

# “I Am not Here for Fun”: The Satirical Facebook Group Royalists Marketplace, Queer TikToking, and the New Democracy Movement in Thailand: An Interview With Pavin Chachavalpongpun

Wolfram Schaffar<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of Tübingen, Germany

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Pavin Chachavalpongpun is an associate professor at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University. He has published extensively on Thailand and Southeast Asian politics. He is also politically active and does not shy away from discussing and criticizing the monarchy, which for a long time was taboo – in academia as well as in political campaigns. In April 2020, Prof. Pavin Chachavalpongpun founded the Facebook group Royalists Marketplace (รอยัลลิสต์มาร์เก็ตเพลส). The name alludes to other Facebook groups, like the Chulalongkorn Marketplace or Thammasat Marketplace, which were set up by former students of those universities as platforms for selling and purchasing items, and socializing in times of the COVID-19 lockdown. Pavin’s group, however, is a persiflage of these initiatives. He developed a unique style of political communication, with a distinct mixture of memes, TikTok and Youtube videos, together with serious academic debates, which made his Facebook group the leading platform for criticism of the monarchy. This interview took place via Zoom between Kyoto and Cologne at the end of August 2020. Information on the dynamic developments that have unfolded since then has been added.

**Keywords:** Facebook; Queer/LGBTIQ; Students’ Movement; Thai Monarchy; TikTok

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## BACKGROUND

The success of the Royalists Marketplace<sup>1</sup> was unprecedented: The group became the fastest growing Facebook group in Thailand ever, and within only a few months attracted more than two million members, making it one of the largest Facebook groups in the world by the end of October 2020. When the new round of pro-democracy protests, organized by a students’ movement, started across Thailand mid-July 2020, banners with the logo of the Royalists Marketplace were seen in Bangkok, Chiangmai, Ubon Ratchathani, and other places.

<sup>1</sup> See Royalists Marketplace Facebook group site at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/634791290746287>. For an early account on the project by its founder see Pavin (2020a).

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On 24 August 2020, however, Facebook bowed to the order of the Thai government and switched off access to the group within Thailand. As a reaction to the international outcry that followed, Facebook announced that they would take legal action against the censorship order of the Thai government (Beech, 2020; Pavin, 2020b). Pavin reacted by founding a new group, which attracted even more members within a few days.

The spectacular success of the Royalists Marketplace, its ban in Thailand, and the reaction of Facebook are watershed events in the development of social media in Southeast Asia, and globally. These incidents also mark a turning point in the power relation between the de-facto social media monopolist of Facebook, the new authoritarian governments that have spread around the world (Einzenberger & Schaffar, 2018), and social movements contesting these regimes in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis.



**Figure 1 (left).** A banner with logo of the Royalists Marketplace at a democracy demonstration in Ubon Ratchathani on 19 July 2020. (Photo taken from the Facebook account of Pavin Chachavalpongpun).

**Figure 2 (right).** A photo of Pavin Chachavalpongpun on his personal Facebook account. The banner on the T-Shirt reads: Royalists Marketplace. The line in the post says: I am not here for fun! (Photo by Pavin Chachavalpongpun).

## INTERVIEW

WOLFRAM SCHAFFAR: *Professor Pavin, in Thailand, the majority of the people do not have a university degree, they come from rural areas in the north or the north-east, and many are farmers or workers. A highly sophisticated academic vocabulary is often being used by the elite to exclude these people from the political discourse. I have the impression that, with your communication style on Facebook, you are reaching both ends of the social hierarchy.*

PAVIN CHACHAVALPONGPUN: I think I was born with this ability to communicate with different types of people. And you are right: The other day, the Japanese police came in order to update the situation about my security. They also asked about the Royalists Marketplace: “We checked this Facebook group and we were told that there is not a lot of substance in it – basically you just make fun and joke around.” I got a bit angry because there actually is a lot of substance in there, and the entertaining side of it is very intentional. We have over one million members,<sup>2</sup> and not everyone is educated and understands politics like academics do. For that reason, I have to cater for different appetites, and I think I’m the person who can do it. Sometimes I pick up a political conversation and I turn it into a TikTok clip – something that might be too difficult in isolation, but once it has been digested through TikTok in this mode of entertainment, everyone can understand it better.

