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# Constructing Moral Authority in Rural Thailand: Banharn Silpa-archa's Non-violent War on Drugs

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Politicians, like any other human beings, have different faces. These faces can be poles apart. The late Ferdinand Marcos is widely regarded as a corrupt dictator who plundered the Philippine state, but the people in his home region of Ilocos still fondly remember him as “the best leader the Philippines ever had” (*Asiaweek*, 2 June 1995, p. 80), a person who “approximated their concept of a true leader” (Zialcita, 1991, p. 274). Similarly, universally condemned Burmese military leaders actually enjoy legitimacy in some villages (Thawngmung, 2003). Beyond Southeast Asia, President Trujillo of the Dominican Republic, a tyrant notorious for his repression, was a hero of the peasants (Turits, 2003). These accounts indicate the difficulty of pigeonholing politicians one way or the other. Banharn Silpa-archa of Thailand, the subject of this paper, is another such politician.

Banharn (b.1932) has been a Member of Parliament (MP) from the agrarian province of Suphanburi, situated about one hundred kilometres north of Bangkok, since 1976. Since 1994, he has been the leader of the Chart Thai (CT) Party, one of the oldest parties in Thailand. In 1995–96 he even served as prime minister. In his seemingly illustrious political career, however, he has been implicated in numerous corruption scandals. His (and other politicians') misuse of office was allegedly so egregious that the military used it as a pretext for ousting the civilian government in 1991. His short-lived administration and its bungling of financial policies are also believed to have contributed to the economic crisis of 1997. Most scholars and journalists therefore depict him as one of the debased provincial strongmen whose rise to power in post-1973 Thailand has hampered sound democratic governance. He is typically labelled an “old-style politician” who stays in power by resorting to vote-buying, patronage, or pork barrelling (see *FEER*, 17 August 1995, p. 38; Ockey, 1996, p. 353; 2001; 2004; Murray, 1996, p. 371, p. 373; Robertson, 1996, pp. 924–25). In Suphanburi, however, Banharn commands a great deal of support and respect. As but one reflection of this support, he has won landslide victories in all elections he has contested thus far, receiving 60–94 per cent

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of the vote. Many villagers I met during my fieldwork in 1999–2002 and 2004 even called him the caring “father” of their province [*pho Muang*]. The seemingly suspicious election results can actually be seen as the manifestation of the moral authority that many Suphanburians confer on him.

The question is “why”. Why do Suphanburians view someone who is seen as a nefarious villain by Bangkokians as their morally correct leader? How has Banharn constructed his authority in Suphanburi? This paper explores one answer. I argue that Banharn’s moral authority derives, in good part, from his non-violent campaign against illegal drugs, especially highly addictive methamphetamine pills or *yaa baa* [literally “crazy drugs”]. The use of *yaa baa* has become a very serious social problem for Thailand in the past decade. To tackle this problem, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–06) declared a violent and heavily criticised war on drugs on 1 February 2003. In the ensuing three months, an estimated 2,500 people were summarily executed by the police without due legal process. Undeterred by criticism, Thaksin carried out another round of drug-busting operations in 2004 (Pasuk and Baker, 2004, pp. 158–62; McCargo and Ukrist, 2005, pp. 226–27, p. 245; *FEER*, 13 March 2003, p. 18). In contrast, Banharn has adhered to non-violent means of drug suppression in Suphanburi.

Specifically, my discussion will focus on the so-called “Good Youth of Suphan” Project [*khrongkan yawachon khon dee sri Suphan*], a province-wide project inaugurated by Banharn in 1997 to nurture young people of good character, particularly to fight drug use among Suphanburi’s youth. To further this project, Banharn has held a number of village-level ceremonies, in which he preaches directly to young people on the need to shun all sorts of illegal drugs including *yaa baa*. He thus plays an important role in cultivating social norms against drugs, which many villagers appreciate. His moral authority has been constructed through such ceremonies, which project him in the image of a paternalistic MP deeply concerned about the welfare of villagers. While Bangkok-based or Western scholars and journalists construct him as a “dirty” provincial boss, ordinary Suphanburians see a contrasting “virtuous” side of him. This paper aims to shed light on that side, which remains hidden or stifled in the media and academic accounts.

I do not argue, however, that the side of Banharn seen by Suphanburians is his *true* side. I disavow such an essentialist position. I take the view that what we assume to be objective “reality” or “truth” (beyond basic indisputable facts) is actually a socially constructed artifact (Foucault, 1972; 1973; 1980; Searle, 1995). For the same epistemological reason, it is a serious mistake to argue, as Banharn’s detractors might, that Suphanburians have been brainwashed by Banharn, who is *essentially* a depraved politician. What I want to do is to show how the positive *image* of Banharn has been formed in the eyes and minds of Suphanburians via the medium of the Good Youth of Suphan project.

The first section of this paper briefly discusses the emergence of *yaa baa* as a serious social problem in contemporary Thailand, and also outlines Banharn’s background. This establishes the historical context for the second section, in which I discuss the circumstances under which Banharn launched the Good Youth of Suphan project. The third section focuses on one village-level ceremony as an illustration of how Banharn has implemented the project. I then explore the significance of the ceremony for the construction of social norms and the legitimization of his authority at the local level. The analysis here draws on my direct observation of the ceremony, supplemented by my open-ended interviews with the villagers who attended this ceremony. I conclude by reflecting

briefly on the implications of my argument for the literature on provincial Thai politics. This paper is not intended, however, as a comprehensive study of drug suppression in Suphanburi, much less in Thailand.

### Historical Background

Drugs have been a deeply ingrained part of Thai history. Opium production was even legal for a long period. Its legalisation dates to 1855, when England signed the Bowring Treaty with Siam (Suehiro, 1989, p. 20, p. 72). Subsequently, opium production became one of the largest sources of state revenue (18 per cent in 1926). In 1955, then Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram promised to abolish the sale of opium by 1956, but was later forced to postpone its abolition because he was unable to find an alternative source of revenue (Ingram, 1971, pp. 177–78, pp. 186–87; Batson, 1984, p. 90, p. 120; Thak, 1974, pp. 109–110, p. 259).

