CHAPTER 4: THAILAND’S INTERNAL NATION BRANDING

In commercial branding, ambassadorship is considered a crucial feature of the branding process since customers’ perceptions of a product or a service are shaped through the contact with the employees who represent the brand. Many companies thus invest heavily into internal branding to make sure that every employee ‘lives the brand’ thereby boosting their motivation and morale and creating eager brand ambassadors.¹ The need for internal branding becomes even more imperative when it comes to branding nations as public support is vital for the new nation brand to succeed. Without it, nation branding might easily backfire. For example, the Ukrainian government was forced to abandon certain elements of its new nation brand following fierce public backlash.² The importance of domestic support, however, goes beyond creating a favourable public opinion on the new nation brand. As Aronczyk points out, the nation’s citizens need to ‘perform attitudes and behaviours that are compatible with the brand strategy’ should this strategy succeed. This is especially the case when the new nation brand does not fully reflect the reality on the ground as nation branding often produces an airbrushed version rather than a truthful reflection of the nation, its people, and socio-political and economic conditions. Although some scholars are deeply sceptical about governments’ ability to change citizens’ attitudes and behaviours through nation branding, we should not ignore such attempts.³

This chapter examines Thailand’s post-coup internal nation branding efforts in the education, culture, public relations and private sectors: what were the political motivations behind these efforts? I argue that the NCPO was using internally focused nation branding to diffuse virtue across Thai society in preparation for the post-Bhumibol era. When they seized power on 22 May 2014, the reign of King Bhumibol Adulyadej was nearing the end. The then eighty-six-year-old monarch had largely withdrawn from Thailand’s public and political life. Except for a handful of increasingly rare public appearances, Bhumibol had relinquished almost all of his public duties and had spent most of the previous eight years in-and-out of hospital. He did not publicly intervene in the events preceding the 2014 coup. There was no royal call to action similar to his 25 April 2006 televised speech to the country’s judges, which is widely believed to have led to the annulment of the April 2006 snap election won by Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai Party.⁴ Although it is unclear whether Bhumibol really favoured the 2006 military coup, his actions helped to pave the way.⁵ By the 2014 coup, Bhumibol was no longer an active political force. The same was true for Queen Sirikit, who withdrew from public

³ For example, see Ståhlberg and Bolin, ‘Having a soul’ 283; César Jiménez-Martínez, ‘Making Chile Visible: Purposes, Operationalisation and Audiences from the Perspective of Nation Branding Practitioners,’ *Geopolitics* 22, no.3 (2017): 512-14.
⁵ Ferrara notes that the 2006 coup-makers sought the support of Queen Sirikit instead of King Bhumibol, who had retreated into semi-seclusion at his Hua Hin palace in the early 2000’s. Sirikit became the most influential political figure in the palace. It might well be the case that Sirikit, rather than Bhumibol, sanctioned the 2006 coup. See Ferrara, *Modern Thailand*, 235.
life following a stroke in 2012. The cult of personality built around King Bhumibol had allowed the country’s traditional elites to continue using his virtuous reign to legitimise their actions even after he had retreated from the public life.\textsuperscript{6} However, the years of political conflict that followed the 2006 coup undermined the royal charisma among some pro-Thaksin supporters, who grew disillusioned with the palace that openly sided with the anti-Thaksin forces. Queen Sirikit significantly contributed to this when she presided over the funeral of a female PAD protestor in October 2008, who died during street protests against the then pro-Thaksin government of Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat (Thaksin’s brother-in-law). Many Red Shirts refer to this as the moment when their eyes opened to the monarchy’s partisan role in Thai politics.\textsuperscript{7} Coupled with the prospects of Vajiralongkorn, Bhumibol’s son, being a significantly less popular and virtuous monarch than his father, the NCPO (and the traditional elites) needed to look for alternative sources of legitimation to keep the increasingly fragile virtuous rule alive. They found these in notions of Thainess and collective national identity that were still associated with the Thai monarchy but did not require the continuation of Bhumibol’s virtuous reign.

**Education**

Scholars writing on nation branding have paid relatively little attention to the role of education, especially in relation to its broader socio-political functions. Out of the few scholars who have addressed education, most tend to focus on its international dimension with a particular emphasis on the higher education sector. They see education as an object of nation branding that has been strategically deployed to propel the nation in its race towards increased global competitiveness, commercialisation and soft power.\textsuperscript{8} One exception is a recent critical study by Kristin Eggeling, who approaches branding in the education sector as an arena for ‘state-identity politics [and] regime legitimation.’\textsuperscript{9} Using examples of Kazakhstan and Qatar, Eggeling points out:

> ‘Rather than questioning the power of the elite, […] state-funded, prestigious HEIs [higher education institutions] can also re-affirm the centralisation of political power and become a projection surface for the “soft” and benevolent policies of otherwise authoritarian governments.’\textsuperscript{10}

While Eggeling does not move beyond the higher education sector or its international dimension, her discussions of the sector’s branding in relation to identity, legitimacy and power hold much relevance for this section. My focus here, however, is on the internal dimension of

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\textsuperscript{6} Thongchai, ‘Hyper-royalism,’ 26-7.

\textsuperscript{7} Ferrara, *Modern Thailand*, 244.


\textsuperscript{9} Eggeling, *Nation-branding in practice*, 212.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 213.
education, particularly in respect to citizen buy-in. As Aronczyk explains, ‘the primary responsibility for the success of the nation brand lies with individuals: the nation’s citizens, members of the diaspora or even non-citizens [...] who wish to have a stake in its success.’ Despite its importance, little has been done to understand the role education plays in internal nation branding. Dinnie, for example, praises South Korea for establishing ‘Brand Academy,’ a special vocational school aimed at training up to 500 South Koreans a year in corporate brand management and design, but he does not critically engage with its underlying ideas and values in the country’s socio-political context. Similarly, Aronczyk discusses the domestic educational activities surrounding Polish nation branding without unpacking their socio-political links. She focuses on the activities’ official purpose of ‘promoting and publicizing the concept of nation branding in order to garner acceptance in the public sphere’ without exploring their deeper meaning and function in the context of domestic Polish politics. While Anholt, also acknowledges that education ‘plays an important role in establishing the image of the country’ as well as in creating ‘a better informed, more enthusiastic and prouder’ citizens, his analysis of how education supports nation branding is overly simplistic and far too optimistic.

Despite years of heavy public investment and relatively high student participation rates, the quality of Thailand’s educational system is low. Poor teaching standards (especially outside Bangkok and other major cities), teacher-centred rote-learning, corporal punishment, high cost of schooling, routinised bribery of teachers, and a highly-centralised decision-making system have resulted in Thailand repeatedly scoring badly in the global education rankings, such as the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). PISA 2012, for example, ranked Thailand as the fiftieth out of the total of sixty-five countries for its overall scores in reading, maths and science. This was a very poor result for Thailand compared to the performance of some of its neighbours such as Singapore and Vietnam that ranked second and seventeenth respectively. Three years later, PISA 2015 ranked Thailand fifty-fourth out of seventy countries marking a further drop in the country’s education system quality while Singapore and Vietnam had both improved their scores. Singapore ranked first with top scores across all three disciplines, whereas Vietnam, despite lower levels of economic development than Thailand, rose by nine places making it the eight-highest performing country overall. PISA 2018 ranked Thailand sixty-sixth out of seventy-eight countries signalling yet another drop in the country’s education system quality driven down primarily by the nosediving reading scores. Singapore ranked second, losing its top spot to China, while Vietnam was not included in the 2018 rankings.

11 Aronczyk, ‘Living the brand,’ 54.
12 Dinnie, Nation branding, 15.
13 Aronczyk, Branding the nation, 93.
14 Anholt, Competitive identity, 107-8
When the NCPO seized power in May 2014, improving the country's education was high on the generals' agenda. General Prayuth Chan-o-cha addressed the need for a nationwide education reform in his ‘Returning Happiness to the People’ broadcast on 13 June 2014, telling Thai people to jai yen yen (calm down) because the NCPO was already working on improving the dire state of the Thai education system. He outlined his reform plans as follows:

‘[We] will improve the entire education system [by] concentrating on the promotion of the national Thai history, discipline, virtue, moral standards, […] consideration of national interests, knowledge of one’s [civic] rights and duties.’

