Regionalization through Media Consumption

Consumption of Thai and Filipino Soap Operas
by Vietnamese Audiences

Nguyen Thi Tu Anh

Consortium of Development Studies in Southeast Asia (CDSSEA)
Publication Series

Series Editor: Chayan Vaddhanaphuti
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About the series

The Consortium of Development Studies in Southeast Asia has drawn on primary postgraduate research undertaken for theses from the master's programs of Asian Institute of Technology's Master of Science in Gender and Development Studies (MGDS), Chiang Mai University's Master of Arts in Social Science (Development Studies) (MASS); and the Chulalongkorn University Master of Arts in International Development Studies (MAIDS). Scholarships for the students of CDSSEA has been generously provided by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada. With a diversity of academic approaches (gender studies, political science, social sciences), the individual works of this collection have in common a focus on the increasing interconnection and regionalization of the five mainland Southeast Asian countries (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam), and examine these exchanges and encounters within the context of the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS).

The publication series engages with physical and social mobility, boundary crossing, and the construction of ethnic identities. Within these concerns, the series also addresses issues of social, cultural and environmental sustainability, and the ways in which livelihoods are sustained and transformed in the mainland Southeast Asian sub-region. The series seeks to strike a balance between the experiences of urban and rural life and examine the rich variety of responses and adaptations to regionalization and globalization.

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

Nguyen Thi Tu Anh

RCSD

The Regional Center for Social Science
and Sustainable Development
Chiang Mai University

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Series Foreword

The Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at Chiang Mai University has extended its publication program to include Master's dissertations from The Consortium of Development Studies in Southeast Asia (CDSSEA). The CDSSEA series covers mainland Southeast Asia: Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, and regionalization, development encounters and exchanges within the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS).

The CDSSEA program brings together resources and expertise from three of Thailand's leading institutions offering Master's degrees in development studies: Chiang Mai University's Master of Arts in Social Science (Development Studies) (MASS); Chulalongkorn University's Master of Arts in International Development Studies (MAIDS); and the Asian Institute of Technology's Master of Science in Gender and Development Studies (MGDS). Although the Consortium's program focuses on the relationship between development studies and social sciences, each of the programs has a different emphasis. The Chiang Mai degree focuses on social sciences and anthropological perspectives, with research interests in environmental and resource management, food security and local livelihoods, labour migration and trans-border issues, ethnicity and development, health, tourism, and agrarian transitions. Chulalongkorn's program concentrates on the political dimension of development, including democratization, human rights, conflict resolution, international and civil society development organizations, community development and globalization. The Asian Institute of Technology focuses on the relationships between gender and development—including women's rights, civil society, and gender dimensions of urbanization and industrialization.

The CDSSEA program has a practical dimension, building leadership capacity in mainland Southeast Asia's regional development, bringing together postgraduate students, encouraging debate, and promoting the rethinking of development alternatives in such areas as social equality, justice and participation, environmental and economic sustainability, and community development. In this regard, a major objective is to develop the knowledge and skills of development practitioners and to enhance the quality and effectiveness of policy-making and its implementation in the region.

The publications in this series—selected from the CDSSEA Master's program—are designed to express this diverse range of interests in development studies and regionalization, and to emphasize the relationships between empirical and theoretical research, policy-making and practice.

Victor T. King, Senior Editorial Adviser,
Critical Perspectives on Regional Integration Series

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Abbreviations

ABS-CBN	Alto Broadcasting System - Chronicle Broadcasting Network
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AEC	ASEAN Economic Community
ASCC	ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community
ASEAN	The Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CMU	Chiang Mai University
CP	Chính phủ (Government)
DOTC	Department of Telecommunications and Communications
DTH	Direct to Home
DTT	Digital Terrestrial Television
ECPR	European Consortium for Political Research
GMA	Global Media Arts (Network)
HCTV	Hanoi Television
HTV	Ho Chi Minh City Television
IMC	International Media Joint Stock Company
IRRI	International Rice Research Institute
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
JAMCO	Japan Media Communication Center
KOFICE	Korea Foundation for International Culture Exchange
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
MBC	Middle East Broadcasting Center

MTRCB	Movie and Television Review and Classification Board
MV	Music Video
NECTEC	National Electronics and Computer Technology Center
NLD	Người Lao Động (The Laborer)
NTC	National Telecommunications Commission
OBS	Observatorio
SCTV	Saigontourist Cable Television
TCDC	Thailand Creative and Design Center
TFS	Television Film Studios
THVL	Truyền Hình Vĩnh Long (Vinh Long Television)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
US	United States
USA	United States of America
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	United States Dollar
VCTV	Vietnam Cable Television
VFC	Vietnam Television Film Center
VNM	Vietnam Material
VNNIC	Vietnam Internet Network Information Center
VOV	Voice of Vietnam
VTC	Vietnam Television Corporation
VTV	Vietnam Television

Glossary of Terms

De Facto	Existing in fact, although perhaps not intended, legal, or accepted
De Jure	Having a right or existence as stated by law
Đổi Mới	Name given to the economic reforms initiated in Vietnam in 1986 with the goal of creating a "socialist-oriented market economy".
Lakorns	Thai soap operas
Loy Krathong	A festival celebrated annually throughout Thailand
Mở Cửa	Open Door Policy of Vietnam Government
Songkran	Thai New Year's festival
Telenovelas	A type of limited-run serial drama originally produced in Latin America that has become popular in European, Asian, and other global television networks
Teleseryes	Filipino Television Drama
Tuk Tuks	Three-wheeled mean of transportation in Thailand

Lakorns / Telesyres mentioned in-text

Leud Hong	(Phoenix Blood)
Jam Loey Rak	(Defendant of Love)
Ngao Asoke	(Asoke's shadow)
Reuan Pae	(The Boathouse)
Kaew Lom Pet	(Glass Encircles Diamond)
Song Pradtana	(Two Desires)
Kularb Satan	(Devil's Rose)

Full House

Temptation of Wife

Stairway to the Heaven

Nong Mia　　　　　　　　(My Wife's Sister)

Abb Rak Online　　　　　(Secret Love Online)

Alalayan Ang Puso Ko　　(Be Careful with My Heart)

Kung Aagawin Mo Ang Langit　　　(Losing Heaven)

Magkaribal　　　　　　　(Rivals)

Lobo　　　　　　　　　　(She – Wolf: The Last Sentinel)

Tayong Dalawa　　　　　(The Two of Us)

Dahil May Isang Ikaw　　(Destined Hearts)

Walang Hanggan　　　　(My Eternal)

Habang *Kapiling Ka*　　　(While I'm with you)

Impostora　　　　　　　(The Impostor)

Dyesebel

Babaeng Hampaslupa　　(The Poor Heiress)

MgaNagbabagang　　　 (Roses and Thorns)
Bulaklak

Glamorosa

Kahit Isang Saglit　　　(A Time for Us)

Pangako Sa'yo　　　　　(The Promise)

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Nguyen Thi Tu Anh

Map of Region
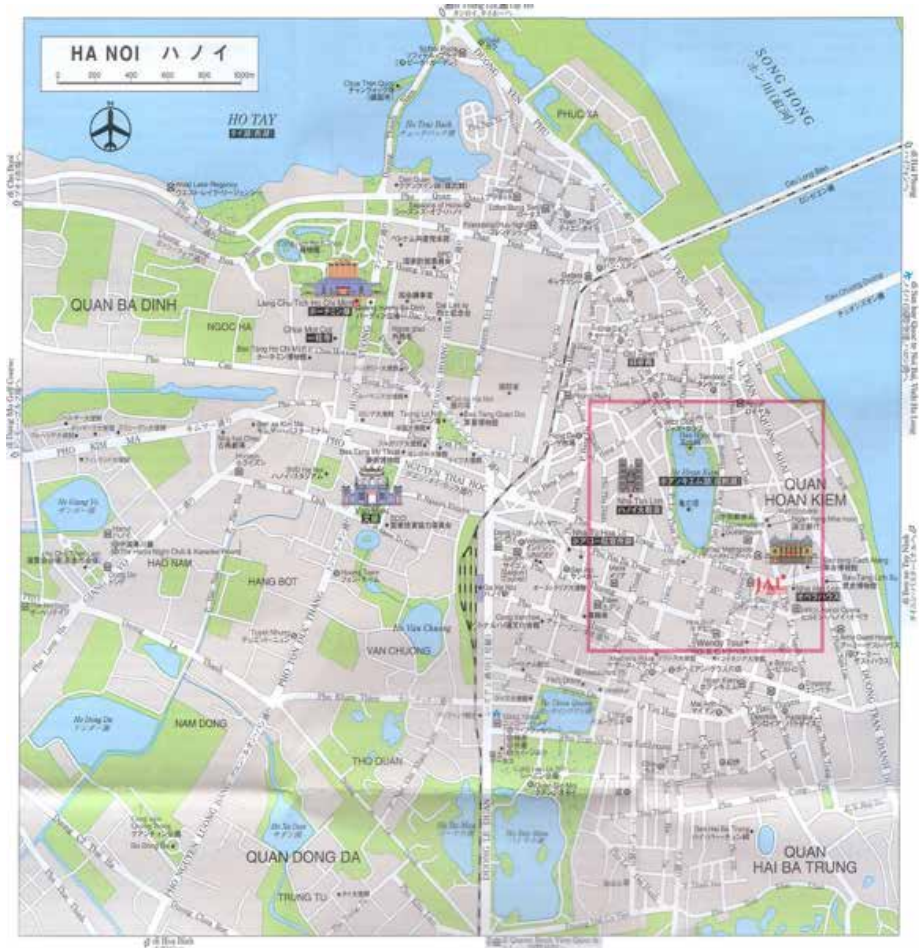
Map of Field Site in Hanoi (*Image Source: Orange Smile, 2017*)

Map of Field Site in Ho Chi Minh City *(Image Source: Vietnamitas En Madrid, n.d.)*

Chapter 1

Introduction

Research Background

The Context of Vietnam after Doi Moi

Since the 1986 *Doi Moi* (which translates directly to "Renovation") economic reforms, Vietnam has overcome the socio-economic crisis and become a middle-income country, opened to the outside world, embraced globalization, and deeply engaged in the international community (Nguyen, 2013). Since being an isolated country in the 1980s, Vietnam has changed to become an increasingly dynamic and active player on the international stage by being a member of many important multilateral regional and international institutions, and made positive contributions to developments in the Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Asia-Pacific regions (Nguyen, 2013). In particular, the year 1995 marked the milestone when Vietnam became the seventh member of The Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN. Naya and Plummer claim that Vietnam's accession to ASEAN has important real and symbolic value (1997). It is a key component of Vietnam's emerging economic reform strategy: that of integrating into the global market place (Naya and Plummer, 1997).

Globalization has led to a profound transition in Vietnam's entertainment industry. It has become more diverse and complex with the import of cultural products; and a remarkable change has been witnessed in the entertainment industry in Vietnam with the increasing dominance of pop culture in the 1990s

(Le, 2011). Attracting and satisfying the audience has become a strategy to gain competitive advantages of art organizations (Le, 2008). A number of recording and distribution companies established in the 1990s illustrate a wide demand for entertainment rising in Vietnamese society (Le, 2011). This period was also marked by a significant entrance of foreign music and films into the Vietnamese market, bringing advantages for the majority of the population to approach international mass media (Le, 2011). Hayes also indicates that from the early 1990s, a significant number of videos from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and the United States of America (USA) entered Vietnam; and young Vietnamese people particularly, started embracing the new types of music, dance and drama flowing into the country (2014). Korean popular culture (also known as K-POP or Korean Wave) is a notable example that also entered Vietnam in this period. Korean dramas have been recorded as gaining increasing popularity in Vietnam since 1997, which provided a base for the booming of Korean popular cultural product markets (Suh, Cho and Kwon, n.d). Until now the popularity of Korean popular cultural products remains high in Vietnam.

The consumption of foreign cultural products in Vietnam has been assisted by the development of mass media, especially television (TV) and the Internet. In Vietnam, television is assessed as the most powerful and effective form of mass media, with 85 percent of the population watching TV every day, and it maintains the highest daily reach, with nearly 83 percent of people aged 15 to 54 watching TV for two hours a day (Vietnam Plus, 2012). Moreover, nowadays many families in Vietnam receive television signals by cable, satellite and terrestrial digital services. The strong development of cable and digital television has enabled households to watch at least 20 TV channels (Vietnam Plus, 2012). In some big cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, families have access to more foreign TV channels than Vietnamese channels (Vietnam Plus, 2012). In term of using the Internet, Vietnam first connected to the World Wide Web (the Internet) in 1991, but only since 1997 has the Internet been officially used and developed in Vietnam (International Telecommunication Union, 2002). By 2011, the country had 26.8 million netizens (users of the internet) out of a total population of 91.5 million people; more than one-third of the population used the Internet and around 95 percent of those people were between 15 and 24 years and living in urban Vietnam, mainly Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Cimigo, 2011).

The increase of television channels and internet service, in parallel with competition in the field of visual media to satisfy audiences' demand for entertainment content, created the way for Thai and Filipino drama series to enter Vietnam. This is due to two related reasons. First, according to the director of Song Vang - a Vietnamese film importer and producer - there are not enough Chinese and Korean dramas to satisfy local demand; hence, importers or TV channels in Vietnam have turned to films from other countries (Talkvietnam, 2013). In addition, Vietnamese audiences have been familiar with Chinese and Korean television dramas for a long time; in order to keep and attract more viewers, TV channels also competitively need new content to create new "taste" for the audiences. Second, according to Mr. Tran Minh Tien, the CEO of Lasta Company - a company providing media service in Vietnam - the quality of Vietnamese soap operas remains relatively low (Talkvietnam, 2013). Similarly, the director of Song Vang also commented that when compared with foreign dramas, Vietnamese television series are behind those of other countries in the region, both in terms of production and content (Talkvietnam, 2013).

Generally, the emergence of Thai and Filipino popular cultural content, particularly television dramas in Vietnam, can be viewed as part of Vietnam's transforming economy, opening to the world, and getting involved in global cultural products. Vietnam's participation in ASEAN has also provided more opportunities to promote economic collaboration and cultural exchanges between other ASEAN member countries. In addition, the advent of digital technology and media content, along with the companies' strategies to diversify local demand for entertainment, has led to changes in the broader consumption of Vietnamese people who today have come to consume diverse foreign cultural products.

Background to the Rise of Thai and Filipino Soap Operas in Vietnam

The primary background necessary to note is the diplomatic relations between Vietnam and Thailand and between Vietnam and the Philippines, as well as the strategy for the ASEAN Community establishment. As mentioned above, the coming of Thai and Filipino dramas to Vietnam is a result of the policy for integration of Vietnam into the international community, especially into ASEAN. Joining ASEAN in 1995 has opened up opportunities for Vietnam

to step-up economic integration and cultural exchanges with other ASEAN member countries, including Thailand and the Philippines. Vietnam officially established diplomatic relations with both Thailand and the Philippines in 1976 (Ly, 2012). The bilateral relations with those two countries have been strongly consolidated and developed since Vietnam's admission to ASEAN in 1995.

According to the Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the Kingdom of Thailand, bilateral trade between Vietnam and Thailand exceeded 4.2 billion US Dollars (USD) in 2006 (2007). Furthermore, in 2007, Thailand was ranked third in ASEAN and twelfth among 77 countries/territories investing in Vietnam (Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the Kingdom of Thailand, 2007). Vietnam and Thailand are known as the two biggest rice exporters in the world, and the two sides have agreed to conduct rice export co-operation in order to co-ordinate price policy and exchange market information. Vietnam and Thailand also collaborate in other fields such as culture, education, technology and healthcare.

In terms of diplomatic relations with the Philippines, the two countries (Vietnam and the Philippines) signed an agreement to establish a commission on economics, science and technology between the two governments and implemented four sessions up until 2008 (Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the Republic of the Philippines, 2007). Two-way trade reached 1.12 billion USD in 2006; and remarkably, the Philippines was ranked as fourth in ASEAN (after Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand) and twenty-sixth among the countries/territories investing in Vietnam (Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the Republic of the Philippines, 2007). In the agricultural and educational areas, Vietnam and the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) established relations in 1968. Since then, some Vietnamese agricultural experts have been trained in the Philippines by the IRRI, and about 60-70 percent of the rice planting area in Vietnam has applied technology from the IRRI (Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the Republic of the Philippines, 2007).

The co-operation between Vietnam and Thailand, as well as between Vietnam and the Philippines, in various fields provides conditions to facilitate the flow of products, including current cultural products between Vietnam and the two ASEAN countries. Furthermore, the establishment of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015 indicates a strong commitment of the

ASEAN leaders to transform ASEAN into a region with free movement of goods, services, investment, skilled labor, and freer flows of capital (AEC Blueprint, 2008). Along with the emphasis on building a regional economic community, ASEAN also attempts to promote the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), which guides the cultural integration of people in Southeast Asia region (ASEAN, 2009).

The ASCC Blueprint encourages the marketing and distribution of cultural products and services, and improving the capacity of national institutions to manage and develop the cultural industry by enhancing employment activities and commercialization of local cultural products/services in both domestic and international markets (2009). This policy is likely to promote free flows of cultural products, which are considered to be a means to enhance the international image and prestige of a country, among ASEAN nations (Acharya, 2008). Additionally, the spread of cultural products (music, films, comics, etc.) can be perceived as a crucial measure of regional interaction and identity (Acharya, 2008). Therefore, the ASCC Blueprint emphasizes the role of action to disseminate ASEAN culture, social traditions and values through the media, as well as promote exchanges of television programs to improve cross-cultural understanding among ASEAN member states (2009).

Today, while the popularity of Korean popular culture remains high, Vietnamese audiences have welcomed both Thai and Filipino television series. They positively receive cultural products from other ASEAN countries, not only from East Asia and the West, which have been familiar to them for more than a decade. Coincidentally, this phenomenon came at the same time that the AEC was focusing on and promoting deeper understandings and integrations among ASEAN. Thus, it can be said that recent flows of Thai and Filipino television dramas to Vietnam and the consumption of those series among Vietnamese audiences partly help to promote the ASEAN community building when they make economic links in the field of media between the three countries and more importantly, provide cultural understandings for the audiences about Thailand and the Philippines. This is in line with the aims of the ASEAN Community to improve connections between ASEAN citizens, particularly in those three nations.

In order to explore the effects of Thai and Filipino TV dramas on the perception of Vietnamese audiences toward these countries in the latter

chapters, the progress by which the cultural products that come to Vietnam and have been accepted in Vietnam also needs to be accounted for as essential background information. Around 2002, one Vietnamese television channel started to import a Thai TV drama, entitled *Leud Hong* (Phoenix Blood). The series gained good reception among Vietnamese audiences. However, after the series finished, Thai TV dramas seemed to disappear in Vietnam. It has only been recently that Thai television dramas, also known as Thai *lakorns*, made a come-back when cable TV channels such as: Let's Viet, Today TV, and SCTV 6, began to import and broadcast Thai dramas. Notably, 2013 marked the success of Thai series in Vietnam when they began to compete with Korean and Chinese soap operas, which had been daily household entertainment for a long time (Phuc, 2013). A number of Thai dramas were broadcasted and brought high audience ratings for those cable channels in 2013 such as the following: *Jam Loey Rak* (Defendant of Love), *Ngao Asoke* (Asoke's shadow), *Reuan Pae* (The Boathouse), *Kaew Lom Pet* (Glass Encircles Diamond), *Song Pradtana* (Two Desires), and *Kularb Satan* (Devil's Rose) (Hoang, 2014). Due to the popularity of these shows, the cable channels scheduled specific show times for broadcasting Thai soap operas (Hoang, 2014). For instance, since 2013, Let's Viet has chosen one or two fixed times among the 10:00, 19:30, or 21:30 time slots to broadcast Thai soap operas every day. Previously, Thai *lakorns* were broadcasted without any specific times, which made it difficult for audiences to arrange their time if they wanted to watch Thai dramas. With the current specific show times, Vietnamese audiences can easily follow Thai dramas on the cable channels. Now Thai dramas are regularly shown on the channels and all of them are dubbed in Vietnamese.

With the advent of digital technology, the past few years has seen a new phenomenon characterized by fans of Thai dramas beginning to subtitle their favorite series in Vietnamese and upload them onto the Internet. Several web pages, such as Kites.vn, SIAMovies.vn, and ChuonChuonCanhSen, were started by Vietnamese people with a love of Thai television series and have eventually established a translation team to create subtitles for Thai *lakorns*. Audiences visit those web pages, follow Thai series, and appreciate the efforts of the subtitling teams. Moreover, they give comments, sharing their wishes to keep watching Thai dramas and encouraging the teams of the web pages to keep doing translation and subtitles. These web pages upload the latest Thai drama series subtitled in Vietnamese and closely follow the newest series, episode-

by-episode. While the television channels mostly broadcast old series, which have been shown in Thailand a few years back, these web sites have an advantage of uploading new dramas. This makes young audiences prefer watching Thai soap operas from the websites, more so than from television.

As for the Filipino dramas, around 2011, some cable TV channels started to import Filipino series to broadcast, along with a number of Korean and Chinese dramas in order to diversify its programming content (Huong, 2013). Like the aforementioned Thai series, Filipino series have also gained positive reception among Vietnamese audiences. Currently, they have been able to compete with Korean and Chinese dramas, achieving good ratings on some TV channels (Huong, 2013). Generally, Filipino soap operas are broadcasted mainly on the cable TV channels of SCTV4, SCTV5, SCTV6 and Today TV and are dubbed in Vietnamese (Huong, 2013).

The website of Today TV, the channel which is considered to be the pioneer in broadcasting Filipino series, frequently introduces the content of upcoming Filipino dramas, such as the names of actors and actresses participating in those series and their showing times. It also creates an online space for audiences wishing to share their comments on the series, which is airing or has already been broadcasted. It can be seen that many viewers enthusiastically offer their feelings and opinions. They also give suggestions about which dramas the company should import. Reading through their comments, it seems that most of the audiences think that Filipino drama is interesting and, therefore, encourage the channel to air more Filipino series. Moreover, Filipino series are also uploaded on the Internet. However, unlike Thai *lakorns*, Filipino dramas are broadcasted on the TV channels before being uploaded on the Internet and are not updated with latest series on any web pages. Hence, Filipino series uploaded on the Internet keep Vietnamese dubbings previously implemented by the TV channels.

Statement of Research Problem and Justification

As mentioned, unlike Korean or Chinese dramas, which have already been familiar to Vietnamese audiences for a longer period, Thai and Filipino TV series have only recently gained recognition among Vietnamese audiences. With the rising popularity of Thai and Filipino television dramas, Vietnamese online newspapers have begun to analyze the reasons behind the success of

these dramas. Most of the articles agree that Thai and Filipino series are the "new wind" for the Vietnamese audiences (Anh, 2012). A significantly factor is that the costs for importing the Thai and Filipino dramas are much lower than the Korean series. With regard to the content, the articles point out that Thai and Filipino dramas contain content that is more familiar to the tastes of Vietnamese viewers. In other words, they are more proximate to the Vietnamese life.

These articles further comment that Thai *lakorns* tend to convey a simple storyline with a sequencing climax, in addition to the humor and skillful acting of beautiful actors and actresses (Hoang, 2014). Compared with Korean dramas in which audiences tend to like the second male lead more than the first male lead and the female's lead role is always central in the series, in the Thai *lakorns* the male lead dominates the story and female lead characters attempt to gain his attraction (Hoang, 2014). Moreover, the topics exploited in Thai series are more diverse, such as family relationships, class conflict, or the love obstacles of a couple. Furthermore, stories about homosexuality, sex among adolescents, or many other social issues are depicted on Thai TV series. Although these "sensitive" issues are represented in Korean and Chinese movies, Korean and Chinese television series do not portray such issues (Hoang, 2014). In addition, Thai soaps portray images about Thailand – a country with famous destinations for travelling (Hoang, 2014). Also, Thai producers are notably good at depicting special cultural features of Thailand on screen (Ngoc Huong and Tu Han, 2011). For instance, in many TV dramas, modern cars are always seen appearing in parallel with *tuk tuks* – a three-wheel vehicle which has become a symbol of Thailand.

Similarly to Thai *lakorns*, Filipino soaps attract audiences through the participation of many beautiful actresses and actors with "Western facial features" and good acting skills (Talkvietnam, 2013). Furthermore, the portrayal of female characters with personalities of meekness and devotion (such as, living their life for their loved ones) is close with the Vietnamese idea of a good woman. Filipino producers also create several sequencing climaxes in their series, which effectively perpetuate the audience watching the series (Giadinh, 2014). In addition, Filipino dramas are set in beautiful locations such as in the forests or beaches (Giadinh, 2014). Worthy of note is that Filipino producers actively promote their products in foreign countries, including Vietnam, by bringing actors and actresses abroad to meet fans (Huong, 2013). Some famous

actors and actresses also regularly appear on Today TV channel to promote their series, speaking both English and Vietnamese. This illustrates the attempt of Filipino series-makers to promote their products to the Vietnamese market (Talkvietnam, 2013).

