The Sad Case of the Bangkok Film Festival

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To recount the brief history of the Bangkok International Film Festival (BKKIFF) involves plunging the reader into swamps of rumours, scorn, management scuffles, confusing shifts of power and incidents of shameful corruption. Please don’t wince – the history of the festival included good news and good-hearted people, and originally I would have loved to open the article on a more optimistic note with the story of those who struggled and clung to their faith to initiate the idea of a movie festival in a country, like Thailand, that barely grasps the concept of cinema as an art form. But unfortunately, a vile scandal broke out in December 2007 while this anthology was starting to take shape, and it turned out to be a scandal that not only brought shame to the BKKIFF and the Thai people, but probably constitutes one of the most shocking infamies in the history of international film festivals. It also serves as a cautionary tale on how a film festival could be exploited by crafty bureaucrats and businessmen, at the expense of cinephiles and taxpayers’ money.

It was then that the US Department of Justice announced that it had arrested an American couple, Gerald Green and his wife Patricia, for bribing the governor of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). TAT has been the sponsor of BKKIFF since 2002, and the $1.7-million kickbacks were paid, according to the FBI report, so that Mr Green’s company, the L.A.-based Film Festival Management Inc., could be awarded the contract to organise the festival between 2003 and 2006. This scandalous report, like all
kinds of embarrassing news, spread through the world’s filmmaking community in a matter of hours. In Bangkok, we sighed: just when you thought the reputation of the BKKIFF couldn’t get any worse, it did.

The FBI affidavit didn’t directly name the Thai official who allegedly took the bribe. The TAT governor during that period was Juthamas Siriwanchai, who promptly held a press conference denying any involvement. A day later however, Ms. Juthamas resigned from the political party she belonged to and pulled out of Thailand’s general election three days before voters went to the polls. At the time of going to print, the Thai anti-graft agency are still working in co-operation with the FBI to prove the crime, or the innocence, of those likely to be involved in the fraud. Yet as most Thais know, hardly any high-ranking Thai officials are ever convicted of high-profile corruption crimes, and we keep our fingers crossed that justice will be honoured this time around.
Without any intention to rub salt on the wound, I’m recounting the incident fully aware that the bribery scandal was a final humiliation to this troubled festival of my home city, and that it represents a perfect opportunity for the government to rethink the management and funding of this notoriously expensive event. After BKKIFF’s 2007 edition, having been moved to July from January, there was uncertainty whether TAT would continue to host the festival – or whether the festival would continue to exist at all. Then in December 2007, it looked likely that BKKIFF would go on despite the bloody *coup de grace* brought on courtesy of Mr Green and the FBI. In September 2008, the festival finally took place with the Federation of National Film Association of Thailand as the organiser, while TAT, still the sponsor, lowered its involvement. But then again the fate of BKKIFF 2009 remains unclear largely due to the current economic crisis. One thing is dead certain though: the L.A.-based firm, reportedly with little experience in managing a film festival even though it’s called Film Festival Management Inc, would not re-emerge to get any contract from the still-shocked-and-awed TAT.

Still, with grudging optimism, we can regard this scam as a cleansing agent that can help to purge old demons and encourage a new chapter of BKKIFF. So perhaps it helps to go back to review the birth of movie festivals in Thailand in the mid-1990s, and to gauge the degree of local cinephilia and government support that are always the blood vessels of most major cinefests. In the global climate when film festivals have become everything from political tools to tourism magnets – sometimes even to celebrate good films – the tale from Bangkok is a worthy case study.

The early years

Though Thai films enjoyed halcyon days in the 1960s when as many as 200 titles were produced each year, the historical mindset was that cinema was strictly a form of lowly entertainment. The idea of the movies as an arm of cultural identity and academic curiosity was thin on the ground. Likewise, in terms of economic spur: while Hong Kong pioneered its festival in the late 1970s during the peak of its homegrown moviemaking business, the concept of ‘selling’ Thai cinema to overseas audiences didn’t gain ground until
only lately. And while foreign critics had good reasons to fly to the former British colony to check out new Asian harvests in the 1980s, hardly anybody outside Thailand took Siamese films seriously until Pen-ek Ratanaruang, Nonzee Nimibutr, Wisit Sasanatieng and Apichatpong Weerasethakul burst onto the scene in the late 1990s.