Instead of setting out clear educational goals and structural aims, Prayuth’s reform plans comprised a vague set of behavioural and attitudinal objectives: patriotism, discipline, civic duties, goodness and morality were to become the central pillars of Thailand’s post-coup education strategy. How the NCPO wanted to tackle the pressing educational problems the country was facing remained unclear. By September 2014, the Ministry of Education had already started revising the Thai curriculum based on the NCPO’s demands of patriotism, civic duties, discipline, goodness and morality with the new curriculum coming to use in the second semester of the 2014 school year. According to this new curriculum, Thai students were to study a new school subject on civic duties that was extracted from a broader topic of social sciences to become a subject in its own right. They were also required to recite Prayuth’s 12 values of Thainess in addition to the daily morning rituals of national anthem singing and flag raising. This was a quick delivery on the junta’s demands considering the customary rigidness of Thailand’s bureaucratic structures.

In the Thai context, education has always been an important tool of socialisation and political indoctrination. As Tan points out, the greater the insecurity of the Thai ruling elites, the more indoctrinating the state education system is. This was definitely the case of the NCPO’s post-coup education policy. Their narrow and conservative interpretations of Thainess and collective national identity formed the grounds for their post-coup political legitimisation based on shared norms and values, but in preparation for Vajiralongkorn’s succession they needed to detach them from the figure of the king by shifting the onus of upholding these supposedly shared norms and values onto Thai people. Discipline, morality and virtue were no longer to be located in the concept of dhammaraja but rather in the notions of Thainess and collective national identity, which were still associated with the Thai monarchy, but did not require the continuous presence of a virtuous king. The junta’s post-coup education policy thus focused on achieving a society-wide virtuous self-management of the Thai citizens. Its ultimate goal was a deferent, docile, and above all apolitical Thai citizenship that would not challenge a form of authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rule by the traditional elites once a significantly less virtuous and popular new king assumed power. Varga’s assertion that governments choose to use nation branding because it promises to correct ‘inadequate self-management of the citizens’ and their collective identity without the need for structural reforms applies to the

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20 Ibid.
22 Connors, National identity, 2.
junta’s post-coup education branding efforts. Just like in the tourism sector, the junta’s branding in the education sector can be conceptualised in Foucauldian terms as techniques of control that seek to connect with and mobilise the self-conduct of Thai citizens for certain purposes.

Thailand’s private sector was instrumental in supporting the junta’s internal education nation branding efforts. For example, Amarin Printing and Publishing, a Bangkok-based publishing house known for its affiliations to the monarchy, published a series of books promoting the junta-defined 12 values. Civic Duty, a short Thai-language guide written as a series of short infographics organised in eight chapters (see Illustration 5.1), was permeated with references of social unity, peace, order, and King Bhumibol’s philosophy of sufficiency economy. It paid very little attention to citizens’ political rights and duties, which it narrowly defined in terms of electoral participation linking the breakdown of democracy to the citizens’ (mis)conduct rather than elite behaviour or weak institutional design. The book was an example of what Connors calls a strategy ‘of citizen construction, the creation of a self-governing subject, which is simultaneously a component of the broader hegemony sought by the [Thai] state.’ Its constant emphasis on unity, peace and order worked contrary to the democratic principles based on the institutionalisation of conflict by creating unrealistic expectations about democracy and democratic governance that were irreconcilable with the realities of everyday politics. Civic Duty for Children, a bi-lingual English-Thai children’s book series, focused instead on one aspect of civic duty at a time. Full of pretty cartoon drawings depicting different social situations, the series included titles, such as Good Kids Love Democracy, Good Kids Salute the National Flag, Good Kids Queue Up, Good Kids Know How to Use Public Property and Good Kids Respect Traffic Regulations. Amarin seemed to have hoped that visually appealing books will attract the young. It is here that the marketing-side of nation branding becomes clear as the military government and the traditional elites used some modern marketing techniques to re-package the old ideas on individual and collective identity and ‘sell’ them back to Thai people in the form of Thailand’s new strategic national myth.

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28 Ibid, 33.
29 Connors, National identity, 8.
30 Field notes, November 2016.
Thailand’s post-coup education policy was not all about state-led indoctrination of shared norms and values. The Ministry of Education initiated a number of policies and projects ostensibly aimed at increasing the overall quality of Thai education. For example, the 2014 ‘DLTV (Distance Learning Television)’ and ‘DLIT (Distance Learning via Information Technology)’ projects sought to tackle the lack of teachers and improve accessibility of education in remote areas.\(^{31}\) The 2015 ‘Moderate Class, More Knowledge’ policy cut down the number of class hours by two to allow more time for extra-curricular activities.\(^{32}\) The 2016 ‘Pracharath school’ project sought to develop a select number of primary and secondary schools with the help of the private sectors to achieve a better-quality market-oriented education that would drive national economic growth and global competitiveness.\(^{33}\) Discussing some of these policies with a school teacher in the Northeast in late 2016 made clear that the military government had not consulted teachers before making any of these changes.\(^{34}\) He pointed out that, for example, the reduced class hours were simply a nuisance for working parents.\(^{35}\)

Following the launch of the Thailand 4.0 project in April 2016, the Ministry of Education started formulating their own ‘Education 4.0’ strategy. Speaking at an educational festival ‘Think Beyond 4.0’ in Bangkok in November 2016, Dr Teerakiat Jareonsettasin, the then

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\(^{33}\) For example, see ‘โรงเรียนประชารัฐ (VTR) [Pracharath school (VTR)],’ YouTube, published 30 May 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jpdavg51GI.

\(^{34}\) Focus group with Red Shirt villagers, Ubon Ratchathani, 14 October 2016.

\(^{35}\) Focus group – villagers, Ubon Ratchathani.
Minister of Education, outlined that the Ministry would focus on the development of critical thinking skills, English-language skills and STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering and maths) to achieve creativity and innovation— the key drivers of the new 4.0 age Thailand was aiming for. The Ministry re-calibrated some of its existing projects and international collaborations to reflect this shift: Thailand 4.0 became the main focus of the Year 2 of the UK-Thailand Transnational Education Project launched by the British Council in association with Thailand’s Office of the Higher Education Commission. This was a transnational higher education partnership project focused on developing joint or double degrees between UK and Thai research-oriented higher education institutions. Unsurprisingly, almost all of these joint and double degree programmes were offered in STEM disciplines. The sole exception was the Thai Studies bachelor level degree programme jointly offered by Thailand’s Thammasat University and SOAS, University of London, that allowed Thai students to start their programme at Thammasat and transfer to SOAS after two years to finish their degree there. None of these joint and double degree programmes were offered in social sciences, a discipline with strong focus on critical thinking.

The NCPO’s post-coup education policy was highly contradictory. On the one hand, it emphasised the need for innovation and creativity while, on the other, it strove for more state-led indoctrination of students. It was a reflection of the NCPO’s strategic national myth of an economically modernising, yet socially traditional and culturally unique country, and their legitimization needs based on both economic performance (output-based rationales) and traditional norms and values (ideology-based rationales). Branding in the education sector thus created notions of bounded creativity and innovation: creativity and innovation were desirable only in those areas that did not threaten the power and legitimacy of traditional elites and their political networks. In other words, they wanted innovative scientists and creative managers who would work towards upholding the existing power structures, not social critics and political scientists who could dismantle them. Given the rise of student protests in 2020, this strategy clearly did not work and might have even backfired as the Thai youth has grown increasingly fed up with the country’s dysfunctional political system and the constant emphasis on indoctrination.

Culture
The literature on nation branding sees culture as vital part of the nation branding matrix: it adds value and helps to differentiate the branded nation from other nations. In this respect, nation branding drives the commodification of culture as it gives a monetary value and ‘sells’ it to its target audiences. Since the premiership of Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006), Thai culture has been promoted as one of the key drivers of future economic development as part of Thai governments’ broader efforts of turning Thailand into a creative economy, a more stable and sustainable mode of knowledge-based economic development that is able to withstand external and internal economic shocks. Although the NCPO initially abandoned this concept in favour of their digital economy plan, the generals understood the economic value of Thai culture and creative economy was back on their agenda by the early 2018. Yet, as Alangorn Parivudhiphongs, ‘Creative industries policy in Thailand: A story of rise and demise,’ in Routledge Handbook of Cultural and Creative Industries in Asia, eds. Lorraine Lim and Hye-Kyung Lee (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 28.
Parivudhiphongs points out, there is an inherent tension between the often-conservative approach of Thai governments (and senior bureaucrats) focused on preservation and regulation of cultural traditions vis-à-vis the need for cultural innovation harboured in the concept of creative economy. This did not seem to matter to the NCPO, whose strategic national myth was based on exactly the same tension.