In her study about the Thai cultural industry in relation to intra-Asia flows of popular culture, Siriyuvasak indicated that while the emerging outward flow of Thai cultural products began with the reputation of Thai movies exported to East Asia and the global market since the 2000s, the inter-Asia flow of TV dramas from Thailand is a recent phenomenon (2010). Since 2002, 21 Thai TV soap operas have been exported to Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Hong Kong, Taiwan, China and Vietnam (Siriyuvasak, 2010). Looking at the emerging outward flow of Thailand's TV series, Shim, Heryanto and Siriyuvasak stated that the situation of the "'weaker' cultural economy in Southeast Asia" may be in the process of changing, especially with the rise of Thai dramas in Southeast Asia and mainland China (2010, p.174). The broadcasting of *Battle of Angels* by Anhui Satellite TV in 2009 received favorable ratings and notable attention for Thai TV dramas in China, along with the size of the online fan community for Thai actors (Ke, 2011). Several Thai TV dramas have been aired in China, with *Track of Love* reaching the second highest in ratings on China Central Television's TV drama channel (CCTV8) in 2010 (Pajee, 2011). Thai TV series were initially imported by Chinese TV stations because of their competitive prices. Despite this, the prices of Thai TV soap operas have increased because of their popularity and are now almost on par with Hong Kong TV dramas, while still remaining cheaper than Korean TV dramas (Ke, 2011).

Chan presumed that Thai popular culture, particularly its TV dramas, could possibly become the next wave in the largest TV market in Asia (2011). Although it still faces problems and shortcomings, the Thai cultural industry may transform into a model for other Southeast Asian countries to export their cultural products (Chan, 2011). The appearance of Thai TV dramas in Vietnam is an evident showing of progress in a widening inter-Asia flow of Thai cultural products in the region. It contributes to promote the popularity of Thai popular cultural content (T-POP) in the region. Vietnamese audiences gain advantages from the flow when they can both enjoy and interpret Thai series, in order to get more knowledge and understanding about other ASEAN nations.

Unlike Thai cultural products, which have mostly been consumed by its own domestic market and have only been promoted to export to international markets recently, the Filipino cultural industry has focused on promoting its products to international markets for a long time. The Filipino government established a regulatory framework, which facilitates media industry with three major institutes: 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 Jr., 2005). With the supported framework, Filipino films are being recognized at international film festivals and also earning a few awards along the way. For TV programs in the Philippines, the capacity of capturing the highest percentage of people watching the programming is basic competition in TV broadcasting and a very important condition for the survival of big TV companies (Pasadilla and Lantin Jr., 2005). Therefore, the opportunity for TV broadcasting in the Philippines lies in expanding their TV viewership - both local viewers and international viewers, especially overseas Filipino contract workers and as well as Filipino immigrants (Pasadilla and Lantin Jr., 2005).

It can be seen that Filipinos of all ages have scattered across the world over the past few decades. Eugenio Lopez III, chairman and CEO of ABS-CBN (Alto Broadcasting System-Chronicle Broadcasting Network), which is one of the biggest TV firms in the Philippines, reveals that there are about seven million Filipinos working overseas at any one time (Hookway, 2004). Unlike other immigrant groups, Filipinos are more likely to work for specific jobs such as nursing, nannies or engineering as temporary employees rather than permanent ones in a new country. These Filipinos immigrants living in different regional countries keep closer ties with home than other diasporic groups (Hookway, 2004). Many Filipino migrant workers send monthly remittances to their families in the Philippines and also frequently return home between overseas jobs (Hookway, 2004; 2009). At this time, they become fans of shows broadcasting domestically on TV; hence, when they come back to their work abroad, they hope to be able to follow the Filipino TV programs. This is a great opportunity for Filipino TV companies to develop services in other foreign countries (Hookway, 2009).

In the Philippines, there are 21 local TV stations in Metro Manila and five major broadcasting firms. However, the only two local TV companies vigorously competing and capturing most of the TV viewers are ABS-CBN

and GMA, with a combined market share of 90.1 percent; ABS-CBN has a market share of 65.34 percent whereas GMA has a market share of 24.76 percent (Pasadilla and Lantin Jr., 2005, p.39). These two TV companies are also the pioneers for exporting TV programs in general (and soap operas in particular) to other countries. According to Hookway, they compete by bringing home-grown soap operas, chat shows and movies through broadband Internet connections to those Filipinos living and working abroad, and also the diaspora of Filipinos who have become citizens of other countries (2009). Both of the two biggest TV networks develop their own content, and therefore own the rights to broadcast their shows on any platforms.

Soap operas produced by ABS-CBN have been aired in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, and the network is also trying to enter markets in Latin America (Hookway, 2002). ABS-CBN develops their cultural products to meet international standards, while trying to make the products more accessible for foreign audiences (Hookway, 2002). For instance, when they produce soaps, they simplify names of characters in the series in order to make audiences in the nations outside the Philippines remember characters' names easier. Another strategy is that when they sell their series to Indonesian and Malaysian markets, the company is careful to keep away from sensitive issues relating to religion and politics as well as some other taboo themes of incest or heavy kissing.

Looking at the way the big TV networks in the Philippines promote their cultural products transnationally, Hookway presumed that under the globalization of popular culture, the country could become Asia's base for mass-produced TV entertainment, with markets spreading from Malaysia to Argentina (2002). The recent appearance of Filipino soap operas in Vietnam lies under the strategy of widening their TV viewership. However, inter-ASEAN cultural exchange needs to be additionally accounted for when it contributes to bringing about an advantageous flow of Filipino TV series to Vietnam.

The flows of Thai and Filipino soaps to Vietnam can partly be seen as a result of the efforts of these two countries' economic, cultural and political agendas in the context of promoting Southeast Asian community building. Media products are regarded as parts of economic, cultural and

political agendas. According to Acharya, cultural products can be a source of soft power when they are employed by dominant countries to advertise their international image and prestige, and are always attached to the specific political context (2008). Achieving soft power through the spread of cultural products aims to change the perceptions, preferences, interpretive frameworks, and emotions of the "recipient" (the viewer) (Chua, 2012). Looking at Korean media products as an obvious example, we can easily see that they contribute significantly to the Korean economy when they can be sold in many countries at a high price nowadays. Moreover, the growing interest in the Korean popular culture, especially TV dramas, attracts a significant number of foreign visitors travelling to the locations where their favorite series were filmed (Kim, 2007). Nowadays the adaptation of Korean mobile phones, fashion, cosmetics, food and lifestyles is widening in many Asian countries. This is partially due to the Korean government successfully promoting a beautiful national image to the world through supporting their media products to go global. In the past, national images of Korea were negatively attached to the de-militarized zone, division and political disturbances, but now such images are gradually being replaced by the success of trendy entertainers and developed technology (Onishi, 2005). Obviously, the popularity of Korean popular culture embeds positive Korean features in regional consumers' minds, which in turn creates positive attitudes and opinions about Korea. Thus, Korean pop culture could become an effective means of Korean soft power in the region (Chua, 2012). The growth and circulation of Korean popular cultural products in the Asian region has created awe and anxiety in neighboring nations, and has become a sweeping force for many Asian countries to revitalize and internationalize their local media industries (Shim, 2005). This impact can be illustrated by the remaking of original Korean dramas by producers from other Asian nations. For instance, both Thai and Filipino film producers remade the Korean soap *Full House*, and particularly, the Thai *Full House* remade version has enjoyed success in Southeast Asia and China. Furthermore, Filipino filmmakers also successfully remade other famous Korean drama stories, such as *Temptation of Wife* and *Stairway to the Heaven*.

It can be noticed that studies on the Thai and Filipino cultural industries mostly focus on analyzing their industries' characteristics and how their cultural products enter the intra-regional flows. The works indicate significant developments in the Thai and Filipino cultural industries when their cultural

products are not only consumed by their domestic audiences but also have gained remarkable positions in Asia. There are also a few studies looking at the audience reception towards Thai cultural products, which can be exemplified in Amporn's research on the consumption of Thai TV dramas among the Shan community in Burma or Yongye's work on the consumption of Asian series, including Thai series, among the Hmong community in Laos (2008; 2012). In this book, the consumption of Thai dramas is reported in comparison with Filipino series, all in relation to the process of regionalization in Southeast Asia with the target of building a common ASEAN Community. It is argued that the consumption of Thai and Filipino TV soap operas can help Vietnamese audiences gain understanding about the two countries, which partly contributes to the regionalization process driven by the people. This argument is based on two groundings. Firstly, it is indicated that mass media is a vehicle to imagine not only the nation, but also the larger space outside national borders, and transnational media allow for the construction of a new transnational subjectivity (Yang, 2002). Media helps audiences to move through great distances without physically travelling from local sites; therefore, media is seen as "…crucial components of transnationalism; stationary audiences in effect become transnational" (Amporn, 2008, p.32). As such, overcoming physical distances with geographical borders, Vietnamese audiences can have imaginations about Thailand and the Philippines through consuming their series. Secondly, in reference to the goal of building an ASEAN Community, it encourages more integration not only in the economic field (AEC) but also in the cultural area (ASCC) aiming to establish a regional identity (ASEAN, 1997). In order to motivate cultural integration, it is necessary to increase people-to-people contact among ASEAN member nations (ASEAN, 2009). It is difficult to motivate cultural integration with just the attribution of national governments in ASEAN countries with top-down policy (Esther et.al., 2014). Instead, the creation of a regional community requires substantial change by all, especially ASEAN citizens (Esther et.al., 2014). The regionalization process becomes more practical with the participation of citizens in ASEAN countries. For example, the media flows from Thailand and the Philippines to Vietnam promote inter-cultural exchange among the three countries and especially provide an opportunity for citizens in Vietnam to participate in the process of regional cultural integration through consuming the products.

It is due to the points mentioned above, that an in-depth study of the media flows from Thailand and the Philippines to Vietnam is particularly

interesting. While in fact Vietnamese viewers retain their interest in watching Korean and Chinese series, the recently increasing popularity of Thai and Filipino television series demands research attention. This book seeks to explore the perceptions of Vietnamese audiences towards Thai and Filipino dramas, and further how and to what extent viewing Thai and Filipino dramas can generate perceptions about the region in the context of the AEC.

Conceptual Framework

The framework is based on concepts of transnational media flows, consumption, cultural proximity, cultural affinity and reflexivity. By employing these concepts, it is hoped that knowledge of transnational Thai and Filipino soap operas in Vietnam and the consumption of the cultural products among Vietnamese audiences will be expanded.

Studying the concept of transnational media flows helps to increase understanding of general institutions that facilitate the flows of Thai and Filipino TV series to Vietnam. It is seen as a broad context for the rising phenomena of these dramas in Vietnam. The concept of consumption provides possible aspects that can be employed to approach viewers. It is a means to help identify the process that Vietnamese audiences generate understanding of Thailand and the Philippines after watching their soap operas. This is expected to provide an answer for the question of whether or not popular cultural products, particularly TV dramas, are able to advance Vietnamese audiences' knowledge of a region. Applying the notion of cultural proximity, cultural affinity and reflexivity will operationalize Vietnamese viewers' perceptions towards the other two ASEAN nations of Thailand and the Philippines through consuming their series.
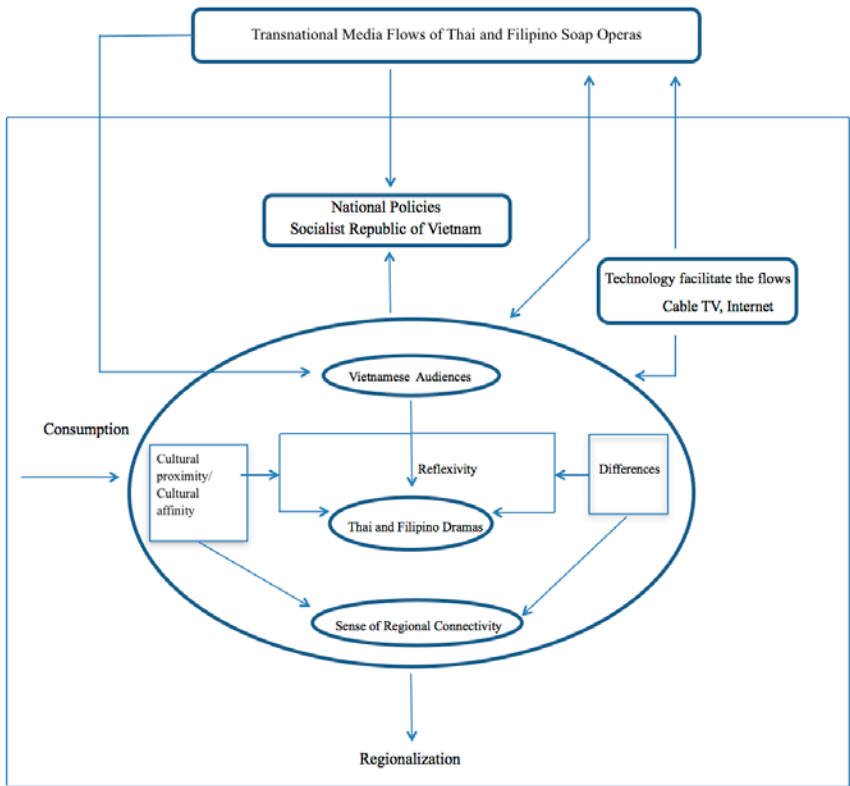
Figure 1.1: Conceptual Framework of the Study (Image Source: By the author)

Research Methodology

Research Site

This research was implemented in urban areas of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the two biggest and most developed cities in Vietnam. These cities have the highest concentration of cable TV and Internet users in the country. Thus, people living in the cities have access to many foreign media products, including Thai and Filipino dramas. In fact, nowadays, many households in rural areas have cable TV and Internet connection. Therefore, it is expected that there are a number of people in rural areas in Vietnam who also know and watch Thai and Filipino series. The evidence is that many interviewed audience

members in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City indicated that their relatives living in other towns follow *lakorns* and *teleseryes* (Filipino television dramas) through cable TV channels. However, according to a survey implemented by GALLUP, although in Vietnam cable TV and the Internet have been brought in rural areas, these kinds of media are so far concentrated in the central areas of big cities, especially in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (2013). Moreover, these two metropolises are located in different regions in Vietnam, Hanoi in the north while Ho Chi Minh City in the south. The two regions have their own characteristics. For example, while Hanoi has four seasons of spring, summer, autumn and winter, Ho Chi Minh City has dry and rainy seasons. While Hanoi people do not like eating sweet and spicy food, people in Ho Chi Minh City prefer sweet and spicy food. It could be said that living environment and styles in Ho Chi Minh City are closer with Thailand. Therefore, it is easier for people living in Ho Chi Minh City to feel closer to Thailand than those from Hanoi and this affects their interpretations to *lakorns*. As such, choosing the research sites in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City provided an advantage for the researcher to approach people for interviews and to develop an overview on the popularity of *lakorns* and *teleseryes* in the two different regions in Vietnam.

Furthermore, cable TV channels which broadcast Thai and Filipino dramas, and Internet pages which upload Thai and Filipino series were included as research sites. The cable TV and the Internet are different modes for watching the dramas. Both of them transmit contents of *lakorns* and *teleseryes* to the audiences through visual imagery. However, the initiative level that TV and the Internet provide for the audiences is different. If the audiences choose to watch the series from the cable TV they have to follow the series in accordance with broadcasting schedules given by the channels and no matter what they like or do not like, they have to watch all parts and episodes of the dramas, which are aired on TV. In contrast, the audiences can actively control time and contents they expect to watch on the Internet. They can arrange their own free time to watch the dramas. Besides having internet connections at home, audiences can access the Internet in many public places through smartphones, iPad, tablets, laptops and notebooks with 3G functions and Wireless connections. Thus, they can theoretically watch Thai and Filipino dramas whenever they want. Moreover, the audiences can skip any parts or episodes in the series that they do not like watching if they follow *lakorns* and *teleseryes* on the Internet.

On the Internet, it is known that there are loads of foreign dramas uploaded. Hence, it can be said that Thai and Filipino series uploaded and updated on various web pages and many audiences choosing to watch the series on the Internet, partially reflects the popularity of *lakorns* and *teleseryes* in Vietnam nowadays. For *lakorns*, choosing the source to watch affects the perceptions of the audience towards Thailand. As indicated previously, the cable TV channels usually airs old Thai series originally produced a few years earlier while some Internet sites update the latest dramas. Thus, images on Thailand in the *lakorns* broadcasted on TV are old and not updated, compared with those aired on the Internet. This leads to different perceptions towards the country because the audiences watching the Thai dramas have different points of time settings. Nonetheless, nowadays, the cable TV channels attempt to broadcast Thai and Filipino series whose originally production times are in line with the present time, in order to capture more viewers and improve competitive strength.

Unit of Analysis

In this book, the consumption of Thai and Filipino series among Vietnamese audiences is discussed to find out how the flows of these dramas are facilitated to come to Vietnam. More importantly, how Vietnamese audiences perceive Thailand and the Philippines in relation to national images, culture and gender through consuming their cultural products is explored. Therefore, the units of analysis in this research are audience interpretation, content conveyed in Thai and Filipino soap operas and the distribution networks of these media products in Vietnam.

Level of Analysis

In examining the impacts of transnational media in Vietnam, this research explores the consumption of Thai and Filipino soap operas on two fronts - national and transnational. On the national level, the study seeks to understand how these series are currently known and how they have become popular to audiences. On the transnational level, it wishes to explore how consuming transnational dramas shapes the images of the two ASEAN countries in Vietnamese viewers' minds.

Data collection

Secondary and Primary Data Collection

Secondary data: This comprised a variety of published documents (foreign books, articles, theses, and internet articles) to gain understandings about the development of the context in Vietnam and within Vietnamese audiences and also to find out general information about Thai and Filipino dramas, as well as viewers.

Primary data: This was collected in the field, using various methods; including observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews and group discussions. The data was gathered from 36 interviewees: general audience members, producers and members of websites making Vietnamese subtitles for Thai series, a translator working for a private company who co-operates with the cable channel Today TV and cable TV channel Let's Viet's staff members. As this book looks at both TV and Internet sources in airing Thai and Filipino series, the interviewees' ages ranged from 19 – 30 because the audiences at these ages usually interact with both sources. In fact, there are many people over 30 years old watching Thai and Filipino dramas in Vietnam. However, they mostly follow the series on TV, rather than on the Internet. Many of them access the Internet every day for different purposes but it is rare for them to spend time watching the dramas on the Internet.

In Hanoi, my interviewees were only general audiences, while in Ho Chi Minh City, the interviewees included all general audiences, producers and members of websites making Vietnamese subtitles for Thai dramas, the translator and Let's Viet's staff. The reason for this is that the translator, staff, website producers and members are mostly living, studying or working in Ho Chi Minh City and the TV channels which broadcast Thai and Filipino dramas are also located in this southern city.

General audiences: Interviewing these consumers aimed to explore how popular Thai and Filipino series are. These viewers consume pop cultural products (TV dramas) as a leisure activity in their free time after they accomplish their main work of the day. The ages of the casual audience members who were interviewed were around 19-30. Most of them had educational backgrounds of bachelor's degrees. They were students, shop sellers, clerks, and office staff in private companies.

In-depth interviews were applied using a guiding set of questions to carry out unstructured interviews with the audience members. Twenty-four casual audiences, including 12 people in Hanoi and 12 people Ho Chi Minh City were interviewed. The researcher also used participatory observation method by spending time to observe and watch Thai and Filipino dramas with some of the audiences in Hanoi. The researcher visited their homes and also their work places, in order to know in detail which source they can find and watch the series, and to understand how Thai and Filipino dramas are interpreted individually and collectively in relation to their social lives.

Audiences – Producers and members of websites making Vietnamese subtitles (for Thai series): As mentioned, while the TV channels broadcast mostly old Thai dramas, several web pages make subtitles and upload the latest Thai series on the Internet. It is not the same for Filipino dramas. Those uploaded on the Internet have all been previously broadcasted on the TV channels. In addition, Filipino series are not updated like Thai series on the Internet and those uploaded on the Internet keep the Vietnamese dubbings done by the TV channels. The producers and members of the websites making Vietnamese subtitles for Thai *lakorns* are a specific consumer group within a broad audience population. They are the ones who love watching Thai dramas. Their ages are around 19-23, and they are students at various universities or colleges. Those who make subtitles have capacities of using Thai or English fluently and using technology, both of which help them translate and upload the newest Thai TV dramas on their web pages.

The researcher met with both producers and members of some of the websites, as well as the producer of the ChuonChuonCanh Sen Facebook page in Ho Chi Minh City. The group discussion method was used with five members of the SIAMovies.vn page to explore their perceptions toward the popularity of Thai series in Vietnam and their diverse interpretations on the aspects of gender, culture and national image after they consume Thai series. The discussion was implemented based on the questionnaire for casual audiences. For the two key informants (who are the producers and at the same time administrators, members and casual audiences) of the two web pages, in-depth unstructured interviews were applied in order to understand their motivation for establishing the pages, the way they manage subtitling and communicating with the page members, their ideas on the future status of Thai dramas in Vietnam and also their interpretations towards *lakorn*. Therefore, the same set

of questions for casual audiences was used and more queries were added regarding the establishment progress of their websites and challenges in managing the pages.

Audiences – The TV channel Let's Viet's staff: This channel does not broadcast Filipino dramas. Five staff members who were responsible for translating Thai series before broadcasting them on the channel were 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. They can speak Thai fluently. They are also both casual audience members and "avid" fans of Thai series. Their ages were around 25-30.

The group discussion method was used to explore their views on the context that today in Vietnam there are many cable channels airing Thai TV series, including the channel they are working for. At the same time, their interpretations on gender, culture, and national image of Thailand could be gathered with more details than the casual audiences. As their background was Thai Studies, they had plenty of existing understanding of Thailand before working with the series. Hence, they could concretely describe cultural features of Thailand, which they can see through watching Thai TV dramas. The discussion was based on issues mentioned in the questionnaire for the casual audiences and more informative questions were added relating to strategy of importing Thai *lakorns* of the channel, partners of the channels, rating of Thai dramas and their predictions on the future position of *lakorns* in Vietnam.

Lastly, the translator working for a private company who co-operated with the cable channel Today TV - the "pioneer" channel in broadcasting Filipino series in Vietnam - was a key informant. She was an audience of both Thai and Filipino TV series. An unstructured in-depth interview was conducted with her with the set of questions for the casual audiences. The conversation with her helped to understand her comparative receptions towards Thailand and the Philippines after watching their dramas. More importantly, she provided an explanation about the current popularity of Filipino series, specifically on Today TV, and the reason why Filipino series are not subtitled in Vietnam and updated on Internet like Thai dramas.

Data Analysis

Similar to data collection activities, data analysis focused on data provided by the informants, including casual audiences, producers and members of the websites making subtitles for Thai series, the translator working for a private company who co-operates with the Today TV cable channel, and the Let's Viet cable TV channel's staff. The analysis followed the conceptual framework shown above. All of the data collection and fieldwork observations were classified and reflected upon, and all explanations in this study were based on the research questions and objectives.

Chapter 2

Literature Review and Theoretical Concepts

Transnational Media Flows

Over the last few decades, media flows have increased across the world due to the increasing mobility of the globalization era. The "dominant flow" coming from the US-led West has been known for long time. It creates what is termed as "Americanization" or "McDonaldization", which refers to a great symbol of America's transnational corporate power and way of life (Ferrari, 2007, p.35). The emergence of this cultural homogenization is tightly accompanied with economic supremacy, and is often called "cultural imperialism" in neo-Marxist terms. Therefore, many studies on Western media have been done, especially on the dominance of American media flow to the rest of the world.

Thussu, in *"Media on the Move"* appreciatively indicates that the United States is the world leader in exporting cultural products and its entertainment industry is one of its biggest export earners (2007); its film industry is a key reason for US domination in the global entertainment market. Hollywood movies are aired in more than 150 countries worldwide and have a dominant market share in most countries; American TV programs are seen in over 125 nations (Miller *et al.* 2005). Lu emphasizes that the active role of the USA government is a crucial factor contributing to its domination in the global cultural industry and the promotion for American culture abroad (2013).

Europe has continuously been the largest market for the distribution of American film and television content (Thussu, 2007). However, although the USA is still the leader in selling TV programs to the rest of the world with more than 70 percent of all sales, Britain is the largest exporter of television formats in the world and also leads Europe in general media exports (Thussu, 2007).

