

# **Regionalization through Media Consumption: The Consumption of Thai and Filipino Soap Operas among Vietnamese Audiences**

Nguyen Thi Tu Anh

## **Abstract**

The research draws on the flows of media products from Thailand and the Philippines into Vietnam. The aim of this study is to analyze the rise of Thai and Filipino television dramas and their success in Vietnam; and to investigate the influence of such television dramas towards Vietnamese's perception about Thailand and the Philippines. This research was implemented based on semi-structured and in-depth interviews with Vietnamese audiences, focusing on the perceptions of Vietnamese viewers aspects of gender, culture and national images towards Thailand and the Philippines. Thai and Filipino drama series have recently gained popularity and have been welcomed by a number of viewers in Vietnam. These transnational media flows reflect the regionalization progress in socio-economy when they coincidentally emerge in the context of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) which promotes more integration among countries in the region. Through the consumption of Thai and Filipino television dramas expressed with images, ideas, and emotions, Vietnamese audiences can generate more understanding about the two member states of the Associations of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The paper argues that the aspects of cultural proximity and cultural differences Vietnamese audiences make towards watching Thai and Filipino dramas

contribute to facilitate bottom-up regionalization in accordance with target of building a common ASEAN Community.

**Keywords:** Transnational Media Flow, Consumption, ASEAN, Cultural Proximity, Cultural Differences

## Introduction

It is indicated that there are two approaches employed to implement critical media studies, known as political-economic and cultural. Both seek to find out how ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, nationality and additional impacts may affect the way in which we interpret and understand media (Goodwilliam, 2013). However, there are distinctions between the two disciplines, which are the applications of macro or micro analysis (Lansen, 2013). The perspectives of political economy usually uses macro-level analysis that focuses on structural and institutional issues regarding exploitation, power and class, whereas cultural approaches often employs micro-level analysis to particularly examine the generation of meaning (Lansen, 2013). This approach focuses on issues of the media's effect influenced by psychological studies. Within the scope of this research, political-economic and cultural approaches are used to analyze the phenomenon of the emergence of transnational Thai and Filipino soap operas flows into Vietnam.

This study looks at the rise of transnational Thai and Filipino dramas in Vietnam from the political-economic and cultural approaches, but more focus is placed on the cultural aspects. From the political-economic perspective, the study draws on institutional factors which provide conditions for the free flow of products among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states, including media products, particularly from Thailand and the

Philippines into Vietnam. From the cultural perspective, it explores how Vietnamese audiences generate an understanding about Thailand and the Philippines through watching television serial dramas. The paper argues that the impacts of Thai and Filipino soap opera consumption among Vietnamese audiences can reveal how ASEAN viewers perceive the region, in the sense of both commonalities and differences under the driving force of the regionalization process in building the ASEAN community.

Thai and Filipino dramas first emerged in Vietnam from 2011 by cable television networks broadcasting imported Thai and Filipino dramas to the country. Today, while the popularity of Korean popular culture remains crucial, both Thai and Filipino television series have been welcomed by Vietnamese audiences. Coincidentally, this phenomenon occurred around the time when the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) was being significantly promoted around the region with the focus on deepening understanding and integration among ASEAN members. In their respective countries, Thai dramas are locally known as *lakorn* and Filipino series are known as *teleseryes*. The consumption of Thai and Filipino cultural products in Vietnam has been aided by the development of mass media, especially television and the internet. Moreover, over the past few years with the advent of digital technology, the new phenomenon has seen fans of Thai dramas subtitle their favorite series into Vietnamese and upload them onto the internet. Similarly, Filipino *teleseryes* are also uploaded onto the internet. However, older Thai dramas are mainly broadcasted on the cable television channels whereas its latest series are uploaded onto several websites. Filipino dramas in comparison are first broadcasted on television channels before being uploaded on the internet, and they are not updated with the latest series on any web pages. Hence, Filipino series, which are uploaded on the internet, keep the dubbings in Vietnamese that were implemented previously by the television channels.

An online Vietnamese newspaper reported that both *lakorns* and *teleseryes* attract audiences with plots, presentational styles, and characters. A Thai television drama series usually convey a simple storyline with a sequential climax, added with the beautiful actors and actress's humour and acting skill (www.tinviet.net.vn, 2013). In addition, Thai television dramas portray images about Thailand, a country with famous travel destinations (www.tinviet.net.vn, 2013). According to Siriyuvasak (2010), Thai television dramas have been exported to Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Hong Kong, Taiwan, China and Vietnam. Looking at the emerging outward flow of Thailand's television series, Chan (2011) has presumed that Thai popular culture, particularly its television dramas could possibly become the next largest wave in Asia's television market. Similar to Thai *lakorns*, Filipino television dramas attract audiences by using many beautiful actresses and actors who possess western facial features and good acting skills (www.talkvietnam.com, 2013). Filipino producers also create storylines with a sequential climax in their series, which effectively keeps audiences to continue watching (www.giadinh.net.vn, 2014). Significantly, Filipino producers actively promote their products in foreign countries including Vietnam by sending actors and actresses abroad for fan meetings (www.phunuonline.com.vn, 2013). From the given online news reports, it can be stated that Vietnamese audiences are attracted to *lakorns* and *teleseryes* for both the content in the plots, presentational styles, and the attractive actors and actresses.

