

**Thai Youth Cinema as Cultural Evidence: Social Well-Being and Everyday  
Connectedness in Budit Rittakol's Films**

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**Abstract**

This qualitative study revisits Budit Rittakol's youth films from the 1980s and 1990s to explore their cultural role in promoting social well-being an aspect largely overlooked in Thai film scholarship. The research adopts a detailed investigation of four selected films, including *Khu Wun Wai Wan* (1986), *Bunchu Phu Narak* (1988), *Bunchu Hog*, *Lok Ni Di Ok Sutsuai Narak Nayu Tha Ngui* (1991), and *Anueng Khitthueng Pho Sangkhep* (1992). It aims to explore how Budit's youth films represent values of inclusion, friendship, and emotional resilience and reposition Thai youth films as tools that contribute to cultural continuity. The study employs a combination of textual and contextual analysis to scrutinize narrative structures, character relationships, and cultural references in the selected films. This dual approach enables a nuanced understanding of how cinematic elements reflect and shape Thai concepts of social well-being. Rather than portraying well-being as an institutional or imported ideal, this study demonstrates that it emerges organically from daily interactions, traditions, and cinematic storytelling. The analysis situates Budit's work within broader discourses of Thai soft power, cultural identity, and emotional connectedness.

**Keywords** Thai Cinema, Budit Rittakol, Youth Film, 1980s, 1990s, Social Well-being

**1. Introduction**

Social well-being, although widely promoted in today's global frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is not a new concept in Thai society. Rather, it is deeply rooted in longstanding cultural values such as Nam Jai (generosity), Bunkhun (reciprocity), and Sanook (shared joy). These values have historically shaped Thai ways of living, helping communities foster inclusion, emotional connection, and resilience.

While international discourse often frames social well-being as a modern development objective, this study argues that the concept has long been embedded in Thai everyday life and that Thai youth films from the 1980s–1990s serve as historical evidence of its presence.

Bundit Rittakol's youth films are selected to support this argument. He played a major role in shaping Thai youth cinema during the 1980s and 1990s, with his films resonating strongly with audiences through depictions of joyful adolescence and the pursuit of dreams (Lopattananont, 2016; Wuttichainuch, 2022). Although critical discourse has often framed his work as primarily commercial (Thairath TV, 2014), scholars such as Thasanabanchong (1991), Tullayapisithchai (1994), and Chummuangpak (2004) have pointed to underlying social messages in the *Bunchu* series. Lopattananont (2014) further argues that Bundit's idealized portrayals of youth served to counterbalance foreign cultural influences and reinforce national values. Others have highlighted the educational dimensions of his work and its role in shaping collective cultural memory (MGR Online, 2009a), helping challenge the idea that his films were purely entertainment (MGR Online, 2009b).

Building on these earlier interpretations, this study proposes that Bundit's youth films are prime examples of cinematic works that actively contribute to the representation of social well-being by emphasizing friendship, inclusion, and resilience through a variety of narratives. These values foster emotional connection and a sense of belonging among audiences. They also align with contemporary concepts of social well-being, particularly those outlined in today's SDGs.

Revisiting his films through this lens therefore offers a timely and necessary shift. Moving beyond a purely entertainment-focused reading allows for a deeper understanding of how Bundit's work reflects Thai social structures, informs perceptions of youth culture, and contributes to conversations on social cohesion. This study reconsiders his films from the 1980s and 1990s within their Thai cultural context, while also positioning Bundit's work as part of a larger body of Thai youth cinema due to shared patterns, such as recurring character types, narrative strategies, and themes centered on connectedness. Many films function not only as artistic expression, but also as cultural evidence of Thailand's enduring ethos of social well-being. As such, this study calls for a broader reassessment of Thai film history one that views youth films not merely as entertainment, but as key texts for understanding how Thai culture sustains inclusion, community, and identity through the cinematic medium.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This study integrates three theoretical perspectives, namely, social well-being, the youth film genre, and media cultural theory, to help shape and accommodate the validity of the analysis. Social well-being theory provides a foundation for understanding the roles of friendship, resilience, and emotional connection within Thai culture. The youth film genre situates Bundit's work within a broader tradition of generational storytelling, emphasizing how films aimed at young audiences contribute to identity formation and cultural negotiation. Media cultural theory complements these by recognizing that films are not merely passive reflections of society but active forces that shape public consciousness.

### **2.1 Social Well-Being in Thai Society**

The concept of social well-being was introduced by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1946 as part of its definition of health, which includes physical, mental, and social well-being not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (World Health Organization, 1948; Schramme, 2023).