Following the 2014 military coup, the Ministry of Culture launched the ‘Cultural Product of Thailand’ (CPOT), a project very much in line with some of the ideas underpinning the concept of creative economy even though the project did not initially make that connection itself. A video commissioned by the Ministry of Culture, which was published on YouTube in June 2016, branded the project as part of the NCPO’s broader economic vision under the ‘Security, Prosperity and Sustainability’ slogan. An interviewed official working at the Ministry of Culture explained that CPOT aimed to get every province to produce a product or provide a service that would reflect its unique cultural identity. There were five distinct product and service CPOT categories:

1. Food;
2. Fabric (including clothes);
3. Jewellery/accessories;
4. Utensils and decorations;
5. Performative and martial arts, and entertainment.

In many respects, CPOT was a carbon copy of Thaksin’s still very popular One Tambon One Product (OTOP) project overseen by the Ministry of Interior. Keen to make a distinction between the two, the interviewed official explained that CPOT was specifically about cultural products and not just any products. However, there was no clear distinction between the two in practice. Most, if not all, OTOP products would easily qualify for CPOT. A good example of this was a special in-flight magazine that I picked up on a Thai Smile flight (owned by Thai Airways) in September 2016. Called ‘OTOP Prestige’ and distributed between August and November 2016, the in-flight magazine advertised various OTOP products to both Thai and international travellers. The products included Thai jewellery, handbags and purses, handmade tableware, lacquerware, ceramics and porcelain, silk and fabrics, and herbal and beauty products. If it was not for the magazine’s name, it would be impossible to tell whether the advertised products were OTOP or, indeed, CPOT.

Despite launching CPOT, the military government continued to promote OTOP. The in-flight magazine even contained a short message from General Prayuth Chan-o-cha that reaffirmed the government’s commitment to this Thaksin-era project. This raises an important question: why did the military government launch CPOT in the first place? One possible explanation might be that they simply wanted to come up with a re-branded version of OTOP as part of their efforts to purge Thaksin and his influence from Thai politics, but it is difficult to see how CPOT could have succeeded. Its obvious similarities with the more established OTOP were bound to cause public confusion instead of presenting a viable challenge to OTOP. Unsurprisingly, CPOT seemed to have attracted little public interest. A quick comparison of

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40 Alongkorn, ‘Creative industries,’ 38.
42 Interview with an official working for the Ministry of Culture, 6 October 2016.
44 Interview, Ministry of Culture.
CPOT and OTOP search term popularity in Thailand between May 2014 and October 2020 reveals that search volumes for CPOT were almost non-existent (see Figure 4.1). The lack of public interest did not prevent the Ministry of Culture from publishing its first English-language CPOT catalogue in 2019.\textsuperscript{45} The 250-page glossy picture catalogue showcased the different CPOT products based on their province of origin, presenting them in fashion-like images featuring vibrant colours and boldly styled models and a short text describing their origin. The catalogue contextualised CPOT now as part of Thailand’s move towards creative economy, which was inexorably linked to the NCPO’s flagship nation branding ‘Thailand 4.0’ project.

**Illustration 4.2:** Thai Smile in-flight magazine (Photo credit: Petra Desatová).
Post-coup branding in Thailand’s culture sector was about more than just adding extra value to cultural products and services. Just like in the education and tourism sectors, the NCPO were keen to use culture as a vehicle to spread virtue across Thai society in the form of behavioural guidance, Thainess and specific notions of individual and collective identity. As Michael Connors observes in his 2005 article on Thai cultural policy:

‘From early [sic] last century to the present day Thai elites have shown an abiding concern for the well-being of Thai identity and culture, or “Thai-ness” (khwam pen thai). [...] Thai-ness, in the perspective of Thai culture officials and related intellectuals, always seems to be under threat or in a state of distress, something officials have to minister back to good health.’\(^{46}\)

The elite concern for the survival of Thainess goes beyond its aesthetic and emotional value. As Connors points out, Thainess constitutes ‘the central ideological resource of the ruling elite – an all-encompassing ideology that aims to create a nationally identifying citizenry that can be mobilized for productive purposes.’\(^{47}\) Before the early 1970s, Thai cultural policy was based on narrowly defined notions of Thainess rooted in ethno-nationalism with no regard for different regional and cultural identities. Following the turbulent events of the mid-1970s, it became gradually more pluralised and localised, while the 1980s saw a more liberal shift towards democracy and diversity.\(^{48}\) The introduction of nation branding in the early 2000s also led to a growing tendency towards the commodification of Thai culture and identity for economic purposes, especially during the premiership of Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-06).

\(^{46}\) Connors, ‘Ministering culture,’ 523.
\(^{47}\) Ibid, 524.
\(^{48}\) Ibid, 531.
However, the 2006 and 2014 coups put a halt to these trends as many traditional and conservative notions of Thai culture and identity were reintroduced by the respective military juntas. This was especially the case of the NCPO, who reverted back to more narrow and ethno-nationalist notions of Thainess and Thai culture, and their historic function of creating productive and loyal citizens. The emphasis on Thai manners was a steady feature of the Ministry of Culture’s post-coup branding activities. Besides promoting Prayuth’s 12 values of Thainess, the Ministry also launched a number of spin-off campaigns that focused on manner indoctrination outside of the 12 values framework. One of these campaigns was a ‘Smile, Wai, Hello, Thank You, Sorry’ campaign that consisted of TV adverts, vinyl posters and billboards in all provinces. I saw one of the campaign billboards situated at a main city junction in Ubon Ratchathani in October 2016. Underneath the main slogan, which read ‘Join together to build Thainess,’ were five cartoon-like characters, two girls and three boys, representing the five campaign manners. The Ministry also published an article discussing these manners, including their history, in the January-March 2016 issue of the Thai-language Culture magazine. The article concludes that ‘if [Thai people] use [these manners] until they become a habit, Thai society will surely have only peace.’ The promotion of these five manners as well as their linking to peace was highly problematic: they were part of the junta-defined conservative notions of Thainess, of happy, smiling, docile and apolitical Thais who are not too ambitious and who know their place within the country’s rigid social hierarchy system. By behaving according to all these idealised notions, Thai people would become model citizens working towards strengthening the power and political legitimacy of virtuous rule.

Another spin-off campaign with similar intentions and messaging was the Ministry of Culture’s 2016 ‘Drive with Generosity, Create Traffic Discipline’ campaign. The interviewed official at the Ministry of Culture explained that the reason why the Ministry decided to focus on promoting traffic discipline was quite simple: ‘We believe Thai people needed this [traffic] topic the most, which also leads to the theme of unity. It is here [that we] correspond with the government policy.’ Considering the dire state of Thai traffic, launching a traffic education campaign made sense. However, it is less clear why the traffic education campaign was launched by the Ministry of Culture instead of, for example, the Ministry of Transport and Communications and why the Ministry of Culture felt the need to link traffic discipline with national unity. One possible explanation might be that a better traffic self-management of Thai people would lend support to the junta’s claims for bringing peace and order to Thailand, which was a crucial element of the NCPO’s post-coup strategic national myth. The Ministry’s traffic discipline campaign could not solve the root cause of Thailand’s traffic issues, such as overcrowding and lacklustre approach to safety, but it could create the all-important notions of peace, order and discipline under the NCPO rule. The generals might have been inspired by Singapore, one of Thailand’s Southeast Asian neighbours, where notions of peace, order and discipline render the country’s soft authoritarian rule in a more favourable light.