Literature regarding Thai and Filipino cultural industries tend to focus on analyses of industries' characteristics and how their cultural products enter the intra-regional flows. There have been a few studies looking at the audience reception towards Thai cultural products. For example, Amporn's (2008) research on the consumption of Thai television dramas among the Shan community in Myanmar, and Yongye's (2012) work on the consumption of

Asian series, including Thai series, among the Hmong community in Laos. My study explores comparisons between Thai drama consumption with Filipino drama consumption in relation to regionalization in Southeast Asia with the target of building a common ASEAN Community. I argue that the consumption of Thai and Filipino television soap operas can help the Vietnamese audiences to gain a better understanding about the two countries, which eventually could contribute to the regionalization process driven by people. My argument is based on two grounds. Firstly, I agree with Yang (2002) who argues that that mass media is a vehicle to imagine not only the nation, but also the larger space outside national borders. In Yang's view, transnational media allows for the construction of a new transnational subjectivity. As such, overcoming physical distances with geographical borders, Vietnamese audiences can imagine life in Thailand and the Philippines through consuming these series. Secondly, a motivated cultural integration is necessary to increase people-to-people contact among ASEAN member states (ASCC Blueprint 2009) with the goal of building the ASEAN Community, integration in both economic and cultural fields to promote a regional identity is needed (ASEAN Vision 2020 1997). However, Esther *et al.* (2014) argue that it would be difficult to motivate cultural integration between people-to-people with the attribution of national governments in ASEAN member states with such top-down policy. Instead, the creation of a regional community requires substantial change by all, especially ASEAN citizens. My paper argues that the regionalization process can be more practical with the participation of citizens in ASEAN member states. Hence, the media flows from Thailand and the Philippines into Vietnam can promote inter-cultural exchanges among the three countries and provide opportunities for Vietnamese citizens to participate in the process of regional cultural integration through consuming cultural products.

While today Vietnamese viewers maintain their interest in watching Korean and Chinese television series, the recent increase in popularity of Thai and Filipino television series demands research attention. My study seeks to explore the perceptions of Vietnamese audiences towards Thai and Filipino dramas, examining how and to what extent viewing Thai and Filipino dramas can generate perceptions about the region in the context of the AEC. In this study, the process of regionalism is understood as the official establishment of the AEC at the end of 2015 with the motivation for making deeper integration in culture and security among ASEAN member states in the long term. Regionalism is also seen as a situational background for the flow of Thai and Filipino cultural products into Vietnam. Within this context, the research focuses on analyzing how the process of regionalization is taking place in the media field amongst Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines. From a business point of view, this process is referred to the cooperation among media organizations of Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines in order to satisfy entertainment demands of Vietnamese audiences and to promote regional economic integration in the media field. Ultimately, this study seeks to find out how people-to-people connectivity practiced by Vietnamese audiences' watching the Thai and Filipino television series could contribute to bringing Vietnamese audiences into close contact with the other two ASEAN members.

This paper examines the perception of Vietnamese audiences toward transnational media flows of Thai and Filipino soap operas into Vietnam. Together with providing overview understanding about Thai and Filipino dramas in Vietnam, the two parts in my essay address the issues of intra-regional circulation of cultural products and Vietnamese viewers' interpretations of cultural proximity and cultural differences after consuming Thai and Filipino media products.

## Data Collection Method

The method used to conduct the research was semi-structured in-depth interviews with audience interviewees in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam's two biggest and most developed cities. Hanoi is the capital city and a political center for Vietnam, and Ho Chi Minh City is the center for business. People from these two cities own television sets and have access to the internet, which provides access for consuming foreign cultural products. In Hanoi, my informants consist only of audiences who watch Thai and Filipino drama series while in Ho Chi Minh City, my informants included both audiences and media production personnel, namely producers and website members who add Vietnamese subtitles for Thai dramas. For example, a translator for a Filipino series aired on television and the cable television channel staff of Let's Viet, a channel which broadcasts Thai television dramas. My informants were media personnel living and studying or working in Ho Chi Minh City. The television channels which broadcast Thai and Filipino dramas are also located in this southern city. For my study, I employed participatory observations and group discussions for data collection. Generally, the interviewees' ages were limited to around 19 to 30 years old because audiences between these ages usually interact with both television and the internet, since my study looked at both of these media sources for airing Thai and Filipino series. In fact, there are many people over 30 years old watching Thai and Filipino dramas in Vietnam. However, they mostly follow the series on cable television, not on the internet. Many of them have access to the internet every day but, for different purposes and it is rare for them to spend time watching dramas online.