Along with the dominant flow, media landscape in the world has witnessed the rise of non-Western media flows, which can be referred to as "contra-flow", over the last few decades. According to Kavoori, "contra-flow" can be understood as "the semantic and imaginative referents for the institutional, cultural and political matrix of a world framed by processes of global cultural power and local negotiation: a world experienced through the identity politics of nations, individuals and cultures and negotiated through contestations of locality, nationality and global citizenship" (2007, p.49). Nowadays, global media flows are a two-way movement, which not only come from the West to the rest of the world, but are also derived from the less powerful regions of the world (Kavoori, 2007). The development of digital technology, satellite technology, broadcasting networks, and the physical movement of people around the world have promoted the growth of media flow from non-Western countries to the Western countries (Thussu, 2007). The contra-media flows can be exemplified as such of the widening of the Indian media industry – known as Bollywood - the spread of Latin American *telenovelas* (series dramas produced in Latin America), and the expansion of the geo-cultural pan-Arabic entertainment network, MBC (Cunningham and Sinclair, 2001; Thussu, 2007). As the contra media flows have been strongly emerging, many media scholars have started paying attention to study this situation.

With respect to transnational contra media flows in Asia, Japan has been positioned as a strong cultural industry. Iwabuchi, in his reputed work *"Re-centering globalization"*, studied the significant increase of Japanese popular culture (J-pop) consumption in the regions of East and Southeast Asia beginning in the early 1990s, and driving hitherto domestically contributed to orient Japanese cultural formation to become more extroverted (2002). By looking at the diffusion of Japanese commercialized popular culture, especially TV dramas and popular music in Tokyo, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Taipei, and Hong Kong, Iwabuchi indicates that popular cultural forms in Asian contexts are an intertwined composition of global homogenization and heterogenization, which promote the orientation of indigenized modernity in East and Southeast Asia (2002).

While Japan had been one of the main dominant non-Western media flows in Asia throughout the 1980s and 1990s; beginning in 1997, an increasing amount of Korean popular cultural content - comprising TV dramas, movies, pop songs and their associated celebrities - started gaining significant popularity in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and other East and Southeast Asian nations (Shim, 2006). K-pop has been replacing J-pop through Asia for almost two decades, and its popularity still remains important today. Nowadays K-pop products not only concentrate in neighboring Asian nations but also reach as far as the United States, Mexico, Egypt and Iraq (Kim, 2007).

The success of K-pop beyond its national border is attributed to a combination of reasons, which come from "Korea's tragic history, the intensive of Korean emotive culture, and the non-threatening nature of its people" (Kim, 2007, p.132). The rise of the K-pop phenomenon contributes to the creation of a regional cultural manifestation in Asia against the long domination of Western culture (Dator and Seo, 2004). Similarly, Leung states that K-pop's popularity can be considered as a strong confirmation for the power of Asian modernity, in terms of economics and cultural development, which might challenge the threat of the Western dominant media powers (2004).

In this book, the transnational mobility of Thai and Filipino dramas to Vietnam is seen as contra media flows. It is previously shown that Thai and Filipino soaps have been emerging in Vietnam, while Korean dramas still maintain their popularity among Vietnamese audiences. In Southeast Asia, Thai series have become familiar to Vietnamese audiences for only the past few years whereas Cambodian, Laotian, and Burmese audiences have consumed them for a longer time. Similar to Thai soaps, Filipino series are currently known among Vietnamese people. However, Filipino dramas have been exported to many different regional countries as a competitive strategy between Filipino TV companies to grasp more and more viewers, and also in response to the demand of a large number of Filipino migrant workers and diasporas working and living abroad. The transnational flows of TV series not only make Vietnamese people's media consumption become more diverse but also contribute to widening regional knowledge for Vietnamese audiences.

Consumption of Transnational Media Flows

Trends in Media Studies

There are two main approaches in media studies: political–economic and cultural. Both of them 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 (Zanetta, 2013). The perspectives of political economy usually use macro-level analysis that focus on structural and institutional issues regarding exploitation, power and class, whereas cultural approaches often employ micro-level analysis to examine the generation of meaning (Zanetta, 2013).

Looking at studies on the popularity of K-pop in Asia as an example, it is known that most existing works on K-pop can be grouped into the two categories: the political-economic and the cultural (Yang, 2012). Similar to Zanetta, Yang in her research on the K-pop consumption among audiences in China, Japan and Taiwan, indicates that the political-economic approaches, whether critical or not, concentrate on analyzing structural or institutional backgrounds for the boom of Korean popular culture in Asia, and have contributed valuable understanding to K-pop's material base (2012). From the political–economic points of view, the rise of K-pop is seen as the result of recent capitalist development, or as a response to the 1997 economic crisis. Nonetheless, Yang argues that these perspectives are not sufficient in explaining the complex process of reception, which should be regarded as the main factor for the success of Korean cultural products in the receiving countries (2012). The authors who follow political-economic approaches, at best, show that audiences are passive and manufactured by cultural industries or media when they consume without much consideration to the products provided to them by cultural industries or media (Yang, 2012). Therefore, some media scholars look to cultural aspects of Korean cultural products to explore a clue to their success. They have paid more attention to the content; for instance, Confucian elements or traditional values in Korean TV series contribute to attract a large portion of the population in the receiving countries (Han, 2005). Along with the analysis of cultural contents, cultural tastes and the transnational reception process of the audiences have been studied and found to contain common elements with Korean popular culture (Yang, 2012).

Audience reception in media studies started to receive greater attention from the work of pioneering sociologist Stuart Hall. In contrast to the idea that mass media overpowers and manipulates audiences with standardized cultural commodities, Hall, in his article *"Encoding/Decoding in Television Discourse",* argues that audiences are more active towards the impacts of mass-produced culture, and textual meaning is not simply fixedly determined by the sender, but rather can be "decoded" by audiences in various ways (1973; Gao, 2012; Morley and Chen, 1996). This approach appreciates the role of audiences in consuming media products in the way that media consumers have control over the meaning of TV, popular music and film (Gao, 2012). Regarding the role of active viewers in watching television, Livingstone states that people are emotionally involved with television; they perceive television as "a bridge" to connect them to the rest of the world through a shared imagined community, through updating what is being taken in other places and through having common topics to talk with others in their everyday lives (2000).

Audience-Approach Studies on Media Consumption

In line with the active audience approach, Moores in *"Interpreting audiences: The ethnography of media consumption"* emphasizes that in order to explain the relationship between media genres and the social patterns of taste, it is important to account for the role of situational contexts for which the media is used and interpreted (1993). It can be understood in that way that media consumption is closely related to people's daily lives. Supporting this idea, Yang also states that people's media consumption tastes are differentiated according to diverse social factors, such as their socio–economic status and demographic characteristics (e.g. lifestyle and life experiences), in the era of information and post-modernism. Moreover, gender is also an important dimension in studies of media consumption (Yang, 2012). Moores analyzes many examples to explore the differences in media consumption between women and men, in order to examine the issue of relationships between gender, genre and media consumption (1993). Particularly, in the case of soap operas, it is indicated that to appreciate soaps, it is compulsory for social readers to possess a number of extra-textual competencies (Moores, 1993). Those extra-textual competencies include a basic understanding of generic rules, knowledge of a particular series' characters and history, and an ability as well as willingness to engage emotionally in the moral codes of personal conducts (Brundson,

1981). The last one is seen as the most crucial factor, and it is the skill that women are more likely to possess than men. It can be considered as a type of cultural capital that makes women have more interests in soap operas than men; or as Brunsdon states, the genre of soap opera in present conditions "textually implies a feminine viewer" (Moores, 1993; Brunsdon 1981, p.37).

Ahmet agrees with the point that soap operas, in general, have predominantly female audiences (2012). Hobson markedly emphasizes that women typically use soap operas as a way of talking indirectly about their own attitudes and behavior (2003). It is clear that many women experience viewing and talking with family and friends about soaps as a pleasurable experience (Ahmet, 2012). Furthermore, soaps are considered as "an example of women's literature that supports the status quo regarding women's place in the social order" (Ahmet, 2012, p.2). Yongye, in her research *"Hmong Dubbed Series: The Production and Consumption of Asian Dramas among Hmong Community in Lao PDR"* explores the idea that the Hmong women who consumed Thai and Korean series in dubbed Hmong language revealed the changes in their identity by comparing themselves to the characters portrayed in those dramas (2012).

Nonetheless, although soap operas are generally regarded as a genre particularly for women, it is aimed at a wider audience. The audience for soaps actually does comprise men occasionally (Ahmet, 2012). In a study about gender construction of young Filipino men and their serial drama connection, Bantugan found out that "the connection between male audiences and serial dramas lies deeper than a desire for entertainment. It lies at the very core of a man's being – in the union of his mind and heart – in his gender – which society helps construct" (2012, p.2). Bantugan indicated that most of the participants in his research were exclusive-heterosexuals, which contrasts with the notion that only men having tendencies towards non-exclusive heterosexuality are the most exposed to serial dramas. Moreover, the author also realized that most of the male audiences of dramas clearly "gave more attention to narrative format than relationship, character traits or values found in the serial dramas they watched – revealing a high stimulation from and significant concern for how a narrative is told" (Bantugan, 2012, p.6).

In the present study, the rise of transnational Thai and Filipino dramas in Vietnam is looked at from the political–economic and cultural approaches, but more focus is placed on the cultural aspects. From the political–economic

perspective, institutional factors are drawn that bring advantages for the free flows of products among the ASEAN network, including media products, particularly from Thailand and the Philippines to Vietnam. From the cultural perspective, how Vietnamese audiences generate understanding of Thailand and the Philippines through watching their TV serial dramas is explored. Amporn in her work on the consumption of Thai soaps among Shan communities in Burma shows that consuming Thai dramas shapes Shan people's imaginations about Thailand (2008). To Shan audiences, Thailand appears in the Thai series as a place where everyone possesses a cellphone and has a luxurious life in a nice house and driving a nice car (Amporn, 2008). The author argues that because Thai soap operas usually portray the lives of characters from upper class or rich families, it has led to the ways in which Shan audiences have come to see Thailand as a beautiful and modern place. Moreover, Amporn points out that the beauty and the modernity of Thailand in Shan viewers' minds have been linked with the development of new technologies and the economy. Thai dramas bring "an aspect of life – a world of unrestricted fulfillment of the consumerist imagination", which the Burmese local economy, under long-time military rule, has not yet been able to provide (Amporn, 2008, p.48).

Obviously, today under globalization and regionalization forces, media products are vehicles to bring the whole world to individuals. Consuming transnational cultural products is a way to help people fill up the physically trans-border distance and get to know the world. It is shown that very few studies have actually looked at the consumption of popular culture in Southeast Asia or examined the cultural impacts of the emerging ASEAN Community to people living in this region (Otmazgin, 2011). Looking at the regional flow of popular culture in Southeast Asia, especially in cities, helps provide empirical and theoretical understandings of how the regionalization process actually works.

According to Otmazgin, while studying the operations networks contributing to the regional dissemination and transnational consumption of popular culture reveals the collaboration between companies or individuals involved in regionalization process, the creation of transnational cultural bases, the distribution of products, and the policy of governments applied to drive the regionalization; examining specifically the transnational consumption of cultural commodities expressed with images, ideas, and emotions provides

new frameworks to understand feelings of proximity and belonging between people in Southeast Asia (2011). No one would deny that popular culture facilitates a special relationship and a commonly shared experience between consumers. The reality of people in Southeast Asia spending many hours every day watching TV, going to movies, and listening to music raises the concern that these practices have an effect on people's lives and perceptions (Otmazgin, 2011).

In line with this concern, this research focuses on examining the effects of inter–ASEAN cultural exchange on Vietnamese people's perception about Southeast Asia. Studying the impacts from the consumption of Thai and Filipino dramas among Vietnamese audiences reveals how ASEAN viewers perceive the region, in the senses of both commonalities and differences under the driving force of the regionalization process in building ASEAN community.

Cultural Proximity/Cultural Affinity and Reflexivity

The consumption of foreign TV serial dramas in one country results from the perception of audiences that those soap operas are both "close" and "different" with what audiences experience. Closeness is for audiences' understandings the context where stories in the dramas take place, while difference is necessary to engage audiences following the stories. The closeness refers to what is called "cultural proximity" and "cultural affinity". As a non-Western cultural flow, over the past decade, Asia has witnessed the popularity of K-pop replacing J-pop, where it remains in its crucial role today. Most scholars studying the popularity of K-pop agree that the huge consumption of Korean popular culture across the region is the result of the depiction of "cultural proximity" through its cultural products (Yang, 2012).

"Cultural proximity" and "cultural affinity" are assessed as major factors that determine the flow of cultural products across countries, and their competitions in international market (Suh, Cho and Kwon, n.d.). It is mainly argued that cultural values and characteristics of the home country are embedded in its cultural products and these values and characteristics are transferred to other cultures when the products are consumed in other regions (Shanahan and Morgan, 1999). Cultural proximity thesis emphasizes the view that local audiences actively consume foreign cultural products, which are relevant and close to their local customs/values. Cunningham and Jacka define

the notion of cultural proximity as "the theory which provides a hypothesis on how the audience will have preference for cultural products from countries with which they share cultural ties in recognition of their own culture" (1996, p.14). Regarding the notion of audience preference for culturally proximate texts, Straubharr 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 cultural proximate than those that are "less-proximate" (1991). By studying the Brazilian TV industry, Straubharr found that the popularity of Brazilian *telenovelas* in countries like Venezuela and Argentina were attributed to the similar Latin American cultural roots shared among those nations (1991). 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 is sometimes included: gender images, lifestyle, knowledge about other lifestyles, values, education, family, personal and group networks, and organizational affiliation (Straubhaar, 2003).

The establishment of geo-linguistic and geo-cultural TV markets provides undeniably empirical validity for the notion of cultural proximity. Other works have also indicated that local and intra-regional TV programs tend to be the most popular in any country or region (Lee, 1991). It is shown that high cultural proximity comprises and promotes active flow of cultural products between countries (Kim and Barnett, 1996). As a result, "the higher the cultural proximity or affinity is, the recipients of the cultural products show favorable response to foreign cultural products" (Suh, Cho and Kwon, n.d., p.4).

Iwabuchi indicates that the popularity of Japanese dramas among Taiwanese audiences lies in proximities of physical appearance (such as skin color), and the sense that Taiwan shares the same modern temporality with Japan (2002). The thesis of cultural proximity provides a theoretical foundation to explain the wide distribution of Korean cultural products in the Asian region (Richstad, 1998). Jung supported the idea when specifically indicating that Korean dramas provide a similar cultural proximity to many Asian nations (2009). It is clear that Korean series touch the right point of Asian sentiments, such as family-oriented values and respect for elders, which are very familiar in many Asian countries (Jung, 2009). Moreover, Korean dramas construct an

appearance and feeling of "Asianess" into the cultural content, and the "Asian Face" is a key feature of Korean popular culture for regional export (Siriyuvasak, 2010).

However, cultural proximity cannot account for the fact that audiences also wish to see the difference between themselves and what is shown on screen. It refers to the imagination of audiences analyzed in the above section. In *"Implications of Korean pop culture trends in Southeast Asia"*, Chua revealed that some audiences in Southeast Asia embrace a sense of difference at the societal level (2010). According to Thomas, Vietnamese youth living in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City see in Korean dramas their desired "future" (2004). For the Vietnamese youth viewers, the urban scenes portrayed in Korean series with the dominant feature of capitalist consumerist modernity are the "imaginary" and "imaginable" future that they can aspire to for themselves and for Vietnam as Vietnam is on the progress of liberalizing and marketizing its economy. In reality, Vietnamese audiences do not desire "Korean" culture for themselves per se, but regard it as a symbol of their capitalist-consumerist future.

In the case of Shan communities in Burma consuming Thai soaps, Amporn pointed out that the cultural proximity perceived by Shan people after they watch Thai soaps comes from the Shan belief system that they and Thai people share the same origins and are closely linked by culture, religion, language and history (2008). Moreover, while Bollywood and Hollywood movies provide a distance version of modernity, which may be less accessible or applicable for Shan audiences in their local situation, Thai soaps are more culturally proximate to Shan audiences. When they depict modernity, they still keep Asian cultural values by not presenting sexual scenes and respecting Buddhist morality. The modernity through the settings, the showing of new technologies and foreign products, the economic and material prosperity and the beauty of Thai actors/ actresses portrayed in Thai dramas are characteristic differences that attract Shan audiences. Through seeing the beautiful images and prosperous lives in Thailand on screen, Thailand becomes an "imagined space onto which Shans projects their hopes and desires", and "Thailand has effectively embodied the Shan's aspiration of modernity" (Amporn, 2008, p.49-51).

From all the points mentioned above, the question arises of whether or not the consumption of transnational popular culture products can create a

sense of regional connectivity or curiosity about the region in consumers' minds. The target to promote the regionalization process in ASEAN is the idea of establishing an ASEAN Community with three pillars: the AEC, the ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC), and the ASCC (ASEAN, 2008). The last of these is seen as the most challenging of the three pillars (Acharya, 2008). The idea of ASCC aims to bring regional interactions and identity building to the popular level, which contribute to broadening and deepening ASEAN regionalism (Acharya, 2008). The transnational flows of cultural products in Southeast Asian region, specifically the soap opera flows from Thailand and the Philippines to Vietnam are evidence for promoting ASEAN cultural integration. The regionalization in culture needs to be considered through the perception of people about the region both in commonalities and differences.

In fact, talking about cultural proximity in ASEAN has been far less visible. Southeast Asia is considered to be the most diverse region in the world. The countries in this region have different histories of nationalism. For instance, Thailand's nationalist goal was to protect the nation's independence through stability rather than revolution and "meant that Thais supported the status quo as centered in the royal family", whereas Vietnam and the Philippines gained independence through resistances to colonial powers (Rodell, 2007, p.22). Moreover, there are multiple ethnicities with different languages within each Southeast Asian country. These make the process for thinking of cultural proximity among people in the region become more difficult.

In order to get the perception of commonalities and differences depicted on transnational TV serial dramas, audiences need to interpret their texts by making reflections between what they are watching on screen and what they passed or are experiencing in their society and their social relationships. The process of making 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 in consuming media, as social actors (audiences) become conscious of and are able to reflect upon social life in ritual and other cultural performances, which are "reflexive in the sense of showing ourselves…arousing consciousness of ourselves as we see ourselves" (Ashley, 1990; Myerhoff, 1982, p.105). Thus, reflexivity can be understood as "re-examinations of the self and the self's relation to others and social issues" (Hu, 2008, p.116). According to Giddens, reflexivity is a crucial part that leads

to the self and self-identity in a modern society (1991). There are different levels of account for reflexivity (Lash, 1994). 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" (Lash, 1994, p.115). 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, p.115-116). It can be seen that the notion of reflexivity is 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 that depend on their living context and their experiences.

In a study on the practices of online Chinese fans of Japanese TV dramas, Hu realized that their written posts from a forum and their blogs were not only about Japanese drama itself, but also their reflections on the self, life, and reflective thoughts that could help to stimulate and develop individual growth (2008). Huang argued that through interpreting transnational media texts people reflect on existing norms in their own society and then to position or determine their stand (2008). In the same vein, Yamato, in the research on the consumption of Japanese popular culture among Malaysians, saw transnational media texts of Japanese cultural products as latent materials for Malaysian consumers to reflect upon and discuss the individual proximity in people, and existing social issues (2014).

The present study seeks to explore reflexivity of Vietnamese audiences on both similarities and differences between Vietnam and Thailand and the Philippines through consuming their soap operas. Both of the reflections on commonalities and differences help to generate understandings for Vietnamese audiences about the two regional nations. If the perception of cultural proximity makes the viewers quickly accept and become familiar with Thai and Filipino cultural products, then their reflexivity upon differences towards these two countries, on the one hand, reinforces the idea that Southeast Asia is a truly diverse cultural region where 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 links, which is essential in the progress of promoting regional cultural integration for the ASEAN Community.

Regionalism and Regionalization

The terms "regionalism" and "regionalization" are usually used interchangeably to describe the construction of regional entities (Camroux, 2006). However, it is necessary to have conceptual clarification in order to consider various dimensions implicit in the terms. Before defining "regionalism" and "regionalization", it is suggested to understand the concept of "region". An international "region" can be defined as a "limited number of states linked by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence" (Kacowicz, 1998, p.5). According to Pempel, "regionalism" can be understood as "a top-down process of government to government formation of institutions … and regionalization as the bottom-up process of cross-border cooperation driven by non-governmental actors" (2005, p.6). Kim also conceptualizes "regionalism" as referring to "State led projects of cooperation" whereas describing "regionalization" as "akin to globalization, referring to non-state driven – processes of integration" (2004, p.40). In the same vein, Wisnugroho emphasizes that "regionalism" refers to top-down governmental project and it is proceeded through intergovernmental negotiation and dialogue (2012). This process can be considered as a conscious, deliberate and purposive attempt implemented by national states in *de jure* regions to create formal agreements and mechanisms for dealing with common transnational issues (Wisnugroho, 2012). The author defines "regionalization" as actual processes of real integration, which pull people and tie economies together overcoming national political boundaries. This process could be based on societal integration, but most often considered in terms of economic integration resulted from investment and trade relationships. "Regionalization" creates a *de facto* region with transnational spaces that is not necessary a formal regional organization to flourish (Wisnugroho, 2012). However, in the researcher's point of view, it is not absolute for state/non-state distinctions in definitions of "regionalism" and "regionalization". Through reviewing the literature in international political economy, Camroux indicates that states in Asia have heavily engaged in processes of integration (2006). Moreover, lack of state capacity can affect these processes of regionalization (Hamilton-Hart, 2003). As such, it can be seen

that both state and non-state factors play important roles in the process of motivating integration.

Referring to the conceptual definitions above, the process of building the ASEAN Community with the coming of the AEC at the end of 2015 and the motivation for making deeper integration in culture and security among ASEAN countries in the long term is a process of "regionalism". National states in this region commit to serving for the establishment of a common Community. In this study, the process of "regionalism" is seen as a situational background for the flows of Thai and Filipino cultural products to Vietnam. Within this context, the researcher focuses on analyzing the process of "regionalization" taking place in the field of media among Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines. In the present study, this process is referred to co-operations among media organizations between Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines in order to satisfy the entertainment demand of Vietnamese audiences and to promote regional economic integration in the media field. More importantly, it is strongly purposed to find out the practical integration process attributed by Vietnamese audiences' consumption of Thai and Filipino TV series, which partially contributes to pull Vietnamese audiences closer to the two ASEAN countries.

Chapter 3

Transnational Media Products From Thailand and the Philippines to Vietnam

This chapter analyzes factors that facilitate the transnational flows of Thai and Filipino soap operas to Vietnam. The first element is policy established by the governments of Thailand, Philippines and Vietnam, which support media development. The second is the changing cultural context of Vietnam, with the Korean Wave in ebb and Vietnamese dramas not yet satisfying Vietnamese audiences' taste. These situations lead to competition between different TV channels in Vietnam in searching for and exploiting more foreign series to satisfy the entertainment demand of audiences. The flows of Thai and Filipino soap operas to Vietnam magnify the regional market for culture and increase regional circulation for cultural commodities, which contributes to the promotion of regional integration in the economy of the AEC.

Cultural Industries in Thailand and the Philippines

Thailand

As mentioned above, Thai cultural industry basically serves its domestic demand. According to Siriyuvasak, the Thai government has not paid attention on the export of cultural products; and therefore there has not been much

coherent public policy supporting this area (2010). The Thai government established three departments to take responsibility for promoting the film industry (Siriyuvasak, 2010). Firstly, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports is in charge of making a venue for international film screening and marketing, and for promoting tourism through destination filming in Thailand. Secondly, the Ministry of Commerce is responsible for promoting the export of Thai films and deals with the issue of intellectual property rights. Thirdly, the Department of Contemporary Arts and Culture, Ministry of Culture is tasked with distributing funds to support independent directors and the production of documentary film (NECTEC, 2008). Media content is politically controlled by the government - media independence is deeply affected when it is monopolized either by big corporations and the state or controlled under a state sponsor (Siriyuvasak, 2010).

Nevertheless, since the 2000s when Thai movies started to become recognized at international film festivals such as Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Hong Kong, Busan, and Singapore, the government awakened to a new economic opportunity and hence began exporting film and television dramas. This led to the enactment of a new law in 2008, the Film and Video Act by the National Legislative Assembly (Siriyuvasak, 2010). This new legislation relocated the Film Commission, which is responsible for regulating and providing license for film companies from the Police Department, and moved it to the Ministry of Culture. In order to promote the export of cultural products, the Thai government attempted to set out many strategies on capacity improvement and built an international production center under the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (Siriyuvasak, 2010).

The turn of the 21st Century marked a restructuring of media in Thailand, when legal framework supporting this area improved along with the process of privatizing and commercializing the media (Siriyuvasak, 2010). Specifically, the passing of the new Frequency Allocation Act of 2000 contributed to the liberalization of the broadcasting and telecommunications industries and made these two fields the focus of government policies since 2001. Media organizations began to privatize in 2003 under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. For instance, the Communications Authority of Thailand and the Mass Communication Organization of Thailand become public companies in the stock market; however the government still possesses major shares in these organizations (Siriyuvasak, 2010). In addition, the commercialization of state

television was further implemented. As an example, in 1997 the prime-time slot on Channel 5 owned and operated by the Royal Thai Army was opened to private concession (Siriyuvasak, 2010).