SCHAFFAR: *Since Facebook took ground in Thailand in 2006/2007, it has been dominated by royalist and conservative groups and movements – among others by private vigilante groups like the Rubbish Collector Organization<sup>3</sup>. With your group of more than 1,5 million members, you have effectively shifted the balance of power on Facebook. How do you explain this success?*

PAVIN: I don’t know whether I would conclude that Facebook has been a domain for royalists like the Rubbish Collector Organization and three or four other groups of this kind. It was more a constant contest between each other. Maybe, the nasty tactics used by Rienthong Nanna, the founder of the Rubbish Collector Organization, like organizing violent mobs that bullied and attacked people, and the fact that Facebook did not want to do anything about it, made those groups prominent. But I want to be fair with Facebook. There has always been some space for us as well. For example, my personal Facebook account had long been there, and I have been very vocal. Yet, there has not been any attempt from anyone to close it down.

Moving on to your question on the reasons for the success of the Royalists Marketplace. I think it’s the combination of many factors. COVID-19 might be one reason and maybe the most important one. People stayed home and got bored, and actually that’s exactly how I got the idea to set up the group. I surfed around and looked at Chulalongkorn and Thammasat Marketplaces and I thought: “Why can’t I just do another marketplace – a Royalists Marketplace?”

The first week was most hilarious. We saw someone offering the teak bed where King Ananda was shot.<sup>4</sup> This is something I would not have forecast. I just laughed out loud. Then someone wanted to sell a blue diamond; there is a rumor that the Queen

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2 At the time of the interview, the Royalists Marketplace counted roughly 1,4 million members. By the end of October, the number passed two million.

3 The Rubbish Collector Organization (องค์กรเก็บขยะแผ่นดิน) is a right-wing, royalist vigilante group on Facebook, founded by Rienthong Nanna, who defined the aim of the group as to clean Thailand from social rubbish. The strategy is to screen social media, especially Facebook, and report cases of lèse-majesté to the police (Schaffar, 2016).

4 In June 1946, King Ananda Mahidol was found shot dead in his bed in the Grand Palace in Bangkok. The circumstances surrounding his death stayed mysterious and have been the subject of much controversy.

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has it.<sup>5</sup> This story is a big issue among royalists. I offered a haircut for a dog.<sup>6</sup> And someone offered a mansion dismantling service. You know, because after Koi, the mistress of the present King, fell from grace, she was put in jail and her mansion was dismantled.<sup>7</sup>

First, I did not pay much attention, but as time went by, I saw a good number of people coming in. Maybe people were bored or curious, and they might have found it entertaining at the beginning. But when the number was growing, I brought in very serious discussions.

SCHAFFAR: *But you still published TikTok videos in between, no?*

PAVIN: In between, yes. Again, first of all, I became part of that stupid trend that everyone had to do TikTok. So, the first of my TikTok videos was just about dancing and being camp.<sup>8</sup> Then people liked it every time I did it and that's when I turned it into politics. I called it political TikToking, and this became an element of the Royalists Marketplace, too.

SCHAFFAR: *But with that you are part of a wider trend, as we saw at the occasion of Donald Trump's electoral campaign in Tulsa. He boasted about the high number of participants who registered despite of Covid-19 warnings, but then large parts of the upper ranks in the hall stayed empty. Analysts later claimed that Trump was tricked by TikTokers and K-pop fans, who reserved tickets for his rally with no intention of going. The parallelism between your and the US-American political TikToking is in the style. The US TikTokers, too, did not so much publish serious appeals to mobilize people, but used the Macarena dance to spread the word of their campaign in an indirect, funny, and very ironic way.<sup>9</sup>*

PAVIN: I have to admit, I did not know about this incident. On my part, the political TikToking developed very organically and the parallel is unintentional and maybe coincidental. But concerning the style, TikTok basically compels you to be camp. You have only one minute. If I want to open TikTok and talk to people about militarization of Thai politics? No, this doesn't work. TikTok encourages you to be queer, and it worked perfectly with my personality, too.

Let me illustrate a little bit my writing skills and communication strategy on the

5 The blue diamond affair refers to a stunning case of theft and a chain of killings, which developed into a still unresolved diplomatic conflict between Thailand and Saudi Arabia. A Thai servant to the Palace in Saudi Arabia stole a large amount of jewelry, including a blue diamond, and brought it to Thailand. Although he was caught, most of the precious gems seem to have gone lost, and several special investigators from Saudi Arabia, who were sent to Thailand, were killed under mysterious circumstances.