My informants consist of general audiences, producers and members of websites making Vietnamese subtitles for the Thai television series, such

as the staff members of the cable television channel Let's Viet, and a translator working for a private company cooperating with the cable channel Today TV. In general, audience interviewees consume pop cultural products e.g. television dramas as a leisure activity, their educational background is in a bachelor degree and they work in different occupations ranging from governmental officers, shop sellers, or clerks, etc. The producers and members of the websites making Vietnamese subtitles for Thai *lakorns* are a specific consumer group within a broad audience interviewee population. They are young people who love watching Thai dramas and are typically students at various universities who have the capacity to use Thai or English fluently along with use of technology which help can them make subtitles and upload the newest Thai television dramas on their web pages. For the television channel staff of Let's Viet, who are responsible for translating all the Thai series before broadcasting, were also interviewed. All of them graduated from the Faculty of Orientals, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City, majoring in Thai Studies and they can speak Thai fluently. They are also both casual audience members and avid fans of Thai series. Lastly, the translator working for a private company cooperating with the cable channel Today TV-the pioneering channel in broadcasting Filipino series in Vietnam was a key informant. She was actually a consumer of both Thai and Filipino television series.

Along with collecting primary data through interviews, secondary data was taken from a variety of published documents such as foreign books, articles, theses, and the internet. They were reviewed to gain an understanding about the development of context in Vietnam and Vietnamese audiences; and to find general information about Thai and Filipino dramas as well as its viewers.

## Background on Thai and Filipino soap operas

### Thai television drama

According to Amporn (2008), the pattern of Thai television series usually run for a period of about three months like Latin American's *telenovelas* rather than an American series which can last for years. Thai *lakorns* are usually broadcasted every night at prime time which begins around 8:30 pm after the news. Amporn (2008) indicates that there are six free-to-air channels in Thailand, but just three channels among them show prime time series: channel 3, 5 and 7. Channel 5 broadcasts an hour-long episode; while the other two channels show two-hour episodes including commercials. Channel 3 and 7 air three episodes scheduled usually on Monday-Tuesday, Wednesday-Thursday, and Friday-Sunday, and therefore premier three series simultaneously at any given time. Nowadays, as the Thai government promotes a transition from analog television broadcasting to digital television broadcasting, there are now more channels such as Channel 1, Channel 8 or GTH, channels which also produce and broadcast *lakorn*.

Stories in Thai *lakorns* are mostly about romantic relationships between a poor girl and a rich boy; and the boy's evil ex-girlfriend or a supporter who is usually the rich boy's elder sister who intervenes with their happiness (Amporn, 2008). Some dramas have plots which tell stories of how the new middle class in urban areas cope and deal with the struggle to gain their success in life and love while retaining their souls. Others depict the changing role of women as lovers, mothers and businesswomen. Nowadays, the plots portray the lives and loves of younger people in an urban setting are becoming increasingly popular in many Thai dramas (Amporn, 2008). Additionally, many Thai series also deal with historical themes.

## **Filipino television drama**

In the Philippines, prime-time soap operas are broadcasted five days a week, and usually replay during weekends. They last from three months to a year, or even longer depending on their ratings ([www.worldlibrary.org](http://www.worldlibrary.org), 2015). They fascinate a large audience which crosses age and gender lines in the Philippines, and also get the highest advertising rates on Filipino television ([www.worldlibrary.org](http://www.worldlibrary.org), 2015). Television series are produced mostly by ABS-CBN, GMA network and TV5 ([www.tinviet.net.vn](http://www.tinviet.net.vn), 2014). Some of them are produced by Tape Inc., Dreamscape Entertainment Television, VIVA Entertainment, and Star Cinema ([www.pinoyexchange.com](http://www.pinoyexchange.com), 2015). Characteristically, Filipino dramas usually portray love stories between a Cinderella and her Prince Charming-two different people from opposite worlds; with the presence of a third party or third parties who challenge the main couple's love ([www.poklat.com](http://www.poklat.com), 2015). While love stories are compelling, Filipino dramas stay true to core family values by depicting emotions and behaviors between family members ([www.interaksyon.com](http://www.interaksyon.com), 2013).