Over time, scholars have expanded this idea to include factors such as social equity, community trust, and social connectedness (Keyes, 1998; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Teghe & Rendell, 2005). While the term gained prominence through the Sustainable Development Goals

(SDGs), its underlying principles, such as health, reduced inequality, and community sustainability, have long been present in many societies, including Thailand (United Nations Development Programme, 2017; Kufeoglu, 2022; United Nations, 2018).

Although often framed as a modern policy concept, social well-being is deeply rooted in Thai traditions. Thai communities were built on kinship networks, temple-based support systems, and cooperative economies (Rattanathavorn, Paksukcharern, & Peerapun, 2014). Social values such as Nam Jai (generosity), Bunkhun (reciprocal obligation), and Sanook (joy in shared experience) continue to shape everyday interactions (Kuwinpant, 2002; Falvey, 2010; Ratana-Ubol, 2019). Traditional festivals like Loy Krathong and Songkran further reinforce intergenerational bonding and collective joy (Department of Cultural Promotion, 2021a; 2021b).

Thai society contrasts with more individualistic cultures by prioritizing group-oriented well-being. While contemporary academic discourse sometimes treats social well-being as a novel construct, its roots in Thai culture remain underexplored. Although existing research acknowledges values like Nam Jai and Bunkhun, their role in the broader context of social well-being has rarely been emphasized.

Bundit Rittakol's youth films offer a compelling case study of these values and their presence in cinema. Viewed through this lens, social well-being in his work is explored exhaustively how it is deeply embedded in the narrative structures, character relationships, and cultural contexts of his storytelling.

## **2.2 Youth Film as a Genre**

Youth films focus on the lives, struggles, and aspirations of young people, offering a cinematic space to explore themes such as identity, self-discovery, relationships, and societal expectations. Common motifs include coming-of-age experiences, peer pressure, rebellion, and personal growth.

These films often function as cultural reflections of their time. Scholars such as Doherty (2002) argue that youth films frequently respond to social anxieties, using adolescent characters as metaphors for societal change. Similarly, studies by Buckingham (2008) and Weber & Mitchell (2008) suggest that youth media provides young audiences with a space to negotiate identity, validate their experiences, and find resonance through storytelling. From this perspective, youth films are not only about adolescents but are also cultural artifacts that reveal generational shifts and evolving social norms.

Thai youth films, like their global counterparts, explore young people's aspirations and challenges but are shaped by specific cultural values such as family bonds, respect for elders, and community interdependence (Jarutsantijit, Chummuangpak, & Common, 2020). The emergence of youth films in Thailand during the 1980s and 1990s coincided with significant economic and social transitions brought about by urbanization, globalization, and exposure to Western culture. Many films from this period, particularly those by Bundit Rittakol, reflect these changes by portraying the tension between tradition and modernity (Ingawanij, 2006) or highlighting the lived experiences of youth facing social pressures (Srirak, 2005). While some films reinforced cultural continuity through depictions of family and community values, others incorporated elements of global youth culture to reflect shifting aspirations. Notable examples include *Yesterday* (Jongsiri, 1983), *Gling Wai Gon Por Son Wai* (Srisupab, 1991), and *Gra-bprohng Baan Ka San* (Kaewsawang, 1993).

One key distinction in Thai youth cinema is its portrayal of adolescence as a process of negotiation rather than rebellion. Whereas American youth films often depict teenagers resisting authority, Thai films tend to focus on how young people harmonize their aspirations with traditional values. This difference reflects broader cultural attitudes—adolescence as a journey toward autonomy in the West versus a stage of social integration in Thailand. A

common theme across many Thai youth films, as suggested by preliminary findings in this research, is their implicit engagement with social well-being, cultural identity, and generational continuity.

Applying this framework enables deeper insight into Bundit Rittakol's contributions to the youth genre. His films go beyond light entertainment by presenting youth culture in ways that uphold social cohesion. The *Bunchu* series, for example, portrays adolescence not as an individualistic struggle as is often the case in Western narratives but as a collective journey grounded in Thai cultural values. Viewed through this lens, Bundit's work serves as both a reflection of social shifts and a cinematic effort to preserve and reinforce Thailand's cultural identity and communal unity.

### **2.3 Media Cultural Theory: Understanding the Role of Media in Society**

Media cultural theory explores the relationship between media and society, focusing on how media both reflects and shapes social values, beliefs, and norms (Poster, 2010; Olobia, 2022). Rather than merely transmitting information, media actively constructs public perception, reinforces dominant ideologies, and contributes to societal change (Fenner & Hill, 2010). At the same time, media messages are not uniformly received they are interpreted through the lens of audiences' cultural and social contexts (Roosinda & Suraya, 2018).