It was not until July 1959 that Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat outlawed opium production and started to crack down on its producers and traders nationwide (McCoy, 1991, p. 190). Suphanburi became the target of such clampdowns, as exemplified by a series of police raids on opium dens in the 1960s and 1970s (*KS*, 5 and 15 November 1963; 10 June and 1 September 1964; 25 April and 30 July 1967; 20 June, 30 July and 20 September 1968; 10 August and 10 November 1971; 10 June 1976). The use of opium (and heroin) rapidly declined among the Thai population in subsequent years. Opium cultivation did continue – and actually flourished – in the border areas of northern Thailand, especially during the Vietnam War, but the main market moved overseas (see McCoy, 1991, p. 413 for details).

In the 1980s, however, another type of drug, one that is cheaper and more accessible, appeared. It was *yaa baa*. Smuggled mainly from Burma, the drug spread throughout Thailand in the early 1990s. According to one study, almost 260,000 people had become *yaa baa* users by 1993. By 2000, the figure had increased to 1.2 million (Chouvy and Meissonnier, 2004, p. 25; see also Pasuk, Sungsidh and Nualnoi, 1998, pp. 100–05). While formerly taken largely by farmers and long-distance truck drivers to reduce fatigue or sleepiness, the drug is no longer associated mainly with people of any particular occupation or social class. Especially alarming is the fact that a growing number of young students have turned to the drug to keep them awake while they cram for competitive entrance exams or simply for fun. By 1995 more than 70,000 students had reportedly become *yaa baa* users (*BP*, 18 August 1995, p. 6). The result is a higher incidence of crimes, violent brawls and accidents caused by drug users and dealers. It is against this background that Thaksin's widely publicised and violent crack-down on drugs took place.

Suphanburi is one of the provinces affected by *yaa baa*. According to one report, on the eve of Thaksin's anti-drugs operation there were 1,318 *yaa baa* traffickers in Suphanburi (*KS*, 16 March 2003, p. 9). Another report contended that a disturbing 11 per cent of 12,674 households in the Sri Prachan district of Suphanburi had at least one family member involved in some kind of drug-related activity (*KS*, 1 December 2002, p. 1). There was also a rumour that a number of students at Kanasoot and Sa-nguan Ying Schools – two of the most prestigious secondary schools in Suphanburi – were hooked on *yaa baa* (interviews with merchants in Suphanburi, 2002). In one nationally publicised case that dramatised the *yaa baa* problem in Suphanburi, six drug dealers

took three civilians hostage on 26 November 1996. This prompted Police General Salang Bunnag, Thailand's "Dirty Harry", to come to the scene and execute the six drug dealers on the spot in the presence of a media crew (*FEER*, 27 August 1998, p. 28; *Asiaweek*, 8 January 1999, pp. 34–37). These developments were cause for serious concern for many Suphanburians. Banharn was just one of them (see *BP*, 18 August 1995, p. 6; 20 August 1995, p. 4).

Banharn was born into a middle-class immigrant Chinese family in the provincial capital of Suphanburi in 1932. His father, Saeng Kim Be, made a living as a merchant dealing in daily consumables. Interestingly, some time after Banharn's birth, Saeng Kim won a public bid to acquire ownership of a plant for processing opium, which was legal at the time (*Krungthep Thurakij Sutsabda*, 29 February–6 March 1992, p. 11). By the time Sarit came to power in 1957, however, Saeng Kim had passed away and his opium-processing plant had been closed down. The Silpa-archa family, including Banharn, has had nothing to do with drugs since that time. Banharn moved to Bangkok in 1949, and a construction company (named Saha Srichai) he founded there in 1953 grew so rapidly (DBD/MC Bangkok Company File No. 3893) that he and his family did not need to rely on the now illegal processing of opium at the risk of running foul of the police. He has thus made his wealth in "legitimate" business with (rather than against or outside) the state. Unlike some other provincial barons such as Narong Wongwan of Phrae (Pasuk and Sunghsidh, 1996, pp. 55–73), Banharn has never been involved in the underground drug trade.

In fact, Banharn has taken a very critical view of illegal drugs. Like many other conservatives of his generation, he saw the phenomenon of drug use as reflecting the deplorable erosion of "good old" Thai values in the process of rapid modernisation. In his own words, "Thailand's continuous development has changed its economy and society so much. Especially, the material aspect of change has been great. But at the same time, our society has accumulated problems. Ethics and other good things that used to be part of Thai society have disappeared" (POS, 2002a, 1:3). The most serious manifestation of this change is the use of *yaa baa* among the youth, which, as Banharn put it, is "a big and worrisome problem . . . which threatens our society" (*KS*, 16 April 1999, p. 9). He therefore took a serious interest in tackling the *yaa baa* epidemic to preserve or restore the fabric of "good Thai" society.<sup>1</sup>

Thaksin probably shared Banharn's perception. The crucial difference, however, is the *means* of dealing with the problem. Banharn did not adopt the violent solution that Thaksin did. The CT Party, of which Banharn is the leader, joined Thaksin's coalition government in 2001–05, but that does not mean that he supported Thaksin's policy. He has chosen to conduct a peaceful anti-drug campaign in Suphanburi. In fact, the campaign began in 1997, four years before Thaksin came to power. The centrepiece of that campaign is the "Good Youth of Suphan" project, which I discuss below.

### Initiating the "Good Youth of Suphan" Project

The genesis of the Good Youth of Suphan project dates to 1995, when then Prime Minister Banharn drew up the eighth National Economic and Social Development (NESDB) Plan (1997–2001), which proposed a new dual approach to development. One aspect was "the development of people" [*phatthana khon*]. This approach reflected the concern of Banharn – as well as many intellectuals and Buddhist monks – about the growing

decadence of Thai society caused by the excessive pursuit of wealth. There was an emerging consensus that economic or material development must be accompanied by “human development”, the target of which was youth. As Banharn put it tersely, “In order to develop people . . . , we must start with children and youth” (*KS*, 16 April 1999, p. 9). The other approach stressed “[local] community development” [*phattana chumchon*], reflecting popular recognition that the cultural and social basis of local communities was being endangered in the age of globalisation (see, for example, Hewison, 2002, pp. 143–162; Johnson, 2001; Seri, 1993; *BP*, 22 April 1996, p. 4). These two approaches were interrelated: to build a sound local community, youth of good character must be cultivated, and vice versa. The NESDB plan that incorporated these aims was approved by Banharn’s cabinet in November 1996 (*POS*, 2000, p. 1; NESDB, 1997).