## **Intra-Regional Circulation for Cultural Products**

The transnational mobility of Thai and Filipino dramas into Vietnam can be seen as a rising non-western contra-media flow against the western media flow. The development of digital technology, satellite, broadcasting networks and the physical movement of people around the world has promoted the growth of contra-media flow (Thussu, 2007). With respect to transnational contra-media flows in Asia, countries like Japan and Korea have been positioned as strong cultural industries. As mentioned previously, Thai and Filipino soaps have emerged in Vietnam while Korean dramas still maintain

their high popularity among Vietnamese audiences. In Southeast Asia, Thai series have become familiar to Vietnamese audiences over the past few years, whereas they have been consumed by Cambodian, Laotian, and Burmese audiences for a long time. Similar to Thai soaps, currently Filipino series have also been well known among Vietnamese people. However, Filipino dramas have been exported to many different countries as a competitive strategy between Filipino television companies to grasp more and more viewers, and also to accommodate the demand of the large number of Filipino migrant workers working and living abroad.

Thailand and the Philippines establish their own systems to support their cultural industries. For Thailand, it is the progress of commercializing media areas and setting up policies to develop the creative industry (Siriyusak, 2010). For the Philippines, they establish government regulatory bodies like The Department of Telecommunications and Communications (DOTC); The National Telecommunications Commission (NTC); and the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB) (Pasadilla and Lantin, 2005). This is a necessary base for Thai and Filipino cultural products to be able to enter transnational media markets. Vietnam is the destination where Thai and Filipino television series products have been recently aimed at. The Vietnamese government supports the development of television and internet media, encouraging the media to serve its citizens' cultural demands and broaden understanding between countries as stated in the Law for Media in Vietnam (Ministry of Planning and Investment and Robinson, 1999). The Vietnamese government's encouragement led to the booming sales of cable, satellite and terrestrial television and internet services. While the infrastructure has been made ready, the quality of domestic cultural products has not been improved. These conditions favor Thai and Filipino dramas to enter into Vietnam. Remarkably, the cultural context in Vietnam currently has changed from when

the popularity of Korean popular culture, known as the Korean wave started to decline; internationally the Korean craze is predicted to decline over the next few years ([www.koreatimes.co.kr](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr), 2012). It has been caused by foreign audiences' tiredness of standardized content in Korean music, movies and dramas. The Korea Times (2012) elaborately shows that K-pop idols and teen singers convey similar hypersexual dancing, lyrics and clothing. Korean television series also repeatedly tell stories of adulterous affairs, revenge and secrets about the birth or identity of characters. Like other countries in Asia, Vietnam has been under the influence of the Korean wave, when many Korean media products were broadcasted on television channels for a long time. However, as several Vietnamese websites indicated, Vietnamese audiences today are no longer satisfied with the standardized contents shown in Korean cultural products. The Korean wave has gradually lost its unique status in Vietnam. Moreover, entertainment tastes of Vietnamese audiences have rapidly changed with consumption demand for more new and creative cultural products. Mr. Lam Chi Thien, Director of International Media Joint Stock Company (IMC), a company which is responsible for exploiting, developing and managing content aired on one of Vietnam's popular cable television channels Today TV, indicates that while Singaporean television dramas are portraying a mix of Western and Chinese culture, Korean series tend to repeatedly show stories about rich families and love interests between rich and poor people, something which is not closely related to reality or to the daily lives of Vietnamese audiences. In addition, Chinese series have filled up time slots on many channels. Therefore, Thai and Filipino television soap operas are an answer for Today TV where the stories are closer to everyday lives of the majority of Vietnamese audiences and they depict many cultural similarities ([www.doanhnhansaigon.vn](http://www.doanhnhansaigon.vn), 2015). Moreover, copy right prices for Thai and Filipino dramas are cheaper than Korean dramas ([phunuonline.com](http://phunuonline.com)).

vn, 2013). This helps Vietnamese television channels compete to attract viewers and to diversify their entertainment programs. At the same time, they can make profit with cheaper dramas from Thailand and the Philippines. As these series are more proximate to Vietnamese culture, they can easily gain attraction from Vietnamese audiences (www.citinews.net.vn, 2013).

It can be seen that the flow of Thai and Filipino television series into Vietnam are facilitated by policies for media export and media development in the three countries. Above all is the broader context of the upcoming ASEAN Connectivity which provides a condition for intra-regional media flows. The target of AEC is to encourage free flow of goods and services among ASEAN member states. Cultural products are considered a kind of commodity when it creates economic benefits and bridges connections between involved sides. The movement of cultural products from Thailand and the Philippines into Vietnam magnifies the regional market for culture and economically promotes circulation of cultural goods in the region. Therefore, it can be stated that the transnational flow of cultural commodities help widen regional economy. At the same time, the flow of media from Thailand and the Philippines into Vietnam is propelled by the growing demand of urban consumers in the big cities, such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. I argue that they create an opportunity for bottom-up regionalization when facilitating interpretations of Vietnamese audiences towards Thailand and the Philippines through images, ideas and social messages embedded in their products. The interpretations play an important role in the construction of proximity, perceptions and identities among different communities within a geographical domain broader than nation-state (Otmazgin, 2013). As such the flow of television dramas from Thailand and Philippines into Vietnam helps Vietnamese audiences build up an understanding about the two ASEAN members.