Several key dimensions of media cultural theory help explain its societal impact.

- Media as a cultural force: media plays a crucial role in shaping and maintaining cultural norms and identities, influencing how people think about politics, society, and even everyday life.
- Representation and identity: how groups are portrayed in media can reinforce or challenge social perceptions, contributing to the formation of collective identities (Fürsich, 2010).
- Active audiences: audiences are not passive recipients of media messages. They interpret, negotiate, and sometimes resist the meanings presented, based on their own perspectives.
- Contextual interpretation: the impact of media depends heavily on when, where, and how it is consumed cultural, historical, and social factors all matter (Livingstone, 2005).

Beyond its role as a cultural product, media is also a site of power. Political agendas, ownership structures, and commercial interests all shape what is produced and how it reaches audiences. Theoretical models like Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework (Aligw, Nwafor, & Alegu, 2018), agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), and framing theory (Arowolo, 2017) help unpack these dynamics.

It is also helpful to distinguish between two broad perspectives within media cultural theory. Cultural Studies focuses on the sociocultural meanings embedded in media texts, while Media Theory tends to examine structures, production practices, and technological conditions that affect how content is created and distributed.

Applying these frameworks to Bundit Rittakol's youth films opens up valuable insights, how his work functions as a form of cultural expression that helps shape and sustain values of social well-being. Viewed this way, his films do more than reflect society they actively participate in constructing and reinforcing ideals of social bonding, inclusion, and resilience as specified in these theoretical explanations.

### **3. Research Methodology**

Seven youth films were produced during the 1980s and 1990s. For depth and analytical rigor, this study focuses on four representative titles two from each decade selected for their

thematic richness and their roles in shaping perceptions of youth and social well-being. The analysis combines textual and contextual approaches to explore the films' narratives, stylistic features, and broader sociocultural significance.

### 3.1 Textual Analysis

Textual analysis is commonly used to examine the cinematic features of selected films (Vassiliou, 2006; Wildfeuer & Bateman, 2016). In this study, it serves as the primary method for analyzing the following four films.

Title	Year of Release
1. <i>Khu Wun Wai Wan</i>	1986
2. <i>Bunchu Phu Narak</i>	1988
3. <i>Bunchu Hog, Lok Ni Di Ok Sutsuai Narak Nayu Tha Ngui</i>	1991
4. <i>Anueng Khitthueng Pho Sangkhep</i>	1992

Table 1 List of youth films to be analyzed

Key areas of focus include the narrative structure how the films depict youth experiences and relationships and character development, especially in terms of friendship, inclusion, and resilience. In addition, the study examines mise-en-scène, cinematography, dialogue, and cultural references to uncover how elements like setting, color, and visual motifs reinforce themes of social bonding. Finally, the films are analyzed for how they conform to or challenge conventions of the youth genre, offering insight into their distinctiveness within Thai cinema.

### 3.2 Contextual Analysis

In addition to textual analysis, this study applies contextual analysis to deepen understanding of how the selected films relate to the sociocultural conditions of Thailand during the 1980s and 1990s. Drawing on approaches suggested by Falkingham and Reeves (1997) and Svensson (2021), contextual analysis involves examining the broader environment in which these cultural products were created and received.

This includes attention to major historical and economic transformations, particularly Thailand's shift from an agricultural to an industrial society. Such a transition significantly influenced how youth were represented in media, as traditional values came into contact with modern pressures and aspirations. The analysis also considers Thai cultural norms and how the films either reinforce or challenge dominant discourses surrounding youth, community, and intergenerational expectations.

In addition to historical and cultural dimensions, the study takes into account public reception by exploring how audiences and critics responded to these films at the time of their release, and how these responses have evolved. Finally, a comparative element is included, positioning Thai youth films within the broader context of regional and global trends in youth cinema. This helps to identify both the uniqueness of the Thai case and the shared concerns that transcend national boundaries.

By integrating these layers of context, the study aims to uncover how Budit Rittakol's youth films not only reflect their time but also shape cultural understandings of social cohesion and youth identity.

#### 4. Research Results

This section examines the cinematic elements of each selected film through the lens of social well-being. Each analysis is supported by insights into Thai social characteristics, demonstrating how deeply rooted the concept of social well-being is in Bundit Rittakol's youth films.