Subsequently, Banharn had NESDB pick Suphanburi as “the pilot province” [*jangwat namrong*] for Thailand’s first community-based youth development project. Thus introduced into Suphanburi, the project was called the “Good Youth of Suphan” project. It was officially inaugurated on 1 November 1997 (*POS*, 2000, p. 1; *KS*, 16 October 1997, p. 1). The project aims to encourage young Suphanburians to observe the following eleven principles of everyday conduct (*POS*, 2000, p. 2):

- maintain cleanliness of bodies, houses, and communities
- cooperate in preserving the environment
- lead a democratic way of life
- be frugal and patriotic to Thailand
- observe religious precepts
- observe Thai manners
- observe traffic rules
- be punctual
- line up to receive various kinds of services
- observe school rules and regulations
- stay away from drugs.

Most of these principles are typical of the highly didactic discourse that saturates public life in Thailand.<sup>2</sup> But the last point is quite serious. In fact, it is the most important aim of the Good Youth of Suphan project. For most villagers, the project and Banharn’s anti-drug campaign are synonymous.

Banharn has put an enormous amount of energy into this project from the beginning. In his words, “If this project doesn’t succeed in Suphanburi, it won’t succeed in any other province”. He has therefore “urged everyone and every civil service office to cooperate together in building our children and youth for Suphanburi’s historical honour” (*POS*, 2002a, 1:3). Initially, the project was implemented in the central district of Muang alone, but in July 2000 it was extended to the other nine districts (*SP*, 1 April 1999, p. 1; *KS*, 1 July 2000, p. 1, p. 10; 1 June 2000, p. 1, p. 10). Since October 2001, Banharn has further expanded the target to include all 110 sub-districts and 986 villages of Suphanburi in his belief that “every sub-district and every village needs to be ears and eyes” [*pen huu pen ta*] to eliminate drug use among the youth. The project also targets all 494 schools at all levels in Suphanburi (*KS*, 1 February 2003, p. 7; 16 March 2003, p. 9). Thus, no district, sub-district, village or school is excluded from the scope of the Good Youth of Suphan project.

### “Good Youth of Suphan” Ceremony

The Good Youth of Suphan project basically aims to build and spread social norms against illegal drugs. In industrialised countries, TV and newspapers play an important role in cultivating and disseminating such norms. These media, however, are absent or ineffective in rural Thailand including Suphanburi. Even though almost every household now has a TV set, all broadcasting stations in Thailand are based in Bangkok and are not interested in covering purely local news, such as the Good Youth of Suphan project. Provincial newspapers, such as *Khon Suphan*, carry local news, but their readership is limited mainly to the middle class in district towns. Banharn is thus “handicapped” in propagating his anti-drugs campaign throughout Suphanburi. He therefore needs to rely on alternative methods.

The principal means he has employed is the village-level ceremony. He pays personal visits to various villages throughout Suphanburi to preside over a ceremony in the name of the Good Youth of Suphan project. A sizeable number of villagers, typically 200–300, attend each ceremony, and Banharn talks directly to them about the need to stay away from illicit drugs. As Bowie (1997), Cohn (1999), Durkheim (1974), Handler (1988) and Lukes (1975) have shown, ceremonies serve as effective and vital means of political communication and socialisation. The Good Youth of Suphan ceremonies are no exception. They enable Banharn to exercise, exhibit and impress his moral leadership as an advocate against *yaa baa* in face-to-face settings. If a politician’s authority consists of images or impressions (Edelman, 1976; 1988; Goffman, 1959), the Good Youth of Suphan ceremonies help Banharn create an image or impression that is highly favourable to him.

Given the constraints on his time, however, Banharn cannot organise frequent ceremonies on his own. He therefore needs to rely on what Geertz calls “impresarios, directors . . . the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience” (1980, p. 13). These roles are played by local bureaucrats who are dependent on Banharn for promotion and state funds. As one of the most senior politicians in Thailand and the leader of the CT Party, Banharn has held a number of key cabinet posts, and these posts have enabled him to build a pyramid of local bureaucratic clients, whom he can activate to render many services on his behalf (see Nishizaki, 2006 for details). One such service is to organise Good Youth of Suphan ceremonies. His clients comply, willingly or unwillingly, to maximise their chances of obtaining promotion and state funds. These clients make up what might be called a system of ceremony production: they serve as vital organisers and attendees of ceremonies that display and advertise Banharn’s moral authority in fighting *yaa baa* on the stage of the provincial “theatre state”.

An illustrative case is a Good Youth of Suphan ceremony held on 1 April 2002 in Bang Pla Mor village of Don Kam Yarn sub-district, Muang district. The village had a population of 1,026 people (265 households), most of whom are descendants of migrants from Laos. They are mainly engaged in agriculture, especially rice farming. The ceremony was one of the largest events held in the village in 2002. For many villagers, it provided the first opportunity to see Banharn, former prime minister, firsthand.

More than a hundred local civil servants, ranging from top-echelon provincial-level civil servants down to village-level leaders, played a part in organising this ceremony. Among the most important were:

- Wiphat Khongmalai, Governor
- Withaya Suwachananon, Assistant Governor

- Adul Woraeksiri, Chief of the Provincial Office of Education (POE)
- Songruet Phimpho, Chief of Muang District
- Samnao Yuyaem, Chief of Don Kam Yarn sub-district.