Notably, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra also implemented policies for the development of creative industries by establishing some organizations responsible for knowledge management and creative economy such as: Thailand Creative and Design Center (TCDC), and Thailand Knowledge Park (TKpark) (Siriyuvasak, 2010). This direction was reinforced and improved by the government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva in 2009 (Siriyuvasak, 2010). His government announced the "Creative Thailand" policy to cope with the recession of domestic and global economies (Siriyuvasak, 2010). The target of the policy is to develop the creative economy in six areas: "cultural heritage and bio-diversity, arts and culture, handicraft, media and entertainment industries and software, design and product innovation, promotion and support of the creative economy" (Siriyuvasak, 2010, p.17).

As a result of the policies supporting cultural industry, Thai cultural products have been prevalent in intra-Asia flows of popular culture. While Thai movies have gained the recognition of East Asian and global audiences since the 2000s, Thai soap operas have entered the intra-Asia flows very recently. However, Thai soap operas have gained some success in the market of Southeast Asia and mainland China because of a demand for alternative tastes (Mthai, 2015). The export of Thai TV series is mainly conducted by Exact and Scenario drama production, two of GMM-Grammy's[1] subsidiaries (Siriyuvasak, 2010). The companies own the copyright of TV dramas; therefore they can sell the right and reproduce the TV series for local and regional consumption.

According to Amporn, the broadcast pattern of Thai TV series is similar to the Latin *telenovelas*, in that they usually run for about three months, compared to American series that can last for years (2008). Thai *lakorns* are usually broadcasted every night at prime time, beginning around 8.30 after the

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1 GMM-Grammy is "a leader in fully integrated unique entertainment platform in Thailand comprised of music, media, movie, broadcasting and other biz who can produce and deliver high quality local contents in Thailand and expand into the region with full commitment to social development support". (Gmmgrammy, 2014).

news. Amporn indicates that there are six free-to-air channels[2] in Thailand, yet only three channels among them show prime time series: channel 3, 5 and 7 (2008). Channel 5 broadcasts an hour-long episode, while the other two channels show two-hours episodes including commercials. Channels 3 and 7 air two or three episodes, usually scheduled on Monday-Tuesday, Wednesday-Thursday, and Friday-Sunday. Notably, they premier three series simultaneously at any given time. Dramas on Channel 7 are known as market-oriented, which can be exemplified as "full of 'cat fighting' scenes, and present a visual grammar of lavish and luxurious settings, over-exaggerated acting, and melodramatic plots"; whereas the soaps in Channel 3 are assessed as more "realistic" and "the acting and settings are more 'natural'; and dramas aired on Channel 5 are seen as more "educated" to middle-class audience" (Amporn, 2008, p.44). Nowadays, as the Thai government promotes a transition from analog television broadcasting to digital television there are more paid channels being established and given licenses such as CH1, CH8 or GTH. Those channels also produce and broadcast *lakorn*.

It is shown that Thai soap operas have major distinctive characteristics. Firstly, according to Amporn, stories in Thai *lakorns* are mostly about romantic relationships between a poor girl and a rich boy; and a detractor such as the evil ex-girlfriend of the rich guy or his elder sister intervenes in their path to happiness (2008). Thai dramas also deal with issues of social change and social conflict in accordance with the lives of audiences in an urban area. Some dramas have plots, which tell stories of how the new middle class in urban areas copes and deals with the struggle to gain success in life and love while retaining their souls. Others depict the changing role of women as lovers, mothers and businesswomen. Additionally, many Thai series also deal with historical themes. Nowadays the plots that portray the lives and loves of younger people in urban settings have increasing popularity in many Thai dramas. Secondly, Thai TV series often portray the upper-class of Thai society which is shown through male lead characters. They are always obviously wealthy, but it is often vague

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2   Six free TV channels in Thailand are channel 3, 5, 7, 9, 11 and TITV. Channel 9 and 11 are controlled by government. Channel 3 and 7 are given licenses to private companies by the government. Channel 5 is owned and operated by the Royal Thai Army. The sixth channel TITV has recently been turned to state property. Channel 9 and 11 hardly broadcast dramas "perhaps because they are under the control of the government which subsidizes the channels for education". (Amporn, 2008, pp. 30-62)

for the audience to see how they make money (Mthai, 2015). Notably, most leading actors are from affluent families. They usually own luxurious houses, expensive automobiles, and fancy décor, and also hold high ranks in companies (Amporn, 2008; Mthai, 2015). The leading male characters are always the most handsome in the series, intelligent with a high level of education. All of these features make the leading male actors highly attractive. They are involved in situations leading to love, hate, and murder, which contribute to create interesting stories and getting more viewers (Mthai, 2015). For leading female characters in Thai *lakorns,* they are very beautiful and sweet, but often in trouble and have poor lives (Mthai, 2015). Thirdly, there are not many love scenes in Thai soap operas. Kissing scenes and sex scenes are limited unless the couple in the series are married (Amporn, 2008). Lastly, Thai series usually refer to the Buddhist morality where good always wins over evil, which can be exemplified by looking at the endings where cruel people or those who do bad things are punished or forgiven and the heroes are let to live a happy life (Amporn, 2008).

The Philippines

As written previously, Pasadilla and Lantin Jr. indicate that there are three government regulatory bodies facilitating the cultural industry in the Philippines, including: The Department of Telecommunications and Communications (DOTC); The National Telecommunications Commission (NTC); and the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB) (2005). These bodies implement different tasks to support the industry. First, the DOTC is the main government agency responsible for the supervision and regulation of the industry. This department establishes policies and plans for the development of the industry. They also have the right to issue franchises, grants, licenses, permits and certificates to TV or radio stations. Second, the NTC has functions involving policy implementation and regularly control three areas: telecommunications, broadcast undertakings and the radio spectrum. Within this agency there is a Broadcast Department that is directly attached to the duty of the development of the TV and radio industries. This department includes two divisions: the Program Division and the Technical Division. The Program Division is responsible for implementing guidelines and directions that are instituted by the NTC in order to regulate radio and TV broadcasting programs. Program development, market studies and

strategies to promote public interest have been given to this division. The Technical Division is tasked with the implementation of guidelines and directs the NTC on the technical operations of radio and TV stations. Furthermore, this division also does developmental and improvement research, and recommends standards and services, which contribute to the strengthening of the technical capabilities of radio and TV stations. Third, the MTRCB is entrusted to examine all motion pictures and TV programs, manage production and distribution of motion pictures and TV programs, and categorize all of them.

In accordance with the mentioned statement, in the Philippines, the competition in the cultural industry, especially in the television broadcasting sector lies on capturing a wide base of TV watchers; and among 21 local TV stations and five major broadcasting firms, two local companies ABS-CBN and GMA capture most TV viewers (Pasadilla and Lantin Jr., 2005). In order to compete in attracting more TV watchers, Filipino broadcasting companies who have their own channels are very active in expanding the market around the world for their TV programs. This creates opportunities for Filipino soap operas to be exported transnationally. The broader the areas their TV programs cover, the more competitive strength the TV companies gain. It is their way to consolidate viability and attract advertising agencies (Pasadilla and Lantin Jr., 2005).

Filipino television series is locally called as "Teleserye", "Teledrama", or "Pinoy drama". It is defined as a kind of melodramatic serialized fiction (World Heritage Encyclopedia, 2015; Cyprus, 2015). In the Philippines, soap operas are broadcasted in prime-time five days a week, and usually replayed during weekends (World Heritage Encyclopedia, 2015). They last from three months to a year, or even longer, depending on their ratings (World Heritage Encyclopedia, 2015). They fascinate a large scale of audience, which crosses age and gender lines in the Philippines, and they also get the highest advertising rates on Filipino television (World Heritage Encyclopedia, 2015). Characteristically, Filipino dramas usually portray love stories happening between a Cinderella and her Prince charming – two different people from opposite worlds; and they will also have the presence of third parties, which challenge the main couple's love (Cyprus, 2015). While compelling love stories, Filipino dramas stay true to core family values by depicting emotions and behaviors between family members (Interaksyon, 2013).

In the Philippines, *teleseryes* are produced mostly by ABS-CBN, GMA network and TV5 (Hoang, 2014). Some of them are produced by Tape Inc., Dreamscape Entertainment Television, VIVA Entertainment, and Star Cinema (Tvlibrarian2000, 2015). ABS-CBN is considered as a "pioneer" in exporting Filipino dramas to the international market. From the early 2000s, this network exported the series "*Pangako Sa'yo" (The Promise)* to Singapore, Indonesia, Cambodia, and China and also to some African countries (World Heritage Encyclopedia, 2015). According to the writing on the website: tuldvnhloc. wordpress, *The Promise* was very popular in Cambodia, and at the time it was aired, created the interesting effect of many Cambodian male children being given the name of male lead character in the series, Angelo (2010). Notably, when the drama was broadcasted in Zambia, it became a daily chatting topic between families, friends, and even neighbors. The success of *The Promise* motivated ABS-CBN to invest in the website of ABS-CBN International Sales which facilitates the promotion of Filipino series before exporting them abroad (tinviet.net.vn 2014). *Lobo (She – Wolf: The Last Sentinel)*, *Tayong Dalawa (The Two of Us)*, *Dahil May Isang Ikaw (Destined Hearts)*, or *Walang Hanggan (My Eternal)* are some dramas which successfully attracted a large number of international audiences after being exported by ABS-CBN (Hoang, 2014). GMA network started exporting the drama *Boys Next Door* to South Korea, and then broadened their market to Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Cambodia, Vietnam, China, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya and Hawaii, USA (World Heritage Encyclopedia, 2015). Habang *Kapiling Ka (While I'm with you)*, *Impostora (The Impostor)* and *Dyesebel* are some series which GMA exports and which have achieved reputations abroad (Hoang, 2014). TV5 began to export their dramas later than ABS-CBN and GMA, and they have recently promoted the export of their series abroad. TV5 series have been aired in several countries across the globe. Their hit primetime dramas: *Babaeng Hampaslupa (The Poor Heiress)*, *MgaNagbabagang Bulaklak (Roses and Thorns)*, and *Glamorosa* have been their top series which broadcast on free-to-air television in Cambodia, Uganda, Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Malawi and Nigeria (Interaksyon, 2013). Filipino dramas are often dubbed in other languages, and sometimes have English or other foreign subtitles when imported to different markets (World Heritage Encyclopedia, 2015).

Filipino soap operas have achieved international recognition from international award-giving bodies (World Heritage Encyclopedia, 2015).

Filipino TV companies use international awards as a lever to conveniently export their dramas to other countries (Hoang, 2014). ABS-CBN has gained the most of awards and nominations. Their success started with *Lobo,* which won the category for the best television series in the 30th BANFF World Television Festival (Hoang, 2014). Several dramas produced by ABS-CBN were also nominated in the International Emmy for television soap opera category, including *Dahil May Isang Ikaw (Destined Hearts)* and *Kahit Isang Saglit (A Time For Us)*; and recently, ABS-CBN's soap opera *Magkaribal (Rivals)* was nominated at the 2011 New York Festival TV and Film Award (Hoang, 2014).

The Media and Cultural Industry in Vietnam

In Vietnam, all forms of the media are under the control of the government. According to the Law on Media dated 28 December 1989 (amended by Law 12-1999-QH10 passed by Legislature X of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam at its 5th Session on 12 June 1999), the Vietnamese mass media includes printed media (newspaper, magazines, current affair news, news bulletins from news agencies); audio media (radio programs); visual media (television programs, audio and visual programs made by various technical means); and electronic media (the computer information network). Notably, the law emphasizes important responsibilities that media in Vietnam need to follow. Besides providing information on domestic and world current affairs with the interests of the country and its citizens, media is also responsible for satisfying wholesome cultural demands of people and widening mutual understanding between countries and their people (Vietnamese National Assembly, 1999).

As this study focuses on visual dramas, it mainly looks at visual media - television and electronic media – and the Internet, which makes it advantageous for Vietnamese audiences to consume foreign cultural products. The International Telecommunication Union's statistic indicates that approximately ten million TV households, which accounts for 80 percent of Vietnamese homes, own a television set; and the density is higher in urban areas, with 96 percent of households owning televisions (2002). TV penetration of households is counted at 96 percent in Hanoi and 92 percent in Ho Chi Minh City. Moreover, besides free TV channels in Vietnam, people can easily watch many pay-tv channels through cable, satellite and terrestrial digital signals. As the statistic

of the Ministry of Information and Communication shows, the number of pay-TV subscribers notably went up from 2.5 million in 2010 to 3.7 million in 2011 (TNnews, 2013). The annual revenue of this sector recorded in 2011 was 2 billion USD and is forecasted by the US Commercial Service in Vietnam to gain an annual growth rate of 17 percent through 2015 (Eurotvguild, 2015). The Ministry of Information and Communication found that Vietnam had 26 cable television service providers by October 2013, which between them serve 13.5 percent of all households with cable TV (Eurotvguild, 2015). It can be seen that pay-tv channels have become popular in Vietnam, providing an environment conducive for a large number of people to be able to consume diverse TV programs.

The largest television network in the country is the national broadcaster Vietnam Television (VTV), which transmits the free-to-air channels of VTV1 – VTV9, and available internationally via satellite. VTV also operates the largest cable network VCTV (now known as VTVcab) and a DTH (Direct to Home) satellite service. This network, followed by Ho Chi Minh City Television (HTV), Hanoi TV (HCTV) and Saigon Tourist Cable Service (SCTV), carries free-to-air channels, and offers 16 Vietnamese subscription channels and about 45 local and international channels covering many fields of science, entertainment and sport (Eurotvguild, 2015). Vietnam Multimedia Corporation (VTC) operates another important pay-tv platform. It is a Vietnamese state-owned corporation under the Ministry of Post and Telematics. On 2 June 2015, VTC was transferred to be under the management of The Radio Voice of Vietnam – a national radio broadcaster (English.mic.gov.vn, 2015). VTC also provides a DTH satellite service and is the only provider of digital terrestrial television (DTT) in Vietnam.

In terms of the Internet, a policy for Internet development has been implemented by the Vietnamese government since 1986 to put the country on the path of economic reform and social transformation with the recognition of the crucial role of science and technology (Boymal, Martin and Dieu Lam, 2007). Bezanson reviewed that information technology (IT), biotechnology, new materials, and automation were the four important high-technology programs chosen by the government to sustain the economic development of the nation (1999). Among these four national programs, Vietnam paid the greatest attention to the IT program (Boymal, Martin and Dieu Lam, 2007). Therefore the Vietnamese telecommunication sector experienced rapid

modernization and development, contributing to the popularization of Internet usage in the country (Boymal, Martin and Dieu Lam, 2007). The country has seen a steady increase in Internet users and the number of domestically produced websites, and the technical resources which provide Internet connections have also been expanded (Cimigo, 2011).

The Vietnam Internet Network Information Center (VNNIC) indicates that the rate of internet penetration in Vietnam was 25.7 percent by the end of 2009, which is higher than Asia's average of 20 percent (Quinn and Kierans, 2010). These two authors emphasize that Internet penetration in Vietnam is similar to countries like China, the Philippines and Thailand, but it has undergone a faster growth than most other countries in the region. The number of Internet user density is higher in the two biggest cities of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City compared to smaller cities. The statistic provided by the World Bank shows that out of a population of 88.6 million in 2008, Vietnam had around 20 million Internet users (Quinn and Kierans, 2010). A year later in 2009 the number of users went up to 22.7 million, according to the Internet World Statistic (Quinn and Kierans, 2010). There is a difference for Internet usage by age in Vietnam. For young people (15-24 years old), the percentage of Internet usage is nearly universal at 95 percent (Cimigo, 2011). For 25-34 year olds, two thirds use the Internet, whereas for older age groups, Internet usage is lower (Cimigo, 2011). It is indicated that entertainment is a "key field of Internet usage in Vietnam" with nearly half of internet users spending time watching movies and series online (Cimigo, 2011, p.23). The availability of the Internet, especially in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City facilitates people who live in those two huge urban areas to diversify the sources from which they consume foreign media products.

Looking at cultural industry (TV series production) in Vietnam, it is shown that there are 600 governmental and private studios, which are given license to produce TV drama; and among the 600 studios there are 40 studios directly co-operating with the two biggest governmental studios, VFC-VTV (Vietnam Television Center which belongs to Vietnam Television [VTV]) and TFS-HTV (Ho Chi Minh City Television Film Studios attached to Ho Chi Minh City Television) (Vhttdlkv3, 2010). In fact, the number of series produced by private studios has recently increased, accounting for 80 percent of airtime on most popular TV channels (Nhu, 2015). According to a calculation shown in an article posted on an online version of Sai Gon Giai Phong newspaper, in

2014 Ho Chi Minh City Television (HTV) broadcasted more than 1,000 TV drama episodes, but their own studio TFS produced only 180 episodes and the remaining ones were produced by private studios (2015). Also in this year, VFC produced 300 TV series episodes while private studios produced 800 episodes, which were broadcasted on two channels, VTV1 and VTV3. The article reveals that nowadays in Vietnam the two private studios whose dramas have regular show times on some popular channels are Song Vang Company and M & T Pictures. In 2014, Song Vang Company produced 600 TV series episodes shown on VTV, HTV and THVL[3]; and in 2015 the company expected to produce an additional 100 drama episodes to be broadcasted on HTV7[4] (Nhu, 2015). M & T Pictures produced 600 episodes aired on SCTV14[5], HTV and THVL in 2014; and in 2015 they expected to increase the number of episodes because of more show time given on HTV7 (Nhu, 2015).

The participation of both governmental and emerging private studios in producing series contributes to the implementation of the scheme given in Decree No. 54/2010/ND-CP, which states that Vietnamese series can cover at least 30 percent of total dramas to be broadcast on television (Nhu, 2015). As such, the solution to cover the remaining airtime for series on television in Vietnam is to exploit the source of foreign TV dramas. Therefore nowadays, Vietnamese audiences can watch a diversity of series imported from Korea, China, Thailand, Philippines and India on television. In addition, it is indicated that the quality of Vietnamese TV series has not yet been appreciated by domestic audiences who find the content boring, the stories undramatic, the action unskillfully executed, the names uninteresting and the soundtrack unattractive (Vhttdlkv3, 2010). This contributes to a tendency of Vietnamese to consume better quality foreign dramas, and leads to competition between TV channels to import and air foreign dramas in order to satisfy the demand of the audiences.

The Emerging of Transnational Thai and Filipino Media Products in Vietnam

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3   THVL is a local channel in Vinh Long province – a deep southern province in Vietnam. The channel belongs to Vinh Long Television Station which is managed by Vinh Long province's People's Committees.
4   HTV7 is a channel belonging to Ho Chi Minh City Television (HTV).
5   SCTV14 is a channel in the system of Saigon Tourist Cable Service Company (SCTV).

It can be found that Thailand and the Philippines have their own systems in place to encourage the export of media products for regional consumption. This is a necessary condition for Thai and Filipino cultural products entering transnational markets. A sufficient condition depends on the situation and demand in destinations where their products are imported. Vietnam is a destination where Thai and Filipino TV series have recently entered. The Vietnamese government supports the development of media (television and Internet) in order to encourage the media to implement its functions of serving citizens' cultural demands and broadening the understanding between countries as stated in the Law for Media in Vietnam. It creates opportunities for people to approach and consume foreign cultural products, and also opens competition in the field of media to satisfy the cultural demand for people. The government's encouragement leads to the booming of cable, satellite and terrestrial television and Internet, along with the situation that the quality of domestic cultural products has not yet been able to please domestic audiences. These are the sufficient conditions, which make it advantageous for Thai and Filipino dramas to enter Vietnam and are why such dramas are currently known among a number of audiences in the nation.

Remarkably, the current cultural context in Vietnam changed when the powerful Korean Wave was no longer "hot" to audiences. The Korean craze has appeared to be cooling down and is predicted to continue its decline over the next few years (Koreatimes, 2012). According to a survey done by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism and the Korea Foundation for International Culture Exchange (KOFICE), sixty percent of 3,600 people asked in nine countries, including China, Japan, Thailand, the United States and France, believe that it is difficult for the Korean Wave to keep up its international success (Koreatimes, 2012). The decline can be attributed to foreign audiences' tiredness of "standardized content" in Korean music, movies and dramas (Koreatimes, 2012). The Korea Times elaborately shows that K-pop "idols" and teen singers expose similar hypersexual dancing, lyrics and clothing (2012). Korean series repeatedly tell stories such as adulterous affairs, revenge and secrets about the birth or identity of characters.

As other countries in Asia, Vietnam has been under the influence of the Korean Wave as many Korean media products have been broadcasted on TV channels for a long time. However, like audiences in other Asian countries, Vietnamese audiences now are no longer interested in the standardized content

shown in Korean cultural products. Therefore, the Korean Wave has gradually lost its unique status in Vietnam. In addition, the entertainment taste of Vietnamese audiences has rapidly changed with a demand for consuming more new and creative cultural products. TV channels in Vietnam quickly catch this trend to establish competitive strategies in order to capture more viewers. This is an advantageous condition for Thai and Filipino dramas to flow to Vietnam.

Thai and Filipino Dramas on Television

Thai and Filipino TV series first emerged in Vietnam in 2011. Nowadays they are broadcasted on many pay-tv channels such as Let's Viet-VTC9, Today TV-VTC7, or Giaitri TV-VCTV1. However, according to the information provided by informants who watch those series on television, all of them see Thai *lakorn* on Let's Viet and Today TV and follow Filipino *teleseryes* only on Today TV. Let's Viet does not import Filipino dramas, while Today TV imports both Thai and Filipino soap operas. Mr. Lam Chi Thien – Director of International Media Joint Stock Company (IMC) which is responsible for exploiting, developing and managing content aired on Today TV indicates that while Singaporean TV dramas portray a mix of Western and Chinese culture, Korean series repeatedly show stories of rich families and love between rich and poor people which is not really close to the daily lives of Vietnamese audiences, and many channels are already full of Chinese series; Thai and Filipino TV soap operas are the answer for Today TV when their stories are close to the daily lives of the majority of the audience and they depict many cultural similarities (Phuong Quyen, 2015).

It can be seen that Let's Viet and Today TV give specific airing times for Thai and Filipino TV series every day, which make it easier for audiences to watch and follow those dramas in their leisure time. However, the show times for Thai and Filipino series are variably scheduled monthly or yearly according to the broadcasting plans of those two channels. Currently, Thai and Filipino soap operas can compete with Korean TV series to be broadcast on primetime at 19:30 on Let's Viet and at 20:00 on Today TV.

According to the observation of Phan Hieu, a 19-year-old female from Hanoi, Thai *lakorns* aired on Let's Viet are more updated than those aired on Today TV. In fact, before Thai dramas are brought to audiences, both Let's Viet and Today TV have to implement translation, dubbing and post-production

for the series. The processes usually take time, and this causes the series to be out of date when they are aired on those two channels. Sharing the same opinion of the situation, Linh, a 28-year-old female translator working for Let's Viet revealed that:

> The dramas are new when they are imported by Let's Viet. However, after finishing translation, dubbing, and post-production, those series may be old by the time they are broadcast on the channel. In addition, the series aired on the channel need to be in order according to the broadcasting plan announced by the manager before. For instance, after a drama ends there may be two other series waiting to be aired next. The two series are arranged to broadcast in a certain order. The first expected soap opera for next airing might be older than the second one. Nonetheless, it is impossible to skip the first one. The first scheduled series is still broadcasted in accordance with the plan passed previously.

Other translator members working for Let's Viet show that the import of Thai dramas is a strategy to diversify foreign TV series programs on the channel, which contributes to an increase in the number of viewers for the channel. The staff emphasizes Thai *lakorn* as an alternative choice for the audience as they become increasingly bored with Korean soap operas. One of the staff, Phuong, a 23-year-old female, shared how her mother preferred to watch Thai series more than Korean ones. Phuong's mom felt difficulty relating to Korean dramas where everything looked modern and luxurious with many giant houses and different brands of cars and cellphones. She found that Thai series depict a more relatable living context with the weather in Thailand being hot like Ho Chi Minh City, market images being quite similar to those seen in Vietnam, and especially everything not being too "sparkling" as it is in Korean series. The closeness in the living conditions (for example, the hot weather) is one of the factors that makes Thai *lakorn* more popular in the south of Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh City) than in the north of Vietnam (Hanoi), according to the point of view of Let's Viet staff. Moreover, the staff members also added that Thailand promotes its image as an attractive and very interesting destination for international travelers. Many Vietnamese people travel to Thailand and get to know about the country; hence it is easier for them to welcome Thai *lakorn*

when it is aired on the channel. According to the information provided by Van, who also works for Let's Viet shows, the ratings for Thai dramas on this channel is quite good; but sometimes it fluctuates because it depends on the taste of audience. Van emphasizes that the Thai dramas that gain the highest ratings are the ones that are very dramatic and can be exemplified as having situations were women rob boyfriends and husbands from other women and women fight each other for one man. Additionally, according to Linh's information, Thai dramas imported and shown on Today TV are more dramatic and fit better with the audience's taste than those on Let's Viet. This is a partial cause for the rating fluctuation of Thai series on Let's Viet.