##### 4.2 Bundit's Youth Films in the 1980s

The 1980s was a period of rapid industrialization in Thailand, fueled by government policies that promoted export-led growth, foreign investment, and urbanization (Chunanuntathum, Tambunlertchai, & Wattananukit, 1987; Ikemoto, 1992). As the agricultural sector declined, extended family structures gave way to smaller nuclear households, and financial security began to overshadow communal togetherness (Sattayanurak, 2010). Education became increasingly critical not just as a path to knowledge, but as a necessity tied to career advancement in an ever more competitive society. The rise of industrial capitalism elevated the importance of individual success while weakening the balance between personal ambition and collective well-being (Sitthichok, 2022). Although social bonds persisted, traditional forms of social well-being from agrarian communities were reconfigured to fit new urban networks and reshaped familial dynamics (Lopattananont, 2016).

The first film from this period, *Khu Wun Wai Wan* (1986), stands out in Thai youth cinema for its critique of growing individualism amid modernization. The story follows Meen, a rebellious youth expelled from his uncle's home due to reckless behavior. He finds unexpected refuge with Jeab, an eccentric yet kind-hearted boy who struggles with social acceptance. Meen becomes romantically interested in Jeab's sister, Jaeng, and eventually manipulates his way into her affection. However, his deceit is uncovered, and he is left isolated. Meanwhile, Jeab's attempt to expose corruption at Jaeng's school leads to his wrongful institutionalization in an asylum, from which he later escapes.

The film juxtaposes urban hardship represented by delinquent youth, corrupt school officials, and materialism with traditional Thai values such as compassion, mutual support, and social trust. Through its focus on marginalized characters and their emotional resilience, *Khu Wun Wai Wan* emphasizes the enduring importance of social well-being in a rapidly modernizing society. Instead of adhering to familiar narratives of personal success or individual struggle, the film foregrounds friendship, family, and community as key sources of belonging.

Social well-being in the film is expressed through three interconnected forms of inclusion, namely, friendship-based acceptance, intergenerational kindness, and group-level social bonding. These dimensions shape the film's narrative and reflect how Thai cultural values promote emotional resilience, human connection, and a sense of belonging even under difficult social conditions.

The relationship between Meen and Jeab lies at the heart of the film's message about friendship as a form of social inclusion. Their bond is not based on mutual benefit but rather on genuine emotional support. Jeab welcomes Meen into his life not because he expects anything in return, but out of kindness and companionship. This dynamic captures a core element of Thai social well-being, inasmuch as meaningful relationships are founded on sincerity and mutual care, not self-interest.

Jeab's support for Meen goes beyond hospitality. He also becomes a quiet moral guide, encouraging Meen to reflect on his behavior and make more responsible choices. This friendship becomes transformative. Meen, who has never known true belonging, begins to understand what it means to be part of a caring community. His character gradually softens to suggest that sincere relationships can foster personal growth and healing.

The second form of inclusion intergenerational kindness is embodied by Jeab's grandfather. Unlike other adults who dismiss Meen for his troubled past, the grandfather represents Bunkhun, the Thai tradition of elder warmth, generosity, and moral guidance. Instead of immediately judging or rejecting Meen, he offers him shelter and companionship. His actions reflect the Thai Buddhist principles of the Brahma Vihara a set of four virtues that frame ethical behavior. They include the following.

- Loving-kindness (Metta) – showing warmth and goodwill to others.
- Compassion (Karuna) – responding with care to those in distress.
- Sympathetic joy (Mudita) – celebrating the happiness and success of others.
- Equanimity (Upekkha) – maintaining calm and fairness in how we treat others.

Through these actions, the grandfather becomes a symbol of inclusive empathy, showing that acceptance can transcend social labels or past mistakes.

The third form of inclusion appears in the group's evolving social dynamics. At first, Jaeng and her friend are hesitant to accept Meen and Jeab, seeing their behavior as unconventional. However, as the characters spend more time together, they begin to form bonds that move beyond first impressions.

A key scene at an amusement park powerfully illustrates this process. The group laughs, teases each other, and enjoys the rides not in pursuit of romance or rivalry, but in the simple pleasure of shared joy. This moment reflects the Thai concept of Sanook, a cultural value rooted in the belief that happiness is best experienced in community. The scene emphasizes that friendship, in the Thai context, emerges through collective experiences and mutual care, rather than individual achievement.

One of the film's most meaningful messages is found in Meen's redemption. After he is caught misbehaving, he is not cast out permanently. Instead, his genuine remorse and desire to change allow him to rejoin the group. This outcome reflects the forgiving nature of Thai inclusion, where a person's value is measured not by their mistakes but by their willingness to grow. Social well-being, in this light, includes space for failure and renewal.