These people drew up a detailed program and distributed it to relevant civil service offices and Bang Pla Mor villagers to attract the maximum audience. They also erected a big public signboard thanking Banham for his role in community development (Figures 1–2). They also reportedly spent “many sleepless nights” preparing for and rehearsing the ceremony (*SP*, 1 and 16 April 2002; *POS*, 2002a, 1:6). Adul played a particularly important role. In a meeting held on 7 March 2002 with all schoolmasters in Suphanburi, he urged them to take part in the ceremony. In addition, he coordinated with Assistant Governor Withaya to request that village heads in Suphanburi attend the ceremony as observers. He also took an active part in the rehearsals (*SP*, 16 March 2002, p. 3; 1 April 2002, p. 3; *POS*, 2002a, 1:6). By ensuring the success of the ceremony, Adul sought to repay Banham for all the appointments he had been given. He had been

PROGRAMME	
Inspection of Good Youth of Suphan Village Project by H.E. Banham Silpa-archa, 21 <sup>st</sup> Prime Minister and his entourage. 1 April 2002	
Venue: Sub-district Administration of Don Kam Yarn, Muang District, Suphanburi *****	
08:30	- Kamnan, village heads, young people, ordinary people, and representatives of civil service get together at sub-district Administration of Don Kam Yarn
09:30	- H.E. Banham Silpa-archa and his entourage arrive at sub-district Administration of Don Kam Yarn
	- Representative of villagers wraps a cloth around H.E. Banham Silpa-archa's waist
	- Villagers form a procession to welcome [Banham]
	- H.E. Banham Silpa-archa pays respect to the abbot of Bang Pla Mor temple and makes religious offerings
	- Master of ceremonies introduces herself and asks for permission to proceed with the ceremony
	- District Chief of Muang gives an address
	- Youth and villagers perform “Good Youth of Suphan” song
	- Master of ceremonies invites H.E. Banham Silpa-archa and his entourage to step onto stage
	- Representatives of youth and villagers report on the progress of carrying out Good Youth of Suphan Village-level Project
	- H.E. Banham Silpa-archa and his entourage ask questions and sum up their inspection.
	- [Banham and his entourage] watch a cultural dance, <i>Song Fang</i> , performed by Bang Pla Mor villagers
	- Representatives of villagers perform <i>isew</i> to thank H.E. Banham Silpa-archa
	- H.E. Banham Silpa-archa presides over a ceremony for releasing fish
11:30	- [Banham and his entourage] visit five houses in accordance with the Good Youth of Suphan project
	- [Banham and his entourage] inspect the activities of Good Youth of Suphan project
12:00	- Participants have lunch together at Don Kam Yarn Sub-district Administration
	- [Banham and his entourage] watch a video showing the lifestyles of villagers who act in accordance with the Good Youth of Suphan Village Project
13:00	- [Banham and his entourage] leave

**Figure 1.** A Good Youth of Suphan Ceremony Program. *Source:* Leaflet obtained from a villager





Figure 2. A signboard thanking Banharn for promoting community development

appointed assistant to POE Chief of Suphanburi in 1989. Furthermore, in the late 1990s Banharn, using his stronghold over the Education Ministry,<sup>3</sup> appointed Adul as POE Chief in Nakhon Phanom and Petchaburi provinces. Adul was then appointed POE Chief of Suphanburi in January 2002, just three months before the ceremony in Bang Pla Mor (POS, 2002a, 1:8; *SP*, 16 April 2002, p. 3).

By 8:10 am on the day of the ceremony, more than an hour before Banharn's scheduled arrival, quite a few villagers, not to mention local civil servants, teachers and policemen in charge of organising the ceremony, had arrived. The villagers included schoolchildren and their parents. Old and young, men and women were all well represented. Eventually, about 300 villagers, or some 30 per cent of the village population, turned out. Attendance was completely voluntary. The village head had simply informed his people of the ceremony's time and venue. He had encouraged their attendance, but did not force it. Furthermore, contrary to what some scholars might suspect, the villagers were not paid to participate in the ceremony. One villager laughed at me when I asked if any attendee was receiving financial remuneration. He said emphatically: "We are here because we want to be, because it is important to fight the *yaa baa* problem together". The villagers attended the ceremony of their own volition because they agreed with Banharn's cause.

Banharn arrived at 9:30 am, as scheduled. As he got out of his minivan,<sup>4</sup> a horde of provincial authorities flocked around him with a submissive *wai*, a Thai-style gesture of holding hands together to pay respect. Samnao, on behalf of Ban Pla Mor's villagers, wrapped a traditional folk cloth around Banharn's waist in accordance with the program. Banharn's entry into the ceremony venue was preceded and dramatised by a procession of colourfully dressed young boys and girls performing a folk dance. As Banharn followed, villagers and civil servants, who had lined up, greeted him with smiles and deep respectful *wais*. Banharn was followed by his wife Jaemsai, his daughter Kanchana, Som Phahoromrot (a Suphanburi-born NESDB official), Prasert Changchu (director of the National Board of Promoting and Coordinating Youth Activities), and other high-ranking civil servants, including Governor Wiphat. As Banharn appeared at the ceremony venue, some fifty students dispatched from the nearby Wat Niwet Thammaram Primary School played and sang a song to welcome him, while other villagers clapped their hands. This created a highly energised atmosphere (Figures 3–7).



**Figure 3.** Civil servants and villagers line up to welcome Banharn



**Figure 4.** Schoolchildren lead Banharn into the ceremony venue while performing a folk dance. His minivan can be seen in the background



**Figure 5.** Banharn walks into the ceremony venue



**Figure 6.** Schoolchildren holding musical instruments wait for Banharn's arrival. Seated behind them are other Bang Pla Mor villagers

Chusak Kunlathap, superintendent of Anuban School, the largest primary school in Suphanburi, orchestrated the students' performance. Two months earlier (on 30 January), Banharn had held a Good Youth of Suphan ceremony at this school, and Chusak had served as the master of ceremonies (MC). Because of this recent experience, Chusak was now called in to ensure the smooth execution of the ceremony in Bang Pla Mor (*KS*, 16 February 2002, p. 4). He gladly accepted the invitation to repay Banharn for his current post. He was previously the principal of a much smaller school in Suan Taeng, a rural sub-district located 20 kilometres from the provincial capital. But in 1993 he was transferred to Anuban School, thanks to the good offices of Somchai Sujit, Suphanburi's foremost capitalist, whose mother Hansa is the half sister of Banharn's wife Jaemsai.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, in 1997–98 Banharn allocated state funds of three million baht to Anuban School for constructing a multi-purpose building (interviews with Chusak's acquaintances, April 2000 and May 2002).