Remarkably, this year, Thai *lakorn* were aired on VTV3- one of the free-to-air national channels in Vietnam. It aired two series: *My Darling Fake Husband (Khun Samee Karmalor Tee Ruk)* and *A New Glib Man (Pla Lai Pai Daeng)*. *My Darling Fake Husband* was first aired on 11th February. This series had 33 episodes and was shown at 12:00 a.m. from Monday to Friday every week. After the drama ended, *A New Glib Man* was introduced to audience. It had 34 episodes and was aired from 2nd May. It was shown during the same show time as *My Darling Fake Husband*.

For Filipino dramas, the interviewed audiences see these dramas only on Today TV because this channel concentrates on importing a number of Filipino series and is considered "a pioneer" in discovering and bringing those dramas to Vietnam. Similar to Let's Viet, Today TV focuses on the import of Filipino soap operas aiming to diversify foreign drama programs and increase competitive strength in attracting more viewers. Moreover, they give many different show times for Filipino series every day which are convenient for audiences to comfortably choose their own watching time. According to the statement of the Director of IMC, Mr. Lam Chi Thien, at the time Today TV started importing Filipino dramas none of the TV channels in Vietnam had exploited those series before; hence, Today TV has since been able to choose good Filipino series with acceptable prices. The importing of Filipino dramas to Vietnam and their broadcast on Today TV contribute to making this channel "distinctive" among a number of pay-tv channels in Vietnam. According to Mr. Thien, a rating statistic provided by market researching companies in Vietnam states that Today TV captures 80 percent of audiences in the big cities of Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang, and Can Tho; and on the national scale the number

of audiences watching Today TV in primetime is only less than VTV3 (Phuong Quyen, 2015).

Talking about the import of Filipino dramas of Today TV, Tam, a 23-year-old female, working at Master Service Company, which co-operates with Today TV and takes responsibility for translating Filipino series aired on this channel, shared that:

> Today TV imports many Filipino series because the time for assigning the dramas is longer than Korean and Thai soap operas. For example, when the channel buys the copyright of a series it will have a contract between Today TV and their partners. In the contract, there is an article, which regulates the length of time the series is permitted to show on the channel. The time is included the time it takes Today TV to implement translation, dubbing, and post-production for the series before showing it on the channel. If Today TV cannot accomplish all of the processes for the drama to be aired according to the time mentioned in the contract then the channel will have to give up broadcasting the series and bear with the money lost for buying copy right of the drama. Normally, the time for assigning Filipino soap operas between Today TV and their partners is around two years, counted from the buying to airing point of times. The length of time as such is sufficient for Today TV to do translation, dubbing as well as post-production for the dramas; and they can be shown on time on the channel as in the agreement. As such Today TV will not lose the money for buying the copyright of the series. Therefore importing Filipino dramas is an economic choice for the channel.

As discussed previously, Filipino broadcasting companies such as ABS-CBN or GMA focus on promoting their series in foreign countries including Vietnam. Their attempts to advertise their media products are given an advantage when they are supported by Today TV since this channel began importing Filipino dramas to Vietnam. The channel has many strategies to promote those soap operas to Vietnamese viewers. Besides showing the dramas on primetime and co-operating with the Filipino broadcasting firms to bring

their actors and actresses to meet with Vietnamese audiences, Today TV holds award categories for "Favorite foreign series" and "Favorite actor and actress" in the Green Star Award[6] to honor Filipino dramas and actors. In 2014 – the first time the Green Star Award was held, Filipino actor Richard Yap and actress Jodi St. Maria were honored for "Favorite actor and actress" and the drama *Be Careful with My Heart* that they acted in was prized as "Favorite Foreign Series" (Thien, 2014).

Thai and Filipino soap operas on Let's Viet and Today TV are dubbed in Vietnamese. As the main offices of Let's Viet and Today TV are located in Ho Chi Minh City, the teams dubbing Vietnamese for Thai and Filipino dramas are from the southern city and the dubbing sound is speaking in the accent of southern people. It may create some difficulties for northern audiences (Hanoi) who are not familiar with the accent from the south when they watch series on the two channels; but surprisingly, all interviewed northern audiences assess that the dubbing is sufficiently good and clear. However, many of them prefer to watch the dramas with subtitles, as they can help them get to know the native languages used in Thailand and the Philippines and also get "authentic" feelings and emotions of characters in the series.

Thai and Filipino Dramas on the Internet

Besides watching Thai and Filipino series on television, audiences can also follow those dramas on the Internet. The audiences who watch *lakorns* on the Internet are up to date with new series, and viewers of *lakorns* and *teleseryes* can see series previously aired on TV that they could not watch or fully follow because of not having free time. Thai and Filipino dramas broadcasted on TV previously are then uploaded on different web pages. The interviewed audiences watch Thai and Filipino soap operas via websites such as You Tube, xemphimso.vn, phim14.vn, or Kite.vn. Especially, some pages like Kites.vn, SIAMovies.vn and ChuonChuonCanhSen have their own teams to translate and make subtitles for new *lakorns*. The team of Kites.vn translates

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6   The Green Star Award is created by Today TV and Cinema Magazine in Vietnam. This award has categories to honour: Best Vietnamese Film and TV Series, Favourite Vietnamese TV Series, Creative Vietnamese Film, Favourite foreign TV Series, Best Vietnamese Actor and Actress, Prospective Vietnamese Actors and Actresses, Favourite Vietnamese Actor and Actress, and Favourite Foreign Actor and Actress. These awards are assessed and voted on by a committee of experts and audiences (Thien, 2014).

and makes Vietnamese subtitles for various music videos, movies and series from Hollywood, Japan, and Korea; and subtitled Thai series have appeared on the website for around three years. SIAMovies.vn and ChuonChuonCanhSen do translations and subtitles for only Thai media products. SIAMovies.vn website was established in 2013; and they subtitle for both Thai film and *lakorn*. Nonetheless, currently, they hardly translate and subtitle any films or series because most members in their team are students and are very busy with their studies. Now they attempt to maintain the page by updating information about new films, new *lakorns* and activities of famous Thai actors, according to Dat, male, 23 years old, and administrator of SIAMovies website.

ChuonChuonCanhSen is a Facebook page which was set up in 2014. They subtitle for only *lakorn* and occasionally Thai music videos. Quang, a 26-year-old male, and administrator of ChuonChuonCanhSen said as follows:

> Our page translates and does subtitles for selected *lakorns* which all members like and suggest and share them via Internet on our own YouTube page. We expect that we can bring understanding about Thailand to those who watch and follow the page.

In the beginning, Quang did subtitles for Thai Music Videos (MV), and then was interested in making visual effect subtitles for *lakorn*. Because he majored in Information Technology, he loves doing this and hopefully can make people enjoy watching dramas uploaded on the page. Quang is also the leader of ChuonChuonCanhSen's subtitle team. His responsibilities includes doing general management for the page, making posters for promoting new *lakorns* and ordering elaborate tasks for members doing translations and subtitles. Now there are 46 members in the team. Quang and his team are happy and motivated, as ChuonChuonCanhSen has become quite popular among audiences who enjoy watching Thai soap operas. According to his statistics, there are around one million people who have viewed Thai dramas subtitled by his team and uploaded on ChuonChuonCanhSen's YouTube page, as well as around 4,000 registered followers to the face-book page, and a number of invisible followers. Now in Vietnam there are many fan pages of specific Thai actors and Thai couples, such as: the fan page of Jame Jirayu, the fan page of couple Nadech and Yaya, and the fan page of Mark and Kimberly. These fan

pages also have their own subtitle team, but they just translate and do subtitles for the *lakorns* that their idol actors or couples participate.

Filipino soap operas are also uploaded on the Internet, but all of them are broadcasted on television beforehand. They are not updated as Thai series are. Additionally, the dubbings implemented by the channel are maintained for the uploaded Filipino dramas. Tam, a translator for Filipino series working at Master Service Company, indicated as follows:

> Thai lakorns are updated and subtitled because their fans can find sources to do translations and subtitles for new *lakorns*. Oppositely, there is no available source which facilitates Filipino dramas' fans translating the series. Filipino broadcasting companies who own their TV channels do not upload their series on the Internet; and when they do upload the video quality is low. In contrast, Thai TV channels upload *lakorns* on the internet, or fans in Thailand upload Thai series on the Internet for foreign audiences to watch; and the quality of uploaded video is quite good. This is the source for fans in Vietnam to translate and subtitle for Thai dramas.

In fact, in Vietnam there are also fan pages of Filipino actors and couples such as the fan page of actress Marian Rivera, the fan page of actor Dingdong Dantes and the fan page of the couple Kathryn Bernardo and Daniel Padilla. However, unlike fan pages of Thai actors, fan pages of Filipino actors update news and activities of their idols but they do not make subtitles for the dramas in which their idols participate.

Tam also elaborates further difficulties that provide obstacles to translating and making subtitles for Filipino soap operas. Before working for Master Service Company, Tam was a member in ChuonChuonCanhSen page's subtitle team and did translation for Thai series. In her experience, new Thai *lakorns* uploaded on the Internet usually have English subtitles, which make it easier for English translators such as herself. Those who can translate directly from Thai to Vietnamese find the dramas easy to translate because Thai actors speak Thai without mixing in English. However, it is not the same in Filipino dramas. In their series, Filipino actors speak both Tagalog – their native language and English. Even one sentence can be half in Tagalog and half in English.

According to Tam, when Filipino broadcasting firms sell the copyrights of their series for Today TV they provide the dramas with full English subtitles for Today TV. Therefore, Tam and her colleges work with the Filipino *teleseryes,* which are already subtitled with English, not the raw series.

It can be seen that the development of cable, digital and terrestrial TV and Internet contributes considerably to the emerging of Thai and Filipino TV in Vietnam. Although they have not been shown for long in Vietnam, they have been welcomed by Vietnamese audiences and today are quite popular among audiences. Among the audience, there are people who watch both Thai and Filipino soap operas, but also people who see only Thai *lakorn* or Filipino *teleseryes*.

Reasons for Watching Thai and Filipino Dramas

Most of the audiences agree that Thai and Filipino dramas are attractive to them, primarily because there are many beautiful actresses and handsome actors with good acting skills participating in those series.

Viet My, a 19-year-old female student majoring in Chinese Studies stated as follows:

> I like watching Thai dramas primarily because actors and actresses in the series are handsome and beautiful. Especially the actresses' beauty looks more natural than those from Korea who look beautiful mostly because of plastic surgery.

Hieu, a 22-year-old male student majoring in Information Technology shared as follows:

> When I choose series to watch I prioritize the appearance of actors. It is not necessary for them to be beautiful but at least be good-looking. Generally, Filipino actors look nice, and also act well.

Kim Anh, a 19-year-old female student majoring in Mass Media observed as follows:

> Actors in both Thai and Filipino series are beautiful. Especially, I am very impressed with the beauty of female Filipino actors

when they have "Western" features on their faces. Moreover, actors in Thai and Filipino dramas act skillfully. They act more special and emotional than Korean actors.

Mrs. Ngoc, a 30-year-old female cloth-seller shared as follows:

I watch both Thai and Filipino series but actually I watch Thai soaps more than Filipino ones. Watching their dramas, I see that their actors and actresses are nice. They have remarkably good acting skills. In many crying scenes, they act really emotionally. They act as if they truly were the characters in dramas. Those who play roles as good people can really portray the character on screen; and those who play opposite roles of bad or cruel people also can do the same thing.

It can be seen that the nice appearance of Thai and Filipino actors has made good visual impressions on the audience. Moreover, content of those dramas is also a factor that contributes to attract the viewers.

Ngoc Anh, a 19-year-old female, student majoring in Japanese Studies observed as follows:

Content in Thai series is more diverse than Filipino dramas. Especially, stories in Thai and Filipino dramas have practical endings, not always happy endings as in Korean TV series. This makes me feel more interested when watching Thai and Filipino series than watching Korean dramas with predictable happy endings.

Thanh Huyen, a 20-year-old female, student studying Linguistics remarked as follows:

Stories in Thai and Filipino soap operas are close with daily life. Moreover, there are many funny episodes, especially in Thai *lakorn*. Characters in Thai and Filipino dramas are not too "fictional" as in Korean series. Main characters in Korean soap operas are usually perfect in all aspects.

Thuy Linh, a 19-year-old female, student majoring in Mass Media said as follows:

> Stories in Thai and Filipino dramas are not as Korean series which mostly portray "triangle love." Therefore, they bring a new entertainment taste to the audience. I like episodes in Thai series hich take place fast and fascinating.

Ngoc Linh, a 20-year-old student pursuing the foreign trade discipline shared as follows:

> Stories in Thai and Filipino dramas have many climax sequences which attracts viewers. I see that there are more climax sequences in Filipino soap operas than in Thai *lakorns*.

In the last episodes of Thai and Filipino dramas, the main couple usually gets married and have eliminated any threats to their happiness, but then there will be a catastrophe which threatens the main couple's life. For example, a boy's ex-girlfriend or a girl's ex-boyfriend may come back at the end to take revenge on the couple by kidnapping the girl or child of the couple. This situation happens more in *teleseryes* than in *lakorn*. When audiences see the main couple marrying, they always think that it is a happy ending for the couple after overcoming many previous difficulties and expect to see their future life. However, there is still an obstacle that the couple has to overcome to live happily. This climax makes audiences curious until the end to know whether or not the couple can really overcome that final difficulty or cope with more hurt. Moreover, most of the audiences emphasize that the new thing in Thai and Filipino soap operas is the depiction of "third-sex"[7] characters and stories about their works and their daily life, which is not seen in Korean dramas. The audiences see more "third-sex" characters in *lakorn* than in *teleseryes*. They also show that "third-sex" characters bring more fun to the series.

However, there are many audiences who indicate that stories in Thai and Filipino series are quite similar with Korean soap operas in the way they depict a love relationship between poor and rich people. It is clear that the success and popularity of the Korean Wave in Asia caused the Korean Wave to be a

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7   "Third-sex" is a word that is used to refer to all members of the LGBT community in Vietnam and for the purpose of this book, is used interchangeably with "third-gender".

model for other cultural industries in the region. This provides an explanation for why the content in Thai and Filipino dramas is partially affected by Korean TV series.

Phan Hieu, a 19-year-old female student majoring in Japanese Studies indicated as follows:

> Thai and Filipino series' content is quite similar with Korean, quite fictional. There are always poor, foolish and little crack-brained girls loved by a rich and handsome guy.

Kim Anh, a 19-year-old female student in mass media discipline commented as follows:

> The stories in Thai and Filipino dramas are similar to Korean dramas. The leading male character meets and falls in love with the leading female character who is pretty but silly and has to cope with her poor life.

Tam, the translator for Filipino dramas at Master Service Company, illustrated that Filipino series are much more fictional than Thai *lakorns*. Although Thai dramas (like Korean soap operas) portray many storylines that are unlikely to happen in reality, the fiction is reasonable. Whereas the fiction in Filipino *teleseryes* is unreasonable. She exemplifies that in one Filipino series (of which she could not remember the name of) there is an episode where a pregnant woman is beaten by a snake. The woman gives birth to a child with a snake image on his back and whenever the child gets angry the snake is released from his back. Another drama portrays the existence of many mermaids under the ocean in relationship with the modern life of normal people. Moreover, characters in Filipino series are usually in the extreme directions of too good and innocent or too bad and cruel. Good characters are harmed by the bad ones many times. After the first time they get harmed the good characters never seem to learn their lesson, and do not improve or find any way to protect themselves from being harmed the next time. This is too illogical to be relatable.

Additionally, most audiences realize that make-up for actors and cinematographic techniques in Thai soap operas are better than in Filipino series. They could not elaborate on technical points, but according to their visual sense, they see that the image of Thai actors on screen is clearer and more

beautiful than those in Filipino dramas. Linh – a translator of Let's Viet could see that Thai producers applied the same techniques of make-up and cinematography of Korean dramas; and therefore both Thai actors and filmed sceneries in their *lakorns* looked beautiful. This can be a result of Thailand developing itself as a production and manufacturing center for audio-visual products (Siriyuvasak, 2010). It is also one key factor that contributes significantly to the development of the Thai cultural industry. For instance, Technicolor, well-known as one of the major US film laboratories, bought Cinecolor Lab, a Thai film printing laboratory in 2003; and since then Hollywood films produced by famous producers such as: Disney, Dream Works, Universal, Lion Gates and New Line have been printed at Technicolor (Thailand) and distributed for Hollywood's Asian markets (NECTEC, 2008). Kantana Group is another corporation, which provides post-production services for audio-visual and film printing; it started production in the early 2000s (Siriyuvasak, 2010). By becoming a production and manufacturing center for audio-visual products, Thailand can accumulate good production technologies and professionalism in producing its cultural products. Moreover, many foreign producers choose Thailand as their cinematographing destination, and hire Thai production labors because the cost for the labors remains relatively cheap in Thailand (Kanjaruek, 2009). This also helps Thai production laborers learn more innovative techniques and when they work to make Thai cultural products, they can apply the techniques which contribute to make Thai products more professional and attractive with international audiences.

Conclusion

The mobility of dramas from Thailand and the Philippines to Vietnam are contra media flows, which now exist and compete with other dominant contra flows from Korea and China. It is evidence to prove and strengthen the idea that the two-way movement of global media flows, not only from the West to the rest of the world but also which may originate in the less powerful regions of the world (Thussu, 2007; Kavoori, 2007). According to Moeran, the most important factor for the acceptance of media products in any markets is to meet the local demand, desires, orientation, preferences, and curiosities of the population (2001). The transnational flows of Thai and Filipino soap operas to Vietnam are facilitated by those elements.

Both Thai and Filipino governments establish policy supporting the development of their cultural industries, which create a good base for improving the quality of their cultural products. It contributes to an increase in the competitive strength of their products and opens opportunities for them to enter the regional media flow. In Vietnam, the government also encourages citizens to widen their understanding of foreign countries through media. Hence, the government promotes the development of media technology (cable, digital and terrestrial TV and the Internet), which brings many advantages for people to approach and consume a diversity of foreign cultural products. This strategy, along with the fact that cultural industry in Vietnam has not yet been able to provide enough quantity of products and domestic consumers have not yet appreciated their quality, makes for strong competition in the media field. TV channels are in a race to satisfy the diverse entertainment demand for a wide number of people, which helps them to get more and more viewers. Many websites for watching foreign films and series help diversify the source where an audience can consume foreign media products. The problem of Vietnamese TV dramas' quality leads to a situation whereby transnational media flows are not equal between Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines. While Thai and Filipino soap operas have been imported for three to four years and now quite popular in Vietnam, Vietnamese TV series have not yet been exported to other Southeast Asian countries. In an article on citinews.net, Mr. Tran Minh Tien, CEO of Lasta Co., elaborates that before 2011, Filipino soap operas were sold for the low copyright price of 150USD/per episode but not many TV channels in Vietnam bought them (Hoang, 2013). However, since 2013, surprisingly, some TV channels in Vietnam have been willing to pay 1,500 USD/per episode to buy the copyright of Filipino dramas. The situation obviously shows that the quality of Vietnamese dramas has not yet sufficiently developed, according to Mr. Tien (Hoang, 2013). He also questions how Vietnamese series can attract and be sold to other countries in the region when they cannot even satisfy domestic viewers. Mrs. Bich Lien, director of Song Vang Co., also shares the same opinion. Her company attempted to translate some Vietnamese dramas into English and advertised to foreign partners with a low copyright price of 150-250USD/per episode, but did not have any success in exporting the series (Hoang, 2013). Mrs. Lien points out that the quality of Vietnamese series is still relatively low in comparison with other regional countries, and foreign film import companies generally access that Vietnamese dramas are not competitive in both content and production technology (Hoang, 2013).

Although the media flows are not equal among the three countries, they contribute to motivate intra-regional economic integration in preparation for the coming of the AEC in 2015. The target of AEC is to encourage free flow of goods and services among ASEAN countries. Cultural products are considered to be a kind of commodity when they can be sold and bought (Strinati, 2004). They create economic benefits and form connections between involved sides. The movement of cultural products from Thailand and the Philippines to Vietnam magnifies the regional market for culture, and economically promotes the circulation of cultural goods in the region - because before coming to Vietnam, Thai and Filipino dramas had been exported to other Southeast Asian countries. Therefore, the transnational flows of cultural commodities help to widen regional economy, contributing to the top-up policy committed by ASEAN leaders toward the establishment of AEC. At the same time they create an opportunity for bottom-up regionalization when facilitating co-operations between organizations (TV channels or TV broadcasting companies) in the three countries. Both Let's Viet and Today TV have chances to find and work with broadcasting or entertainment firms from Thailand and the Philippines, who can provide the source of dramas for import. For example, Today TV can buy the copyrights of Filipino series directly from big television broadcasting companies in the country (such as ABS-CBN and GMA) as they are drama producers and they have the right to actively sell their products; while Let's Viet can buy copyrights of the series "Hormones 2" from GMM who is a big entertainment company in Thailand and has ownership rights to the series, and who monopolizes airing the drama on their channel in Vietnam (Tv.zing, 2014). Notably, copyright prices for Thai and Filipino dramas are cheaper than for Korean dramas (Huong, 2013). This helps the two channels diversify their entertainment programs and get more economic benefit by paying less money for imported dramas while still attracting more viewers with Thai and Filipino series, which have content with cultural features that is quite close to the taste of Vietnamese audiences (Hoang, 2013).

Today in Vietnam the audiences can conveniently enjoy new tastes of TV series coming from Southeast Asian countries after a long time familiarly with consuming only Korean dramas. As mentioned above, both Thai and Filipino TV series are somehow recognized to be under the effect of Korean dramas. Korean cultural products have been popular in Asia for more than one decade and the "soft power" that the Korean Wave has gained in Asia through

exporting its products internationally makes the Korean cultural industry become a model for other Asian countries. Hence, it is not too difficult to understand why Thai and Filipino series utilize features similar (content, make-up art and cinematography) to Korean dramas. Nonetheless, Thai and Filipino dramas not only absorb techniques used in Korean series but also show their own characteristics such as natural-looking beauty or Western-mix beauty of actors, or stories with many climax sequences. Thus, *lakorn* and *teleserye* can bring "new tastes", attract larger audiences in Vietnam and compete with Korean soap operas. On the other hand, it needs to be mentioned that although the Korean Wave is being largely degraded, it still retains influences in many Asian countries, including Vietnam. Therefore, despite being able to compete with Korean dramas, Thai and Filipino soap operas cannot totally replace Korean series. Tam, a 23- year-old viewer, said that if she herself orders the level of attraction among dramas of the three countries in Vietnam, it would be Korean – Thai – Filipino. The staff members working for the TV channel Let's Viet indicated the similar point that Thai and Filipino soap operas contribute to diversify entertainment taste for audiences. The consumption of Thai and Filipino series makes for people-driven regionalization contributed by citizens. Vietnamese audiences can build up understanding about Thailand and the Philippines through interpretations of images, ideas and social messages embedded in their products. The interpretations play an important role in the construction of proximity of perceptions and identities among different communities within a geographical domain broader than a nation-state (Otmazgin, 2013).

Chapter 4

Audience Interpretations of Thai And Filipino Television Soap Operas

Two *lakorns* and two *teleseryes* that are popular in Vietnam were chosen in order to analyze audiences of Thai and Filipino series, in regards to aspects of family values and gender. For the their interpretations of third-sex issues, cultural characteristics and national images, audiences gave their comments and observations based on not only those selected dramas but also on many other series in accordance with their memories.

The four dramas were selected based on ratings given by staff from the TV channel Let's Viet and the audiences. Moreover, those *lakorns* and *teleseryes* are updated both on TV and on the Internet. As mentioned previously, cable TV channels in Vietnam attempt to import and broadcast new Thai and Filipino dramas to attract more audiences and to increase their competitive strength. The drama *My Wife's Sister* was broadcast between November 2012 and January 2013 in Thailand, and then aired on Let's Viet at the end of 2014. The drama *Secret Love Online* was aired in 2015 in Thailand and at the same time was subtitled, as well as uploaded, on the ChuonChuonCanhSen Facebook page and YouTube page. *Losing Heaven* was premiered during 2011-2012 in the Philippines and imported to Today TV in 2013. The series *Be Careful with My Heart,* which has three seasons, was broadcasted in the Philippines from 2012 to 2014. In Vietnam, on Today TV, the first season of this *teleserye* was aired in 2013, the second season in 2014 and the last season until September 2015.