Ultimately, *Khu Wun Wai Wan* presents a vision of inclusion and belonging that is not determined by social status, background, or prior behavior. It resonates with the Thai cultural belief that social well-being is rooted in emotional sincerity, unconditional acceptance, and the pursuit of shared happiness. In contrast to Western models that often frame inclusion as a structured policy goal, this film portrays it as a natural, lived practice visible in acts of friendship, intergenerational care, and everyday human interactions.

The second film analyzed, *Bunchu Phu Narak*, carries a similar message of social well-being and inclusion as *Khu Wun Wai Wan*, though expressed through a more comedic and rural-urban coming-of-age narrative. The story follows Bunchu, a polite and good-natured young man from Suphan Buri, who travels to Bangkok with his niece, Bualoy, to take a university entrance exam at his mother's urging. Adjusting to urban life proves difficult at first. However, with the support of his older brother Bunchuay and the friendships he builds at a tutorial school, Bunchu gradually begins to find his footing. During this time, he also develops feelings for Molee, a kind-hearted Bangkok girl. His presence, however, draws the jealousy of Toeng, a delinquent who also has his eye on Molee, leading to several conflicts including a staged restaurant attack and a disrupted birthday party. In the end, Bunchu fails his exam and prepares to return home, but Molee's encouragement gives him the strength to try again, reinforcing the film's emphasis on resilience and perseverance.

At its heart, the film contrasts the sincerity and humility of rural life with the competitiveness and impersonality often associated with urban living. Yet rather than portraying the rural protagonist as a misfit in the city, the film offers a more hopeful vision one

where genuine friendships and mutual support create a sense of belonging even in unfamiliar environments.

Social well-being in the film emerges through three central themes, encompassing friendship and inclusion, cooperative learning over competition, and the resilience of rural values in the face of urban change. Together, these themes suggest that strong social bonds can bridge divides and soften the alienating effects of modernization.

Unlike many films that portray rural newcomers as targets of mockery or exclusion, *Bunchu Phu Narak* presents an alternative vision of urban friendship. Upon arriving in the city, Bunchu is welcomed by a diverse group of students Waiyakorn, Nara, Yoi, Cheuuay, Kummoon, and Molee. Despite their differing backgrounds, the group quickly forms a close-knit support system, showing that true friendship is grounded in camaraderie rather than class or origin. The film also resists stereotypes of rural naivety. While Bunchu's manners and worldview may differ from his urban peers, he is never ridiculed. Instead, his sincerity and kindness earn him respect and affection, reinforcing core Thai values of hospitality, warmth, and acceptance. Through these dynamics, the film challenges the assumption that rural-urban integration must be difficult or hierarchical. Instead, it presents inclusion as something natural and emotionally driven.

The idea of cooperative learning plays a central role in the film as well. While many urban narratives emphasize academic competition, *Bunchu Phu Narak* envisions education as a shared pursuit. Bunchu and his peers study together, exchange knowledge, and support one another portraying success not as a solitary goal but as a collective journey. This reflects the traditional Thai principle of communal upliftment, where personal achievement is often understood as meaningful only when it contributes to the well-being of others. The film's climax further illustrates this bond: when Molee is abducted, Bunchu and his friends act selflessly, risking their safety to rescue her. Their actions emphasize the values of social responsibility, empathy, and unity key elements of Thai social well-being.

A final important theme is the affirmation of rural values as a source of strength, not backwardness. Rather than suggesting that rural traditions must be abandoned to succeed in the city, the film portrays Bunchu's background as an asset. His patience, humility, and deep sense of community become key to his survival and emotional growth in the city. Through this portrayal, the film argues that rural culture can enrich urban life and maintain relevance in modern environments.

One of the film's most memorable takeaways is its optimistic depiction of Bangkok a city where tradition and modernity can coexist. Although Bunchu encounters challenges, he also experiences moments of sincere inclusion and support. His ability to retain his rural identity while integrating into a modern city suggests that Thai culture embraces adaptation rather than demanding assimilation. The film doesn't ignore the tensions that come with modernization. While Bunchu's friend group welcomes him, the broader urban setting remains less accommodating. Characters like Ngentra and Toeng represent the more self-serving, materialistic side of city life, offering a subtle critique of how urbanization can undermine compassion and connection.