**Figure 7.** Upon Banharn's arrival, schoolchildren stand up to sing and play music



**Figure 8.** A schoolteacher addresses Banharn and the audience

Banharn took a seat on the large sofa that had been set up in the front row – a seating arrangement that vividly symbolised the power hierarchy among the participants. The MC, a female teacher dispatched from the aforementioned Sa-nguan Ying School, then gave a keynote speech (Figure 8). Banharn had channelled construction funds of over 16.5 million baht into this school from the Education Ministry between 1990 and 1997 (BB, 1989, p. 499; 1991, p. 468; 1996b, pp. 2–220). Sending a representative to the ceremony as MC was an expression of Sa-nguan Ying’s institutional gratitude to Banharn for the funds. The MC’s speech was followed by a speech by Songruet, Muang District Chief. Both speeches focused on the danger of *yaa baa* and trumpeted the determination of Bang Pla Mor villagers to stamp out *yaa baa*. Songruet even declared that “there is not a single person [in the village] who produces, sells, or is addicted to *yaa baa*” because Bang Pla Mor is “a good village” where “every villager is well disciplined to observe the law and rules strictly”.<sup>6</sup> This may have been an exaggeration, but Songruet’s speech discursively pushed *yaa baa* users or traders, if any existed, into the category of socially deviant outsiders who have no place in “a good village”, while simultaneously upholding the social norm of repudiating drugs.

After these speeches, some thirty local schoolchildren, aged from seven to fifteen and all wearing white T-shirts bearing the words “Good Youth of Suphan”, appeared and began dancing briskly to the tune of “Good Youth of Suphan Song” – an extremely lively song composed by Ad Carabao, a nationally famous Suphanburi-born singer.<sup>7</sup> The words of the song recounted the eleven principles of moral conduct that Suphanburi’s youth are supposed to observe (Figures 9–10). Thoroughly energised, the audience clapped along to the upbeat music. Teachers from Nathasin Dramatic Arts College, a college established by Banharn in 1991, had rehearsed this dance several times (*SP*, 1 April 2002, 4). Their services were given in recognition of over 481 million baht in state funds that Banharn had channelled into their college between 1991 and 1999 (BB, 1991, pp. 430–31; 1992, pp. 469–71; 1993, pp. 524–27; 1994, p. 589; 1995, p. 432; 1996a, pp. 601–02, p. 607, p. 611; 1997, pp. 204–05; 1998, pp. 161–62; Nathasin Dramatic Arts College, n.d., pp. 75–77).

After the dance came the main part of the ceremony. Banharn, along with other officials, stepped onto a beautifully decorated stage that trumpeted the purpose of Banharn’s visit on



**Figure 9.** Schoolchildren dance to the tune of a Good Youth of Suphan song

the wall. Seated on stage, he faced a handful of selected local school children. Speaking into a microphone, he asked them, with a stern look and in a highly authoritative tone of voice, about the Good Youth of Suphan project (Figure 11). The atmosphere became tense, and the attention of the audience was riveted on Banharn. Placing utmost emphasis on the anti-drug objective of the project, he asked one girl, “Why is *yaa baa* bad? Why is it necessary to avoid it?” The student, looking nervous and awe-struck in the presence of a former prime minister, answered: “Because it destroys our Thai society and culture, which have been bequeathed from generation to generation. We must therefore resist it in every way we can”. Banharn continued: “What would you do if you saw your classmate taking *yaa baa*?” The student replied: “I would tell him to stop and to think about his parents who have brought him up. I would also call on my friends to help persuade him to stop using the drug”. Satisfied, Banharn asked another student, “Have you seen the drug?” The student gave the emphatic reply: “No, I have never touched it, and I never



**Figure 10.** Banharn, seated in the centre and flanked by his wife Jaemsai and Governor Wiphat, watches schoolchildren perform



**Figure 11.** Banharn, seated in the centre of the left table, asks students about the objectives of the Good Youth of Suphan project

will". Banharn said firmly, "Very good. I want you all to stay that way". While generally serious in tone, the session was enlivened by Banharn's occasional, impromptu gags. For instance, when one pretty girl gave a well-articulated answer to his question, he said excitedly: "What's your name? Where do you live? Could you tell me? I want to come and visit you at your home someday". This aggressive "courtship" of the young girl by a former prime minister drew loud spontaneous laughter from the audience. Such off-the-cuff, light-hearted antics effectively drew the audience even further into the otherwise solemn session.

The students on stage probably knew or could guess what Banharn would ask, so they had prepared satisfactory answers beforehand. The significance of the session, however, is that through the very act of preparing and publicly reciting the model answers that played up the evil nature of *yaa baa* and their individual and collective responsibility to root out the drug, the students absorbed these prescriptive values more deeply than before. They also realised how serious Banharn was about the *yaa baa* problem. The session conveyed the same message to the audience by using language that everybody could understand. Absolutely no pompous language was used (see below for elaboration).