The Ministry of Culture’s traffic discipline campaign comprised a series of videos, some of which seemed primarily aimed at Thai children while others targeted the adult population. The first series, called The Ordinary Thai Household: all about Thai, were aired

50 Interview, Ministry of Culture.
on the military-owned Channel 7 and targeted mostly young audiences.\textsuperscript{51} The one-minute long cartoon videos depicted different members of a Thai family engaging with traffic rules: typically, the most senior family member in a given video explained the application of Thailand’s traffic rules to his/her fellow family members. As such, the videos contained important messages beyond traffic rules that spoke to social hierarchy, family relations, appropriate manners and social values. The same applied to the other video series called \textit{Thainess: Building traffic discipline}, which was aimed at adult audiences depicting real-life situations and the appropriate ‘Thai’ ways of handling them. For example, one of the videos encouraged Thais to smile at their fellow road users when stuck in a major traffic jam on their way to work in the middle of Bangkok.\textsuperscript{52} Another video urged Thais to help their fellow road users when in need.\textsuperscript{53} Promoting traffic education clearly was not the main purpose of these videos. Just like other nation branding campaigns launched under the NCPO, this campaign was about the dissemination of virtue across Thai society veiled in the ostensible topic of traffic education. It was yet another example of internal nation branding aimed at changing the social attitudes and behaviours of the Thai citizens by disseminating the junta-sanctioned notions of good citizenship, appropriate manners and Thainess. These notions of individual and collective identity were to become the main legitimating source of virtuous rule filling the void left behind by King Bhumibol’s death. The NCPO’s internal nation branding campaigns were part of ongoing political efforts by the traditional elites to solve what Connors terms ‘the people-problem,’ Thailand’s political discourse that objectifies people as something that needs to ‘be worked upon and reformed’ through carefully developed strategies of, for example, nation building, national integration and socialisation.\textsuperscript{54} Thailand’s ruling elites have been using different image and identity practices to manage socio-political changes and various external and internal threats to their power since at least the mid-nineteenth century. Nation branding is thus one of the most recent iterations of these efforts to fix Thailand’s ‘people-problem.’

The Ministry of Culture’s focus on promoting Thai manners did not stop with the traffic education campaign. In June 2019, the Ministry launched a Thai manner competition called \textit{Good Thais have manners} with the support of a mixture of public and private partners.\textsuperscript{55} These included the Sino-Thai Poh Teck Tung Foundation (a road rescue foundation that also manages unclaimed corpses), the Huachiew Chalermprakiet University (established by the Foundation in Samut Prakan Province and named by King Bhumibol in 1992), Mono29 and MThai – both part of the Mono Next Media Group owned by the Bodharamik family, who were once close to Thaksin Shinawatra. The competition called onto Thai teenagers and young adults under the age of 25 to produce short films that would help promote Thai manners, behaviours and language across Thai society. Participants could submit their films either as individuals or on

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\textsuperscript{51} The videos can be accessed at ‘กระทรวงวัฒนธรรม [Ministry of Culture] Ministry of Culture, Thailand,’ YouTube, accessed 22 August 2018, https://www.youtube.com/ channel/UChQSAhhFhcDCQbil8CjVaNg.

\textsuperscript{52} See ‘(MINISTRY OF CULTURE) ความเป็นไทย สร้างวินัยจราจร ตอน ยิ้ม [Thainess, Creating Traffic Discipline, Part: Smile],’ YouTube, published, 7 October 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1-Fz2Fz3dM.


\textsuperscript{54} Connors, \textit{National identity}, 8 and 9.

behalf of their teams by the end of August 2019, and the winning submissions would be awarded educational scholarships worth more than 300,000 Thai baht (US $9,599) in total.\textsuperscript{56} The competition was accompanied by a miniseries of patronising videos telling Thais among other things how to eat properly, dress properly, queue properly and behave properly on public transport.\textsuperscript{57} One of the biggest perks were undoubtedly nationwide film-making classes offered by the Mono Group to those interested in joining the competition. The direct effects of the competition, as well as the NCPO’s tenacious promotion of Thai manners following the 2014 coup, are very hard to evaluate but given the waves of student protests that gripped Thailand in 2020, it is fair to say that they have had limited success. Seemingly unfazed by these developments, the Ministry of Culture relaunched the second year of the \textit{Good Thais have manners} competition on 21 September 2020 as Thai students were flooding the streets of Bangkok openly challenging the power and authority of the Prayuth-led administration and the country’s previously sacrosanct monarchy.

**Public Relations**

The academic literature on nation branding often overlooks the area of public relations (PR) or only mentions it in passing as part of the nation branding mix.\textsuperscript{58} For example, Dinnie discusses PR in a single paragraph, concluding that PR ‘should be integrated with other elements of the [nation branding] strategy, rather than merely being resorted to as a crisis management tool.’\textsuperscript{59} Yet, public relations have played an important role in the junta’s nation branding efforts following the 2014 coup. As a government that seized power through undemocratic means, the Prayuth administration sought to use PR to generate domestic support and legitimacy for the military regime and the royalist political order they represented. Much of the post-coup PR activities were thus aimed at building a positive image of General Prayuth, who was the official ‘face’ of the coup, his military regime and authoritarian rule. This was a fairly narrow approach to PR. As Szondi points out, relationship building rather than image management should be the core function of PR.\textsuperscript{60} The relationship building approach to nation branding is based on a reciprocal communication model characterised by balanced power relations where the resultant nation brand is a product of a continuous negotiation between all stakeholders and target publics who co-create and maintain the national brand.\textsuperscript{61} By adopting this approach to nation branding, countries can create stronger and more sustainable nation brands.

Although rather idealistic in nature, the relationship building approach to nation branding would have been more suitable to Thailand’s post-coup context than the image management approach adopted by the junta as it would have signalled that the generals were serious about resolving the country’s socio-economic and political problems. Yet, building popularity was not the only motivating factor behind the junta’s use of PR in post-coup Thailand. As Toledano and McKie point out, PR activities also seek ‘to integrate the individual

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\textsuperscript{56} ‘ประกวดหนังสั้น “ไทยดีทีมีมารยาท” ชิงทุนการศึกษารวมกว่า 300,000 บาท [The short film contest “Good Thais have manners” offers 300,000 baht worth of education scholarships],’ \textit{ScholarShip}, 4 July 2019, \url{https://www.scholarship.in.th/short-flims-contest-2019/}.

\textsuperscript{57} The miniseries is available at \url{https://seeme.me/ch/thaid/k5vovD}.


\textsuperscript{59} Dinnie, \textit{Nation Branding}, 224.

\textsuperscript{60} Szondi, ‘Image management,’ 336.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid, 339.
into the collective in a form of social engineering." In other words, PR activities have socialisation capabilities as they communicate social values, moral codes, and desired forms of behaviour to the citizens. As such, they can help to create new or strengthen the existing shared norms and values that constitute one of the four key elements of political legitimation, the other being consent of the governed, conformity with rules and regulations of obtaining power and its proper and effective use, as defined by Alagappa.

Despite some initial public support of the coup, the NCPO’s continuing popularity was never guaranteed. Thailand has a history of popular uprisings against military rule: mass street protests brought down military governments in both 1973 and 1992. In the latter case, the military suffered a significant loss of ‘face’ that took years to recover. The concept of ‘face’ is immensely important in Thai culture. As Persons explains, having ‘face’ means ‘possess[ing] an unquantifiable amount of social power.’ This is especially important for Thai leaders who could use their ‘face’ to ‘gain things of great value’ such as power, influence or respect. While ‘face’ is difficult to gain, it can be lost easily and, as Persons argues, ‘[f]or most Thais, but especially for leaders, loss of face under any circumstances is flatly unacceptable [original emphasis].’ Hence, Thais would do anything to prevent ‘face’ loss. The concepts of ‘face’ and ‘face’ loss seemed to have played an important role in Prayuth’s post-coup PR activities. This was mainly because Prayuth and the NCPO promised in the wake of the coup that they would solve the country’s socio-economic and political problems. But the deteriorating economy, the constant postponement of elections, international and domestic criticism of his regime, and some sporadic anti-junta protests threatened to damage Prayuth’s ‘face’ and the ‘face’ of his military regime. In this context, PR became the NCPO’s self-legitimation and socialisation tool as they needed to both feel secure about their own position and power and secure the citizen buy-in into their strategic national myth. Not surprisingly then, there was an increase in PR activities following the 2014 coup.