It can be seen that the *lakorns* and *teleseryes* that really impressed audiences were in the period from 2012 until the present. This period is not too long and the audiences can still remember contents, episodes and characters in the dramas. Furthermore, those TV dramas told stories within contexts of modern societies, which helped the researcher to explore the perceptions of audiences towards Thailand and the Philippines in the contemporary period.

Name of Drama	Original Broadcast Channel	Broadcast Channel in Vietnam	Rating	Content
My Wife's Sister (Nong Mia)	CH8	Let's Viet	Excellent	It tells a story about a triangle love between two sisters who have the same father but different mothers and a handsome, kind man. Ngamnek, the elder sister and Fuengfa, the younger sister are both involved in a romantic relationship with Ekkapop. Fuengfa is always jealous of her sister and intentionally robs Ekkapop from Ngamnek's hand even after Ngamnek and Ekkapop get married. The relationship between Ngamnek and Ekkapop encounters more challenges with the appearance of Kanta, a rich woman who is also interested in Ekkapop and Mawin, who is Ngamnek's boss and always stays beside her when she is in difficult situations. (Let's Viet, 2015)

Name of Drama	Original Broadcast Channel	Broadcast Channel in Vietnam	Rating	Content
Secret Love Online (Abb Rak Online)	CH3	Chuon Chuon Canh Sen YouTube Page	Popular	The series follows the story of Saya, a marketing manager in a financial brokerage firm, who falls in love with one of her new younger staff members, Pranon. She creates an online chat name called "Khun Abb Rak" or "Miss Secret Love" to communicate with Pranon without seeming unprofessional. Lipda, whom Saya has worked for over 5 years, is actually secretly in love with her. Nonetheless, Lipda tries to put aside his own feelings and helps Saya when he finds out that she secretly admires Pranon. Meanwhile, Praow, who is the Pranon's colleague tries her best to get closer to Pranon to separate Saya once she knows that Saya is his secret admirer. However, Praow's plan backfires on her when she actually begins to fall in love with Pranon. (Let's Viet, 2015)

Table 4.1 Features of Thai TV dramas

Figure 4.1 Poster for *My Wife's Sister (Image Source: Let's Viet, 2015)*

Figure 4.2 Poster for *Secret Love Online (Image Source: ChuonChuon-CanhSen, 2015)*

Name of Drama	Original Broadcast Channel	Broadcast Channel in Vietnam	Rating	Content
Be Careful With My Heart (Alalay-an Ang Puso Ko)	ABS-CBN	Today TV	Excellent	The series tells the story of the life adventure of Maya de la Rosa. She dreams to become a flight attendant but she has to work as a tour guide to earn money in her hometown. In order to help her sister to pay a large medical bill, Maya goes to Manila to find a chance to work overseas; but she discovers that the woman who had offered work overseas had cheated her. Maya is stuck in Manila with no money or place to go. A handsome and wealthy widower, Richard Lim, working in the airline industry helps Maya by offering her to become his youngest daughter's temporary nanny. Moving to live in the Lim home, Maya recognizes that since his wife died, the family's joy died with her, which causes them problems. While fulfilling her duties, Maya falls in love with the Lim children and, admittedly, with Richard.

Name of Drama	Original Broadcast Channel	Broadcast Channel in Vietnam	Rating	Content
Losing Heaven (Kung Aagawin Mo Ang Langit)	GMA	Today TV	Excellent	The series tells a story of two close high-school friends, Ellery and Bridgitte, who are both involved in romantic relationships with Jonas, a charming bachelor. Bridgitte falls in love with Jonas at first sight while Jonas only has eyes for Ellery. After getting married to Jonas, Ellery discovers that she cannot conceive a child, so Ellery and Jonas ask Bridgette to help them. However, Ellery unluckily has a car accident, which leaves her in coma. Several months after Ellery's accident, Bridgitte gives birth to the baby while Ellery is still unconscious on her hospital bed. Grasping this opportunity, Bridgitte forces Jonas to marry her for the sake of their child. However, Ellery awakens from her unconscious state. She knows that Bridgitte is trying to steal everything from her; and thus, they wage a battle for love both legally and morally. (TodayTV, 2015)

Table 4.2 Features of Filipino dramas

Figure 4.3 Poster for *Be Careful with My Heart (Image Source: TodayTV, 2015)*

Figure 4.4 Poster for *Losing Heaven (Image Source: TodayTV, 2015)*

Interpretations of Family Image

Family Values

With the question: "What do you think about the image of family portrayed in Thai and Filipino TV series?", all of the interviewed audiences indicated that in those series, the family plays an important role in characters' lives and is the core unit of the different societies. Main characters are always attached to their families and their families are involved in important decisions related to the characters' lives and careers. Stories in the series of *My Wife's Sister*, *Be Careful with My Heart* and *Losing Heaven* take place inside families and around families.

Kim Anh, a 19-year-old female, who was a student majoring in Mass Media commented as follows:

> I see that in Thai and Filipino dramas, family and connections between family members are exposed similarly to Vietnam. Thais and Filipinos also respect their parents and keep close contact with their siblings. For example, in the Thai *lakorn My Wife's Sister*, after getting married, Ngamnek - the lead female - moves to live with her husband's family. Moreover, even though Ngamnek has her own family, she still takes care of her younger sister. Or in the Filipino series *Be Careful With My Heart*, Maya decides to work abroad to help her sister and her mother; and although she lives in Manila she always keeps in touch with her family in her hometown.

Mrs Ngoc, a 30 – year - old female, clothing sale assistant, remarked as follows:

> Watching Thai and Filipino dramas, I see that Thais and Filipinos respect family values, like the Vietnamese. Thus, (it feels) familiar, so it is easy to follow their series. In the dramas such as *My Wife's Sister*, *Losing Heaven* and *Be Careful With My Heart* stories happening to different families are told and the stories are extended along with social relationships of the family members.

Relationships between Children and Parents

Most of the audiences realize that in the relationship between children and parents in Thai and Filipino families, children have more freedom and are more independent from their parents. In the series of *My Wife's Sister*, *Be Careful with My Heart* and *Losing Heaven*, parents are portrayed as the people who give advice and suggestions to their daughters and/or sons. They do not intervene too much in their children's love and career decisions.

Ngoc Anh, a 19–year-old female student, recognized that in Thai and Filipino dramas, daughters and sons respect their parents and parents also respect their children by listening to the opinions of their kids. Sons and daughters are expected to obey their parents but they are still free to speak their opinions. Kim Anh, an undergraduate female student, indicated that children are more independent from their parents in Thailand and the Philippines than in Vietnam. From the dramas she has watched, she observed that although children show respect and are encouraged to obey their parents, they still have some freedom to make decisions about their education, their career and their love lives. Mrs. Ngoc, a clothes seller agreed with the point by saying, "In Thai and Filipino dramas, if sons and/or daughters do not agree with their parents they can talk to their parents. However, it is not the same in Vietnam when sons and/or daughters have to absolutely accept their parents' opinions without any arguments."

Interpretations of Gender

Traditional Gender Roles

In order to find out audience interpretations of gender roles depicted in *lakorns* and *teleseryes*, the researcher asked two questions:

- What do you think about the role of women in Thai and/or Filipino dramas?

- How do you think about the men's role in Thai and/or Filipino dramas?

All interviewed Vietnamese audience members agreed that in Thai and Filipino soap operas, men are portrayed as "the pillar" in the family, who provide the main source of income for the household while women are portrayed as having the role of housewife and mother. Phuc, a 23 year-old teacher in Ho

Chi Minh City pointed out that Thai women in reality and those portrayed on screen are generally similar (about eighty percent) in that they spend lots of time taking care of their families and are a spiritual prop for their children. She accentuates that Vietnamese dramas also portray the same image of mothers but the acting skill of Vietnamese actresses is not as good, so they struggle to transmit genuine feeling to the audience. Phuc majored in Thai studies and hence has a deep understanding of Thai culture. Thus, Phuc can compare and analyze the role of Thai women based on her real experiences in Thailand. However, for the other interviewees like Linh – an 18-year-old student and Phuong – a 23-year-old English teacher, who did not learn and graduate in Thai Studies and has never met Thai people in reality, they still have the same interpretations of Thai women after watching Thai soap operas. They indicate that even though Thai women work out of their household, they still prioritize taking care of their families and their children.

Loan, a 27-year-old female, officer in a private import-export company commented as follows:

> In Thai and Filipino dramas, men are more dominant than women. In the series like *My Wife's Sister* or *Be Careful With My Heart*, men go out and earn money to support their families while women focus more on looking after housework. In *My Wife's Sister*, although the lead female also works, she is not the person who provides the main source of income for the family. In *Be Careful with My Heart*, the lead female also works as a stewardess, but she concentrates more on taking care of her family while her husband gets a high position in his work and is the main source to provide income for the family.

Hue, a 23- year-old female student majoring in Thai Studies, commented as follows:

> *Lakorns* depict Thai women as those who are good at endurance when they both work and take care of their families. For Filipino women, after getting married, they also work but focus more on taking care of their family. It is obvious in the series *Be Careful With My Heart* that even though the lead female (Maya) who works as a stewardess, after marrying and

giving a birth, she concentrates more on taking care of her family and her children. The drama especially focuses on telling stories which happen within Maya's family more than those taking place out of her family, such as the postpartum depression that Maya encounters after having a baby, or clashes between Maya and her husband about the education of their children. The tasks that Thai and Filipino women have to do are similar to Vietnamese women. Thai and Filipino men (like Vietnamese men) are responsible for providing the main source of income for the family. In the series with content heavily inclining to family stories like *My Wife's Sister, Be Careful With My Heart* or *Losing Heaven*, men are always dominant with the role as 'the pillar' of their household.

Ngoc Anh, a 19-year-old female student majoring in Japanese Studies, observed as follows:

> I see that Thai and Filipino women both work and look after their family, but they prioritize their family, which is generally proximate with women in Vietnam. However, Filipino women are more similar to Vietnamese women in the way that most of them are tightly attached to their families and usually are under the pressure of traditional ideas that they need to be devoted to the family and children without any arguments, and they do not have much freedom after getting married. In *Be Careful with My Heart*, after marriage, Maya works as an airhostess but she still concentrates more on looking after her family. In comparison with the lead female in Thai *lakorn My Wife's Sister*, Maya is more attached and has more burdens with her family.

Gender Equality

According to the audiences' descriptions, women in Thailand and the Philippines adhere to their traditional role of being a mother and taking care of the family. On the other hand, they are more free and independent than Vietnamese women as they are not under much pressure to be tightly attached

to the family and remain active in their lives. For men, most of the audiences agreed that in the series' Thai and Filipino men are "lady-killers"; however they respect women more than Vietnamese men and also are less patriarchal than Vietnamese men.

Kim Ngan, a female 26-year-old bank clerk noted as follows:

> Thai and Filipino women dynamically both work and look after their family. Nowadays Vietnamese women are also the same. However, Vietnamese women are not active in their love lives as they are bonded with the traditional idea that women should not be active in love. In contrast, Thai and Filipino women take initiative in love. They actively pursue the ones they fall in love with. For instance, in *Secret Love Online*, Praow is active in following Pranon, the guy she loves. In *Losing Heaven*, the second lead female is active in grasping opportunities to have the guy she loves although she uses many bad tricks.

Thuy Linh, a female, 19-year-old student majoring in Mass Media observed as follows:

> In Filipino dramas that I have seen, Filipino women basically respect family values and implement their roles in the family by looking after children and doing housework after marriage. Nonetheless, most of them are Westernized, so they have strong characteristics and are more open than Vietnamese women. They are quite free to do what they like and not too dependent on their parents. Moreover, Filipino women are active in love, and in some dramas there are female characters even having many affairs. For example, in *Losing Heaven*, Bridgett's aunt advises Bridgett to end all actions that hurt her best friend Ellery, but Bridgett does not stop and she still tries many ways to keep Ellery's husband staying from staying with her… Thus, Bridgett would fight for her love. Filipino men in the series are depicted as the 'pillar' in the family, but they still respect their wives. Ellery's father in *Losing Heaven* is such a man. Even though he is the head of the family,

he does not press his wife to agree with him. Instead, he always shares and listens to his wife's opinions on all matters. I also witness those characteristics in Filipino men in other dramas.

Phuc, a female, 23-years-old Thai language teacher observed as follows:

Thai men in dramas respect women, but I am more impressed with Filipino men, especially the image of father in their soap operas. The father is a better prop for children to lean on than their mother. The father usually loves his daughter and/or son more than their mother. For example, in *Losing Heaven*, Ellery's family adopts Bridgett when her parents pass away, and Ellery's father loves Bridgett as his own daughter. When he finds out that Bridgett gets cancer while staying in prison to wait for the day to be sentenced in court, he persuades his wife and Ellery to withdraw the petition to prosecute Bridgett for trying to kill Ellery's mother that his family submits to the court before. Ellery's mother does not agree with his decision and gets angry when she finds out that her husband and Ellery both agree to withdraw the case against Bridgett.

Thu Hang, a 23-year-old female student majoring in Thai Studies, stated as follows:

The women in most Thai dramas I have seen are more open and have more freedom than Vietnamese women. They are not restricted too much by housework as Vietnamese women are. This can be seen in *My Wife's Sister*; when the lead female knows that her husband gets involved in a relationship with her sister, she cannot endure the pain because of her husband's affair and thus decides to divorce him. The lead female is active in her life. I think in Vietnam not many women would do the same thing because they are encouraged to sacrifice for the happiness of their family. Especially, those who have children will live for the sake of their kids. They do not want their kids grow up without a father; thus, many of them try to endure and find ways to make their husbands detach relationship with affairs. They are willing to forgive their husbands'

wrongdoing. For Thai men, I see that they are "lady-killers". In the same series, the lead male character always says that he loves his wife but acts otherwise when he still cannot refuse the attraction of his wife's sister and gets into a relationship with her.

Thao, a 23-year -old female, Thai-Vietnamese translator observed as follows:

> Watching Thai dramas, I see that Thai women usually wear lots of make-up, whereas Vietnamese women prefer natural beauty without much make-up. In addition, Thai women are quite modern and free to work outside of their family. They do not get married early. Now I am watching the latest series called *Secret Love Online*. Looking at Saya, the marketing manager of a brokerage company, she has her own career. She has not yet married, even though the female character she portrays in the drama is quite old. She does not face any pressure that she needs to get married quickly. It is the opposite in Vietnam. Women are usually encouraged to get married early. For Thai men, as it is shown in dramas, they take care of their appearance more than Vietnamese men. Moreover, they are not patriarchal and care for their girlfriends/wives more than Vietnamese men. For those who get married, they also share housework with their wives. Also in *Secret Love Online*, the Awatsaya's boss still helps her to pursue Pranon, her inferior staff, while he himself has fallen in love with her for a long time. He always cares about Saya's feeling.

Viet My, a 19-year -old female student majoring in Chinese Studies, said as follows:

> The women in Thai dramas are more independent than Vietnamese women. Most of Thai women do not accept unhappy lives with their husbands. The lead female character in *My Wife's Sister* is an example. When she knows her darling husband has a relationship with her younger sister and other women surround her husband, she decides to divorce him.

She does not endure her pain along with tiredness in order to preserve the marriage between her and her husband. Women in *lakorns* are usually portrayed as the ones who have successful careers, and care more about their career than marriage and giving birth. Therefore, they can gain accomplishments and equal status with men. This contradicts the situation of Vietnamese women as they are often encouraged to get married and give birth early in their lives.

Taking examples from the series *Secret Love Online* that I am following now, the two lead females, Saya and Praow, are quite free to choose the way they live and the job they want to do. Looking at Saya, she is around 33 to 35 years old and she is very beautiful, but she has not yet married and she has a successful career as the manager of a brokerage company. People do not pressure Saya to get married and start a family. Praow is similar when her age is around 28 years old and she is also nice, but she has not married either and still keeps striving with her work. It is not like that in Vietnam. For women at the age of 28 and over 28 in Vietnam, if they have not married yet, their parents, relatives and friends urge them to get married as soon as possible because most people in Vietnam think that women who are 28 and over 28 are quite old and it is not good for them to get pregnant and have a baby. To Vietnamese people, women are conditioned to think that having a family and children is a must and it is difficult to accept the women who choose to live single with no kids. In addition, some parents say to their daughters who are at the margin age of 28 or above but have not married yet or still have not had any plans for marrying that getting married is not only for the daughters but also for the parents because the parents do not want to hear people saying that they have a 'spinster' daughter in the family.

Phuong, a 23-year-old female English teacher commented as follows:

Women in Thai *lakorns* are portrayed as strong and decisive people. They are less attached to the family than Vietnamese women. Sometimes Thai women in the dramas are very dreadful and tricky. Like in *My Wife's Sister*, Fuengfa tries to steal her sister's husband. She is jealous of her sister and uses many tricks to implement her plan. For Thai men in dramas, they are not as patriarchal as men in Vietnam, and they also take care of their girlfriends/wives than Vietnamese men do.

Third-sex Issue

Responding to the questions: "Did you see any third-gender characters in Thai and Filipino dramas?" and "What do think about the characters portrayed in the series?" all of the interviewees noted that minor third-sex characters appear frequently in Thai and Filipino dramas.

Thuy Linh, a 19-year -old female, student majoring in Mass Media said:

In most of the Thai soap operas that I have seen, there are always third-sex characters. I also see third-sex characters in Filipino series, but not as many as in *lakorns*. For me, watching third-sex characters in dramas is fine, but it is not for my parents. It is difficult for them to accept those who are third-sex. I remember that when my parents saw a sex scene between two men in a Filipino drama, they switched to another TV channel.

Kim Anh, a 19-year-old female student majoring in Mass Media, observed; "I think that Thai and Filipino people are quite open toward third-sex people because I usually see third-sex characters appearing in their dramas."

Phuc, a 23-year-old female, Thai language teacher noted as follows:

There are always third-sex characters in *lakorns*. They make dramas funnier. I have many Thai friends, and they told me that in former times it was difficult for Thai people to accept their children or their relatives belonging to a third-sex, which is the same as Vietnamese society nowadays. However, later Thai people recognized that having good nature is more

important. If their third-sex children or relatives live morally, such as treating parents well and studying well, that is more important. Thus, third-sex people were gradually accepted into Thai society. Today, Thai people are open with this issue.

Members of the SIAMovies.com.vn webpage observed as follows: "There are always third-sex people in Thai dramas. Attitudes of other characters in *lakorns* toward the third-gender ones are quite comfortable. We also know that in reality, Thais are now generally open to third-gender people."

Interpretations of Cultural Characteristics

The researcher asked the questions: "Do you think that Thai and/or Filipino dramas reflect Thai and/or Filipino culture?" and "Can you illustrate some cultural features of Thailand and the Philippines after watching?" All of the interviewed viewers agreed that Thai *lakorns* more obviously successful in portraying Thai culture than Filipino *teleseryes* portray Filipino culture.

Thuy Linh, a 19-year-old female student majoring in Mass Media, commented as follows:

> Through watching Thai *lakorn*, I know that Thai people also follow the lunar calendar and go to the temple to pray for peace, luck and happiness. Their lifestyle is not much different from Vietnamese lifestyles. However, watching Filipino dramas, I see that the majority of Filipino people are Christians. When any character in the series feels sad, they usually go to the church to pray. Likewise, in the events of Christmas Day or New Year's Day, they have bigger celebrations than in Vietnam. In addition, Filipino people usually have Western style meals with Western food.

Phan Hieu, a 19-year-old female student majoring in Japanese Studies, said as follows:

> In Thai dramas, I am most impressed by the way they greet people. They put their palms together, which is very reverent. In Filipino series, their culture seems to mix with Western

culture. For example, I see in one Filipino soap opera that the characters produce wine like Westerners.

Viet My, a 19-year-old female student majoring in Chinese Studies, remarked as follows:

> Thai series can show parts of Thai culture. I see that Thai people in dramas have a unique way of greeting. Their traditional wedding customs are also interesting. People joining traditional weddings often splash water on the couple's hands or heads and they also use white powder (which I do not know what it is) to dot on the couple's foreheads. I guess it is to congratulate the couple and pray for their happiness.

Thanh Huyen, a 22-year-old female student in the linguistics discipline, observed as follows: "I can see some features of Thai culture in their dramas. I am impressed with the way Thai people greet each other. They join two hands and bow down their heads, which is very respectful."

Loan, a 27-year-old female staff member in a private import-export company, said as follows:

> Thai dramas depict their culture better than Filipino series. Watching Thai *lakorns* I can see that there are many traditional festivals in Thailand; I really like their Songkran Festival. On the other hand, I cannot recognize Filipino culture after watching their dramas.

Phuong, a 23-year-old female student majoring in Thai Studies, said as follows: "Watching Thai *lakorns*, I can see their culture with many traditional festivals such as *Loy Krathong*, *Songkran*, and also their traditional clothes. I am also interested in their wedding customs."

Meanwhile Minh Nguyet, a 23-year-old female student majoring in Thai Studies, stated:

> In *lakorns*, the first thing that can be seen is the deferential greeting between people. When characters in Thai dramas or people in reality go to temples, they always wear polite and

discreet clothes as Thailand has requirements for clothes that people should wear when going to temples. In Vietnam, there are also requirements for clothes, which should be worn for going to temples, but they are not as strict as in Thailand. Additionally, listening to conversations in *lakorns* and referring to my experience, Thai people have a polite communicative culture. In Vietnamese dramas, sometimes there are still impolite exchanges in conversations between characters.

Phuong, a 23-year-old female translator staff member at the cable TV channel Let's Viet, observed as follows:

One of the most dominant aspects of Thai culture is the way to greet people by placing the palms of two hands together. This point is very clear in all *lakorns* as characters always do as such when they are being introduced or greeting someone. When I studied Thai at university, the first thing I had to learn was how to greet people in accordance with Thai culture. Thai people have different ways to do the palm greeting action depending on age and relationship. As such, the greeting can show sincerity. Moreover, in *lakorns*, it is often seen that women sit with their two knees kept in one side. This is also a touch of Thai culture.

Van, a 25-year-old female translator staff member also working for Let's Viet channel, added more features of Thai culture depicted in *lakorns*:

In *lakorns*, when couples have a wedding ceremony following Thai traditional customs, they always wear traditional dresses both for males and females. This is not the same in Vietnam. Although in reality Vietnamese also hold wedding ceremonies according to our traditional customs; and both the bride and groom are encouraged to wear traditional dress, it is still optional. Especially for the groom; he can wear traditional clothes or a Western suit.

Phuc, a 23-year–old female Thai language teacher, remarked as follows:

Thai *lakorns* feature dominant touches of Thai culture, such as the way to greet people or traditional wedding customs. As I studied and graduated a Thai major in university, I have experienced the customs depicted in *lakorns* before. For instance, in all the Thai series that have wedding scenes, they always screen their wedding customs. One of them is that participants splash water one by one on the bride and groom's heads or on their palms in order to send their best regards to the couple. In contrast, I cannot see Filipino culture in Filipino dramas. Their wedding ceremonies take place in a church, totally in Western style. When characters in Filipino series feel sad or spiritual insecure, they go to church to pray. In comparison with Filipino series, Thai dramas can portray more local cultural characteristics.

Tam, a 23-year-old female translator for Filipino series, said as follows:

I watch both Thai and Filipino dramas. However, as I work as a translator for Filipino series, I notice more about Filipino culture. Both in *teleseryes* and in reality, most Filipino people follow Christianity. They have many festivals, and most of them are related to Christianity. As far as I know, Filipino culture is mixed due to the fact that Spain and the United States have had strong influences on Filipino culture because the Philippines was historically ruled by the Spanish and Americans. For *lakorns*, although I do not notice much Thai culture, I see some Thai cultural features such as Thai people often going to temples to pray or images of Thai traditional wedding customs.

Interpretations of National Images

In response to the question: "What do you think about the images of Thailand and/or the Philippines filmed in their soap operas?" the interviewed audience members pointed out that although Thai and Filipino dramas are similar to Korean dramas showing high skyscraper buildings, modern cars and cellphones; they are not always as "luxurious" and "sparkling" as in Korean

series. They do not advertise fashion clothes and cellphone brands as in Korean dramas and they still depict images of markets and rural areas with paddy fields and rough roads, which many Vietnamese audiences feel close to as they can easily see those their everyday lives. For the audiences living in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the modernity in Thai and Filipino soap operas are not too far from them when they can see a similar part of that modernity in the two biggest cities in Vietnam even though urban areas in Thailand and the Philippines are assessed as more developed than in Vietnam by most of the viewers.