This serious question-and-answer session, which lasted for nearly an hour, was followed by the performance of two very lively, traditional folk dances called *song fang* and *isew* – dances which, again, had been rehearsed by Nathasin Dramatic Arts College teachers. These dances had little to do with the Good Youth of Suphan project per se. They were simply meant as entertainment. Known as "fun-loving" [*sanuk*] people, Thais believe, as one guidebook aptly describes, that "anything worth doing ... should have an element of *sanuk*. ... Nothing condemns an activity more than the description *mai sanuk* or 'not fun'" (Cumings, 2003, p. 43). Therefore, even seemingly serious ceremonies incorporate fun activities (see Bowie, 1997, p. 20, p. 23, pp. 198–99). These two dances were good examples. And they were immensely successful. In particular, the second dance, *isew*, commanded the attention of the audience, as fifteen dancers, both adults and children, dressed in strikingly colourful clothes, moved their hands and feet vigorously in time to the tempo of bubbly music. The centre of attention was a



**Figure 12.** Villagers perform a local folk dance, *song fang*

female singer who, in a comical, animated, and resounding tone of voice (which is one prominent feature of *isew*), sang a song that praised Banham's contributions to making Suphanburi "a better place to live" (Figures 12–13). The villagers in the audience clapped their hands loudly in obvious appreciation. "Fun" was an extremely effective tool for generating an air of village unity behind the cause of fighting *yaa baa*.

Soon after these dances, the ceremony, which had lasted for over two hours, came to an end, and the villagers returned home after thanking Banham. Banham then proceeded to have lunch.<sup>8</sup>

### *Discussion*

Cynics might interpret this ceremony as a populist gimmick to win votes. I do not deny this entirely. Politicians everywhere are always interested in getting reelected, and none of



**Figure 13.** Villagers perform another local folk dance, *isew*. The woman with the microphone is the lead singer

them invest much time in doing anything that is not politically useful to them. But there was actually a lot more to this ceremony. When considered against the backdrop of growing *yaa baa* prevalence, which deeply concerns Bang Pla Mor villagers, the ceremony performed a significant social function: it served as an occasion on which the villagers affirmed and reaffirmed social norms against having anything to do with *yaa baa* either as consumers or traffickers.

Two factors contributed to this process. First, the ceremony mobilised a sizeable number of villagers. It provided a rare opportunity for these villagers to get together in one place. Through the collective and simultaneous acts of watching, listening, reciting, singing, dancing, laughing, clapping hands and simply sitting together (through what they may have considered long, boring speeches), the villagers reconfirmed their common membership in the village community. It is through engaging in such common activities, which were all carried out in the name of fighting the use of *yaa baa*, that a social norm against the drug came to be nurtured and strengthened. The participants may not have needed the ceremony to understand the dangers of *yaa baa*, but it helped collectivise or elevate what may have been a value or belief at the individual level to the status of a *social* norm to which all villagers must adhere. Staying away from *yaa baa* was turned, through the felicitous use of pomp, solemnity, dramaturgy and entertainment, into a socially standardised behaviour, in the presence of hundreds of people. Conversely, taking or trading in the drug was illegitimated and stigmatised, by means of the same ceremony and its trappings, as a socially deviant and disapproved behaviour. The ceremony set clear moral boundaries delineating what is right and wrong. Participants could reaffirm that their private value was shared and embraced by hundreds of fellow villagers. They knew what to expect of others and what was expected of them by others. The ceremony thus reinforced mutual social expectations.

In all likelihood, drug users or traders in the village did not attend the ceremony. That, however, may have been the most powerful dimension of the ceremony. By excluding drug users and traders from a village-level activity, the ceremony symbolically transformed them into socially stigmatised, “abnormal” people and thereby passed what Foucault (1995, pp. 177–84) might call a “normalizing judgment” on the act of steering clear of unlawful drugs. If official ceremonies helped cultivate anti-communist and promonarchy norms in the 1970s (Bowie, 1997), a Good Youth of Suphan ceremony organised by Banharn can be called a ritual for building norms against illicit drugs.

The second factor that contributed to the formation of social norms was the physical presence of a large number of state authorities, ranging from Banharn, former prime minister, down to village heads. The fact that these prominent figures, many of whom the villagers had never seen before, took the trouble to come to their small village and were willing to invest three precious hours in propagating the aims of the Good Youth of Suphan project indicated that preventing the use of *yaa baa* was a serious *social* issue that concerned not simply individuals but the whole village community. Shunning illicit drugs was not a matter of individual choice but a collective responsibility or obligation on the part of villagers as a whole. To the extent that all the officials present embodied the otherwise invisible and amorphous “state”, the Good Youth of Suphan ceremony made a vivid spectacle of the state’s seriousness about eliminating *yaa baa* from Thai society. The “state” came to the Bang Pla Mor village, as it were, to remind its residents of what they were allowed or not allowed to do. The ceremony not only created and strengthened horizontal ties among the villagers around the anti-drug social norm; it



also symbolically incorporated them vertically into the orbit of the state that disapproved of any act related to illegal drugs.

The extent to which the ceremony produced its intended effect is hard to determine. Social norms are not amenable to easy quantification. It is also difficult to isolate the effect of the ceremony from the effect of Thaksin's violent suppression of drugs. Nonetheless, many Bang Pla Mor villagers firmly believed that Banharn's project was meaningful. In particular, parents who were alarmed about the widely reported use of *yaa baa* among young students were very appreciative of Banharn's initiative in holding the ceremony. One farmer brought her 10 year-old daughter to the ceremony. She said, referring to her elder sister in the neighbouring Chainat province: "Her [teenage] son is hanging out with bad friends. She is worried. In her village, there is no social activity of the sort we had. So the people lack the unity to solve the *yaa baa* problem. But in our village Banharn helped build that unity" (interview, 11 April 2002). From her serious expression, I believe she meant what she said. In other words, her "public transcript" reflected her inner belief (cf. Scott, 1990).

To the extent that the Good Youth of Suphan ceremony has helped build social norms against *yaa baa* in Bang Pla Mor, Banharn has taken credit for it. The ceremony cast him in the positive image of a caring leader who took the trouble to visit the small village out of his deep concern for the welfare of his people. He provided much-needed moral guidance at a time when the fabric of village society was being threatened by the evil of *yaa baa*. The fact that many Bang Pla Mor villagers look up to him as their moral leader derives, in no small part, from the image created by the Good Youth of Suphan ceremony. Just a few days after attending the ceremony, one of the participants, a 28 year-old man from a farming family, made a typical remark:

We are lucky to have Banharn as our leader. In some other provinces, members of parliament are the ones who are engaged in drug trading and distribute *yaa baa* among the population. But Banharn does what he can to solve the problem. He is like our father. What would Suphanburi be like without him? There would be more drug users for sure (interview, 3 April 2002).