For most of his direct military rule, Prayuth sought to cultivate an image of a benevolent yet all-powerful paternalistic ruler that was modelled on the example of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1959-1963). While Sarit claimed the role of the country’s father (pho), a position later assumed by King Bhumibol, Prayuth’s supporters endowed him with the nonetheless paternalistic title of an ‘Uncle Tu’ (lung tu), ‘Tu’ being Prayuth’s nickname which rather ironically translates as ‘to usurp.’ The use of nicknames is a common feature in Thailand. In fact, very few Thais use legal names in their daily lives as most are given their nicknames in early childhood and grow up using them instead. The link between Prayuth’s nickname and his role as the leader of the 2014 coup was thus purely coincidental. Similar to Sarit, Prayuth placed much emphasis on unity, discipline and manners which became the defining features of his paternalism. He frequently used his Friday broadcasts to lecture Thais on these values. For example, in one of his early broadcasts he reproached Thais for littering and implored them to

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64 Ferrara, Modern Thailand, 211.
65 Persons, Face, 15.
66 Ibid, 55-6.
67 Ibid, 58.
68 Interview with Tippatai Saelawong, 26 October 2016.
69 For example, see ‘นายกฯลุงตู่สุดยอด “ป๋า Prem” ชม กล้ารัฐประหาร ทำประเทศมีความสงบเรียบร้อย [‘The wonderful Prime Minister Uncle Tu!’ ‘Father Prem’ praises the brave coup that made the country peaceful and orderly],’ MGR Online, 29 December 2014, https://mgonline.com/daily/detail/9570000149747.
follow his example of collecting and disposing waste left behind by others.\textsuperscript{70} In another one, he complained about language standards of Thai children instructing them not to use ‘new’ words they saw on Facebook or the Internet because these words were undermining the ‘beautiful Thai culture and traditions.’\textsuperscript{71}

While paternalism worked relatively well for Sarit back in the 1960s, it did not seem to work well for Prayuth in 2010s. Unlike Sarit, Prayuth was not an accomplished speaker. His weekly broadcasts were often too long, he regularly veered off the script and people grew tired of his constant lecturing.\textsuperscript{72} Tippatai Saelawong, a researcher at Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI), pointed out that more than 90 per cent of Thais did not watch Prayuth’s broadcasts by 2016.\textsuperscript{73} This was despite a change in format that turned Prayuth’s monologues into Q&A sessions with three female presenters in an apparent attempt to make the broadcasts more appealing.\textsuperscript{74} Prayuth’s broadcasts were conspicuously similar in style, timing and format to Thaksin’s weekly radio programme during his 2001-06 premiership.\textsuperscript{75} Inspired by the American presidential tradition, Thaksin was the first Thai prime minister to give weekly addresses to the nation in order to maintain public support for himself, his government, his policies and projects. All ensuing governments, whether military or civilian, pro- or anti-Thaksin, upheld this tradition albeit with some minor format alterations to make it suitable for TV broadcasting. Tippatai explained that Prayuth’s weekly broadcasts were unnecessary and a ‘lost opportunity cost’ because the government forced them onto all TV channels not just the government-owned ones.\textsuperscript{76} Yet, keeping the Friday broadcasts despite their low ratings was also a way for Prayuth to show off his coercive power that enabled him to push the weekly broadcasts onto Thai commercial TV channels. As Tippatai noted: ‘If it was done by a regular government, no one would accept this for sure.’\textsuperscript{77} This example shows that nation branding in authoritarian regimes does not supplant the use of hard power. Instead, it co-exists with it. This is in line with Gershewski’s three pillar approach to the survival of authoritarian regimes.

A staple theme of Prayuth’s post-coup PR activities was a sense that Thailand was losing something very important and valuable, and the military government was working hard to prevent that from happening. This was rendered in a series of patriotic songs penned by Prayuth himself: ‘Returning Happiness to Thailand’ (2014), ‘Because You Are Thailand’ (2015), ‘Hope and Faith’ (2016), ‘Bridge’ (2017), ‘Diamond Heart’ (2018), ‘Fight for the

\textsuperscript{72} For a detailed analysis of Prayuth’s speeches, see Phanthaphoommee Narongdej, ‘The Ideology and Translation of the Thai Prime Minister’s Weekly Address (2014-2016)’ (PhD diss., University of Leeds, 2019).
\textsuperscript{73} Interview, Tippatai.
\textsuperscript{74} ‘People no longer happy with PM’s weekly TV show,’ The Nation, 17 May 2016, http://www.nationmultimedia.com/politics/People-no-longer-happy-with-PMs-weekly-TV-show-30286083.html.
\textsuperscript{75} For further information, see McCargo and Ukrist, Thaksinization, 168-72.
\textsuperscript{76} Interview, Tippatai
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
Explicitly nationalist and social anxiety-inducing, the songs contained the recurring themes of the military’s devotion to the nation, their relentless commitment to solving problems and creating a better and brighter future for all. They called onto Thai people to unite in times of hardship and be good citizens who would work towards protecting the nation and its traditional values alongside of the military. This was yet another variation of the age-old national myth that presented the military as the nation’s saviour working for the greater good of all Thais, but Prayuth also sought to justify the military’s continuous role in politics. After all, Thailand was not out of danger yet as his songs frequently implied.

To help maintain his ‘face’ and the ‘face’ of his military regime amidst growing popular discontent, Prayuth’s songs sought to re-direct people’s attention away from the country’s socio-economic problems to problems of collective identity. It was the disunity, lack of Thainess and patriotism rather than the country’s dire socio-economic situation Thai people needed to worry about. For example, in ‘Returning Happiness to Thailand’ Prayuth portrayed Thailand as a nation still at danger from those who did not conform to the conservative notions of united, peace-loving and above all apolitical Thais. In ‘Hope and Faith’ he implied that Thainess was under threat as a result of King Bhumibol’s passing and called onto Thais to work together for the sake of preserving Thainess for the years to come. In ‘In Memory’ he reminded Thais of the country’s deep-seated political polarisation urging them not to forget how hard it was to rebuild the country following the 2014 coup. The problem, as the songs implied, were the people not the military. The songs also sought to render Prayuth with a softer image: he was no longer the power-hungry military general but rather a writer with a gentle soul and much devotion to his own country. The mellow melodies that accompanied these songs completed this softer image.

Besides the military, the monarchy was another area of heightened post-coup PR activity. Monarchical PR is nothing new in Thailand and every year different celebrations are held to commemorate significant royal dates, such as the king’s or queen’s birthday. Yet, the NCPO put much more effort into these events following the 2014 coup. The 2015 ‘Bike for Mom’ and ‘Bike for Dad’ were one of the biggest monarchical PR events organised to commemorate the king’s and the queen’s birthdays in recent years. The impact of these two events was felt long after they ended. The ‘Bike for Dad’ and ‘Bike for Mom’ posters continued to adorn a number of billboards in Bangkok, especially along the downtown Ratchaprasong area for more than a year. They were only taken down following King Bhumibol’s death in October 2016. Other big monarchical PR events included a series of commemorative PR campaigns surrounding King Bhumibol’s death, such as a moralistic billboard campaign urging Thais to live their lives in accordance with values officially associated with Bhumibol and his reign (these included goodness, tolerance, sufficiency, strength, love and national unity; see

78 All songs are available on YouTube.
79 For the full lyrics in Thai, see ‘เพลงคืนความสุขให้ประเทศไทย อิดช้ามื้อ’ [The Returning Happiness to Thailand song is an overnight hit], K@pook!, accessed 13 April 2018, https://musicstation.kapook.com/view90179.html.
80 For the full lyrics in Thai, see ‘นายกฯแต่งเพลงความหวังความศรัทธาให้กําลังใจประชาชน’ [Prime Minister composes a song “Hope and Faith” to increase people’s morale], MThai, 27 October 2016, https://music.mthai.com/hotissue/250339.html.
81 For the full lyrics in Thai, see ‘เพลง “ในความทรงจำ”//เพลงใหม่จากใจลุงตู่!!!’ [The “In Memory” song/the new song from Uncle Tu’s heart], YouTube, 9 January 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WhMNImtYeko&feature=emb_logo.
Petra Desatova, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies

Image 4.3), and the 2018 palace-led winter festivals that included yet another nationwide cycling event.

**Image 4.3:** The ‘Endure for Dad’ message on a digital billboard at Bangkok’s Sam Yan MRT station, 10 November 2016 (Photo credit: Petra Desatová).

