium stage facing the audience, behind which a giant image of the queen had been placed. Students would kneel in front of their mother, as in the etiquette classes discussed above. The orphans at the school, confined to the two ends of the stage, out of the audience's sight, were visibly uncomfortable. Inscrutable, they mechanically executed the expected act of reverence before strict teachers, who acted as sort of "vice-mums." In the middle of the stage, the mothers of the other students were smiling, trying to hold back tears, deeply moved by their children's gracious act of subordination. At the end of the ceremony, some of the orphans I knew were sitting on the side-lines, crying.

Since the 2014 coup, these tears have apparently dried as many Thai children's and youth's anger against "state parenthood" took over. Significantly, a number of youth leaders are young girls, who do not embrace the maternal model of passive femininity projected by the Queen. In the following sections, I look closer at this (mostly nonviolent) generational rebellion, which is, in many respects, unprecedented and internationally unique, for it weaves together a critical re-reading of Thai political history, global pop culture and digital capitalism in a way that speaks to both domestic and foreign audiences. Shifting cultural conceptualisations of childhood and parenthood are at the centre of this.

## **Online Activism, Offline Protests: "Bad Children's" Pop Dissent**

The 10th August demonstration, with which this chapter kicked off, is part of a broader wave of young people's mobilisation, civil disobedience and digital ferment that drew Thai teenagers onto the streets since the judicial dissolution of the youthful Future Forward party in February 2020,<sup>6</sup> conveying the discontent of hundreds of thousands of *dek* with the Thai nation's "putative parents": the army and the monarchy (Bolotta, 2021a). With hashtags such as #long-life-to-democracy (sharp reformulation of the traditional motto "long live the king"), or #we-are-adults-and-we-can-choose-for-ourselves (Sinpeng, 2020), these youths

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<sup>6</sup>The Future Forward party (*phak anakhot mai*), founded in 2018 on a progressive platform that sought to restrain the military's power in Thai politics, was dissolved after a spectacular rise – particularly among the youths – in 2020, when the Constitutional Court found it guilty of violating finance rules (McCargo & Chattharakul, 2020).



scornfully attacked the political paradigm of monarchical paternalism, claiming their role as conscious citizens, and reminding the military of representative democracy's basic principles.

Their protest makes use of irreverent flash mobs and digital tools, and draws heavily from globalised pop culture: Hollywood heroines, Japanese manga, "rainbow" TV series, K-pop stars. These popular memes have been brandished as virtual symbols of generational mobilisation that are capable of crossing national borders, capturing the attention of the media and international spectators. This proved to be an effective strategy – adhocistic, decentralised and largely non-partisan – which caught unprepared, at least initially, the military-royal palace's "old folks," not by chance renamed "dinosaurs" by the young demonstrators.

On the 3rd of August 2020 – to cite a meaningful example – hundreds of young people gathered in central Bangkok to cast a "democratic spell." Disguised as Harry Potter, the wizard of the popular fantasy epic, they slyly waved their chopsticks (which, for the occasion, served as "magic wands") towards the Democracy Monument: already sit-in of protests during the Yellow Shirt/Red Shirt season, following the 2006 military-cum-judicial deposition of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. "Thailand has been dominated by the dark power of the Death Eaters," as they explained (Beech, 2020). They held portraits of Lord Voldemort, Harry Potter's sworn enemy, the most powerful dark wizard of all times, described by British writer J.K. Rowling as "the one who shall not be named." Quite clearly, the reference was to the uncriticisable King of Thailand, Maha Vajiralongkorn (Rama X), who succeeded his beloved father, Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) in 2016, but never really entered the hearts of his subjects.

Taking on the features of "democracy's wizards and sorceresses," the young demonstrators then raised three fingers to the sky: a silent act of dissent that is performed in Thai public spaces since the 2014 coup, and which slowly became popular at the different latitudes of Asian authoritarianism: from Bangkok to Yangon (Myanmar), from Hong Kong to Taiwan (Farrelly, 2021). Inspired by another film saga, *The Hunger Games*, the "three-finger salute" expresses anti-golpist sentiments and conveys, according to the young demonstrators, the principles of freedom, equality and brotherhood. With the conscious aim of producing politically powerful images, the youthful crowds have here intermeshed the eighteenth-century motto of the French Revolution with Hollywood's post-apocalyptic imagery: a cultural invention that Claude Levi-Strauss would not hesitate to call "bricolage" (Levi-Strauss, 1966). In the process, their spectacularising of democratic resistance has succeeded in intercepting international media's sensationalist appetites. These *deks* are by no means naive.