Another participant, a middle-aged female farmer who comes from the Uthai Thani province but now lives in Bang Pla Mor, felt likewise:

None of the members of parliament in Uthai Thani holds a similar ceremony. They only say it's bad to take *yaa baa*. But in practice, they do nothing to solve the problem. They don't really care. Banharn does. He treats the people in Suphanburi as if they were his children. So he comes and meets us to make sure we won't do anything illegal. . . We need a leader who teaches us, especially the youth, about morals. If there were more leaders like him in Thailand, the *yaa baa* problem wouldn't be so serious (interview, 10 April 2002).

These comments underscore the points made by Edelman (1976; 1988) and Goffman (1959). Insofar as our perceptions of politicians consist of images or impressions created by the way they present themselves to us on the stage of public theatre, the Good Youth of Suphan ceremony was immensely instrumental in constructing, broadcasting and sanctifying Banharn as a morally correct, legitimate leader who pursues a socially

worthy project in earnest. His moral authority in Suphanburi is the result of elaborate dramaturgical acts organised, rehearsed and performed by a wide array of his clients, whom he can effectively mobilise on the strength of his appointive and budgetary power in the central state. The making of political authority is a thespian art, as Geertz (1980) and Thompson (1974) argued. Banharn's is no exception. In his works, Ockey classifies Thai politicians into two contrasting categories: those who display moral goodness [*phudi*], and those who display the negative characteristics of abrasive and law-breaking *nakleng* ["tough guys"]. Banharn is put in the latter category (1996, p. 353; 2004, pp. 1–21). Quite contrary to this categorisation, he actually appears as *phudi* in the village setting of Suphanburi, thanks (among other things) to the Good Youth of Suphan ceremony.

This point can be illustrated by how villagers in Bang Pla Mor (and elsewhere in Suphanburi) view Banharn's corruption. They are all well aware of the corruption scandals he has been implicated in, but they have no way of ascertaining the veracity of such "invisible" scandals in Bangkok, which are far removed from their own social context. They therefore reconcile the negative image of Banharn with the positive one they see firsthand by coming up with all sorts of (ad hoc) justifications or rationalisations – e.g. "That is what Bangkokians have made up", "He may do bad things in Bangkok, but in Suphanburi he does good for us", "Every politician is corrupt, so it's no big deal", "Nobody is perfect", and so on.

Urban middle-class people might attribute these viewpoints to the villagers' lack of education. The villagers, however, are actually no different from other human beings. Most people base their judgments on what they see, and dismiss, minimise or rationalise what they do not see, in ways that corroborate what they see. The villagers in Suphanburi are no exception. They embrace the image of Banharn as their virtuous leader because that is what they see. What they see is their "reality". Conversely, they remain agnostic about the opposite image of him as corrupt because they do not see it. They believe what they see, and they see what they believe – seeing is believing, and believing is seeing. The villagers' view of Banharn is based on this universal human proclivity, and has little to do with their lack of education.

Insofar as images or impressions are essential components of ideology, the Good Youth of Suphan ceremony can be seen as an effective social practice of establishing ideological domination for Banharn. While some scholars, such as Scott (1985) and Turton (1984), make a case for the limits of ideological domination in the countryside, my case study suggests otherwise. This raises the question: why does the good image of Banharn – a kind of "ruling idea" – take a strong ideational hold on the villagers in Suphanburi? The answer, I suggest, is two-fold. First, the image appeals to the shared concern of virtually all villagers about a serious and concrete social issue. If Banharn had tried to base his authority on abstract and high-sounding political notions or principles, such as democracy or transparency, he would enjoy less support. Second, Banharn's positive image is produced in face-to-face encounters with villagers at the micro level of society. He has not tried to impose this image by means of a top-down, impersonal propaganda war. Just as Keyes shows that local schools serve as micro-level spatial units for socialising villagers into the "proposed world" where the system of bureaucratic domination prevails (1991), the Good Youth of Suphan ceremony serves as a localised site for incorporating Suphanburi's villagers into the "proposed province" ruled by a morally correct leader. Banharn is not the only Thai leader to have made successful use of ceremony for ideological production. Siamese/Thai kings have historically done so (Bowie, 1997,

pp. 41–52; Peleggi, 2002). In this respect, Banharn is following the well-demonstrated pattern of establishing leadership in Thailand.

Bang Pla Mor is hardly the only place where Banharn has held a Good Youth of Suphan ceremony. By the end of 2006, he had held ceremonies in 45 other villages, scattered over all ten districts of Suphanburi. Some of these villages are located in the outlying corners of the province (data obtained from a civil servant in charge of the project, 13 December 2006). Thus, the positive image of Banharn as being in the vanguard of a peaceful war on *yaa baa* has spread to tens of thousands of people dispersed over a wide geographical area in Suphanburi.

This does not mean that Suphanburians were downright critical of Thaksin's violent suppression of *yaa baa*. The criticisms of human rights activists, intellectuals and journalists notwithstanding, many Suphanburians I talked to were actually supportive of, or at least willing to condone, Thaksin's draconian measures as necessary to deal with a problem as serious as *yaa baa*. The comments I often heard were: "They [those who were killed] had it coming", "It is their own fault", and "He warned them first". Indeed, Thaksin's clean-up operation brought immediate results. Within less than five weeks of his declaration of war on drugs, the provincial police of Suphanburi had arrested 622 drug traffickers, of whom 44 were killed. This figure represents nearly 47 per cent of the 1,318 drug traffickers who had operated in Suphanburi on the eve of Thaksin's operation (*KS*, 16 March 2003, p. 9). Many Suphanburians, including the local print media, praised this result. At the same time, however, these people favour a more peaceful policy in the long run. As devout Buddhists, they were repulsed by the bloodshed that resulted from Thaksin's ruthless clampdown. They have also heard about innocent civilians being mistaken for drug dealers and being killed by the police, and shudder with fear that the same thing could have happened to them. Thaksin created what might be called a culture of fear and suspicion. The villagers may have looked the other way in the short term in the past, but if the same method of drug suppression is repeated by any future leader, they may not give it the kind of support they gave to Thaksin.