6 This refers to FooFoo, the poodle of King Vajiralongkorn. The fact that the pet was bestowed the military rank of Air Chief Marshal was commented on in serious newspapers and left political analysts bewildered.

7 The bestowal of the rank and title as Royal Consort to Sineenat Wongvajirapakdi, called Koi, her fall from grace and the most recent reinstatement, attracted worldwide attention and led to incredulous amazement.

8 Camp is an aesthetic style, related to kitsch, which regards something as appealing because of its ironic value and bad taste. The way Pavin uses the term here draws on the American writer Susan Sontag's essay, "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964), where she discussed the relation to homosexuality and emphasized its key elements as artifice, frivolity, naïve middle-class pretentiousness, and shocking excess.

9 Some examples of this campaign are published on Youtube, see, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utERTzrLD2Y&feature=youtu.be>.

Royalists Marketplace. In the morning, I write something serious, always about one page, as part of a longer series. In the past, I came up with four different series. I wrote a series about the collapse of the Russian absolute monarchy, and then I wrote about how Queen Victoria of England ruined her family. The third one was on Thai politics and the monarchy, of which I wrote about 30 parts.

In the evening, I write another chapter of what I called *likay luang* (ลิเกหลวง) or royal *likay*. *Likay* is a Thai popular folk theater, where they dress up all over the top, with gold and diamonds and loud kitsch music, which goes like “chingchingching”. So, the term *likay* also carries a connotation of being over the top, being surreal, being just not like in the real world. I take real stories, but rewrite them in a *likay* style, and I have already written about 50 episodes. For example, I wrote one episode on how king Rama X locked up his previous wife. In the episode, I pretend to be the wife and start like this:

Oh my God, I cannot believe it! Even though I love him so much, this is what he’s doing to me! He has another wife and I got so angry. That’s why I went to Munich, and when I saw them, I slapped her in the face and that’s why my husband got mad at me and put me in jail.

It goes on like this, and I even use the real names.

These days, I do TikTok less, because I think it started to get a little bit out of fashion and I don’t want to be the one to hang on to it. That’s also another tactic: Don’t hang on to things that are going to be obsolete. But yesterday, I did one more TikTok: Koi, the mistress of king Rama X, who fell from grace, was released from prison and is now being reinstated in Munich. So, I picked an old camp song in Thai with the line “I am returning”, in order to accompany the *likay luang* of “Koi, Returning as Mistress”. And as usual, I performed with an inch of eyelashes as I sing, “I’m returning to you, please baby . . .” (see Figure 3). I actually invest a lot of time in the Royalists Marketplace.

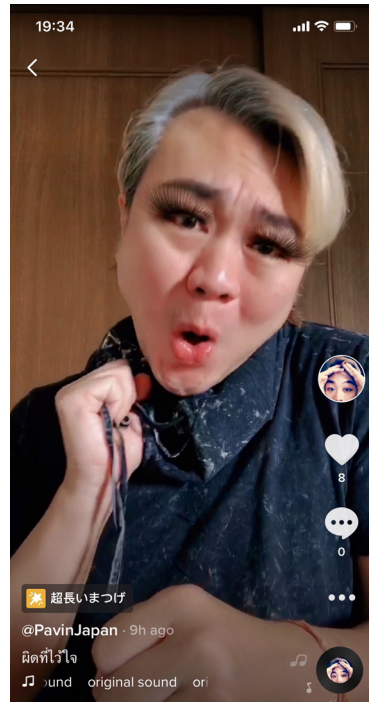


Figure 3. Screenshot taken from the TikTok “I Return”, performed by Pavin Chachavalpongpun. (Photo by Pavin Chachavalpongpun).

SCHAFFAR: *Let us briefly touch upon the social base of the Royalists Marketplace. In the case of the new students’ movement, there has been the criticism that they are mainly from urban, higher-middle-class families, who grew up with a specific pop culture – Harry Potter and Ham-taro<sup>10</sup> – which they are now using as repertoire for the demonstrations.*

10 *Ham-taro* is a character of a children’s manga series from Japan, which is highly popular in Thailand, albeit mostly in urban, middle-class families. *Ham-taro* depicts a little hamster. For the demonstrations, the students danced around the Democracy Monument in Bangkok adopted *Ham-taro*’s song, singing: “The most delicious food is taxpayers’ money”, and “Dissolve the parliament! Dissolve the parliament! Dissolve the parliament!”.