Seen through the lens of social well-being, *Bunchu Phu Narak* presents a vision of inclusion where personal background is secondary to sincerity, cooperation replaces competition, and tradition finds a place in the modern world. The film challenges assumptions that urbanization leads inevitably to alienation, suggesting instead that cultural harmony and mutual care can resist that trajectory. Importantly, it also portrays social well-being not as a fixed tradition but as something dynamic growing out of everyday interactions and evolving alongside the society it supports. In this way, Thai identity is shown to be resilient, adapting to change while holding onto its most cherished values.

This portrayal aligns closely with *Khu Wun Wai Wan*, and reflects a broader pattern in Thai cinema of the 1980s: films that did not just depict society, but also shaped cultural attitudes. In doing so, they anticipated what is now often described as Thailand's soft power. While Western frameworks tend to define social well-being through laws or institutions, Thai films like *Bunchu Phu Narak* highlight emotional connection, generosity, and interpersonal care as its foundation. These qualities visible in everyday gestures and relationships represent powerful cultural resources. Long before the term "soft power" became mainstream, Bundit's youth films captured its essence through stories of kindness, inclusion, and community.

#### **4.3 Bundit's Youth Films in the 1990s**

The 1990s marked both the peak and turning point of Thailand's rapid economic transformation. While the 1980s laid the groundwork for industrial growth, the early 1990s witnessed unprecedented economic expansion, driven by industrialization and increasing foreign investment (Coxhead & Plangpraphan, 1998). Alongside this growth came a rise in materialism and competitive individualism, which gradually pushed traditional values such as social well-being into the background. Wealth, ambition, and personal success emerged as dominant ideals, shaping both daily life and youth culture (Lopattananont, 2014).

However, by the decade's end, this unrestrained expansion led to financial instability, culminating in the 1997 Asian financial crisis (Akyüz, 2000). Excessive borrowing, consumerism, and speculative investment caused a sharp economic downturn, forcing Thailand to reassess its direction (Vilaysouk, 2021). In response, the philosophy of a self-sufficiency economy gained prominence as a corrective to Western-style capitalism, advocating for balance between ambition and sustainable living (Mongsawad, 2010).

While materialism left a noticeable imprint on Thai society, it did not entirely displace traditional values. Rather, the 1990s became a period of negotiation where economic pressures coexisted with enduring cultural beliefs. This tension is reflected in Bundit Rittakol's youth films, which portray young people navigating both the promises and pitfalls of modernization.

*Bunchu Hog, Lok Ni Di Ok Sutsuai Narak Nayu Tha Ngui* continues the story of Bunchu as he transitions into adulthood, this time while caring for his younger cousin, Tongdee, who has just started university. Their lives are disrupted by Lalita, a manipulative woman who charms several members of Bunchu's friend group, causing rifts and distrust. While others fall victim to her schemes, Bunchu remains loyal to Molee and stays grounded in his values. Lalita later attempts to sabotage his involvement in a commercial project, but her efforts fail. As the story unfolds, Bunchu is faced with a choice: remain in Bangkok for love or return to his rural home to pursue his personal aspirations. The film explores themes of ethical decision-making, personal integrity, and the pressures of adulthood.

By the 1990s, urban life had become shaped by material success and individualism. Yet, *Bunchu Hog, Lok Ni Di Ok Sutsuai Narak Nayu Tha Ngui* resists this trend by reaffirming the importance of social cohesion and mutual care. As Bunchu and his childhood friends grow older, they continue to rely on each other while navigating careers, financial uncertainty, and personal setbacks. Despite modernization's challenges, the film suggests that social well-being has not vanished it has evolved. Through this lens, the narrative emphasizes that friendship, inclusion, and community remain deeply relevant to Thai society. This message is explored through three interwoven themes.

The first theme centers on the strength of group unity, positioning friendship as more powerful than rivalry or romantic desire. When Lalita creates conflict among Bunchu's peers, their bond is tested. However, they ultimately choose to prioritize their friendship over personal gain. This decision reinforces the film's larger message: even in a competitive and modernizing world, the foundation of well-being lies in maintaining emotional bonds. The story also

demonstrates that these bonds do not fade with age. Bunchu's circle continues to offer support in adulthood, helping each other through everyday struggles, and reminding viewers that social connection is not a childhood relic but a lifelong necessity.

The second theme explores rural inclusion in an urban world, with Tongdee serving as a contemporary reflection of Bunchu's younger self. He arrives in the city with rural manners and values, yet is not mocked or marginalized. On the contrary, his sincerity and honesty win over his urban peers. This choice challenges the assumption that rural identity must be sacrificed for modern success. Instead, the film proposes that integrating rural ethics into urban life offers a more humane form of progress.