## **Perceptions of Cultural Proximity and Cultural Differences Reflect the Regionalization Process Driven by People**

In order to get the perception of commonalities and differences depicted in transnational television serial dramas, audiences need to interpret their literary texts by reflecting on the character's dialogue, place, time and the context of what they are watching on screen, and compare it to what they are experiencing in their own society and social relationships. The process of reflection or reflexivity for the interpretation of transnational media has been seen in many media studies. The reflexivity is evidence to show the active role of audiences as social actors become conscious of and are able to reflect upon social life in ritual and other cultural performances (Ashley, 1990). Reflexivity can be understood as "re-examinations of the self and the self's relation to others and social issues" (Hu, 2008: 116). According to Giddens (1991), reflexivity is a crucial part which leads to the self and self-identity in a modern society. As Lash (1994) further explains, there are different levels of account for reflexivity. The first level is structural reflexivity which is defined as the reflection of an agency on the rules and resources of social structure, and then on agency's social conditions of existence. The second level is self-reflexivity perceived as the reflection of an agency on itself, which is a form of self-monitoring, comprising the autonomous monitoring of life narratives and love relationships (Lash, 1994: 115-116). The notion of reflexivity can be applied to explain not only the audiences' interpretation process of transnational media, but also its effects on the receivers. It takes place in transnational media's audiences in various ways which depend on their living context and their experiences. This study seeks to explore reflexivity of Vietnamese audiences on the aspects of cultural similarities and the differences between Vietnam and Thailand, and the Philippines through consuming television drama series. The aspects of cultural commonalities and differences seen through

media consumption can help generate an understanding for Vietnamese audiences about the two regional nations. If the perception of cultural proximity causes the viewers to quickly accept and become familiar with Thai and Filipino cultural products, then on the one hand, their reflexivity upon differences towards these two countries reinforces the idea that Southeast Asia is a truly diverse cultural region when each nation embraces its own cultural characteristics. More importantly, on the other hand, it can help the Vietnamese audiences get the feeling of affinity with Thailand and the Philippines when they can see and get to know cultural features of these countries. Hence, it can be said that the reflexivity of the viewers on both cultural proximity and differences partly assists the construction of people-to-people connections, which is essential for the progress of promoting regional cultural integration for the ASEAN Community.

The cultural proximity is a major factor for determining the flow of cultural products across countries, and their competitions in an international market (Ksiazek and Webster, 2008). Cunningham and Jacka (1996: 14) define the notion of cultural proximity as “the theory which provides a hypothesis on how the audience will have a preference for cultural products from countries with which they share cultural ties in recognition of their own culture”. Straubharr (1991) argues that audiences firstly prefer national material and when it cannot be satisfied in certain genres, the audiences tend to look for regional cultural products which are more closer in cultural proximity than those of less proximity. By studying the Brazilian television industry, Straubharr (1991) found that the popularity of Brazilian *telenovelas* in countries like Venezuela and Argentina were attributed by similar Latin American cultural roots shared among those nations. In the work “Watching ‘Dallas’: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination”, Ien Ang (1982), examined the cross-cultural reception of Dutch audiences toward the American series, where she discovered that Dutch

viewers's pleasures were associated with the soap opera viewing. She realized that audiences in Holland watching Dallas created a connection between emotions, i.e. sadness and happiness, exposed in the series and feelings and thoughts of the audiences in real life. Therefore, the author emphasized that Dallas contributed a "sense of meaning-albeit 'tragic' meaning-to the anomie of Dutch viewers". It is suggested that cultural proximity is a complex notion with many dimensions. Language is the most crucial factor in considering cultural proximity, but there are also other elements such as religion, dress, music, non-verbal codes, humor, story pacing, and ethnic types (Iwabuchi, 2002). In addition to these factors, cultural proximity sometimes includes: gender images, lifestyle, knowledge about other lifestyles, values, education, family, personal and group networks, and organizational affiliation (Straubhaar, 2003).

It is obvious that the language used in Thai dramas is Thai, and the language used in Filipino series is a mixture between Tagalog, the native Filipino language and English, which are not in close proximity with Vietnamese. However, Thai and Filipino dramas are translated into Vietnamese once they are exported to Vietnam. Therefore, language is not a dominant factor affecting Vietnamese audiences' interpretations of cultural proximity toward Thailand and the Philippines. I would argue the Asian values embedded in depictions of family status along with traditional gender roles and religion are proximate cultural features seen by Vietnamese audiences after they have watched Thai and Filipino dramas. Besides the construction of Asian values through media space, Asian values have also been socialized through other channels, other institutions as well as other means continuously. In this study, Asian values have been considered from overall consumption. As *lakorns* and *teleseryes* are open texts where audiences can make different interpretations, they offer a space for instructing social values, norms; and simultaneously offer the space for resistance to norms and social values.