In those years before film festivals, Bangkok cinephiles haunted various institutions to consume non-American titles. The Alliance Francaise, the Goethe Institute, the British Council and the Japan Foundation organised regular screenings in their auditoriums (as they still do now), and those places saw the gatherings of small legions of film students and enthusiasts craving for alternatives from Hollywood dominance. If nothing else, this testifies that even though the potent stimuli that would engender a film festival was absent, the interest in filmgoing as a cultural practice has always been here, albeit marginalised.

The first time the term ‘film festival’ was officially used in Thailand was in 1995, when American expatriate Scott Rosenberg, together with the Thai National Film Archive and film historian Dome Sukhawong, organised the BOI Film Festival. Even though the venue and surroundings were a little unusual, it was a small, well-intentioned event. The festival was funded by the Thai Board of Investment (BOI), and it took place as part of the BOI Fair, a vast exhibition of Thai machinery and investment opportunities on a dusty ground fair near an industrial port in the eastern province of Chonburi. Thai films were shown along with selections from Southeast Asia. Despite being a trailblazer in a way, it’s unclear how much the BOI Film Festival actually influenced the subsequent attempts to put together local cine-affairs in later years.

Before we move on to the birth of BKKIFF, it must be noted that, in 1997, a significant but often overlooked movie event was started in Bangkok. Modest, friendly and always struggling, the Thai Short Film and Video Festival was originated by the Thai Film Foundation, led by Chalida Uabumrungjit, and until today it still best represents the spirit of a film festival as an event where the joy of making movies is celebrated among like-minded people. Its limited funding usually comes from different cultural agencies, but the festival has over the years matured into a crucial gathering of film students and independent filmmakers. The festival threw its 11th edition in August 2007, and it is now the longest-running film festival in Thailand.
With the emphasis on local shorts, the Thai Short Film and Video Festival has been programming shorts from other countries, especially from Asia, since its first year. To put forward a bold supposition, it’s fair to say that this is the festival that has been following the right direction (perhaps unintentionally) from the get-go – that is, to establish Bangkok as a cultural hub for moving images in the region of Southeast Asia.

Perhaps spurred by the growth of Asian films in the global market and by the enthusiasm for ‘New Thai Cinema’, the first Bangkok Film Festival (BFF, note the absence of ‘International’) was founded in September 1998. Two forces made it possible: *The Nation* newspaper sponsored the event and another American in Bangkok, former IBM staff member and movie enthusiast Brian Bennett, became the programmer. Without the fanfare and pseudo-glitz that would later become the mark of the festival’s later reincarnations, the first BFF took place at the multiplex on the sixth floor of the Emporium, a stylish department store on Sukhumvit Road. The programming included American independent cinema, which Bennett favoured, and a fair share of Asian titles.

That first edition was borne by the air of cultural curiosity, perhaps a headlong naiveté – even the sponsor plunged into the project without a clear idea of what it would yield. And despite the quibble that it ignored the local film industry, the first BFF was a success. To a certain extent, it became the outlet of local cinephilia as well as a widely publicised event that attracted the attention of regular multiplex-goers. It introduced the idea of alternative cinema to general audiences, especially young people who had been spoon-fed by Hollywood staples, and a number of them seemed to catch the bug.

In a less cheerful light, the 1998 festival also featured a controversial run-in with the censors – that unshakable demon whose path is inseparable from the development of Siamese movie culture – when the police raided the festival office and banned two films, the Singaporean *Bugis Street*, because of its nudity, and the Thai experimental short *My Teacher Eats Biscuits*, directed by Ing K and Brian Bennett himself, for its unsavoury portrayal of monks. (It would take a whole article to discuss the Thai censorship law, a model of supreme frustration usually enforced by arbitrary judgement of the powers-that-be. In 2007, for example, BKKIFF screened the orgy-strewn *Shortbus* without anyone bat-
ting an eyelid. In December 2007, the new Film Act was passed by Parliament to replace the Jurassic one used since 1930, and although it finally initiated the rating system, it retains the right of the State to cut or ban films.