PAVIN: I would say that this is a mis-analysis. I have a good oversight, because I’m the only administrator, so everything has to go through me. That’s why I know exactly that, first, the majority are young people. Second, they come from all across the nation, not just urban areas. Many think that it is cool to become a member of the Royalists Marketplace – and they want to show that they are cool by posting photos of their activities. As admin, I have to approve them – which I am doing mostly, even though sometimes they are doing something silly, like posting a photo taken by the Mekong River. I am getting these photos from everywhere. I am approving it, because I want to give them a sense of belonging.

But I don’t just approve; I also go to see the profiles. Quite a lot of times, these people surprise me: They are sending me very intelligent statements, and then I find out that they come from rural places, like Nong Khai, and on their profile I find pictures of their families living in poor conditions. I’m so touched, and this is something I have to encourage.

The students’ movement, though, has its own dynamics. They took up the issue of the monarchy independently. They did not discuss it with me; they just informed me. However, the Royalists Marketplace did play a part, because it came before the student protests. In many ways, the Royalists Marketplace set up a stage for the young to reinterpret the information and the idea about the monarchy. It has set up a new environment of like-minded people, which is very important, when you think about taboo issues. If you work on them on your own, it is scary. But if you walk into the room and you look around and see: “Wow, there’s one million people who think like that”, then people get what I call an immunity. That’s why they are brave, and that’s why the students want to push forward.

SCHAFFAR: *Talking about being brave on the streets: At the first demonstrations on 19 July 2020, some people proclaimed you “Queen of Thailand” – they were holding up a picture of you with your dog in a golden frame, and then prostrating in front of it (see Figure 4). First, I thought that this might trigger a direct violent answer by the police or the military. I also heard from people watching it from abroad that this might endanger the entire movement. A couple of weeks later, the development seems to prove that your strategy was right, though.*

PAVIN: Maybe because I myself am quite radical, and maybe because I have been in this business for quite some time, I tell you: When talking about social movements, you can’t expect everyone to agree with you. When those overseas ask whether the students have gone too far, holding up a picture like that, I take it as a different idea. To say, “I don’t care”, might be a bit too strong, but if you cannot propose or suggest anything better, darling, maybe you should just stay home and watch *Absolutely Fabulous*.<sup>11</sup>

The next point is the incident at Thammasat University: I was asked to give a speech for a gathering at Thammasat via video telephony, but I was not aware that it would turn out that big. That’s why I recorded on my handphone only for five minutes, in which I didn’t really say anything. This time, I just went around the bush,

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11 British sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous* is an iconic example of camp and highly popular among queer and LGBT people worldwide. In allusion to it, Pavin uses “*Absolutely Fabulous*” as subtitle of his personal Facebook page.

because I did not want to take the attention away from the substance of what the students wanted to say. It is important to let the students say something substantial. As for this “Queen of Thailand” image – it was not my intention at all. But then it happened, and they started the projection.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, to put up the photo at the demonstration in July was someone’s individual decision. It was not from the movement – I can guarantee that. Certainly, they think that I am camp and that I could be an icon. But more importantly, what they wanted was basically to bring down the level of reverence of the monarchy, and this is such a right way to do so – by parody, by sarcasm.

SCHAFFAR: *Is there more about this aspect of being camp and queer? I’m asking because the current democracy demonstrations were preceded mid-April by a campaign on Twitter – a so-called memes’ war (see Schaffar & Praphakorn, 2021, this issue). A young crowd from Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan used memes to discuss about authoritarianism and the monarchy, and the central hashtag #MilkTeaAlliance trended globally with billions of clicks. The interesting thing is that this started in the fandom of a Thai homoerotic Boy Love TV series “2gether – the series” (เพราะเรารักกัน).*



**Figure 4 (left).** Demonstration in Chiangmai on 19 July 2020. Demonstrators holding up the photo of Pavin Chachavalpongpun. (Photo taken from the Facebook account of Pavin Chachavalpongpun).