With respect to family values portrayed in a drama series of these two countries, my interview material shows that this aspect is primarily recognized by the viewers since it is closely related to the traditional ideology in Vietnamese society. In those series, the family plays an important role in characters' lives and is the core unit of societies. Main characters are always attached with their families and their families are involved in important decisions in regards to the characters' life and careers. In reality, family is the center for Thais and Filipinos' life. The family is seen as the first loyalty and primary obligation to Southeast Asian people (Morrow, 1989). Debt of gratitude is the concept that forms the basic kinship ties between parents and children in Thailand (Rabibhadana, 1984). Children in Thailand are absorbed into the idea of respecting and maintaining close ties with their parents and also their relatives even when they have grown into adulthood. In the Philippines, parents consider their duty to provide material and educational support for their children. In turn, Filipino children, like in Vietnam and Thailand, are also expected to respect and take care of their parents when they get old. For older children, even when they get married and have their own families they are still expected to assist younger siblings with school and jobs after graduation (Nadeau, 2015). It is said that the role of family may be diminished in modern societies, but for modern Vietnamese people the family's position is still highly appreciated and the family values are transmitted through the generations. Therefore, with the respect toward family relations depicted in Thai and Filipino series, Vietnamese audiences came to accept the dramas easily.

It can be argued that Thai and Filipino dramas also portray the traditional roles of men and women. All of the interviewed audience members indicated that in Thai and Filipino soap operas, men provide the main source of income for the household while women are attached with the role of housewife and mother. These roles are similar with the ideology about the roles of men and

women in Vietnamese culture. The highest status in Vietnamese families belongs to men; thus, they generally have absolute authority in the household. As men provide the main source of income for their family, they are never expected to work in the kitchen or cook. Because they are also the head of the family, they can make final decisions in all matters, although they may consult with their wife or children. In contrast, Vietnamese women have limited rights and take a secondary place in the family. After marriage, women have to take up the responsibilities of a housewife and a mother. Today in Vietnam women have more freedom to study and pursue their career, but people are still inclined to accept the idea that women should focus more on taking care of their family rather than pursuing their work.

In Thai society, old culture and traditions from the ancient times express that because of war, men go to fight in combat and women look after the children, family and all kinds of farm work as Thailand is mainly an agricultural economy ([www.ukessays.com](http://www.ukessays.com), 2015). Nowadays, although the role of women is changing, they can have more freedom to pursue their careers and be part of many socio-economic fields, Thai women basically still follow the old principle which stereotypes Thai women as being good wives and good mothers ([www.ukessays.com](http://www.ukessays.com), 2015). Phuc, a 23 year-old teacher in Ho Chi Minh City who is quite familiar with Thai culture from her study and work related with Thailand, says that she feels that Thai women in reality and what is portrayed on screen are generally not much different. She gives an example of what she saw on television in that Thai women spend time taking care of their families even though they have career outside their home and share financial burden with their husband. To her, this portrayal of Thai women on screen is no different from what she knows is happening with Thai women in reality. Linh, a 19 year-old student, and Phuong, a 23 year-old English teacher, also have the same interpretations about Thai women after watching Thai soap operas.

They indicate that even though Thai women have their career in the office, they prioritize taking care of their families and their children. Similar to Vietnam and Thailand, in the Philippines, men are traditionally more dominant than women in society (Heinrich, 2015). The men are expected to have more freedom and provide for their families, while the women are usually occupied with housework and taking care of the elderly as well as children of the household ([www.cgacadthephilippines.weebly.com](http://www.cgacadthephilippines.weebly.com), 2015).

Along with family values and gender roles, Vietnamese audiences also recognize cultural proximity with the Buddhist features in Thai television dramas. Many temples appear in Thai series, where the main characters are usually seen going to the temples to pray for their families, and for the strength to overcome challenges. In Thailand, Buddhism is the national religion with around 95 percent of the population following Buddhism ([www.buddhanet.net](http://www.buddhanet.net), 2015). In Vietnam, although Buddhism is not the national religion, it is a popular religion where there is a high percentage of Buddhists in the country at 55 percent ([www.buddhanet.net](http://www.buddhanet.net), 2015). While the interviewees did not talk about their religious beliefs, all of them indicated that they felt familiar with images of temples and the Buddhist ceremonies portrayed in Thai dramas. Moreover, morality in accordance with the laws of Buddhist karma portrayed in Thai dramas impressed Vietnamese audiences. Many interviewees discussed that at the end of stories in Thai *lakorns*, good characters always have a happy life whereas bad characters would be punished strongly. This refers to one of the fundamental ideas of Buddhist karma based on the law of causality which is understood as the principle between the individual actions and their fruition. Good people would enjoy happiness while bad people have to pay a price for their actions. In reality, Vietnamese people respect this Buddhist doctrine and is expressed in a proverb: “What goes around comes around”. Phan Hieu, a 19 year-old female student majoring in Japanese Studies,