Tippatai Saelawong, the TDRI researcher whom I interviewed in October 2016, pointed out that there had always been a problem with monarchical PR in Thailand as there were no laws that would regulate the government spending on this particular public expenditure, but Thais did not dare to question it because monarchical PR was the sign of loyalty. This was underpinned by a simple logic: the bigger and more expensive the PR events were, the more loyalty they conveyed. Tippatai felt that the volume of the post-coup monarchical PR was excessive; the public money spent on these events could have been used for other purposes that the public might have benefited from more, such as HIV campaigning. However, the excessive use of monarchical PR was in line with the junta’s legitimation needs and political objectives: these PR campaigns and events served as identity reminders for the Thai people of their duty to revere the royal institution and the entire political system the institution underpinned. It was not until August 2020 when the protesting Thai students broke the taboo of monarchical spending and publicly called for the revision of funds spent on this institution.

The post-coup PR activities did not seem to work well for Prayuth and his military regime. They were often subject to open criticism and satire both at home and abroad. Prayuth’s public conduct characterised by regular ill-tempered outbursts seemed to indicate that his sense of security and self-esteem also did not improve over time. His Friday broadcasts quickly declined in popularity as people grew tired of his constant moralising. His patriotic songs, which were played endlessly on Thai TV and radio and were uploaded on YouTube and other social media channels, gradually became a source of online mockery despite some initial success. Even worse for Prayuth, his songs seemed to have inspired a creative rebuke: on 22 October 2018, a ten-member group of Thai rappers calling themselves Rap Against Dictatorship released a music video criticising Prayuth, the NCPO and the military for endlessly interfering in Thai politics and driving the country to a socio-economic tipping point. Titled *Prathet Ku Me* or What My Country’s Got, the music video touched upon some of the core grievances including corruption, nepotism, abuse of power, lack of public accountability,

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82 Interview, Tippatai.

socio-economic inequality and suppression of people’s rights and freedoms. It became an overnight success attracting millions of views in a matter of days and a close attention of both international and domestic media.\footnote{At the time of writing in November 2020, the official music video had more than 93 million views and almost 1.5 million likes on YouTube alone. See \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZvvvLiGUtM}.}

The NCPO initially threatened the Rap Against Dictatorship group with arrests and criminal charges, but these only fuelled the video’s popularity making it virtually impossible for the junta to crack down on the group’s members. Instead, the NCPO responded with its own rap music video released on 1 November 2018. Titled Thailand 4.0, it was a complete disaster: after the underwhelming opening line of ‘Come on!...Hello Thailand 4.0. Woo! One, two, three... Let’s go!’, the song contained a score of patriotic messages mixed with lines about Thailand’s bright technology-driven future and musical elements clearly borrowed from the country’s national anthem. The music video was lambasted online and ridiculed by many domestic and international media outlets.\footnote{At the time of writing in November 2020, the official video had more than 4.7 million views and 70-thousand dislikes on YouTube. See \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ck9lTSYwOKE}.} It revealed a growing gap between the NCPO, who were desperately trying to attract young Thais to their conservative value messaging, and the emerging defiant youth force that used pop culture as an affront to authoritarianism.

Private Sector

Dinnie points out that ‘[s]ecuring internal buy-in to the nation brand is an important component of nation branding.’ Yet, it is not just the nation’s citizens who need to ‘live the brand.’ The government also needs the support of the private sector, especially big businesses, because businesses, just like the nation’s citizens, can act as powerful brand ambassadors for their nations.\footnote{Dinnie, \textit{Nation branding}, 70.} Big businesses, on the other hand, have vested interests in nation branding due to the country-of-origin effect. Although the link between the country’s reputation and consumer buying behaviour is not linear, positive country image is arguably more conducive to business activities than the negative one which often carries the risk of, for example, product quality misconceptions or boycotts. Negative country image might simply become a liability for business. Talking in late 2016, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the then CEO of a Thai auto parts manufacturing business, revealed that some foreign businesses were wary of doing business with Thai companies following the 2014 coup.\footnote{Ibid, 70.} They perceived Thailand and Thai businesses as untrustworthy and doubted whether Thai businesses ‘would honour trade contract[s] when [Thailand] still did not honour constitution[s].’ As Thanathorn noted, ‘in one way it would have been better to say that the business had no nationality.’

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{Interview with Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, 25 October 2016. In March 2018, Thanathorn co-founded a new political party called the Future Forward Party or อนาคตใหม่ in Thai. He was elected the party leader in May 2018. The Party has built its platform on a progressive anti-junta agenda. For more information, see the party website ‘\[About us the Future Forward party,\]’ Future Forward, accessed 15 December 2018, \url{https://futureforwardparty.org/about-fwp/future-forward-party}.} For more information, see the party website ‘\[About us the Future Forward party,\]’ Future Forward, accessed 15 December 2018, \url{https://futureforwardparty.org/about-fwp/future-forward-party}.\footnote{Ibid.} For
\end{itemize}
Thanathorn, Thailand’s post-coup image was clearly a liability rather than an asset because businesses can be perceived as an extension of their country of origin and thereby sharing some of their country’s traits.

There is a clear indication that Thai businesses with international operations understand that they are representing Thailand through their products, services, brands and business conduct. There is also a clear indication that these businesses have an interest in Thailand having a positive image and a strong national brand. Some businesses, such as Kasikorn Bank or Singha Beer, had started promoting Thailand long before the concept of nation branding was first introduced by Thaksin Shinawatra in the early 2000s. For example, Kasikorn Bank (then known as Thai Farmers Bank) produced a 192-page English language travel guide called the ‘Highlights of Thailand’ and distributed it free of charge to foreign tourists and investors during the TAT’s 1987 ‘Visit Thailand Year.’ Singha Beer used ‘Amazing Thailand – never without Singha Beer’ slogan in its TV and radio advertising during the 1998-9 ‘Amazing Thailand’ tourism campaign. Both Kasikorn and Singha Beer joined the Thai state in re-packaging Thai identity for foreign consumption during the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, their efforts were driven by the need for self-promotion that went beyond the immediate products or services they had on offer.

Most of Thailand’s big businesses are owned by a handful of influential Sino-Thai families that have close links to the country’s traditional elites. In fact, nineteen out the top twenty wealthiest Thai families that appeared on the Forbes 2014 rich list were Sino-Thais. Most of these families benefitted from the capitalist development initiated by Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (under US patronage) in the early 1960s and built close relationships with the country’s military, monarchy and senior bureaucracy through complex patronage networks, intermarriage and backdoor deals. They used their money and influence to build monopolies, gain countless privileges and access to power. Although they did not seek a direct political role, their interests dominated the parliament in the 1980s and 1990s. By the early 2000s, these Sino-Thai families were firmly entrenched in the top echelons of Thailand’s virtuous rule. Many openly supported Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai party in the run up to the 2001 general elections and during the first few years in the office. Some even took an active role in politics by becoming Thai Rak Thai party-list MPs, senior party officials and/or

91 Between June and November 2016, I interviewed a total of five informants from some of Thailand’s most well-known businesses with international operations. These businesses included Chang Beer (ThaiBev), Singha Beer (Boon Rawd Brewery), Pranda Group, King Power and Kasikorn Bank. All informants confirmed that these businesses were representing Thailand. Some even referred to the businesses as Thailand’s brand ambassadors.

92 I would like to thank Mrs Wiwan Tharahirunchot for providing the ‘Highlights of Thailand’ book for research purposes.


94 For a good analysis of the inequality of Thai wealth, including the rich Sino-Thai families, see Pasuk Phongpaichit, ‘Inequality, Wealth and Thailand’s Politics,’ Journal of Contemporary Asia 46, no.3 (2016): 414.


