

COLD WAR RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE RISE OF THE CINEMA HALL

In the 1960s and '70s, while the Vietnam War was raging to the east of Thailand and a communist movement was growing domestically, the difficult-to-access wilds of rural Nan province became a safe haven for both Thai and Lao communists. The area's historical disconnection from the rest of the country and proximity to Laos made the Bangkok political establishment wary of the potential for Nan to develop into a communist training ground. As the Vietnam War came to a close in 1975, with newly established communist governments sweeping to power in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, refugees fled across the porous Thai-Lao border with many coming into Nan province. They were seen by the Thai government as a further threat to national security.

Fear of an insurgency in Nan spurred the activation of road construction projects into the hinterlands during the 1970s. It was believed that bringing the largely rural population of Nan under the veil of the modern, national economy would prevent insurgents – both homegrown and foreign – from building a support base there.

Engineering firms from far and wide were awarded contracts to build roads and other infrastructure projects. In 1976, a young civil engineer named Pornsak Anugkawanit was hired by the Italian-Thai Company to help in a road-construction project designed to link some of the more remote districts of Nan to the national road network. Pornsak, a native of Phuket province, had spent very little time in the north but, as he settled in for a prolonged period of work in the Pua district of Nan, he quickly adjusted to northern culture. Pornsak met a local girl named Surang, the daughter of Chinese-born merchant parents and operators of an old wooden movie theatre. Soon thereafter, Pornsak and Surang were married, settling down in Pua town for the duration of the road-construction project. When the project was complete and Pornsak's contract with the Italian-Thai Company had been fulfilled, the couple turned their attention to the movie theatre run by Surang's family. The young couple predicted that the completed road system would enable agricultural products from the surrounding countryside to quickly reach the national market and beyond, bringing prosperity to the area. With that in mind, in 1979, they invested the savings

Pornsak had amassed while working for the Italian-Thai Company in the construction of a brick-and-cement movie theatre near the centre of the town, just a few hundred metres from the road Pornsak had helped engineer. They named the theatre after the town it stood in and the Pua Rama was born.

Most of Pua, and indeed the rest of rural Thailand, did not yet have access to private televisions and movie theatres were one of the few places people could go to for modern entertainment. As such, Pornsak and Surang created one of the most popular venues in town. Throughout most of the 1980s their theatre was hugely successful. Each night it was packed with people who came to watch movies from as far away as remote Bo Klua district. Residents of the town and nearby villages made the Pua Rama their go-to place for entertainment. On weekends and national holidays, the turn-out was so high that the theatre sold standing-room only tickets.

By the early 1990s, however, just a little over ten years after it opened, Pornsak and Surang saw sharp declines in theatre attendance. Household electrification and the accompanying growth of home entertainment technology had become available in Pua and what was once a night at the movies for a typical family turned into a night at home in front of the TV. Despite lagging ticket sales, they held on through most of the 1990s. They lowered ticket prices and began running double features to attract customers but nothing seemed to work. The population of small towns like Pua was diminishing; an unintended consequence of the stronger market integration made possible by the construction of the road networks.

In 1997, the Asian financial crisis struck Thailand. Many banks across the country saw major defaults on loan payments, leaving them cash strapped and unable to dispense further loans. This caused a ripple effect across the country and small businesses suffered, the Pua Rama among them. Pornsak and Surang held on for another two years before showing their last movie at the Pua Rama in 1999.

The Pua Rama theatre in Pua, Nan province, was built in 1979 and closed in 1999.