Conclusion

It is clear that one of the basic questions which needs to be addressed in media research is how soap operas contribute to the audience's perception of reality that flows logically from the content of the soap operas (Ahmet and Khalid, 2012). Analyzing interpretations of Vietnamese viewers on Thai and Filipino series assists in knowing how the audiences perceive reality about the two ASEAN countries in connection with images and content in their TV series even though the interpretations are differentiated among audiences based on their cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.

The interpretations generate understanding for Vietnamese viewers about Thailand and the Philippines. Although it is said that soap operas are often fictitious, TV 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, p.5). Thus, consuming Thai and Filipino TV series can truly provide perceptions of reality about these two ASEAN nations for Vietnamese audiences, which helps to promote the people-driven integration process attributed to the efforts of citizens in the region.

Chapter 5

Audience Perceptions of "Cultural Proximity" and "Cultural Differences" Towards Thailand and the Philippines in Relation to Asean Connectivity

This chapter further analyzes perceptions of "proximity" and "differences" towards Thailand and the Philippines, which are based on the audience interpretations of the Thai and Filipino TV series presented in Chapter 4. Moreover, this chapter also considers the opportunities and challenges for widening and increasing connectivity between Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines in the context of building the ASEAN community partly indicated through the flows of Thai and Filipino media products to Vietnam and consumption of their products among Vietnamese audiences. The interpretations of cultural proximity and differences toward Thailand and Philippines after watching their dramas facilitate the regionalization process in the way that they both provide understanding about the two countries for Vietnamese audiences.

Audience Perceptions on "Cultural Proximity"

The language used in Thai dramas is Thai and the language used in Filipino series is a mixture between Tagalog – the native language of Filipinos

and English, of which neither are proximate with Vietnamese. However, both 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. The "Asian values" embedded in depictions of family status along with traditional gender roles and religion are proximate cultural features seen among Vietnamese audiences after they watch Thai and Filipino dramas. The viewers primarily recognize respect for family values because it is close to traditional ideology in Vietnamese society.

Traditionally speaking, family is the center of Thais and Filipinos' lives. The family is generally seen as the first loyalty and primary obligation to Southeast Asian people, including Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam (Morrow, 1989). The mutual obligations, with defined tasks of different family members, create a solid linkage in the family. "Debt of gratitude" is a concept that forms the basic kinship ties between parents and children in Thailand (Rabibhadana, 1984). Children in Thailand absorb the idea of respecting and maintaining close ties with their parents and also their relatives even after they grow into adulthood. In the Philippines, parents consider it their duty to provide the essentials 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; and for older children, even if they are married and have their own families, they are expected to assist younger siblings with school and work after graduation (Nadeau, 2015). Additionally, relatives in the same kin group support each other in times of need and they participate in joint family activities even when they do not live together in the same household (Nadeau, 2015). It is said that the role of family may be diminishing in modern societies, but for Vietnamese people nowadays, the family's position is still highly appreciated and family values are going to be transmitted through generations. Therefore, the respect toward family position shown in Thai and Filipino series helps Vietnamese audiences easily accept the dramas when they show a similar cultural background.

These family values also expose the traditional roles of men and women. As shown previously, all of the interviewed audience members saw that in Thai and Filipino soap operas, men provide the main source of income for the household while women take on the role of housewife and mother, which is very similar with the expected 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 responsibilities of housewife and mother. Today in Vietnam women have more freedom to study and establish their career, although people are still inclined to accept the idea that women should focus more on taking care of their family than pursuing their work.

In Thai society, old culture and traditions from the ancient time express that men go to fight in combat and women look after children, family and all kinds of farm work (Ukessays, 2015). Thai women who work out of the domestic sphere are often seen as deviant. On the contrary, when they act as mothers, they receive considerable respect and are thought to be more moral than men (Alcano et.al., n.d.). As for the importance of the elderly in Thailand: younger people listen to older generations and children listen to their parents. Although the role of women is changing nowadays and 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 (Ukessays, 2015). 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 and children of the household (Cgacadthephilippines, 2015).

Along with family values and gender roles, Vietnamese audiences also feel cultural proximity with the Buddhist features in Thai TV dramas. There are many temples appearing in Thai series and characters usually go to temples to pray for their families and for the strength to overcome the challenges they are facing. In Thailand, Buddhism is the national religion with around 95 percent of the population following Buddhism (Buddhanet, 2015). In Vietnam, although Buddhism is not the national religion, 55 percent of the population are Buddhists (Buddhanet, 2015). The interviewees did not talk about their religions, however all of them indicated that they felt familiar with images of temples and the Buddhist prayer ceremony. Moreover, morality in accordance

with the laws of Buddhist karma portrayed in Thai soap operas impressed the audiences. Many interviewees emphasized that at the end of stories in *lakorns,* good characters always have a happy life whereas bad characters would be punished. This refers to one of the fundamental ideas of Buddhist karma based on the law of causality of cause-effect, which is understood as the principle between individual action and its fruition. Good people would enjoy happiness while bad people would have to pay a price for their actions. In reality, Vietnamese people respect this Buddhist doctrine and express in a proverb: "What goes around comes around". Thus, many audiences could realize the idea's embedment in Thai dramas.

Ngoc Anh, a 19 year-old female student majoring in Japanese Studies commented as follows:

> Thai *lakorns* usually incline to the idea that human nature will never be able to change and it is difficult to turn a bad person to be a good person. Hence, the bad characters in *lakorns* usually have to receive painful deaths at the end as the strongest punishment for their previously cruel actions.

Phan Hieu, a 19 year-old female student also majoring in Japanese Studies observed as follows:

> I see that in Thai dramas bad people are usually punished by death when stories end. For me, ending like that is a little bit heavy and scary. However, it can satisfy many viewers as they agree that bad people deserve to be punished for their mistakes.

Minh Nguyet, a 23 year-old female student majoring Thai Studies said as follows:

> At the end of stories in *lakorns* bad characters usually must pay a price for their mistakes. It is one of basic moral values in the law of Buddhist karma that Thai people respect and follow.

It can be seen that in Korean dramas, at the end of stories, bad characters have opportunities to change themselves to be good people. The bad people would regret what they have done and then they would say sorry to those people whom they harmed before. In turn of those who were harmed, they would forgive mistakes of bad people. As such, everyone can live happily in his or her own way in Korean series. Vietnamese audiences are familiar with this ending format, so when watching *lakorns* with "heavier" endings, they may feel scared, however, on the other hand, it (the series) may be more interesting and attractive to them as it presents a contrast to Korean dramas.

Audience Perceptions of "Cultural Differences"

In terms of cultural differences, the audiences response demonstrated four points: behaviors between children and parents in the family, gender equality, attitude towards the issue of third-sex, and cultural characteristics.

Most of the interviewed audiences realized that in the relationship between children and parents in Thai and Filipino families, children have more freedom and are more independent from their parents. In the series of *My Wife's Sister*, *Be Careful With My Heart* and *Losing Heaven*, parents are portrayed as the people who give advice and suggestions to their daughters and/or sons. 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. Most Vietnamese parents expect their children do exactly as they instruct. There is a Vietnamese proverb: "The fish which is not preserved in salt will be rotten; the child who does not obey his parents will be corrupted in every way", which emphasizes that the obedience of children to parents is absolute.

For gender equality, most of the interviewees reflexively indicated that even though women portrayed in Thai and Filipino TV series implement their traditional role of being a housewife and a mother, they have more freedom and independence in comparison with Vietnamese women when they are not forced to be tightly attached to the family and are active in their own lives. For men, most of the audiences have the same idea that in the series Thai and Filipino men are "lady-killers"; but they respect women more than Vietnamese men and are also less patriarchal than Vietnamese men.

The audiences recognized that Thai and Filipino men in their TV dramas are "lady-killers" because the lead male characters are central in both *lakorns* and *teleseryes*. Being the center, they usually have the advantage of having a good appearance, good qualifications, and wealth. Thus, there are always many girls surrounding them and fighting for them in the series. This is different from Korean dramas in which lead females are the center and stories take place around the female characters. More importantly, most viewers interpret Thai and Filipino women as having more equality with men, than in Vietnam. This is partly explained as the audiences mostly watch dramas in the context of modern times, not historical series when women in the countries were subordinate to men. In an online research paper about gender in Southeast Asia implemented by Alcano et.al., it is shown that Thai women certainly have better social and economic positions in comparison to other Southeast Asian countries (n.d.). Dolan also accentuates that women in Filipino society have always enjoyed more equality with men than was common in other parts of Southeast Asia (1991). It may be explained by considering the relationship between the kinship system and gender in the region. According to Hirschman and Edward, except for a few matrilineal societies in the region, Southeast Asian kinship systems "are typically bilateral" which is characterized by "no strong sex preference for children, and both girl and boy children are highly valued", and having "equal importance attached to the husband's and wife's families" (2007, p.4378). It is not necessary for a newly married couple to live with the new groom's family. Instead, their residence after marriage is largely a matter of choice or dependent on their relative economic opportunities (Hirschman and Edward, 2007).

Thailand and the Philippines follow the bilateral kinship system, except among some groups of Thai people living in Northern and Northeastern Thailand that practice matrilocality (Dube, 1996). With the bilateral kinship system, women in Southeast Asia are generally appreciated for their crucial economic roles as along with being wives and mothers they have always contributed to income-earning activities (Dube, 1996). Participation in a wide range of tasks has helped Southeast Asian women's economic autonomy and power; this is truly seen among most Thai, Malaysian, Indonesian and Filipino women (Dube, 1996). It is also worthy to note that Southeast Asian women have had a crucial presence in trade in both rural and urban markets where they conduct trade of surpluses, as well as sell food, clothes and many other

items; and this role has been carried into the modern economy in some places, such as Thailand where women commonly have their own business and "are deeply involved in management" (Dube, 1996, p.7). The engagement of Southeast Asian women in many income-earning activities certainly brings relative freedom to their lives. Moreover, Southeast Asian countries, including Thailand and the Philippines, have a constitution that encourages equality between women and men and reduces the gender gap. In Thailand, women were granted equality with men for the first time in the 1997 constitution, which was reconfirmed in 2007; while Philippines Constitution affirms the equal rights of men and women before the law and has recognized the role of women in nation-building since 1987 (Romanow, 2012; Hega 2003).

Looking at Vietnam, historically, early Vietnamese society was matrilineal, but this changed when the Chinese came to dominate and colonize, beginning in 111 B. C. (Truong, 2013). It is believed that Chinese culture with Confucian ideology was imported into Vietnamese society, which led to total transformation of society into a patriarchy in about the Sixth Century, attached 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 with the dominant position while women's roles are to serve their husbands and his family by doing housework; they must also bear children because such is their duty (Frenier and Mancini, 1996). However, gender relations in Vietnam have undergone major changes since the collapse of the last feudal regime and communist ideology began in 1945. The first constitution of Vietnam, passed in 1946, stated that "all the rights that Vietnam has as a nation belong to its people regardless of racial, gender, wealth, class, and religious discrimination" and "women and men have equal rights in all areas" (Truong, 2013, p.28). These changes were a result of socialist ideology, pragmatic thinking and the modernization process (Truong, 2013). The idea of the equality of men and women was turned into public policies. For instance, the Marriage and Family Law was an attempt to promote gender equality in Vietnamese society by announcing some basic equal rights between husband and wife such as the following: husband and wife are faithful to love, respect, to care for and help each other; and husband and wife have equal obligations and rights in all aspects of their family (2000). The *Mở Cửa* (Open Door) and *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) Policies have brought opportunities for women in terms of work, gender equality, and leadership (Truong, 2013). Nonetheless, changes in gender equality

have not been able to make Confucian-affiliated ideas of gender disappear. Recent sociological and psychology research indicates that although there have been obvious changes, women have still been under the effect of and held back by traditional ideas (Truong, 2013). Dalton et al. accentuates that in Vietnam more women joining the workforce does not mean that their duties at home are reduced when, in fact, they implement dual responsibilities in earning a living from work with full-time positions outside of their family and fulfilling their traditional roles as a mother and a wife at home (2001). 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). Many scholars agree with this point. Le comments that the standpoint for thinking highly of men and subordinating women is a product of Confucianism, which has led to the implication that the tradition has given greater domination, dignity and power to men and has confined women to staying at home and bearing the children (1992). Pham also concludes that it is difficult to develop the concept of equality in Vietnamese society (1999).

The communist revolution, the Renovation Policy in the globalization process, along with the promotion of socialist-oriented market economy has contributed to modern ideas to gender roles in Vietnam, but Confucian-rooted ideas on gender roles continue to maintain a strong influence on Vietnamese society. Such ideas are deeply embedded into people's minds. Therefore, most interviewed audiences interpret that Thai and Filipino men are depicted as not very patriarchal and more respective to women and women enjoy more freedom and are not too attached to the housework, even though they still have to carry the same traditional roles as mother and wife at home. The soap opera is considered as a two-way mirror that reflects society and in turn is modified by society, and fiction in dramas is "interwoven with events in the 'real' world" (Ahmet, 2012, p.4). The images of women and men in Thai and Filipino TV series are somewhat fictionalized, providing a fantasy, imaginary solutions, some excitement and relaxation for viewers (Hall 1997; Spence, 2015). At the same time, those depicted images are partly a reflection of everyday lives and ideas of people living in Thai and Filipino societies toward gender roles. Hence, it helps Vietnamese audiences to accumulate the reflexive interpretation and gain more understanding about the two ASEAN countries. Importantly, most of the interviewed audience members were female and unmarried; thus, what

they interpret on the differences of gender characteristics between Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines is their self-reference based on what they have seen and experienced or will experience in the near future.

Added with the different reflexivity on the behaviors between parents and children and gender characteristics, the audience members also provide interesting reflexive interpretations about the image of third-sex people 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 - gay or lesbian (although mostly gay). This partially reflects practical attitudes towards homosexuality in Thai and Filipino societies in reality. In the Philippines, according to a United Nations-backed study, it is shown that "cultural and social attitudes toward homosexual people are complex, with signs of acceptance, particularly among the young" (Mis, 2014). A survey conducted by The Pew Research Center in 39 countries with 37,653 respondents, revealed that 73 percent of the Filipino respondents agreed that homosexuality should be accepted by society and the number of younger respondents in the 18-29 age group who supported this idea was even higher at 78 percent (UNDP and UNAID, 2014). These figures are clear evidence for the increasing acceptance toward homosexual people in the Philippines, but they do not mean that Filipino society fully accepts third-sex people (Mis, 2014). Thailand is famous for being one of the most tolerant countries in Asia towards gay and lesbian individuals (UNDP and USAID, 2014). However, like the Philippines, Thai society does not wholly accept sexual and gender minorities. Social attitudes toward homosexuality in Thailand "can be somewhat tolerant as long as they remain within certain social confines and are not particularly visible" (UNDP and USAID, 2014, p.29). Remarkably, many homosexual people move away from home, as they are afraid of bringing shame to their family and parents (Samakkeekarom and Taesombat, 2013). This does not always happen, though, when some families fully accept their gay or lesbian children and do not see their children's homosexuality as a reason to disown them (UNDP and USAID, 2014). In these cases, acceptance is rooted from the understanding that regardless of their children's gender identity, they still can implement their duties toward their parents, such as financial support for parents, or taking care of aging parents (Winter, 2006).

In Vietnam, currently, even though people have heard and known about homosexuality, the community as a whole is not yet open and tolerant towards

people having homosexual orientation. Most people in Vietnam still stigmatize homosexuals and have negative feelings towards them. Lots of parents feel vulnerable, shocked, angry, and shy when they know that their child is gay or lesbian. While some parents attempt to change their child's manner, others do not care about their child anymore. From the facts as such, most of the audience members I interviewed indicated that through watching Thai and Filipino TV soap operas, they see that Thai and Filipino societies are quite open with third-gender people. They may know or may not know about the fact that Thai and Filipino societies are known as having wide acceptance and/or tolerance with homosexuals but not full approval. However, from what they watch in their dramas, viewers aged 19-30 generally interpreted that Thailand and the Philippines are quite open towards third-sex people. However, most third-sex characters in Thai and Filipino dramas have been limited to supporting roles and comic relief, so audiences who are over 30 years old can still accept and keep following the series, in accordance with the observation of Linh, the staff member working for Let's Viet. As such, the appearance of third-sex roles in Thai and Filipino series can bring new tastes for the audiences when they cannot see these characters in Korean dramas. At the same time, this helps the viewers to compare the social attitudes towards the homosexual issue between Vietnam and the other two ASEAN countries.

One more interpretation that can be made on cultural differences, which Vietnamese audiences pointed out, is the cultural characteristics of Thailand and the Philippines featured in their dramas. According to the interviewed viewers, Thai *lakorns* more obviously and successfully portray Thai culture than Filipino *teleseryes* portray Filipino culture. On the one hand, the different cultural features portrayed in Thai and Filipino dramas contribute to attract Vietnamese audiences as they bring new tastes for the viewers. On the other hand, more importantly, they provide understanding about Thailand and the Philippines for the audiences. Specifically, for those having experience with Thai culture, *lakorns* help them to reinforce their understanding about the nation. Generally, the audiences notice more Thai cultural features through *lakorns* than Filipino cultural characteristics through *teleseryes*. The audiences mainly recognize Western influences shown in *teleseryes* while they see many traditional cultural images depicted in *lakorns*. This can be partially analyzed from historical contexts of Thailand and the Philippines.

As Tam, a translator for Filipino series mentioned earlier about Filipino history, there have been heavy Western impacts on the nation's culture. 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). Today, many Filipinos have Spanish last names and many Filipino words in Tagalog (the first Filipino national language) are the same or variations of Spanish words (Nadal, 2004). For instance, "meat" in Spanish is "carne" and in Tagalog is "karne." "Leche" means "milk" in both Tagalog and Spanish (Nadal, 2004). Moreover, resulting from influences of American colonization, the Philippines now has English as its second national language and English is taught in most higher education institutions (Posadas, 1999). In accordance with this fact, Nadal indicates that Filipino educational systems have mostly adopted American curriculum even though it may not necessarily be relevant to their culture (2011). In contemporary times, American television is popular in the Philippines, which makes many Filipinos aware of American trends in politics, events and celebrities (Nadal, 2011). In contrast to the Philippines and many other Southeast Asian countries oppressed under Western colonialists, Thailand maintained its independence throughout the colonial period (Beck et.al, 2006), which contributed to the country being "more culturally secure, with its institution intact, and less wary of Western influences" (Science, 2015). Thailand modernized itself based on Western definitions under the monarchy's guidance when the monarchy actively pursued Western education, nation-building, and popular culture to transform into a modern country (Science, 2015).

The points just analyzed partly explain why Vietnamese audiences mostly see Western style influences in Filipino dramas while being able to see traditional customs in Thai series. Through following Thai and Filipino soap operas, all of the interviewed audiences emphasize that even though rural scenes are familiar to Vietnamese viewers, urban scenes cinematographed on screen look more developed than in Vietnam. Moreover, both viewers having experience of visiting and those who have not yet travelled to the two countries, think that Thailand and the Philippines are beautiful countries with many nice places for

travelling. In addition, some of the audiences find out more information about Thailand and also want to study Thai language after watching *lakorns*.

Phuong, a 23-year-old English teacher, commented as follows:

> Before becoming aware of and then watching Thai dramas, I did not know much about Thailand. However, after that, I started finding about the country in some aspects of politics, lifestyle of Thai people, and Thai food. Now, if I see news about Thailand on television or in newspapers I will watch or read it. I am also learning Thai and I am asking my friend who is a Thai language teacher to teach me some Thai.

Ngoc Linh, a 20-year-old female student in the foreign trade discipline, mentioned as follows:

> As I often watch *lakorns* with subtitles, I know how the Thai language sounds. Listening to actors and actresses talking in dramas, I notice that the sound of Thai is cute. Thus, I was planning to study Thai but I saw that it would be difficult to remember Thai language characters, as it is hieroglyphic. So finally I gave up on my plan for learning Thai.

Members of the Thai film page SIAMovies.vn noted as follows:

> After watching Thai movies and *lakorns*, we have motivation to find out more about Thailand. We keep up-to-date with information and activities of Thai actors and actresses. We read more about famous places for travelling in Thailand and of course we also learn more about Thai culture.

Notably, most of the audience members indicated that before watching Thai and Filipino series, they only know that these two countries are also in ASEAN as Vietnam and know very little about their cultures; and some audiences do not know anything about Thai and Filipino cultures. However, after watching their dramas with images of their living environment, their people, and their customs, they themselves experience that the two countries are actually not too different from Vietnam. This makes them feel a closer affinity with Thailand and the Philippines.

ASEAN Connectivity Through Transnational Media Flows and Media Consumption

It should be confirmed that the flow of cultural products from the two ASEAN countries to Vietnam and Vietnam's consumption of the products contribute to increased connectivity among the three countries. TV drama is seen as a kind of commodity, but it has special characteristics when it is embedded with images, ideas, emotions or the general culture of its origin. As such, it can be said that culture can create economic value. The entering of Thai and Filipino soap operas into Vietnam promotes circulation of cultural commodities in the region, which serves for the incoming of the AEC with the target of making free flows of goods, labor, and capital in ASEAN. The diplomatic relationships between Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines were announced in 1976. Since that point in time, Vietnam has co-operated with the two countries in many fields. Currently, the flows of Thai and Filipino cultural goods to Vietnam open opportunities for co-operation among all those involved in the process of commodifying and commercializing culture, including producers, promoters, entrepreneurs, agents, and distributors. The establishment of the AEC can be considered as "a catalyst" which makes good conditions for the transnational mobility of Thai and Filipino media products to Vietnam. As Thai and Filipino series are transnationally exported to Vietnam, they certainly create economic connectivity at the national level between exporters from Thailand and the Philippines and importers of Vietnam. Most of the interviewed audience members revealed that they had heard of and known about the AEC and its target to encourage the free flow of goods and economic co-operation among ASEAN nations. In their opinions, promoting economic collaboration will lead to increasing cultural exchange between countries in the region, which helps to bring more Thai and Filipino series to Vietnam. Along with the context of the coming AEC, there is entertainment demand from the Vietnamese audiences for consuming diverse cultural products, while the fact that domestic cultural products (TV soap operas) have not yet been able to satisfy the audience also plays an important role for the coming of Thai and Filipino dramas to Vietnam. The flows are facilitated by the development of media technology in Vietnam with the availability of cable TV and the Internet. This is a reference to the strategies to promote ASEAN awareness and a sense of community which are as follows: "Enhance the use of and the capability to utilize new media technologies to promote ASEAN awareness and identity and facilitating ASEAN

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media industry collaborations to showcase Member States' culture, developments and talents"; and "Promote exchanges of television programs to enhance cross-culture understanding among ASEAN Member States" (ASEAN, 2009, p.21).

The Thai and Filipino media flows and the consumption of their soap operas help to broaden cultural connectivity between Vietnamese audiences and communities in the other two ASEAN countries. By consuming their dramas, Vietnamese audiences can gain understanding about Thailand and the Philippines in different aspects of gender roles, culture and national images. It is one of the ways to make people-to-people links that can help to promote deeper inter-ASEAN social and cultural interactions and understandings in the efforts of building a common regional community. Watching Thai and Filipino dramas assists the audiences to know features of cultural proximity and differences between Vietnam and the two countries. It is clear that the development in ASEAN regionalism today is the emergence of the idea of building an ASEAN community with three pillars: The ASEAN Economic Community, the ASEAN Political and Security Community, and the ASEAN Socio-Community; the last of these pillars is assessed as the most challenging one (Acharya, 2008). In order to promote cultural integration in ASEAN, there needs to be linkages among people in ASEAN societies. Consuming transnational cultural products can be an advantageous way to pull people closer because they portray images of the original countries, overcome physical borders and make transnational imaginations for the audiences. The consumption of Thai and Filipino soap operas among Vietnamese people partly facilitates the regionalization in the area of culture between the three nations when the Vietnamese viewers can see and gain some insight into the people, lifestyles, and culture of people in Thailand and the Philippines.

However, there are some challenges in the progress to motivate regionalization in ASEAN through media flows and media consumption. As analyzed previously, media flows are not equal in the region. Thai and Filipino cultural products can participate in the intra-regional flows and bring economic benefits for the two nations whereas Vietnamese media products are still on the way to finding strategies for overcoming the limitations in content and film producing technology, as well as improving quality to satisfy the domestic audience while reaching out to the intra-regional cultural commodity market. This situation makes an economic development gap between Vietnam and Thailand and the Philippines in the cultural industry. It is shown that the AEC

would bring greater opportunities for Vietnam to export goods and services to the ASEAN market (Caer, 2015). A cultural product is one kind of good that Vietnam should consider exporting as it can create economic revenues for the country. Nonetheless, in order to export the product, Vietnam needs to have direction to improve the product quality that would lead to an increase of competitive strength for its cultural industry in the region. Thai and Filipino soap operas have established their competitive strengths when being accepted by many markets in the region and nowadays they are attempting to widen their markets. Vietnam, in fact, has been left behind in gaining a stand in the regional market for cultural products. Generally, it is a difficulty not only for Vietnam to reduce the gap in competition for itself, but in the regional context it is also a challenge for ASEAN to narrow the competitiveness gap among member countries. Geiger accentuates that narrowing the competitiveness gap in ASEAN is a key for AEC realization to become by 2015 "a single market and production base, a highly competitive economic region, a region of equitable economic development, and a region fully integrated into the global economy" (2013). Mr. Vu Dang Dung, Vietnam's Permanent Representative to ASEAN supports this point and acknowledges that it is very hard to build a community if gaps remain among member countries (Geiger, 2013).