96 Baker, ‘Roots of authoritarianism,’ 396.

members of Thaksin’s cabinet between 2001 and 2006.\textsuperscript{98} However, as Ukrist notes, most of the big business Sino-Thai families ‘had distanced themselves from Thaksin by the time of the [2006] coup or soon after.’\textsuperscript{99} These families withdrew their support for Thaksin because he challenged the power and legitimacy of virtuous rule – the system they continued to rely on for business protection and profits.\textsuperscript{100}

Through his pro-poor economic policies Thaksin empowered large segments of the Thai electorate, who discovered the power of popular vote to demand a more equal distribution of state power and resources.\textsuperscript{101} Yet, such a re-distribution would require the removal of patronage-based networks, and state and royal privileges that form the bedrock on which the power, status and wealth of these Sino-Thai families is built.\textsuperscript{102} These families thus have vested interests in sustaining Thailand’s virtuous rule. As Pasuk explains, [m]oney played a large role in the agitation that led to the 2014 coup [original emphasis]’ and the junta’s rollback on democracy and their electoral system reforms.\textsuperscript{103} Many Sino-Thai families prospered under the NCPO and became major donors of the pro-junta Palang Pracharat Party in the run-up to the March 2019 election.\textsuperscript{104} This was despite the general economic slowdown Thailand experienced under the NCPO rule.

Money was not the only tool the big Sino-Thai businesses used to prop up virtuous rule. Nation branding offered them another opportunity to work towards strengthening the power and legitimacy of the Thai political system and their own privileged standing within it. It was a form of protection for patronage-based businesses that relied heavily on inside connections. For example, in 2014, Kasikorn Bank produced an emotionally loaded advert ‘rak...jak pho [Love… from dad]’ to mark King Bhumibol’s birthday and the Thai national Father’s Day both celebrated on 5 December. The advertisement is a story narrated by a young Thai girl whose dream is to become a ballerina, but she gives it up to pursue her father’s dream of expanding his business instead. Justifying her decision, the girl notes that ‘[w]hen we only listen to our own dreams, we forget about the dreams of those who love us.’\textsuperscript{105} Although family love and sacrifice are the central theme of this advert, its content is highly political. Launched on the king’s birthday in the year of the coup, the advert is full of analogies that go beyond the family business context. The girl who wants to become a ballerina represents Thai people and their dreams and aspirations. The girl’s father represents the nation’s father, that is King Bhumibol, while the father’s business is a symbolic portrayal of the Thai nation. It is no coincidence that the girl’s father is portrayed as a loving and benevolent parent that supports his child’s ambitions as these qualities were commonly ascribed to Bhumibol as the country’s paternalistic ruler. It is also no coincidence that the advert implicitly reproaches the girl for wanting to pursue her own dream which it portrays as an inherently selfish act. Since the 2006 coup, the

\begin{itemize}
  \item[99] Ibid, 150.
  \item[100] Pasuk, ‘Inequality,’ 420.
  \item[101] Ukrist, ‘Network Thaksin,’ 152-4; Baker, ‘Roots of authoritarianism,’ 397.
  \item[102] Pasuk, ‘Inequality,’ 419-20.
  \item[103] Ibid, 421.
  \item[105] My translation. See, 'รัก...จากพ่อ KBank [Love… from dad KBank],' YouTube, published 3 December 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sq7-jbwMwaU&t =18s.
\end{itemize}
country’s traditional elites, their networks and the Yellow Shirts have frequently described the popular support of the Shinawatras as acts of selfishness. Based on a pervasive official state narrative that the rural electorate is uneducated, parochial and money-focused, they accused the Shinawatra supporters for being self-interested and pursuing short-term benefits instead of acting in the interest of the nation as a whole.106

The Kasikorn advert was a soft reminder to the Thai people to work toward the greater good by staying loyal to the king and the Thai nation and giving up their selfish dreams and aspirations. It contained at least four of Prayuth’s twelve values of Thainess: loyalty to Nation-Religion-King; willingness to self-sacrifice for the common good; gratitude towards one’s parents; and attending to the needs of others and the nation before self. The advert has amassed over 260,000 views,107 a modest number compared to some of the most popular Kasikorn YouTube videos that routinely attract tens of millions of views. It seemed as if some Thais were getting tired of these moralising videos. As I discuss in chapter 5 of this book, participants of the six focus groups that I conducted between October and November 2016 also favoured the least moralising video out of the four shown.

The existing literature on nation branding does not help to explain the business behaviour of big Sino-Thai businesses, such as Kasikorn. These businesses are more than just brand ambassadors because their role in nation branding goes beyond shaping the country’s external image through interactions with foreigners, be it their business partners or customers. Instead, they actively partake in the process of internal nation branding by reproducing national myths, government-sanctioned notions of good citizenship and by acting as model ‘citizens.’ King Power, Thailand’s largest duty-free retailer founded by late Vichai Srivaddhanaprabha, who was the head of one of the richest Sino-Thai families and owner of the Leicester City Football Club, is a good example of a Sino-Thai business that acts as a model Thai ‘citizen.’ The business lists ‘retaining Thainess,’ whether by ‘Thai’ smile, greeting (wai) or manners, as one of its main corporate values.108 Although all Thai King Power employees know these markers of culturally appropriate conduct well, they are told to pay special attention to them or to perform them a ‘little bit more.’109 Every new employee goes through a training where they learn how to smile, wai, greet and dress properly.110 The business makes Thai employees behave more Thai by enforcing the traditional state-defined notions of Thainess onto them.

King Power is an outwardly royalist business. When I visited its flagship store in downtown Bangkok in June 2016, it was a physical tribute to the country’s monarchy. Instead of the company’s logo, its side entrance bore the royal Garuda emblem and a golden-gilded rao ♥ phra chao yu hua or ‘we love the king’ slogan (see Illustration 5.4). This was the only visible entrance from the street and the main point of entry to the store. The main entrance that is at the front of the building and bears the King Power logo was not in use at the time of my visit; it was also shielded from public view by thick green vegetation. Next to the side entrance was a monumental image of King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit. Besides a small sign on the side of the driveway, there was nothing to indicate that this was the entrance to the King Power store.111 One could have easily mistaken it for a recently built royal museum.

107 At the time of writing in November 2020.
108 Interview with a King Power employee, 12 October 2016.
109 Ibid.
110 Ibid.
111 Field notes, 5 July 2016.
Since royalism is an important pillar of Thai nationalism, King Power is also an outwardly nationalist business. When in 2010 Vichai bought Leicester City FC, an English football club, he claimed he did it to publicise Thailand abroad.\(^{112}\) When Leicester unexpectedly won the English Premier League in 2016, it was presented as Thailand’s win and Thai people’s pride. As one King Power employee explained ‘people felt that it was Thai people’s football team therefore [they] felt [they] had a part.’\(^{113}\) The employee ‘felt proud because since the first time when our boss bought [the club], many complained that the boss invested money in a foreign country but when they succeeded I was proud.’\(^{114}\) Effectively, Leicester City became the source of Thai national pride and a unifying force in a deeply-divided nation. As the employee summarised: ‘All employees were happy, the owner was also happy, it was everyone’s pride.’\(^{115}\) It is here that King Power’s actions go beyond the framework of commercial nationalism: ‘the [deliberate] use of nationalism [by commercial entities] to sell (or gain ratings) and the use of commercial strategies by public sector entities to foster nationalism and nationalist agendas.’\(^{116}\) Although Leicester’s win boosted King Power’s sales by riding on the wave of commercial nationalism, many King Power stores quickly sold out of


\(^{113}\) Interview, King Power.

\(^{114}\) Ibid.

\(^{115}\) Ibid.

\(^{116}\) In their earlier work, Volcic and Andrejevic argued that nation branding was a complementary process to commercial nationalism, which they defined in much narrower terms as the use of nationalism by private sector to sell products or services. The definition used here comes from their more recent work where nation branding is already part of commercial nationalism. See Zala Volcic and Mark Andrejevic, ‘Introduction,’ in Commercial Nationalism: selling the nation and nationalizing the sell, eds. Zala Volcic and Mark Andrejevic, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 2.
Leicester merchandise, I argue that it is primarily non-material rather than material gains that motivate King Power’s royalist and nationalist behaviour. By presenting itself as a royalist-nationalist business firmly rooted in Thainess, King Power enhances its social capital and creates justifications for its privileged status. At the same time, it helps to sustain virtuous rule by disseminating state-defined notions of Thainess through its business conduct and activities.

Vichai, the late King Power’s owner, received his Srivaddhanaprabha surname from King Bhumibol in 2013 in recognition of his contributions to the country. As Handley explains, King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit started to give out royal honours in the 1960s in order to build a strong base of non-royal elite supporters. These typically included upper-class Thais, senior military officers and bureaucrats as well as Thailand’s leading capitalists. Vichai and his King Power business might have been part of King Bhumibol’s and Queen Sirikit’s patronage networks. However, the relationship between the palace and King Power seemed to have grown more complicated following Bhumibol’s death.