The third theme turns the viewer's attention back to the role of rural communities in shaping personal values. Although much of the action takes place in the city, the film often gestures toward the emotional pull of home. As Bunchu considers whether to stay in Bangkok or return to help his community, the narrative reframes this decision as a moral one not simply professional. His eventual return to support local farmers symbolizes a reaffirmation of traditional values in the face of urban temptation.

Rural life is portrayed not just as nostalgic, but as meaningful. Community activities, agricultural cooperation, and Buddhist teachings of generosity and interdependence are all highlighted as living traditions that promote harmony and support. In contrast, the city is shown as a place where social values risk being overshadowed by ambition and self-interest.

Still, the film avoids framing modernization as inherently destructive. Instead, it presents a more balanced view modernity may bring risks to social well-being, but it also provides space for those values to adapt and survive. Social cohesion is portrayed not as a fading relic, but as something that must be actively nurtured through ethical choices and community ties. In this way, *Bunchu Hog, Lok Ni Di Ok Sutsuai Narak Nayu Tha Ngui* positions social well-being as a moral compass guiding young adults through a rapidly changing landscape.

Unlike Bundit Rittakol's earlier films, *Anueng Khitthueng Pho Sangkhep* offers a nostalgic and lighthearted portrayal of high school life, emphasizing camaraderie, playful rivalries, and shared memories. The story begins with humorous clashes between science and art students, who engage in a series of harmless pranks. As the narrative unfolds, the school environment becomes a space for unity and collaboration, particularly when students work together to organize an academic fair. Personal relationships also add depth to the story, including a subplot where a female student misinterprets an intern teacher's kindness as romantic interest. The film culminates in moments of reflection, growth, and reconciliation, ultimately affirming the enduring bonds of adolescence and the emotional value of social connectedness within the school setting.

One of the film's most compelling portrayals of social well-being is how it transforms rivalry into friendship. Initially, the two student groups compete with each other in a lighthearted, prank-filled rivalry. But when they are tasked with co-hosting the academic fair, their cooperation marks a turning point. A failed prank where science students accidentally sabotage themselves leads not to resentment, but to laughter and bonding. This moment captures the film's central idea, inasmuch as, even in competition, connection and unity can emerge when people choose empathy over conflict.

The theme of mutual support becomes even more apparent when an external threat unites the students. When a group of ruffians confronts the art students over a romantic dispute, the science students despite earlier tensions stand by their peers. This act of solidarity reflects the film's view of social well-being as an active choice: it's not merely about peaceful coexistence, but about showing up for one another when it counts. The film argues that unity doesn't require sameness; rather, it grows through shared experience, trust, and a willingness to put relationships before ego or rivalry.

The school itself plays a critical role in fostering inclusivity and emotional growth. Unlike portrayals of rigid, authoritarian teachers, the educators in *Anueng Khitthueng Pho Sangkhep* act as mentors and compassionate guides. This is especially clear in the subplot involving a female student who develops feelings for an intern teacher. Instead of responding harshly, the teacher handles the situation with kindness and maturity, allowing the student space to reflect and grow. This thoughtful handling reinforces the idea that high school is not just a place for academic learning but also for navigating emotions, relationships, and self-awareness.

What truly sets the film apart, however, is its idealized vision of friendship as something enduring and unconditional. Unlike many school-based stories that punish characters for mistakes or emotional struggles, this film makes space for everyone. No student is permanently cast out. This is beautifully conveyed in the final school reunion scene, where even those who had once distanced themselves or caused conflict are warmly welcomed. The moment signals that friendship, when grounded in shared memories and mutual care, can outlast misunderstandings and time.

The film's affectionate depiction of adolescence as a time of joy, mischief, and emotional discovery contrasts sharply with adult life, where obligations and ambition often lead to social distance. By capturing small but meaningful moments classroom jokes, after-school hangouts, shared meals, and spontaneous adventures the film reminds viewers of the emotional warmth that youth friendships offer. The reunion scene, filled with smiles and nostalgia, encapsulates this message: that social connectedness is one of the most precious aspects of youth.

Taken together, Bundit's films from the 1990s continue to foreground social well-being as a core element of Thai cultural identity. Yet they also reflect the shifting social context of the era. While the 1980s emphasized intergenerational relationships and rural-urban integration, the 1990s brought new concerns: the effects of modernization, competition, and materialism on relationships and emotional resilience. Still, essential values like inclusion, emotional sincerity, and collective joy remained prominent though often filtered through a growing sense of nostalgia and awareness of adulthood's challenges.