observed that bad people in Thai dramas are usually punished by death when stories end. For her, an ending like that is a little bit heavy and scary. However, she thought that the ending could satisfy many viewers as they agreed that bad people were worthy to be punished for their mistakes. Minh Nguyet, a 23 year-old female student majoring in Thai Studies also agrees that at the end of the stories in *lakorns*, bad characters usually must pay a price for their mistakes. This is one of the basic moral values in the law of Buddhist karma that Thai people respect and follow.

In addition, Vietnamese audiences feel a close cultural proximity with the image of rural areas shown in the series. The rural space appears with paddy fields and unsmooth roads that many Vietnamese people are familiar with. The audience interviewees emphasize that although Thai and Filipino dramas are similar with Korean dramas in terms of portraying high skyscraper buildings, modern cars and cellphones, however they are not always luxurious and sparkling as Korean series. They do not advertise fashion clothes and cellphone brands like they do in Korean dramas. They tend to depict images of local markets and rural areas where many Vietnamese people feel a relation to the living environment. For the audience interviewees living in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the modernity in Thai and Filipino soap operas are not too distant from their own cities, when they can see a similar part of that modernity in Vietnam. However, viewers have compared urban areas in Thailand and the Philippines as being more developed than Vietnam.

It can be said that cultural proximity cannot account for the fact that audiences can realize the difference between themselves and what is shown on screen. In terms of cultural differences, the audiences show four factors which are: behaviors between children and parents in the family, gender equality, attitudes to the third-sex issue, and cultural characteristics. Most of

the interviewed audiences recognized that in the relationship between children and parents in Thai and Filipino families, children have more freedom and more independence from their parents. Parents are portrayed as the people who give advice and suggestions to their children and they do not intervene too much in their children's love and career decisions. However, in Vietnam, children are not as free to do what they want because Vietnamese parents expect their children to do exactly as what has been instructed.

For gender equality, most of the interviewees reflexively indicated that even though women portrayed in Thai and Filipino television series depict their traditional role of being a housewife and a mother, they have more freedom and are independent in comparison with Vietnamese women. Images of Thai and Filipino women are not strictly attached to the family and they are also active in their lives. Most Vietnamese audiences also reflect that Thai and Filipino men in the series tend to respect women more than Vietnamese men and also are less patriarchal. This may come from the fact that historically these two countries hold bilateral kinship system. Women in Thailand and the Philippines are generally appreciated for their crucial economic roles as they have always contributed to income-earning activities (Dube, 1996). Participation in a wide range of tasks has helped them gain economic autonomy and power (Dube, 1996). Moreover, Thailand and the Philippines have a constitution which encourages equality between women and men, reducing the gender gap. Looking at Vietnam historically, from about the sixth century it is believed that Confucian ideology and Chinese culture were incorporated into Vietnamese society, which led to a total transformation of society into a patriarchy with the changes in gender roles (Frenier and Mancini, 1996; Nguyen, 1998). Within the discourse of a patriarchal family, men are the head of family in the dominant position, while women's roles are to serve their husbands and his family by doing housework; and they must also bear children because such is their

duty (Frenier and Mancini, 1996). Gender relations in Vietnam have undergone major changes since the collapse of the last feudal regime and when communist ideology began in 1945. The idea of equality for men and women was turned into public policies. Nonetheless, changes in gender equality have not been able to make Confucian affiliated ideas of gender disappear. Dalton *et al.* (2001) accentuate that in Vietnam more women joining the workforce does not necessarily mean that their duties at home are reduced, in fact, they have dual responsibilities in earning a living from work in full-time positions outside of their family and fulfilling their traditional roles as a mother and a wife at home. Thus, it was concluded that even though economic and social advances for women in Vietnam have been promoted, there is still a lack of support for full gender equality (Dalton *et al.*, 2001).

In regard to the issue of third-sex persons in Thai and Filipino series, all of the interviewees agreed that minor third-sex characters appear frequently in Thai and Filipino dramas, and their roles are homosexual-either gay or lesbian, but mostly gay. This partially reflects an open attitude towards homosexuality in Thai and Filipino societies in reality. However currently in Vietnam, even though people have heard and know about homosexuality, the community as a whole is not yet open and tolerant towards people having a homosexual orientation.