Importantly, it is not only Western cinema that inspires the young dissidents' creativity. A flash mob against the Prayuth government focused, for instance, on a hamster, Hamtaro, protagonist of the Japanese manga of the same name. "We are like hamsters in a cage. Let's run Hamtaro!", thousands of high school students boldly shot out as they flocked to Twitter to shape global messages (Sinpeng, 2020). Furthermore, as Siani (2020) noted, youth activists are also co-opting the monarchy's Buddhist and astrological references, subverting their



intended symbolism through satiric parodies, as when, in October 2020, a transgender protester wearing the traditional garb of the queen strutted down a red carpet in central Bangkok, surrounded by a cheerful crowd of teenagers holding umbrellas – this was a gendered performance mocking royal processions. When they appear in public spaces, indeed, members of the royal family are usually followed by court pages who cover their head with a parasol, representing the cascade of meritorious power that descends, from the heavenly realms, onto the head and the body of the sovereign.

Through these actions, Thai youth activists did not just call for the restoration of democracy, the modification of constitutional arrangements and the introduction of strong limitations to the monarch's powers. Drawing creatively on both local and international cultural idioms, they articulated an additional series of demands: freedom of opinion, abandonment of school uniforms and haircut standards, recognition of LGBTQ+ rights, to mention but a few. With these demands, the so-called *dek* demonstrate to recognise accurately the symbolic connection between royal fatherhood and military authoritarianism, together with Thai gerontocracy's capillary ramifications in various sectors of young people's lives.

While valuing the audacious, creative and non-violent nature of such initiatives, some political commentators have raised serious doubts about their political effectiveness. According to this perspective, Southeast Asian youths' democratic aspirations would mainly draw on a virtual, idealistic and romantic imaginary, peopled by Hollywood divas, androgynous K-pop idols and cartoon superheroes: too little to worry the military in the absence of parliamentary representation and political leadership. This ethnocentric and covertly paternalistic portrait of Thai "kids" often fails to capture the profound meaning of their message. Protesters do not make indiscriminate use of so-called pop culture; rather, they cleverly manipulate its symbols to express forbidden and inarticulable truths that cannot be verbalised in Thai public contexts. Their political project is anything but detached from historical reality and local culture. Social networks are just a medium. Their aim is to break down the wall of silence on the Thai nation's origins, to digitally make their way through the folds of censorship and to give voice to a repressed past that the young dissidents have not directly experienced, but which looms inexorably over their future.

### ***Breaking the Silence, Giving Voice to the Past: "Engaged Siblinghood" at Work***

Among the most influential groups of Thailand's diverse pro-democracy youth movement is the People's Party (*khana ratsadon*). The name *khana ratsadon* is neither casual nor neutral. It is a precise reference, an emblem of Thai constitutional history. In fact, the revolutionaries who deposed King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) in 1932, marking the end of Thai absolute monarchy, were called *khana ratsadon*. Pridi Banomyong, the founder of Thammasat University, was among them. In the following decades, the Thai state's royalist propaganda attempted to

remove these pioneers' exploits from national memory, even materially: in 2017, a commemorative plaque named after them mysteriously disappeared in the centre of Bangkok. Thai youth activists reacted promptly, installing a new plaque in front of the Royal Palace. A new, astonishingly provocative engraving was carved out on it: "This country belongs to the people, not to the King." It was removed soon after by the military.

The 1932 Siamese Revolution is not the only historical fact on which the regime has imposed state silence. On the 6th of October 1976, during a pro-democracy gathering at Thammasat University, soldiers, policemen and hyper-royalist paramilitary squads cracked down on the students with unprecedented ferocity, killing several unarmed protesters. The only fault of latter was to call for the preservation of democracy. According to Thai historian [Thongchai Winichakul \(2020\)](#), student at Thammasat University at that time, survivor and direct witness of the execution, the ambiguous role played by the monarchy during the massacre has been buried under the blanket of a traumatic silence that persists unchallenged despite the courage of today's activists.

In 2018, a group of Thai youths sought to break this silence at the rhythm of rap. In a music video entitled "What Has My Country Got?" (*prathet ku mi*), which immediately went viral, the collective Rap Against Dictatorship gave voice to the frustration of Thailand's younger generations through a series of lashing rhymes, rapidly become the anti-government protest's soundtrack. Some of these lyrics said: "The country whose parliament is the playground of its soldiers. The country in which whatever you do will be intruded upon by the leader. The country in which the big fish eat the small fish. This is my country, this is my country" ([Bolotta, 2021b](#), p. 184).