**Figure 5 (right).** Projection of Somsak Jeamteerasakul, and Pavin Chachavalpongpun at a demonstration at Thammasat University on 10 August 2020. (Photo taken from the Facebook account of Pavin Chachavalpongpun).

PAVIN: Yes, there are commonalities with the MilkTeaAlliance. It was led by young people more or less with the same agenda. Young people are trying to bring down conservative, traditional elites. In Hong Kong, it was against the *ancien regime* in

12 During a demonstration at Thammasat University, protestors projected pictures of the exiled historian Somsak Jeamteerasakul, and Pavin Chachavalpongpun, with a banner mockingly saying: “To your highest majesty with rice, BBQ pork, and soup. Long live the king.” (see Figure 5; Patpicha & Johnson, 2020)

Beijing. In Thailand, it is about bringing down the political elites and challenging the monarchy. But when it comes to concrete action, it takes a national form, in the sense that the Hong Kong movement has Hong Kong ways to do it, and the Thai have Thai ways to do it.

That’s why in Bangkok, we see this LGBT fashion show. We see drag on the streets. Last week, at the Democracy Monument, they even had a mini fashion show on the street during the protest, performed by LGBTIQ people, with an LGBT queen with no hair but dressed in an evening gown. So glamorous. Using the rainbow flag and using the Democracy Monument as a catwalk. We also see other pop culture elements, like Harry Potter or the Ham-taro.

The younger generation is bringing new color and a fresh sensation to political activism, but at the same time, they are being very serious. They have done a brilliant job keeping the connection with other young people, networking, and mobilizing by using the element of pop culture. And they teach each other best practices, in exchange with people in Hong Kong and people in Taipei.

*SCHAFFAR: Let us talk about this transnational networking, taking the example of the MilkTeaAlliance. In June 2020, the democracy activist Netiwit Chotiphapthaisal delivered milktea flavored cookies in front of the Chinese embassy at the day of the commemoration of the Tiananmen massacre. Home-baked cookies, which came in the shape of the Beijing Gate of Heavenly Peace and also in shape of the Bangkok Democracy Monument. The MilkTeaAlliance seemed to develop into a new kind of transnational or internationalist solidarity network. But recently, the hashtag MilkTeaAlliance is not being used much. Do you think that there is a real and substantial transnational solidarity network, or was the MilkTeaAlliance a single and isolated event?*

PAVIN: The question is whether you really want to use a hashtag to give an answer to everything. Right now, other, equally interesting hashtags are trending. Not necessarily #MilkTeaAlliance. Hashtags are an indication of what is important for the day. But it doesn’t mean that the MilkTeaAlliance has gone down.

I believe that the partnership is still there, but it happens that things in Hong Kong have become really quiet. You can’t force these things. But in Taipei, Thais living in Taiwan already organized two big events. I got involved because the students asked me to send a message to the protesters there. When I followed this event, I realized that there is a large number of Thai students in Taipei and they are well connected with the Hong Kong movement and also with the Students’ Association of Taipei. Even certain MPs of the Taiwan parliament participated when they occupied the place in front of the townhall.

*SCHAFFAR: As a final question, how can people from Europe, from Germany or Austria, support the democracy movement?*

PAVIN: When I gave a talk in the Foreign Correspondent Club here in Japan, NHK, the national broadcasting company, covered it. Among the ten topics that I discussed, NHK only took one topic and made it headline, and it happened to be so good and exactly the right thing. They wrote: “Pavin calls for international support for Thai students.”



Western governments have to give support to the students, at least for two reasons. First, to set a sign that their requests are legitimate. Secondly, and equally important: international support builds up protection for the students. The Thai government must know that they can't simply use force. The Thai government needs to know that whatever they do, there are eyes out there watching them.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wolfram Schaffar is Professor for Development Politics at the University of Passau, Germany. Prior to this position, Schaffar has been working as professor for Japanese Studies at the University of Tübingen and as professor for Development Studies and Political Science at the University of Vienna, with visits as guest researcher at the Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, the Yangon University in Myanmar, and at the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) in Leiden. His fields of interest are social media and political movements, new constitutionalism and democratization processes, as well as new authoritarianism.

► Contact: [wolfram.schaffar@gmx.de](mailto:wolfram.schaffar@gmx.de)