For cultural characteristics, all of the interviewed audiences pointed out that Thai *lakorns* more obviously and successfully portray Thai culture than Filipino *teleseryes* portray Filipino culture. They mainly recognized Western influences shown in *teleseryes* while they saw many traditional cultural images depicted in Thai *lakorns*. In Asia, the Philippines is the only country which has been colonized by both Spain (for approximately 370 years) and the United States (for almost 50 years) (Nadal, 2011). Even though the country has gained

freedom from colonial rule, the colonial impressions still have an influence on Filipino society, particularly in religion, educational systems, culture, language, values, and standards of beauty (Nadal, 2011). In contrast to the Philippines and many other Southeast Asian countries, Thailand maintained its independence throughout the colonial period (Beck *et al.*, 2012), which has contributed to the country being more secure in its culture and wary of Western influences.

From the analysis above, it can be realized that the perceptions of cultural similarities and cultural differences through consuming Thai and Filipino television series generate an understanding for Vietnamese viewers about the two countries. The media consumption partly creates a feeling of closeness and affinity between regional citizens. In other words, by consuming Thai and Filipino television soap operas, Vietnamese audiences can come to know cultures, lifestyles and the way of life in the two countries. As such, Thailand and the Philippines' cultural characteristics are disseminated, allowing people in Vietnam to consume the same cultural products of people in these countries. I would argue this cultural consumption contributes to bringing the audiences in Vietnam closer to the people in other ASEAN member states. However, as mentioned above, cultural differences about Thailand and the Philippines were interpreted at the same time with cultural affinity by the audiences. The differences are partial factors for the viewer attractions, and more importantly help the viewers make comparisons and widen their understanding about the foreign countries. Looking at the ways in which Vietnamese audiences interpret Thai and Filipino drama series can lead to a better understanding of how the audiences perceive reality about the two ASEAN member states in connection with images and content in those television series, the interpretations are varied depending on their socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. While soap operas are always fictitious, television dramas "in their faithful portrayal

of all the happiness and the sadness, the triumphs and the prejudices, the successes and the failures in their characters' lives-prove once more that today's soap operas are indeed a reflection of life" (Ahmet and Khalid, 2012: 5). Vietnamese audiences can recognize the similar ideas of valuing an important role of a family or responsibilities of men and women in family filmed in the dramas as they compare it with themselves. In reality, they are living in a cultural environment where the displayed family values are respected; hence, they themselves understand the values and accept the values as a part of their way of life. Especially, female audiences who tend to make comparisons based on what they have experienced or are expected to face in the future with the role of a wife and a mother in Vietnamese society. The viewers make a connection between what is conveyed in the series and their actual lives. Additionally, through watching Thai and Filipino dramas Vietnamese audiences can make sense and recognize the differences between Thai and Filipino customs with Vietnamese customs, for example, when they saw Thai and Filipino's greetings or wedding rituals. It can be seen that the audiences, through consuming the soap operas, make sense of the cross-cultural comparisons by reflecting on what they watched in the series with the ways that they live and experience in their everyday life. Thus, consuming Thai and Filipino television series can truly provide perceptions of reality about these two ASEAN members for Vietnamese audiences, which help to promote the people-to-people integration process attributed to the efforts of citizens in the region.

It can be assumed that the perception of similarities and differences after consuming Thai and Filipino dramas among Vietnamese audiences contribute to motivate regional cultural integration process attributed by ASEAN citizens. Cultural integration is considered to be the hardest task for ASEAN because this region is well known for its diversity in history, politics, language

and culture. The transnational media flows from Thailand and the Philippines and the consumption of their dramas can partly help to promote the cultural integration by providing an understanding for Vietnamese audiences toward these countries. However, at the same time, it reveals challenges in narrowing the competitive gap in cultural industries among ASEAN member states, specifically between Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines in creating a sense of belonging to the ASEAN Community for regional citizens within the context of a diverse Southeast Asia.

## Conclusion

Transnational flows of cultural products from Thailand and Philippines into Vietnam opens a regional market for culture. On the one hand, they economically help to promote flows of cultural commodities in Southeast Asia in accordance with the context of the AEC. On the other hand, they provide a base to build up the connection between people in the region because they embed ideas and social messages into images. Through watching Thai and Filipino soap operas, Vietnamese audiences can generate an understanding on those two nations and can especially recognize both cultural affinity and cultural differences between Vietnam and Thailand and the Philippines. It is also evident that the regionalization process in Southeast Asia can be promoted not only through top-down integration which accentuates the roles of member states with leader commitments but also through integration driven by people that appreciates the contributions of citizens in member nations. In order to promote regionalization among ASEAN member states, it is necessary for citizens in each ASEAN member state to establish the awareness of belonging into the region. The consumption of intra-regional visual media products is a

good way to solace the geographical distance and pull regional citizens closer together when they can perceive an understanding on society and culture of other ASEAN members through images, ideas and emotions shown on screen.

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