In the video's background, a group of actors, many of them just teenagers, staged the 1976 Thammasat massacre: the lifeless body of a student, hanged from a tree, is beaten by a hysteric mob – it is the horrific scene immortalised by Pulitzer Prize winner Neal Ulevich with a sinisterly iconic photo, the same scene projected by demonstrators at Thammasat University on the 10th of August, 2020, before Rung took the stage. Some of the youth protesters I interviewed in Bangkok in November 2021 underscored an-often neglected dimension of their references to the Thammasat massacre:

We feel the student activists who were killed during 'the 6 October event' (*haetkan hok tula*) as our 'elder siblings' (*phi*). We feel emotionally connected to them. They show us the way as elder siblings usually do with their 'littermates' (*nong*). We have to finish the work they started.

Though in different degrees, tones and declinations, hierarchy and the language of kinship are essential dimensions of social life and political discourse across Asia, including in Thailand. Contrary to what is claimed by many Western observers, Thai youths are re-interpreting distinctively – rather than just embracing – globally circulating notions such as democracy and social equality. They refute (royal) paternalism and the political cult of *phu yai* (big people); yet

they experience the social intimacy of their activism in kinship terms, which are intrinsically hierarchical. In this respect, it is very significant that, first, they seek to undermine the father–child trope through an “engaged siblinghood” (expressed in the form of the traditional hierarchical relation between elder and younger siblings); and, second, that they are “kinning” with deceased student activists of a censored past, recognised as mentor *phi* (elder siblings) for their sacrifice and commitment to democracy. While important differences exist between earlier generations of student activists and today’s youth protesters (see, e.g. Kanokrat, 2021), a powerful emotional connection between the past’s “elder siblings” and the present’s “younger siblings” features in this scenario of inter-generational mobilisation.

While in public statements and official slogans, equality is a rallying cry for Thai youth activists, their back-stage social and affective intimacy appears hierarchically organised along *phi-nong* lines. As I have witnessed in multiple occasions while interacting with youth activists in Bangkok, convicted group leaders, experienced protesters, as well as past student activists are often addressed by newcomers as “elder siblings,” who have sacrificed themselves for their younger siblings’ collective rights. Not without contradiction and paradox, the abstract, mostly juridical *fraternité* formula – which some of the protesters have drawn on in public gatherings – can thus be privately experienced as an embodied, kinship-like reality through which Thai traditional hierarchies of seniority are reworked in subversive ways. Although it entails a status differentiation, “engaged siblinghood” is here enacted against state parenthood, heteronormativity, monarchical paternalism and related father–children/king–citizens discourses. Furthermore, it is not age difference or (male) gender the criteria according to which the roles of *phi* and *nong* come to life – as is mandatory in Thai public contexts and state educational institutions. Rather, it is an individual’s track record of activism, selflessness and courage in challenging state authorities for the common good.

In March 2021, Rung and many other *phi* activists, including several female and LGBTQ+ protesters, have been arrested under lese-majesty and sedition laws. Held in custody, some of them went on hunger strike. The pandemic has become a valuable ally of the Thai government in the suppression of dissent. But the silence was broken, even well beyond the borders of Thailand, as I shall discuss in the next section.

### ***Pan-Asian Youth Resistance to (Heteronormative) Authoritarianism***

The generational imagery that shapes Thai (cyber) activism – largely cosmopolitan, anti(hetero)normative, horizontal and post-national – has forged several allegories to refer figuratively (therefore, in a way that is, at least in theory, hardly subject to direct prosecution) to Prayuth government’s illiberal authoritarianism. Drawing satiric comparisons between the Thai and Chinese governments’ efforts to mute student activists became one of them (Bolotta, 2022).

Over the course of 2020, Beijing's final squeeze on Hong Kong and its young dissidents has not gone unnoticed. Thai demonstrators looked at it as an exemplary case of illiberal repression to be averted, the frightening paradigm of Asian authoritarianism. The sequence of events that prompted Thai youths to make of China a meme of authoritarianism is important, because it illustrates the "rhizomatic nature" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) of the cultural logics that underpin youth dissent in the age of social networks.

Thai activists' growing displeasure with China's new assertiveness in the region initially took shape around a tender homosexual story, with young male students as protagonists: "2gether" (*phro rao khu kan*) – a Thai TV series that transposes the *yaoi* Japanese manga genre into the context of a college. At the top of the netizens' preferences in Bangkok, as well as in places as diverse as Jakarta, Manila, Singapore and Beijing (!), the immense popularity of the TV boys-love series across Asia signals the oppositional re-articulation of gender expressions in patriarchal contexts that are historically marked by military machismo (Welker, 2022).