This evolution reveals how Thai youth cinema not only adapted to changing times but also maintained a consistent role in promoting social well-being. More than a cultural ideal, social well-being becomes a guiding principle a way for young people to navigate a transforming world while holding onto meaningful relationships. Through these narratives, youth films serve as reminders that while the world may change, the emotional and communal values at the heart of Thai identity can continue to offer strength and belonging.

## **5. Conclusion and Discussion**

Viewed through the lens of youth cinema as a cultural reflection, the portrayal of social well-being in Bundit Rittakol's films affirms the presence of social cohesion as a deeply rooted element in Thai society. This portrayal goes beyond global frameworks of inclusion, such as those outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While SDG-oriented models conceptualize social well-being as an institutional objective achieved through policies, infrastructure, and rights-based mechanisms Thai social well-being stems from a different foundation. It is not imposed by formal structures but experienced organically in everyday life. In this context, inclusion is not a milestone to achieve but a way of being, rooted in emotional sincerity, shared joy, and mutual trust.

The four films analyzed in this study exemplify how Thai social cohesion emerges through friendships, family relationships, and cultural traditions particularly under the pressures of modernization.

*Khu Wun Wai Wan* illustrates how friendship and intergenerational kindness counter the alienation brought on by urbanization. The bond between Meen and Jeab reflects a form of inclusion grounded not in conformity or gain, but in emotional openness. Likewise, Jeab's grandfather embodies traditional Thai values of compassion and moral responsibility. His warmth and guidance offer an inclusive model of elder-young relationships that contrasts sharply with judgment or exclusion.

The *Bunchu* films deepen this portrayal, offering a generational view of rural sincerity entering a more urban, competitive world. In *Bunchu Phu Narak*, Bunchu's move to Bangkok becomes a cultural crossing point. Yet, his kindness and sincerity traits grounded in his rural upbringing allow him to form meaningful friendships in the city. The narrative suggests that Thai social cohesion is not easily broken by modernization; it adapts and endures. In *Bunchu Hog, Lok Ni Di Ok Sutsuai Narak Nayu Tha Ngui*, the story continues into adulthood, where Bunchu and his friends navigate careers and relationships amid rising materialism. Still, friendship remains central. The inclusion of Tongdee, a rural newcomer, reinforces the idea that belonging in Thai society is achieved through acceptance rather than assimilation.

In contrast, *Anueng Khitthueng Pho Sangkhep* provides a more nostalgic portrait of adolescence as a time of effortless bonding and emotional sincerity. The high school setting with its playful rivalries, misunderstandings, and group camaraderie suggests that social well-being is most profoundly felt in shared moments of joy. The school reunion scene underscores the film's message: while adult life may create distance, the emotional imprint of youthful connections endures. This narrative evokes a cultural truth that the friendships and support systems formed in youth remain emotionally significant, regardless of time or circumstance.

Beyond their individual storylines, these four films reveal a subtle form of Thai soft power. Unlike conventional expressions rooted in policy or diplomacy, this soft power is cultural and emotional embedded in everyday social practices. Inclusion, in these films, is not enforced by law but instinctively practiced. They reflect a society where belonging stems from mutual care, not conformity. As such, Bundit's films operate not only as artistic works, but as cinematic tools that actively promote the value of Thailand's social connectedness.

Several key insights emerge from this study. They extend beyond previous scholarship by drawing attention to the emotional and cultural value embedded in youth cinema an area that has received limited attention in Thai film discourse.

First, all four films reaffirm that social well-being is not a peripheral idea, but a central feature of Thai cultural identity. It is expressed through emotional sincerity, collective experience, and the Thai philosophy of living in relationship with others. Importantly, each film celebrates difference whether across class, origin, personality, or life stage emphasizing that inclusion in Thai society thrives on diversity, not uniformity.

Second, revisiting Bundit's works prompts a broader reconsideration of youth cinema not as a minor or escapist genre, but as a vital cultural space. These films do more than entertain; they provide insight into how identity, resilience, and values are nurtured during formative years. They also show how cinema can mirror and sustain national ethos, particularly in periods of social and economic change.

Finally, while this study centers on Bundit's directorial legacy, its implications extend well beyond his oeuvre. The themes of friendship, inclusion, and community resilience identified here appear in other youth films from the same era. This suggests the need for a wider reassessment of Thai youth cinema in terms of its cultural function. When viewed through the lens of social well-being, such films reveal not only what they depict but how they help preserve emotional continuity and social cohesion across generations.

Based on this study, future research could benefit from comparative analyses with youth films from neighboring Southeast Asian countries. Such cross-cultural exploration may reveal

shared themes of social well-being, resilience, and cultural identity, enriching regional understandings of cinema's social function.

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