Thus, many villagers have good reason to appreciate and admire Banharn's "soft", painstaking approach. Precisely because Thaksin pursued such a heavy-handed policy, Suphanburians praise Banharn's approach. In a way, the popularity of Banharn's policy depended on the bloodiness or harshness of Thaksin's policy. The more people Thaksin killed, the more Banharn emerged in the contrastingly positive image of a non-violent leader.

Originally, the Good Youth of Suphan project was scheduled to end in 2001, but Banharn has extended it indefinitely, given villagers' positive reaction to it and its usefulness to his rule. This means that more ceremonies will be held in more villages to disseminate the project, which in turn suggests that the reputation of Banharn as a respectable leader will spread even more widely throughout Suphanburi.

### **Concluding Comments**

This paper has demonstrated how Banharn's moral authority is produced at the village level by ceremonial means. It is important to explain his local domination from the bottom up, instead of attributing it facilely to vote-buying, patronage or pork barrelling. Extensive village-level fieldwork – something few scholars of local Thai politics have actually done, with the notable exception of Arghiros (2001) – reveals a picture of Banharn that runs directly counter to the image depicted in the existing literature.

Suphanburians support him, not because they are coerced or bought, but for the simple reason that they regard him as a good leader. The morality of leadership matters (see Kerkvliet, 1995 on the same point on the Philippines). To the extent that the literature brings morality into the picture, it spotlights provincial bosses who dispense individual-level material benefits (e.g. emergency funds) to poor villagers, without paying equal attention to the collective, non-material dimension of moral leadership. To ordinary Suphanburians at the village level, the Good Youth of Suphan project and its ceremonial representation symbolise that dimension of Banharn's leadership. No villager obtains any material benefit whatsoever from the project. However, the project enhances villagers' collective well-being by helping to drive out dangerous drugs from their community.

Let me conclude on an epistemological note. To the extent that Banharn's domination can be seen as a case of ideological domination, one might argue that Suphanburians are misled or mystified into believing in the goodness of an essentially debased politician. I disagree. Such Marxist "false consciousness" claims presuppose that Banharn has an essential or absolute quality as a politician, when he actually has no such quality. The goodness or badness of politicians (or any human beings, for that matter) is what we make of them. I am not making the extreme relativistic or postmodernist claim here that *any* interpretation of Banharn is valid. My point is simply that Suphanburians' view of him is based on what they see him doing in their most immediate social context, a context of which most non-Suphanburians are unaware.

Urban middle-class people fail to recognise this point. Worse yet, as mentioned briefly above, they tend to ascribe rural voters' thoughts and behaviour to their lack of education. Several Bangkok-based scholars of Thai politics have advanced an argument that reflects and has shaped such perceptions. These scholars then propose a quite banal solution to the "problem": educate rural voters on the meaning of "democracy". As one well-known scholar argues, "political education [must] be given to rural voters . . . to provide them with a proper understanding of the objects of elections and their mechanisms, as well as to arouse political awareness" (Suchit, 1996, p. 200). Scholars who embrace this kind of view, however, are doing enormous symbolic violence to rural voters' worldview. They are in effect waging a morally condescending, dogmatic offensive without realising it. Scholars' "objective" assessments, no matter how objective they may claim to be, constitute nothing less than ideology in a broadly construed sense (Foucault, 1973; Mannheim, 1991). In light of this, scholars who use the power of their pens (or computers) to dismiss rural voters' thoughts and behaviour as reflecting their low educational levels are unknowingly implicated in constructing and perpetuating a vast ideological edifice that serves to reproduce their superior social positions – an edifice manifested in the value-ridden binary opposition between politically sophisticated Bangkok and the unsophisticated countryside. If rural voters are "stupid" enough to think of an allegedly depraved politician like Banharn as a good leader, they are no less "stupid" than well-educated Americans who regard President Bush as a great leader who is building a strong America and a free democratic world.

## Notes

1. On a more humorous note, according to many Sino-Thai Suphanburians, Banharn took a tough stance against *yaa baa* because its original name, *yaa maa* [meaning "horse drugs"] besmirched the reputation of his Chinese surname "Bae", which means horse. In fact, it was Banharn who used his power as prime

- minister to change the official designation of *yaa maa* to *yaa baa* (Pasuk, Sungsidh and Nualnoi, 1998, p. 101). For Banharn, eliminating *yaa baa* meant restoring the honour of his family members.
2. I thank one of my reviewers for this point.
  3. In 1997–2001, CT Party members, including Banharn's younger brother and daughter, monopolised cabinet posts in the ministry.
  4. Unlike many other politicians, Banharn never uses European cars (at least while in Suphanburi). Nor is he ever escorted by armed bodyguards.
  5. Somchai, along with Hansa, sits on the board of directors of B.S. International, a chemical company founded by Banharn in 1970 (DBD/MC Bangkok Company File No. 330/2513).
  6. Songruet's speech is reproduced in POS, 2002b, a booklet distributed on the day of the ceremony.
  7. Ad's brother, Yorayong Ophakul, is a member of the Muang Municipality Council and the Provincial Council of Elementary School Education, both of which Banharn controls.
  8. After lunch, Banharn visited five families in Bang Pla Mor to further disseminate the Good Youth of Suphan project. According to the program, Banharn was supposed to have lunch after this, but the organisers changed the program order at the last minute.

### Abbreviations

BB	Budget Bureau
BP	<i>Bangkok Post</i>
CT	Chart Thai
DBD/MC	Department of Business Development, Ministry of Commerce
FEER	<i>Far Eastern Economic Review</i>
KS	<i>Khon Suphan</i>
NESDB	National Economic and Social Development Board
POE	Provincial Office of Education
POS	Provincial Office of Suphanburi
SP	<i>Suphan Post</i>

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