When Thai actor Vachirawit Chivaaree (aka: Bright), star of "2gether," reposted an image on Twitter which listed Hong Kong as a "country," an uproar suddenly broke out. Vachirawit's many Chinese followers, including legions of trolls mobilised promptly by the Chinese Ministry of Public Security, lashed out at the actor, targeting his profile – and that of his girlfriend Weeraya Sukaram, known virtually as #Nnevy (Vachirawit is heterosexual in real life) – with ultranationalist invectives and messages of disdain. On the Chinese social network Weibo, the hashtag #Nnevy was viewed by about four billion indignant users (Griffiths, 2020). The Thai actor's girlfriend allegedly expressed virtual support for Taiwan's independence, sparking further disapproval among Chinese netizens. Vachirawit's Thai supporters didn't sit on their hands, acting in his defence; a cyber war ensued with young internet users exchanging vitriolic messages and symmetrical insults. However, when the Chinese trolls began to insult Thailand's purportedly sacred institutions (the monarchy and the army) with the retaliatory aim to offend Thai patriotism, they were confronted with a highly unexpected reaction: "shout it louder!", Thai netizens replied in amusement. After all, Thai youths took the streets against both the military and crown since the 2014 coup, thus assuming a defiant position vis-à-vis Thailand's political institutions, which is radically different from most of their Chinese peers' attitude towards the Chinese Communist Party (Bolotta, 2022). This discrepancy in nationalistic loyalty between the opposing factions, suddenly evident, marked a turning point, widening the dispute. Hong Kong and Taiwan's youth netizens joined the Thais. Activists of the calibre of Joshua Wong and Nathan Law<sup>7</sup> took the field.

In a few weeks, a new transnational actor then appeared on the scene, the Milk Tea Alliance. Under the banner of another meme (milk tea), associated with the

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<sup>7</sup>Joshua Wong, founder of the Hong Kong student activist group Scholarism, and leader of the 2014 Umbrella Movement, is currently in prison. Nathan Law, secretary general of the Hong Kong Federation of students, took refuge in the United Kingdom after the 2020's implementation of Beijing's national security law in the former British colony.

ubiquitous hashtag #Nnevy, netizens from Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Myanmar and the Philippines have teamed up to denounce Beijing's bullying and to call for democracy, gender justice and human rights in the region. Unlike in China, tea is consumed with milk in many Southeast Asian countries, as in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Milk, therefore, marks here a crucial cultural difference, which the Milk Tea Alliance's young dissidents have invested with symbolic fury: where you drink tea with milk you fight for democracy. China, on the other hand, would be the locus of (heteronormative) authoritarianism.

The cyber war has embarrassed the Thai government; the Chinese embassy in Bangkok was quick to point out that "Chinese and Thais are brothers" (*jin thai phi nong kan*), but the die was cast. Since April 2020, flags of Hong Kong and Taiwan are being waved at anti-government protest sites in Thailand; signs of the Milk Tea Alliance also appear in Yangon (Myanmar), where pro-democracy street demonstrations persist despite the mass killings of defenceless civilians by the army of Min Aung Hlang, the coup general who seized power in February 2021. The milk tea meme has thus leaked from chat boxes and peeped into the reality of street demonstrations, expanding its semantic boundaries. Through a whirling series of recursive digital iterations, China has become a nonspecific, generalised and de-territorialised symbol of authoritarianism for many young Asians. The Thai monarchical-military patriarchy and the Burmese dictatorial order are perceived by Thai and Burmese youths alike as local variants of a superordinate political-cultural configuration, which would be epitomised by the Chinese Communist Party.

As cultural signifiers, digital memes (images, actions, texts, sounds) tend to replicate, self-propagate and enrich themselves with new meanings through rhizomatic iterations that bounce on social networks. Catalysts of local and global semantic processes, the most popular memes can assemble disparate social systems, transgressing national sovereignties and ethno-linguistic gaps. In some cases, they quickly disappear in the internet's vortices; in others they favour international mobilisations and widespread political participation, trespassing into the reality of public spaces (Brown & Bristow, 2019). The Milk Tea Alliance aims to leave its mark in the region, under the banner of the symbolic equations "milk tea = democracy; China = authoritarianism," despite the fact that China's digital surveillance system – otherwise known as the Great Firewall – is generally extraordinarily efficient at filtering and blocking data that are deemed harmful.

As is well-known, media technologies both facilitate and constrain political change in the twenty-first century. There's no telling whether the Milk Tea Alliance's activists will be successful. What is certain is that Thai youth's activism and strategic use of (gendered) pop culture have already yielded impressive results, both domestically and abroad.