Along with the competitive gap in the cultural industry, creating a sense of belonging into a community for ASEAN citizens is also a difficult task. It is the issue and challenge of ASEAN in "transforming the nation-state mentalities to regional cultural citizenry" (Esther et.al., 2014). Rodolfo C. Severino, former Secretary-General of ASEAN, accentuates the importance of ASEAN citizens' sense of belonging in promoting the ASEAN community; that is the market integration in ASEAN cannot be achieved without integration of the spirit, which means the people in the region must start to think of themselves as citizens of ASEAN as well as of their own countries; and they must know the reality that, more and more, their interests and the interests of their nations coincide with those of the region as a whole (ASEAN, 2014). In this research, the majority of interviewed audience members shared that they were aware of Vietnam as an ASEAN member. They had also heard and known about the AEC at the end of 2015 through TV news or academic lessons in university. However, at the time the research was conducted and prior to the AEC, they did not feel that AEC would affect or benefit them. They did not feel themselves as being citizens of ASEAN, but still citizens of Vietnam specifically. It can be

said that perceptions on both proximity and differences towards Thailand and the Philippines through the consumption of their dramas contribute to increase audience awareness of the contemporary regionalization process, which forces Vietnam and the audiences themselves as Southeast Asian citizens to integrate more deeply in a common but diverse ASEAN Community. Nonetheless, the interpretations on cultural similarities and differences do not help to create the sense of belonging into the ASEAN Community among the audiences. Watching *lakorns* and *teleseryes* can create the feeling of affinity for the audiences towards the two ASEAN countries, but because of the diversity among Southeast Asian nations, the sense of separation between "self" and "others" is still embedded in the viewers' minds. This sense leads the audiences to come to the thought that Thailand and the Philippines are different from "us".

Thuy Linh, a 19-year-old female student majoring in Mass Media said as follows:

> After watching Thai and Filipino TV series, I get to know more about the two countries. In general, I feel closer with Thailand than the Philippines. In my feeling, the Philippines does not seem to be located in Southeast Asia or Asia as a whole. Through their soap operas, I see that Filipino people have Western lifestyles. In addition, looking at the map, even though the country is also in ASEAN as Vietnam and Thailand, its territory characteristics are different. I see that the Philippines is territorialized by many islands while Thailand and Vietnam's territories are a combination between islands and a mainland. Among ASEAN countries, I feel that Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand are in one block while Indonesia and Malaysia are in another block. The Philippines is separate from those two blocks.

Members of a web page for Thai film, SiamMovies.vn, commented as follows:

> We have heard about the AEC and know its target is to promote integration and collaboration among ASEAN member nations. Nevertheless, we do not feel that the AEC is coming at the end of this year. We do not really expect its coming because

it would be difficult for us to compete for jobs with labors from other ASEAN countries, maybe Filipino laborers for instance, who are more proficient in speaking English than us. We do not feel that we are going to be in the ASEAN Community.

Thao, a 23-year-old female Thai-Vietnamese translator, remarked as follows:

I started watching *lakorns* during my first year at university. At that time, Thai dramas had not become popular yet. However, from my third year in university, which was near the time for the commitment of AEC establishment, Thai series had become more popular in Vietnam and they were aired on cable TV channels. I heard about the AEC when I was an undergraduate student. Thus, I know about its targets. The AEC is going to come at the end of this year, but I do not feel that we are on the way to having more integration with other countries in the region. I feel like the news about the coming AEC is just to let people know about the international political situation, which involves the participation of Vietnam. I like watching *lakorns* and also like Thai culture depicted in *lakorns* and I can see that their traditional customs are similar as what I studied in university. However, it does not make me think that I would be in the same community with Thai people as we are both ASEAN members and we are attempting to establish a common community.

Phung, a 23-year-old female Thai-Vietnamese translator, remarked as follows:

I have heard about the AEC. It is going to come into effect at the end of this year. It promotes deeper economic exchange in ASEAN. Motivating more economic exchange contributes to promoting cultural exchange. This condition makes an advantage for Thai dramas to come to Vietnam. Watching *lakorns* can help me as well as other audiences feel closer with Thailand when we can imagine about their lives, their dresses,

and their traditions. Nonetheless, for me until now I do not have the feeling that the progress of integration for ASEAN Community is taking place in Vietnam. Watching Thai dramas helps me to improve my Thai language and understand more about the country, but it does not give me a feeling of belonging to the community as an ASEAN citizen.

It is seen that the establishment of the ASEAN Community with the first coming of the AEC is topical news for Vietnamese audiences to stay updated on, rather than a practical reality that affects to them. The consumption of Thai and Filipino cultural products certainly provides the viewers some knowledge and feeling of proximity as well as affinity toward these two nations, but it is not sufficient to create a sense of belonging to ASEAN. Esther et.al. pointed out that ASEAN citizens lack a sense of belonging to the region, which makes a difficulty for the target of building a common regional identity (2014). Moreover, as mentioned above, there has not yet been equality in media flows in the region. Thai and Filipino media products have joined the intra-regional flows while Vietnam's cultural industry has not yet gained a stand in the region. This leads to the situation that Vietnamese audiences can consume Thai and Filipino dramas, but the people in Thailand and the Philippines cannot watch Vietnamese TV series. Hence, Vietnamese people can gain understanding about Thailand and the Philippines through their cultural products, but people in the other two countries cannot reciprocate. This limits cultural integration among the three countries because the integration needs to come from all involved sides.

Embracing the huge diversity among ASEAN member states categorized based on their colonial history, political structure, and socio-economic factors, ASEAN cannot successfully build up the ASEAN Community without the involvement of ASEAN citizens along with the attempts of political elites (Hill and Menon, 2010; Esther et.al., 2014). Although the consumption of Thai and Filipino series with interpretations on cultural proximity and cultural differences towards the nations is not enough to create the sense of belonging into ASEAN Community among the audiences, it opens the ability to create ASEAN awareness by promoting a shared set of regional values, not only among the governments of nation-states but also among ASEAN citizens. The citizen contribution is a mark for a dramatic change of ASEAN to transform itself to

be more people-centered, which encourages all sectors of society to participate in and benefit from community building (Esther et.al., 2014).

Conclusion

The perceptions of cultural similarities and cultural differences through consuming Thai and Filipino TV series generate understanding for Vietnamese viewers about the two countries. The media consumption partly creates feeling of closeness and affinity between regional citizens. In other words, by consuming Thai and Filipino TV soap operas, Vietnamese audiences can come to know cultures, lifestyles and the way of thinking of communities in the two countries. As such, Thailand and the Philippines' cultural characteristics are disseminated when people in Vietnam can consume the same cultural products with the communities in the countries, which constructively contributes to pulling the audiences in Vietnam closer to the people in other ASEAN nations.

According to Iwabuchi, cultural proximity with Japan that Taiwanese audiences interpret through their consumption of Japanese cultural products comes from a sense of "coevalness" (2002). Taiwanese viewers see that there is no time lag between Taiwan and Japan when they share the same modern temporality and similar lifestyles. In the case of Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines, it is difficult to say that these three nations have no time lag, because, in fact there are gaps in development among these countries. However, Vietnamese viewers still recognize proximate features with these two countries by consuming their visual media products. This point leads to the idea that it is not necessary for people in different nations to have the same level of modernity and development to be able to realize cultural proximity. It can be the sharing of regional values. Korea and most Southeast Asian nations (except Singapore) do not share the same modern temporality, but Korean cultural products have successfully been popularized in this region. One of the main reasons for the large spread of Korean dramas in Southeast Asia is the depiction of "Asian" cultural values in their soap operas. Thai and Filipino dramas follow the way that Korean series make sense of cultural proximity to regional audiences by portraying "Asianess" in their media products.

However, it is known that cultural similarity cannot account for the fact that the audiences expect to see differences in foreign cultural products in order

to make comparisons and widen their understanding about the foreign countries. It can be said that cultural differences portrayed in Thai and Filipino dramas are partial factors for the viewer's attraction. Looking at Korean dramas, they certainly show proximate "Asian" values but they also concentrate on drawing on their own traditional culture, which creates curiosity among their audiences. Thai and Filipino producers learned this technique from Korean series. Through interpretations of Vietnamese viewers, Thai soap operas present a mixed image between "Asianess" (e.g. family values or gender roles in the family) with "Thainess" - Thai traditional customs (e.g. greeting or traditional wedding ceremony). Filipino series introduce a combination between "Asianess", as Thai *lakorns* do, and Western-influenced culture (e.g. religion, or life style). In comparison with Filipino dramas, Thai series are assessed as more successful in characterizing features of traditional Thai culture. On the one hand, the reflexivity on "Thainess" and Western-influenced culture make attractions for the audiences. On the other hand, more essentially, it creates the feeling of cultural affinity to the audience. This refers to the fact that before watching Thai and Filipino soap operas, the audiences do not know much about or feel unfamiliar with many features of Thai and Filipino cultures. However, by consuming their dramas, the feeling of affinity is stimulated among the Vietnamese audiences towards the two countries. Thus, it can be said that not only perception on cultural proximity but also perception on cultural differences after consuming Thai and Filipino dramas among Vietnamese audiences contribute to motivate the 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 understanding for Vietnamese audiences towards these countries. However, at the same time, it reveals challenges in narrowing the competitive gap in cultural industries among ASEAN countries, specifically between Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines and in creating a sense of belonging into ASEAN Community for regional citizens within the context of a diverse Southeast Asia.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Major Findings of the Study

It is recognized that the flows of Thai and Filipino soap operas to Vietnam are facilitated by major institutional factors. Firstly, the Thai and Filipino governments support the export of their cultural products. Siriyuvasak points out that the long economic depression and the mainstream of neo-liberalism in the Asian economies have led to an uneven transformation of the cultural industries in the region (2010). The industries are moving forward with the assistance of the governments, which contributes to Asian cultural industries readjusting their organizations to make cross-media integration and connections in inter-Asian markets, serving to broaden the production and distribution sphere with the target of profit making (Siriyuvasak, 2010). In Asia, the Japanese and Korean cultural industries have transformed impressively as their products have joined the inter-Asian markets for more than one decade. The governments in Japan and Korea have established policies to support their cultural industries; this makes an advantage for their cultural products being commoditized and popularly circulated in the regional markets. Taking from the experience of the successful transformation of the East Asian cultural industries, Thailand and the Philippines are now trying to encourage their cultural industries to step up in profitable cross-media integration. Therefore, the Thai and Filipino governments have had attempts to support their cultural industries. With the governments' assistance, Thailand and the Philippines can develop and improve

the quality of their media products, opening an opportunity for their products to be transnationally distributed.

Another institutional factor facilitating these flows is Vietnam's policy to promote *Doi* Moi with economic reform implemented by the Vietnamese government in 1986. Vietnam has opened up to the world, which not only helps to develop its economy but also promotes globalization in the field of culture. Many foreign cultural products are imported to Vietnam. Today Vietnamese audiences can consume various cultural products from Hollywood, East Asia, and most recently from Southeast Asia – specifically Thai and Filipino TV dramas. The government in Vietnam has encouraged media development because they consider media as a means to broaden understanding about the world for its people. The encouragement for media development results in the spread of both cable and digital television and the Internet, which all facilitate people in the country to approach and consume diverse foreign entertainment programs. At the same time, it leads to strong competition between TV channels to capture TV viewers by satisfying their diverse entertainment demand. This complex demand is intertwined with the situation that in Vietnam, Korean dramas are losing popularity after having kept the dominant position for more than a decade. Korean TV series are no longer as popular as in previous periods and have to deal with the rapid change in the audiences' tastes. Moreover, it has been shown that the copyrights for Thai and Filipino dramas are cheaper than Korean ones. In addition, domestic cultural products in Vietnam have not yet been able to gain appreciation of audiences. These factors clearly give Thai and Filipino series a competitive edge when entering Vietnam.

The appearance of Thai and Filipino media products in Vietnam is evidence for contra-media flows. In her research about East Asian cultural industries, Siriyuvasak argues that the rise of the flows of East Asian cultural products across Asia could be seen in terms of counter-hegemony to the West (2010). The frequent depiction of East Asian mega-cities such as Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Seoul in the Asian popular cultural products might help to demonstrate and reinforce the cosmopolitanism of a new East Asia and its people. Iwabuchi also makes an argument that the inter-Asia flow of Japanese pop culture is considered to be influential force because it could counter the hegemony of the West and at the same time create a new image of "Asian modernity" for young consumers (2004). Although Thai and Filipino media flows (in the form of soap operas) have not yet gained wide and long-standing

popularity in the region as East Asian media flows have; in my point of view they can also be seen as counter-hegemonic flows to the West. The portrayal of big cities in Southeast Asia of Bangkok and Manila in Thai and Filipino TV series provides additional images of "Asian modernity" in general, and of Southeast Asia in particular, for regional consumers, including Vietnamese audiences. Moreover, along with the portrayal of cosmopolitan urban areas, Thai and Filipino dramas also depict images of mountainous and rural areas with rough roads and old ill-equipped houses without modern cars and buildings, which is a notable feature in most countries in Southeast Asia.

In fact, Vietnamese audiences have been interacting with the dominant contra-media flows from East Asia such as Japanese, Korean or Hong Kong cultural products for a long time. Recently, however, they have been consuming products from contra media flows in Southeast Asia. This situation consolidates the idea that global media traffic is not just one way – from the West to the rest of the world (Thussu, 2007). Non-Western countries have become increasingly crucial in the circulation of cultural products (Thussu, 2007). As such, in spite of the dominance of the West in the field of culture, national and regional markets for culture do exist, develop, and challenge the notion that "the world's popular culture scene should be completely homogeneous" (Otmazgin, 2005, p.511). The flows of Thai and Filipino TV dramas to Vietnam increase circulation of cultural commodity in Southeast Asia. Before being imported to Vietnam their soap operas have come to other Southeast Asian countries such as Laos, Cambodia and Burma. As such it opens a chance for economic activities in a new area of media between Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines. This partly contributes to the coming AEC embedded with the commitment for promoting free flows of goods and broadening economic integration and cooperation among ASEAN member countries. However, there is the fact that the media flows are not equal among the three countries, as until now Vietnamese TV series have not yet reached markets in Thailand and the Philippines due to their limitations in quality and film production technology. Thus, it creates a competitiveness gap between Vietnam and these two countries in the field of cultural industry, which challenges the progress of AEC building.

Vietnamese audiences can make interpretations of proximate and different features towards Thailand and the Philippines through watching their dramas. Thai and Filipino series creators, in fact, learned from experiences in Korean series when they both expose 'Asianess' and introduce their own culture

to Asian audiences. This technique helps to create a feeling of familiarity and curiosity in audiences. As there has been undeniable popularity of the Korean Wave in Asia, it has made wide effects on the cultural industries in Southeast Asia.

Lakorns and *teleseyes* portray Asian values in their dramas. At the same time, they also expose their own cultural characteristics. This situation partly reflects the process of Asianization in the field of cultural industry. In Asia, Japan's pop idol system has been followed by Korea, Taiwan and Thailand "since the star system is an attractive market innovation" (Siriyuvasak, 2010, p.8). Korean television drama production is shown, on the one hand, closely following trendy Japanese dramas which tell stories with the theme of love, hope and a better life, capturing the imagination of young viewers while, on the other hand, learning to make series in their own slightly modified format (Siriuvasak, 2010). Likewise, it can be seen that Thai and Filipino dramas follow the techniques of Korean dramas but appropriated in their own ways to fit with local cultures and to differentiate themselves from Korean series.

In regards to "Asian" values, the audiences recognized these values depicted in both Thai and Filipino soap operas, and see them as close to Vietnamese ideology. The values are emphasized by the image of family as a basic unit of society having many impacts on characters' lives and careers. Along with family values are traditional gender roles for men and women in society. Men in Thai and Filipino societies are "pillars" for their family while women are encouraged to focus on taking care of family, children and house works, similar to Vietnam. Moreover, Vietnamese viewers also feel familiar with the Buddhist culture shown in Thai dramas when there are many temples filmed on screen and characters usually go to the temple to pray for peace and happiness. Finally, the national image appearing in Thai and Filipino series with the combination between modern urban areas and rural areas is also familiar to the audiences.

The interpreted differences between Vietnam and these other two nations include the behavior among children and their parents, the equality between men and women, the third-sex issue, and cultural characteristics. It is indicated that in most Thai and Filipino soap operas, children respect and listen to their parents while parents also respect and listen to their children. This dynamic is different to Vietnam where children are required to absolutely obey their

parents. Many viewers agree that although Thai and Filipino women still have to implement their traditional roles as wives and mothers, they can gain more equality to men than Vietnamese women can. They are more independent, are quite free to pursue their careers, and receive more respect and open communication from their boyfriends or husbands. In Vietnam, nowadays, even though women have more opportunities to establish their own careers, they are encouraged to be tightly attached to and concentrate on caring for their families rather than pursuing career success. This is partly explained by the differences in society systems among Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines. For the third-sex issue, all audience members showed that Thai and Filipino societies are quite open to third-sex people. There are always gay characters providing comic relief for the series, especially in *lakorns*. Other characters in the dramas feel comfortable with third-gender friends, staff members or colleagues. In contrast, in Vietnam, according to the opinions of the interviewees, although people know of and hear about homosexuality, the attitude of society towards third-gender people is not as opened-minded as it is in Thailand and the Philippines. The viewers are also interested in cultural features depicted in Thai and Filipino series. However, they can see more traditional customs drawn in *lakorns* than in *teleseryes*. They mostly just notice the Western influenced culture in Filipino dramas. Thus, the audiences accentuate that *lakorns* can portray Thai culture better and more successfully than *teleseryes*.

Amporn indicates that after consuming Thai soap operas, Shan audiences viewed Thailand as a "beautiful" place with capitalist consumerism (2008). The beauty of Thailand has been attached to the display of new technologies, Western goods and a more developed economy. She argues that while, in fact, the Burmese economy has been under-developed after the past four decades of military rule and the vast majority of people still live in poverty, Thai TV series provide Shan audiences the consumerist imagination that the local reality is lacking and has not yet been able to provide; hence, Thai dramas offer access to different ways of life which may become an object of yearning on the part of Shan viewers. They turn the desire to catch up with the modernity and fantasy in Thailand to real action of moving and crossing the physical border to Thailand (Amporn, 2008). Nonetheless, in my study, it is argued that consuming Thai and Filipino TV dramas enriches consumers in Vietnam in the way that furnishes the audiences with understanding about the two ASEAN countries generally and provides motivation for the part of Vietnamese audiences to

learn more about Thailand specifically, but not raise a sense of yearning for the modernity exposed in Thai and Filipino series among Vietnamese audiences. The viewers were interviewed live in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, two of the biggest cosmopolitan urban areas in Vietnam. The image of modern cellphone, luxurious houses and cars were thus not strange to them. All of the interviewed audience members use smart phones; and they may or may not experience living in nice houses or driving cars; however, they can easily see these things around them in the cities and thus have become familiar to urban modernity. The local economy in Vietnam has been able to partly provide experiences for the audiences in consumption of new technology, or Western commodities as a result of progress liberalizing and capitalizing its economy.

Generally, consuming transnational soap operas shapes reflexive perceptions towards Thailand and the Philippines in regards to both similarities and differences among Vietnamese audiences. It can be seen that the perceptions are quite diverse among audiences. It demonstrates the active role of the audiences when they perceive the textual meanings of TV series in different ways depending on their life experiences. If the reception of proximity helps Thai and Filipino TV series to be accepted and quickly become familiar among viewers in Vietnam, then the perceptions on differences assist the audiences in widening their understanding and make them feel affinity for the nations. Understanding is a basis for integration. Hence, it is important in the contemporary period when it facilitates the process of people-driven cultural integration in the region of Southeast Asia, particularly among the three researched countries, serving for the target of building the ASEAN Community. It is indicated that in order to facilitate integration among ASEAN countries, it should not only concern the role of regional member nation-states, but it is also necessary to encourage participation of ASEAN citizens. The engagement of citizens helps to gain the goals of increasing people-to-people contacts among ASEAN nationals and strengthening regional integration (Esther et.al., 2014). The consumption of Thai and Filipino media products among Vietnamese audiences, can, therefore, be argued as one of the ways to empower the participation of citizens in the process of motivating wide integration between civil communities in ASEAN member nations. However, as noted previously, the media flows are not equal among Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines. While Thai and Filipino cultural commodities have entered the intra-regional flows, Vietnamese products have not yet joined the flows. Thus, Vietnamese

audiences can see the culture and national images of the two countries through their series, but Thai and Filipino people are not yet able to do the same thing via Vietnamese series challenging the balance of the integration process.

It cannot be denied that consuming Thai and Filipino dramas can merely assist Vietnamese audiences to gain understanding about these nations and feel affinity for them, but the consumption does not help them gain a sense of belonging to the region. Thai and Filipino cultures are interesting to many Vietnamese audiences, but for them they are still foreign cultures. This shows a separate consciousness towards the region in Vietnamese audiences' minds. In fact, Southeast Asia is a diverse region with different colonial histories, political systems, economic models, languages and cultures. This creates difficulties for ASEAN when it comes to building a regional identity and developing a sense of belonging to the region among citizens. It has been documented that ASEAN citizens generally lack a sense of belonging to ASEAN, which challenges the establishment of a common community (Esther et.al., 2014). Thus, the hardest task for ASEAN in building the ASEAN Community is to search for a way to create a sense of belonging not only among national governments in the region, but also at the fundamental level attributed by ASEAN citizens (Esther et.al., 2014).

The findings of this study will contribute to understanding the role of transnational media and the consumption of transnational media in support of the regionalization process being promoted in ASEAN at the present time. With the considerations based on both political-economic and cultural approaches, it can be seen that transnational media is an idea about category of nation-state. Being considered as a kind of commodity, media products are now encouraged to freely flow throughout the region for both economic and political aims. Hence, it is recognized as a manageable object with the support of technological and political channels in order to serve national economic and political goals. In this case, the goals are the aim to establish the coming AEC with free flows of goods, services, laborers and capital at the end of 2015, and in the long term, for the ASEAN Community to have deeper integrations not only in the economy but also in culture. Governments in the region, particularly in Thailand and the Philippines, have policies to support the export of their cultural products, indicating that they gradually view the role of media products not only in the domestic sphere, but also in regional affairs when the products can potentially be a profitable activity for export, as well as a means for the

political purpose of introducing the national image to other countries in the region and creating "soft power" for their countries in the context of promoting regionalization. In turn, the consumption of transnational media plays a role in shaping the imaginations of individuals of both faraway places and of their own local lives. By consuming Thai and Filipino soap operas, Vietnamese audiences can generally come to understand the environment, lifestyles, and cultures of people in these two ASEAN nations in comparison with their own lives in Vietnam. This makes people in Vietnam feel more of an affinity for Thailand and the Philippines, and as such it is evidence for centralizing the role of citizens in the process of encouraging regional integration. Looking at the consumption of transnational media is an attempt to explain regionalization beyond state-centric concerns, broaden the cultural perspective to regionalization, and prove how cultural products can affect regional formation.

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Index of Names and Terms

Regionalization through Media Consuption

Consumption of Thai and Filipino Soap Operas by Vietnamese Audiences

Nguyen Thi Tu Anh

This research was inspired by the phenomena of the recent emergence of Thai and Filipino soap operas in Vietnam. In the 4-5 years since they have been exported to the country they have become quite popular among Vietnamese audiences. Thai and Filipino dramas are broadcast on many cable television channels and also viewed on the Internet. Vietnamese audiences who love watching Thai TV dramas have established websites with teams of volunteers making subtitles and uploading updated Thai series on their own web pages. In Vietnam now, Thai and Filipino TV series co-exist and successfully compete with Korean dramas, which have been popular in Vietnam for more than a decade.

In addition to focusing on the flows of TV soap operas from Thailand and the Philippines to Vietnam, this study also explores how the consumption of Thai and Filipino dramas has contributed to a greater understanding of these two countries among Vietnamese audiences. This is related to the greater ASEAN regionalization process. By analyzing the rise of Thai and Filipino dramas and their success in Vietnam, as well as investigating the influence of these soap operas on Vietnamese viewers' perceptions of Thailand and the Philippines, the research strives toward a greater understanding of organic regionalization processes—cultural, social, and economic.