For most critics, the Siamese New Wave began with the release of Nonzee Nimibutr’s *Daeng Bireley and Young Gangsters* in 1997, the year that Thailand suffered a shocking economic meltdown. One year later, BFF was founded. It’s worth observing the inverse fates of the movies and the country’s economic health. Was the film industry Teflon-coated? (No.) Was the economy’s morass actually not that dire as people assumed? (No.) Was it true that people turn to movies for distraction because times were tough? (No, but maybe yes, or perhaps no.) Was the creative juice of filmmakers flowing because of social depression? (Ideally, yes.) Was it the force of globalisation that ripened our cultural hunger in films? (Again, perhaps yes, but maybe no). How come we had the willingness and the wherewithal to spend money on something inherently trivial and expensive like making movies, and organising a movie festival? This was probably a manifestation of the crazy logic that sometimes influences Thai reality.

In any case, *The Nation* and Bennett ran the BFF for three years – until the American was relieved of his duties after the 2000 edition. In 2001, *The Nation* hired independent filmmaker/lecturer Pimpaka Towira to programme the festival, which by that time had grown into a solid annual event devotedly followed by the expanding ranks of Bangkok cinephiles. Foreign guests had started to arrive, too, partly because of the budding reputation of the Thai New Wave. But then a new twist came, along with another set of Americans.

**The later years**

People wonder why BKKIFF doesn’t specify its age in the banner (say, the 34th HKIFF, or the 60th Festival de Cannes; instead we have BKKIFF 2006 or 2007). That’s because the confusion over the paradigm shift that occurred after its 2001 edition made the count impossible, or at least problematic.

When Pimpaka left the fourth BFF to make her feature film, *The Nation* hired Kriangsak ‘Victor’ Silakong to chair the BFF. The former actor/play director set about picking films and completed his programming in mid-2002,
a few months before the scheduled event in September. That was when the Tourism Authority of Thailand stepped in. Foreseeing the potential of the cinefest as one of the flagship spectacles in its annual tourism calendar, the TAT ‘took over’ the festival, while the original host, The Nation, was contracted to be the organiser. Although Kriangsak had wrapped his selection and the festival was ready to roll, TAT demanded that the festival be pushed from September 2002 to January 2003, because, as my source confirms, that was the only month in the year that TAT had no other events. Squeezed tightly between Rotterdam and Gothenberg and Berlin, the ‘new’ festival was launched with the title Bangkok International Film Festival 2003.

TAT duly promoted tourism as the main objective of BKKIFF. To achieve its desired level of glitz and glamour, the tourism people, who admitted on several occasions that they knew nothing about movies, hired the L.A.-based Film Festival Management Inc. (FFM), owned by Gerald Green, to organise special gala events and to fly in ‘celebrities’ (some of the biggest names that year include Steven Seagal; meanwhile Kriangsak got Agnès Varda to come and present a retrospective of her films). Inevitably, the cost ballooned from 20 million baht to 150 and eventually to 200 million baht (US$4–5 million). The venue was moved to downtown multiplexes around Siam Square and Rajaprasong.

Although moviegoers relished a larger inventory of films and the atmosphere of excitement whipped up by huge publicity, critics and industry people bemoaned the obvious lack of relevance; BKKIFF was designed to be a spectacle, photo-ops galore, and did not concern itself with fostering the film-going culture among locals. This quickly led to a conflict of creative interest, and The Nation decided to split from TAT after January 2003 to set up its own cinefest. Since it would be confusing go back to use the title BFF, Kriangsak came up with an entirely new name — World Film Festival of Bangkok. Small yet steady, the WFFBKK, which debuted in October 2003, hosted its sixth edition in 2008 and has over the years played a solid part in bringing in good films. Each year it costs the organiser around 20 million baht to put together the fest.