## **Conclusion: From Parenthood to Childhood**

Royal fatherhood and, subordinately, motherhood act historically as symbolic structures of age-patriarchy in Thailand. Since the beginning of 2020, a new generation of Thai citizens broke free from their role as "children" (of the nation's

father, The King, and mother, the Queen Mother of Thailand), vehemently protesting against the “big people” (*phu yai*) who run the country, and calling for change. In sharp contrast to local paternalistic descriptions of young people as *dek* (children), hundreds of thousands of Thai children and youths took the streets as “siblings” (*phi-nong*) joining forces against state parental abuse.

Despite internal differences and some degree of inter-group competition and disagreement, Thailand’s pro-democracy activists belong to a new generation of progressive, post-millennial netizens, unwilling to indulge old-fashioned parents’ monarchical conservatism, or unelected institutions’ paternalistic prescriptions. As McCargo (2021) stated: “Thai people from Generation Z, aged under 25, have radically different understandings of power, deference and legitimacy from older population groups” (p. 175). Their activism aims to culturally reframe Thailand’s traditional generational and gender order, refuting the moral principles that establish citizens’ political subordination to monarchical paternalism, as well as children’s unquestionable respect to elders. Hollywood sagas, boy-love dramas, Japanese cartoons, rap music and Korean stars – recognisable memes in the pop universe of digital internationalism – serve to transform deeply local struggles in cosmopolitan shows of youth rebellion “from below” (Appadurai, 2013). This youth-led “generational rebellion” has also direct implications for scholars, establishing the epistemic priority of “childhood” over “parenthood” as the main analytical lens through which to investigate contemporary Southeast Asia’s “engaged siblinghood” (Bolotta, 2021b). Whatever the outcome of these virtual and street fibrillations, Thai youth activism signals the return of a cultural category that had already proved decisive in the protest movements of the 1970s: generation (Prajak, 2005).

From an anthropological perspective, generation is a social construction, a relational and situational category which blurs temporal boundaries, and a key site to examine modernity and globalisation (Cole & Durham, 2007). In the hierarchical context of Thai society, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, “young people” do not necessarily belong to a defined or precisely established age group. Regardless of their chronological age, an individual can be considered “young,” even only temporarily, when he relates to a moral authority, or when she/he is engaged in “youth activities,” in a given social context. Digital activism can be definitely considered a prime example of such activities. Outside the policy-oriented domain of statistical and demographic quantifications, the notion of generation is also charged with (historically situated and culturally shaped) emotions and feelings of belonging – it can be experienced and dreamt about as a political sentiment, or collectively practiced as a social, intrinsically relational, identity formation.

Clearly, the tendency to equate generation with status is not limited to Thailand. The languages of power, age and kinship are historically intermeshed in a variety of cultural forms across the globe. The position of children within the family and in relation to parents has often served as a key locus of discursive investment for the symbolic arrangement of monarchical, authoritarian and-or patriarchal socio-political orders. Consider the triangular sacralisation of God, King (God’s representative in the world) and Father (God’s representative within

family) at the basis of *ancien régime* Europe's absolutism (Laslett, 2021). In the case of Buddhist Thailand, parenthood is epitomised by the royal family, with respect to which citizens are expected to assume the position of grateful children. In this respect, it is highly significant that unlike former generations of pro-democracy protesters, today's youth activists call for substantial reform of the royal institution. As a Thai youth recently told me: "We have not achieved anything at the level of institutional politics, but at the level of culture we have already made the revolution." Thanks to Thai young people's bravery, indeed, previously taboo discussions on the monarchy and its evaporating fatherly significance are now a commonplace.

Over the past few months, the Thai youth movement seems to have lost momentum amid state repression and judicial harassment of hundreds leading activists. Yet the mytheme of the Father, in its Buddhist, royalist, Confucian, military or communist variants, is being disjoined; new cultural formations are emerging on the horizon. An inarticulate student massacre, engaged siblinghood, milk tea and boys' love stories merge at the junction of past and present imaginaries, offering suggestive glimpses into a possibly different future.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>As I go through the final proofs of this chapter, the youth-led Move Forward Party won a landslide in the 2023 Thailand general election, held on 14 May 2023. Thai voters said a resounding no to military-royalist elite, trouncing General Prayuth's United Thai Nation Party (Rasheed & Wongketjai, 2023). While the victorious youth's party faces now an uphill struggle to form government, its impressive success gives a clear sign of a turning point.



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