While acting as a patriotic and royalist business is beneficial in the Thai socio-political context, such corporate brand identity might not work well in the global market. Hence, many big Sino-Thai businesses with international operations try to avoid branding that might seem overly nationalistic. For example, when Chang Beer launched their first international Thai festivals in 2016, called ‘Chang Sensory Trails,’ these festivals were aimed at presenting Thailand as a modern, vibrant, trendy, hip nation to match the Chang Beer’s brand identity. An informant working for the Chang Beer marketing at the time explained: ‘We represent Thai beer. We try to explore what is Thai in terms of international perspective.’ In other words, the company is receptive to foreign perceptions of Thailand and works to further reinforce the positive country stereotypes. Yet, they are not promoting intangible Thai values, such as Thai smile, because these could prove elusive over time. The informant pointed out that ‘Thai smile’ might not be relevant to Thai identity in ten-years’ time but Thai food, muay Thai (Thai boxing), beaches and various tourist attractions were more permanent.

The informant likened their country promotion efforts to those of TAT. Chang Beer was promoting Thailand as a tourist destination. Their approach to country promotion was pragmatic and profit driven.

117 Interview, King Power.
118 Handley, King never smiles, 150.
119 In July 2017, King Power faced a lawsuit on corruption charges. Although the lawsuit was dismissed by the Thai courts in September 2018, it brought the company’s name into disrepute both in Thailand and abroad. In November 2018, King Power lost its bid for a retail and services concession at an upcoming U-Tapao International Airport to Thailand’s Central Group. This marked the break in King Power’s monopoly over all major airports in Thailand. Furthermore, King Power’s most lucrative concession at Thailand’s Suvarnabhumi Airport in Bangkok is due to expire in 2020 and auctions are due to begin soon. For example, see ‘Thai court dismisses case against Airports of Thailand, King Power,’ Reuters, 18 September 2018, https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-thailand-king-power/airports-of-thailand-king-power-case-dismissed-idUKKCN1LY0F1 and ‘Thailand’s King Power loses retail bid in U-Tapao airport concession,’ Reuters, 19 November 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/thailand-king-power/thailands-king-power-loses-retail-bid-in-u-tapao-airport-concession-idUSL4N1XU31D.
120 Interview with an informant working for the Chang Beer marketing team, 14 July 2016.
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
123 Ibid.
Even businesses such as Singha Beer, well-known for their traditional Thai identity and nationalist advertising, feel the need to globalise their corporate brand identities. An informant working for Singha Beer explained that the company was still using Thainess as their advertising theme ‘but perhaps the difference [between the current and earlier advertising] is in the degree [because contemporary Thai] values, the way of life [and] beliefs need to be extended to the markets in the foreign countries.’ This indicates that there might be a tension between the business and socio-political functions of nation branding in Thailand. Nevertheless, big businesses such as Chang or Singha Beer do not completely eschew their patriotic identities. These seemed to be reasserted mostly through CSR programmes or day-to-day business conduct. For example, Chang Beer’s parent company ThaiBev supported government-led Thai festivals abroad as part of their CSR programme in 2015. Organised by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, these festivals were aimed at promoting traditional Thai culture and arts which are miles apart from Chang beer’s hip corporate brand identity. Singha Beer, on the other hand, decided to unilaterally extend the 30-day advertising ban imposed by the junta in the wake of Bhumibol’s death to the entire period of mourning. This decision may have resulted in the loss of some revenue as Singha Beer’s competitors resumed their advertising as soon as the ban was lifted.

Not all big Sino-Thai businesses support the royalist political order and the aggressive promotion of Thainess. For example, speaking to Thanathorn Juangroongruankit in October 2016, when he was still the CEO of Thai Summit, Thailand’s auto parts manufacturing business, believed that it was the promotion of Thainess that ‘makes Thai society fall behind.’ He further explained that the brand identity that the Prayuth government was building through the promotion of traditional and highly-conservative norms and values stripped Thai society of upward mobility by teaching Thai people not to have ambitions and aspirations. Thanathorn compared Thainess to a fairy tale that was designed to make ‘[Thai] society live in harmony [and] have no one rise up in search for what is right.’ He concluded that these values were unable to strengthen Thailand’s competitive advantage in the global world. There was a clear tension between economic and socio-political needs of nation branding in the post-coup Thailand. While the government’s economic needs and the needs of the private sector required more flexibility, adaptability and innovation, the junta’s attempts to preserve virtuous rule required the preservation of traditional norms and values and their indoctrination. As such, the junta’s post-coup strategic national myth was full of contradictions that led to confusing messaging in both public and private sectors.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to examine Thailand’s internal nation branding efforts in the areas of education, culture, PR and private sector. I argued that the NCPO, together with the big Sino-Thai business, used internal nation branding to disseminate notions of Thainess, morality, discipline, appropriate manners and good citizenship across Thai society. These were the notions of virtue that the generals hoped would fill the legitimacy void left behind by King Bhumibol and secure the political power and legitimacy of virtuous rule into the post-Bhumibol

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124 Interview with an informant working for Singha Beer, 24 November 2016.
126 Interview, Singha Beer.
127 Interview, Thanathorn.
128 Ibid.
129 Ibid.
era. Thainess and the junta-defined notions of good citizenship were the main branding themes in the education sector. To this end, the Ministry of Education enacted a number of new policies that resulted in an increased indoctrination of Thai students in these norms and values. The objective was to achieve a society-wide virtuous self-management of Thai citizens. Yet, this clashed with the objectives of the government’s economic policy that required increased innovation, creativity and critical thinking. Instead of resolving these contradictions, the Ministry of Education enacted another set of policies that were aimed at improving the overall quality of Thailand’s education system in line with the junta’s economic needs. As such, these policies resulted in notions of bounded innovation and creativity, where innovation and creativity were desirable in areas that would help Thailand’s economy (such as science) but not in those that could challenge the legitimacy of the military government or virtuous rule. As a result, the junta’s promises of a proper educational reform never truly materialised. Branding in the culture sector was focused mostly on disseminating Thai manners and increasing public discipline. The Ministry of Culture and its cultural networks launched billboard campaigns and organised competitions in Thai manners to help achieve the junta’s objective of virtuous self-management of citizens. The Ministry also launched a traffic education campaign to enhance public discipline. In the PR sector, the military and the monarchy were the two major subjects of post-coup branding. Once again, Thainess and the junta-defined notions of good citizenship took centre stage in many branding campaigns and activities as the NCPO deployed an image management approach to PR focused on self-legitimation of their rule and socialisation of Thai citizens. However, as I argued, none of these efforts were isolated attempts at managing social attitudes and behaviours of Thai citizens. They were part of long-term efforts of Thailand’s ruling elites to preserve their political power and legitimacy in the face of different internal and external threats.

Thailand’s private sector played an active role in supporting the military government’s internal nation branding efforts. Businesses such as Kasikorn Bank, Singha Beer, Chang Beer and King Power supported the junta’s branding efforts through their corporate advertising and business activities, which were full of identity reminders and junta-defined notions of Thainess. However, similarly to the education sector many big businesses in the private sector found tensions between their economic and socio-political needs. Overt patriotism and adherence to the state-defined notions of Thainess clashed with their internationalisation objectives. This contradiction was not resolved during the post-coup period examined in this chapter. It seemed that the businesses tried to assert their patriotism mostly through their domestic corporate activities, while they continued to maintain their global image and external outlook.

Thailand’s post-coup nation branding efforts in the education, culture, PR and private sector indicate that nation branding might contain a number of contradictions that can be difficult to reconcile. This is especially true for authoritarian regimes that seek to use nation branding as a strategy for political legitimation, but often rely on a combination of performance and identity-based legitimation rationales. While performance-based rationales require a degree of innovation and modernity, identity-based rationales are usually based on traditional and conservative values. Authoritarian regimes such as China or Russia seem to pursue this strategy of economic modernisation and development on the one hand, and social traditionalism and conservatism on the other. Not only these strategies result in mixed branding messages, they can also put additional pressure on domestic businesses with international operations that see themselves as their nation’s brand ambassadors. The following chapter examines how a number of focus group participants from different geographical locations reacted to Thailand’s post-coup branding efforts.