Back to BKKIFF: once The Nation departed, the TAT virtually handed over the festival to the Americans. FFM handled the programming (except the Southeast Asian section), inviting ‘guests’, flying in ‘celebrities’ and con-
juring up all the red-carpet hullabaloo. Foreign journalists were flown in on business class, put up in luxurious hotels, and they were often shepherded not to the cinema but to sightseeing trips around Bangkok. Still, the screenings had no Thai subtitles, there were no discounts for students, at some Q&A sessions there were no Thai translators (this improved from 2006). In general, the festival curiously lacked the local touch; all it seemed to care about was the gala screenings and the glitz surrounding the movies rather than the movies themselves.

TAT issued a press release declaring that BKKIFF is ‘one of the top ten film festivals in the world’. When it introduced the first Bangkok Film Market in 2006 at the Paragon Hall, it was a paltry, poorly-attended affair and by the second day most booths were deserted as exhibitors went to have foot massages. But, perplexingly, the press release painted a completely opposite picture by calling it a success. I understand that the ability to cocoon yourself in a totally different plain of reality, to shut out what the rest of the world is saying about you, is sometimes necessary. But not when you’re throwing taxpayers’ money around like there’s no tomorrow.

In light of the recent bribery scandal, it could look as if I’m gleefully joining the winning team and arrogantly stomping on the chest of a fall guy by berating the ‘Americanised’ BKKIFF and the dubious decision of TAT to let FFM run the show at an expensive price tag. But all this criticism has been raised by critics and observers since 2004; in fact, I feel like repeating myself for the 99th time. In 2006, a Thai movie magazine printed a satirical cartoon in which a cinephile complains that he’s reluctant to attend BKKIFF because it has been ‘colonised’. It sounded a tad harsh, though frankly I’m tempted to agree. And now that the white people have left with the loot of Aztec gold, the ‘natives’ are left to clean up the mess.

But the problems are rooted deeper than the gaffe with the L.A. guys. It would be shortsighted to blame outsiders who simply exploited our gullibility and ignored our own shortcomings. A lot of people believed all our troubles would be solved when the new TAT governor cancelled the contract with FFM in late 2006 and asked Kriangsak and The Nation to temporarily help run the 2007 festival: what a crazy twist, the same man running two competing festivals – it could only happen in Thailand. Yet to have ousted the American and put our own man in charge is not to scratch exact-
ly where you itch. It is the right move, of course, but there are other factors that need to be put into the equation.

A movie festival should spring from the collective enthusiasm of audiences, film professionals and the government. The shaky Thai film industry, the different factions, cliques and vested interests, and chiefly the fact that the mainstream industry looks down on independent and ‘arthouse’ filmmakers – these do not constitute a healthy foundation for a solid, expandable film festival. The audience base, too, needs to be broadened to ensure long-term, sustained activities of the festival. Most importantly, the government must realise that they cannot ‘buy’ a successful movie fest. This implies a larger idea of our country’s cultural policy and the role the movies should play in a developing nation struggling to reconcile economic necessity, social values and cultural growth of its people.

Opposition has long demurred that a tourism board is not an ideal host of a movie festival. While that’s a difficult point to argue with, it would be particularly tricky for Thailand were BKKIFF transferred to the supervision of a cultural agency, namely the Culture Ministry, known for its conservative attitude and, in certain cases, narrow-mindedness. Without being pessimistic, we can foresee other complications – notably censorship – should the festival be run by the self-styled Thai cultural watchdogs. Thus an alternative must be found. One possible way is for the City of Bangkok to play host, and maybe portions of the finance can come from private sponsors. No structural shake-up, however, seemed likely in the lead up to the 2008 edition, and the TAT looked set to continue to chair the event.

The bribery scandal may have exposed a few corrupt bureaucrats. But beyond that surface crime it also exposes catastrophic consequences of misguided government policies, and perhaps the ease with which greed can exploit the enthusiasm to embrace ‘the culture’. There is hope, nevertheless, in the existing Thai Short Film and Video Festival and the World Film Festival of Bangkok. As for BKKIFF, lessons have been learned – hard lessons – and hopefully what happened also means the opportunity for a fresh start. It’s important to have faith. Things will get better, I’m certain, because it couldn’t possibly get any worse than this.